



THEMATIC DOSSIER: International and Regional Studies: From Theory to Practice

ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ: Международные и региональные исследования: от теории к практике

DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-1-7-22

EDN: DHSPMY

Research article / Научная статья

Turkish Balance, or Türkiye's Foreign Policy Strategy in the Black Sea Region Following the Special Military Operation

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Abstract. The Black Sea region in its various geopolitical configurations is a zone of priority for the Turkish elite. Prior to the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), the Black Sea was regarded as the “Sultan’s harem.” Being essentially a peninsula between the Mediterranean and Black Sea, Türkiye is interested in maintaining control over the Black Sea space or in sharing it with another strong power having access to it. The authors aim to identify and explore Türkiye’s foreign policy strategy in relation to the Black Sea region as one of the key geopolitical spaces for Ankara’s national interests. The foreign policy strategy is understood as a long-term mechanism of the subject in relation to objects and competing subjects, which aims to achieve the most favorable spatial position with the help of military and non-military means and appropriate resources, taking into account the timeliness factor. The article solves specific tasks: it identifies the stable characteristics of Turkish foreign policy, shaped by historical experience and geography, which underlie Ankara’s foreign policy strategy; it shows and studies the strategic vision of the Turkish elite in relation to the Black Sea region; it reveals the mechanisms of influence of external geopolitical subjects on the region and the combination of these mechanisms with Turkish national interests. The concept of Turkish balance is introduced as mechanism of Türkiye’s foreign policy strategy whose main purpose is to integrate stronger powers into the logic and algorithms of foreign policy balances of stronger powers with their mutual opposition and further balancing act, which allows Türkiye to receive maximum geo-economic and geopolitical dividends. The research methodology is represented by systemic, geopolitical and civilizational approaches. Given the role of the Black Sea region in the military-political dynamics since February 2022, the mechanisms of Türkiye’s foreign policy strategy in relation to the region are becoming crucial for Russia in various areas of national security. Authors propagate that February 2022 is the inertia of the events of March 2014 and deeper, of the postponed crisis of 1991 caused by the disintegration of the USSR. However, it was the beginning of the special military operation that brought the military and political confrontation at the global and regional levels into the format of open confrontation. Russia has challenged the West and its system of allies.

Key words: geopolitics of the Black Sea region, regional powers, Russian-Turkish relations, balance of power

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Conflicts of interest. The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contribution. The authors made an equal contribution to the design, research and preparation of the final article's text.

Acknowledgements. The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (project No. 23-28-00917, <https://rscf.ru/en/project/23-28-00917/>).

For citation: Irkhin, A. A., Moskalenko, O. A., & Demeshko, N. E. (2024). Turkish balance, or Türkiye's foreign policy strategy in the Black Sea region following the special military operation. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 24(1), 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-1-7-22>

«Турецкий баланс», или Внешнеполитическая стратегия Турции в Черноморском регионе на фоне специальной военной операции

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Аннотация. Черноморский регион (ЧР) в различных его геополитических конфигурациях является зоной приоритетных интересов турецкой элиты. До Кючук-Кайнарджийского мирного договора (1774 г.) Черное море рассматривалось как «гарем султана». Являясь, по сути, полуостровом между Средиземным и Черным морями, Турция заинтересована в сохранении контроля над черноморским пространством либо в разделении ответственности с другой сильной державой, имеющей выход к Черному морю. Цель исследования — выявить и изучить внешнеполитическую стратегию Турции в отношении ЧР как одного из ключевых геополитических пространств для национальных интересов Анкары. При этом под внешнеполитической стратегией понимается долговременный механизм субъекта в отношении объектов и конкурирующих субъектов, направленный на достижение как можно более выгодного пространственного положения, которое достигается с помощью военных и невоенных средств с применением соответствующих ресурсов с учетом фактора своевременности. В рамках достижения поставленной цели решаются конкретные задачи: выявлены устойчивые характеристики турецкой внешней политики, сформированные историческим опытом и географией, которые лежат в основе внешнеполитической стратегии Анкары; показано и исследовано стратегическое видение турецкой элиты в отношении ЧР; раскрыты механизмы влияния на регион внешних геополитических субъектов и сочетание этих механизмов с турецкими национальными интересами. Авторы вводят понятие «турецкий баланс» как механизм внешнеполитической стратегии Турции, главной целью которого является встраивание в логику и алгоритмы внешнеполитических балансов более сильных держав с взаимным их противопоставлением и дальнейшим уравниванием. Это позволяет Турции получать максимальные геоэкономические и геополитические дивиденды. Методология исследования представлена системным, геополитическим и цивилизационным подходами. Учитывая роль ЧР в военно-политической динамике с февраля 2022 г., механизмы внешнеполитической стратегии Турции в отношении региона приобретают для РФ первостепенный характер в различных направлениях национальной безопасности. Авторы принимают точку зрения, что февраль 2022 г. является инерцией развития марта 2014 г. и глубже — отложенным кризисом 1991 г., вызванным дезинтеграцией СССР. Однако именно начало специальной военной операции (СВО) вывело военно-политическое противостояние на глобальном и региональном уровне в формат открытого противостояния. Россия бросила открытый вызов Западу и его системе союзников.

Ключевые слова: геополитика Черноморского региона, региональные державы, российско-турецкие отношения, баланс сил

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Авторы внесли равнозначный вклад в разработку дизайна, проведение исследования и подготовку текста статьи.

Благодарности. Исследование выполнено за счет гранта Российского научного фонда № 23-28-00917, <https://rscf.ru/project/23-28-00917/>.

Для цитирования: *Ирхин А. А., Москаленко О. А., Демешко Н. Э.* «Турецкий баланс», или Внешнеполитическая стратегия Турции в Черноморском регионе на фоне специальной военной операции // *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения.* 2024. Т. 24, № 1. С. 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-1-7-22>

Hopefully, we will not repeat the mistakes made after the Second World War and the Cold War, and this time we will ensure that we take advantage of the opportunity presented to our country.¹

R.T. Erdoğan

Introduction

The modern Republic of Türkiye is a regional power in three key regions of Eurasia: the Middle East, the Black Sea region, and the South Caucasus and Central Asia — and it strives to achieve the world power status.

Russia's special military operation in Ukraine opened a new stage in Ankara's foreign policy towards the Black Sea region. Türkiye's decision to close the Black Sea straits was made on February 27, 2022, with reference to Article 19 of the Montreux Convention: it assumes Türkiye's active, albeit indirect, involvement in the conflict and at the same time increases Türkiye's geopolitical role as a regional and global power. The Straits factor again brought Ankara back into the pool of great world powers, compensating for its limited resources as a regional power. Turkish researcher M. Akgün emphasizes that the Montreux Convention of 1936 still connects Russia and Türkiye with invisible threads. Its provisions meet their mutual interests: "A revision of the Convention that is largely technically outdated may cause undesirable and unexpected consequences for both countries" (Akgün, 2003, p. 45).

The purpose of the study is to identify and explore Türkiye's foreign policy strategy in relation to the Black Sea region as one of the key geopolitical spaces for Ankara's national interests: transit and link to the other two

priority areas of Turkish foreign policy — Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the Middle East — it is the "backyard" of the Turkish state. At the same time, foreign policy strategy is understood as a long-term mechanism of a subject in relation to objects and competing subjects, aimed at achieving the most advantageous spatial position possible, which is achieved through military and non-military means and appropriate resources, taking into account the timeliness factor (Yurchenko, 2001; Irkhin, 2012).

In order to achieve this goal, the article solves specific problems:

- 1) to identify the stable characteristics of Turkish foreign policy, shaped by historical experience and geography, that underlie Ankara's foreign policy strategy;
- 2) to show and explore the strategic vision of the Turkish elite regarding the Black Sea region;
- 3) to reveal the mechanisms of influence of external geopolitical entities on the region and the combination of these mechanisms with Turkish national interests.

The object of the study is the foreign policy of the Republic of Türkiye at the regional and global levels. The subject is the implementation of Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Black Sea region as part of its foreign policy strategy after the beginning of the special military operation.

The hypothesis of the study is as follows: in relation to the Black Sea region, Türkiye implements the foreign policy logic of equilibration and balancing act between global and regional actors, thus increasing its regional role and status: in the Middle East, in the Black Sea region, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia. In order to denote this logic, the authors introduce the concept of the Turkish balance (on the pattern of the French

¹ "Türkiye'nin Salgının Önlenmesinde Örnek Alınan Bir Konuma Gelmesi Hepimizin Ortak Başarısıdır" // Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı. 28.05.2020. URL: <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/haberler/410/120316/-turkiye-nin-salginin-onlenmesinde-ornek-alinan-bir-konuma-gelmesi-hepimizin-ortak-basarisidir-> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

balance and the British balance offered by H. Kissinger²) to denote a mechanism of the foreign policy strategy of the Turkish Republic, the main goal of which is to integrate stronger powers with their mutual opposition and further balancing, which allows Türkiye to receive maximum geoeconomic and geopolitical dividends.

Currently, the Turkish balance in the Black Sea region aims to preserve the status quo of powers established after 1991. The disintegration of the USSR formed a favourable political situation for the sovereign revival of Türkiye, as states weaker than Türkiye itself appeared on the periphery of Turkish borders (with the exception of Iran), thus building a natural security buffer for Ankara. Therefore, maintaining the post-1991 balance in the post-Soviet space by preserving the existing interstate borders is one of Türkiye's key tasks (Aktürk, 2020). It follows from this logic that violation of this political geography by any of the powers or coalition is not in the interest of Türkiye, and Ankara will do its best to oppose this process.

The research methodology is represented by systemic, geopolitical and civilizational approaches.

A New Role of the Black Sea Region in Regional and Global Politics

The problems of studying the Black Sea region as an object and subject of scientific research are a priority for scientists from the Republic of Türkiye, the USA, Great Britain, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Ukraine.

² *The French balance* (raison d'état) involves the direct participation of the subject in one of the realized balances. *The British balance* represents the playing out of various combinations without the direct participation of the subject: only when the situation becomes critical, the subject enters the game on the side through which it is possible to realize its national interests to the greatest extent; after a victory over the opponent, new balances are built, the purpose of which is to prevent the excessive strengthening of one of the parties due to the victory over the other. See: (Kissinger, 2018, pp. 45–88).

After 1991, for a long time in Russian research discourse the Black Sea region was denied as an object and subject of research interest in relation to national interests. As I. Tsantoulis notes, "Although the concept of the region, even the simple utterance of the word, had become an important foreign policy tool in the post-Cold War period, the idea of the Black Sea region was met with suspicion, if not resistance, by foreign policy elites in the region located primarily in the Russian Federation and Türkiye that perceived this area as belonging to their historically shaped zones of influence and interest. In the case of Russia, the concept of 'near abroad' has significant geopolitical connotations" (Tsantoulis, 2016, p. 149).

The 2008 five-day Russo-Georgian conflict somewhat changed the emphasis of research interest, but not significantly: the Black Sea region as a political reality, where Russia should be present, is still denied. The reunification of Crimea with Russia in 2014 has thrown somewhat into the scale of sovereignty of Russian humanities, but not radically.

In this context, within the framework of the subject of the study, it is necessary to remember that the documents revealing the content of Türkiye's foreign policy strategy are not public, but taking into account the geography, history, mentality of the Turkish elite and people, the foreign policy environment, ideas about the future, based on party programs and the history of political forces, it is assumed that Türkiye's political leadership is based on stable policy parameters.

The study of the geopolitics of the Black Sea region raises the question of approaches to determining its borders. Based on the most obvious riparian principle, the region is considered to include seven states with access to the Black Sea: Russia, Türkiye, Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova (via the port of Giurgiulesti). In the logic of the concept of large spaces in the 2000s the Black

Sea region was associated with the territory of the Caucasus, Caspian Sea, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe for reasons of political and economic security (Aydin, 2004, p. 6). The Black Sea space is included by experts in the Black Sea-Caspian region consisting of Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Romania, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine (Maksimenco, 2005, p. 137). A number of researchers operate with the concept of “Baltic-Black Sea space” or “Baltic-Black Sea region,” considering it either as having a natural origin or as an artificial geopolitical construct (Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2021, p. 500).

Attempts to identify the Black Sea region also revealed an institutional approach associated with the activities of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) consisting of 12 states. It was within the BSEC, in 2004, that the term “Wider Black Sea area” was first used: it implied the involvement not only of the littoral states, but also of those that bordered them and were linked culturally, politically, and economically. As Tsantoulis notes, the BSEC then sought to avoid any division between the Western/Euro-Atlantic context and the former Soviet space, especially Russia (Tsantoulis, 2016, p. 113).

Around the same time, the German Marshall Fund introduced the concept of the Wider Black Sea Region: the concept developed by R. Asmus (Asmus, Dimitrov & Forbrig, 2004; Asmus, 2007) implied the creation of a zone for the implementation of the Euro-Atlantic strategy, which was not limited only to the littoral states, but extended to other regions. The region comprised all the littoral states (Russia, Ukraine, Türkiye, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Greece) and the states of the South Caucasus in view of the “Eurasian energy corridor” connecting the Euro-Atlantic community with the energy resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia (Asmus, 2007). What was

happening in the Black Sea did not concern only the Black Sea, but was perceived as global in nature (Tsantoulis, 2016, p. 114). The West initially constructed the Black Sea region not on a geographical basis, but in terms of the goals of the Euro-Atlantic strategy (Tsantoulis, 2016, p. 201). The region was seen as a key component of the West’s strategic periphery, located in the middle of its aspirations to project influence on the larger European space and the Greater Middle East,³ while the terms “Wider Black Sea region” or “Black Sea/Caspian region” were interchangeable.

In the Russian political science discourse after 2014, the concept of the Greater Mediterranean has emerged designating a geopolitical entity that unites the Black Sea space with the Mediterranean. On the practical level, this concept reflects the consequences and advantages of the processes of Crimea’s reunification with Russia, and on the theoretical level it has to explain the prospects and limits of Russia’s return to an active foreign policy in the Black Sea-Mediterranean and adjacent regions. The author of this concept is the renowned Moscow political scientist Ivan Chikharev, unfortunately deceased in 2023, who for a short period of time committed himself with Sevastopol State University, where he elaborated the very concept of the Greater Mediterranean in 2017–2019 (Stoletov et al., 2019; Chikharev, 2021a; 2021b).

In this context, the Black Sea region seems to be a certain nerve centre of the Greater Mediterranean region. Currently, a significant contribution to the development of this issue is being made under the guidance of D.A. Degterev (Degterev & Aghazada, 2023), A.A. Irkhin (Nechaev et al., 2019; Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2020), and others. The concept of

³ Asmus R., Jackson B. The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom // Hoover Institution. June 1, 2004. URL: <https://www.hoover.org/research/black-sea-and-frontiers-freedom> (accessed: 29.03.2023).

digital regional studies of the Greater Mediterranean, presented in 2018 by I. Chikharev and V. Brovko (Chikharev & Brovko, 2018), has become the basis of the project “Digital Regional Studies of the Greater Mediterranean,” realized at the Sevastopol State University in 2021–2023.

Thus, at least six geopolitical configurations of the Black Sea region can be singled out:

1) the Black Sea region as a region of seven littoral states;

- 2) the Wider Black Sea region as including the littoral states plus Azerbaijan and Armenia;
- 3) the Baltic-Black Sea region;
- 4) the Baltic-Black Sea-Caspian region;
- 5) the Black Sea-Caspian region;
- 6) the Black Sea region as a nerve node of the Greater Mediterranean.

Western geopolitical configurations of the region are determined by the logic of security. I. Tsantoulis’ idea is to summarize them in the form of diagrams presented in Figure 1.

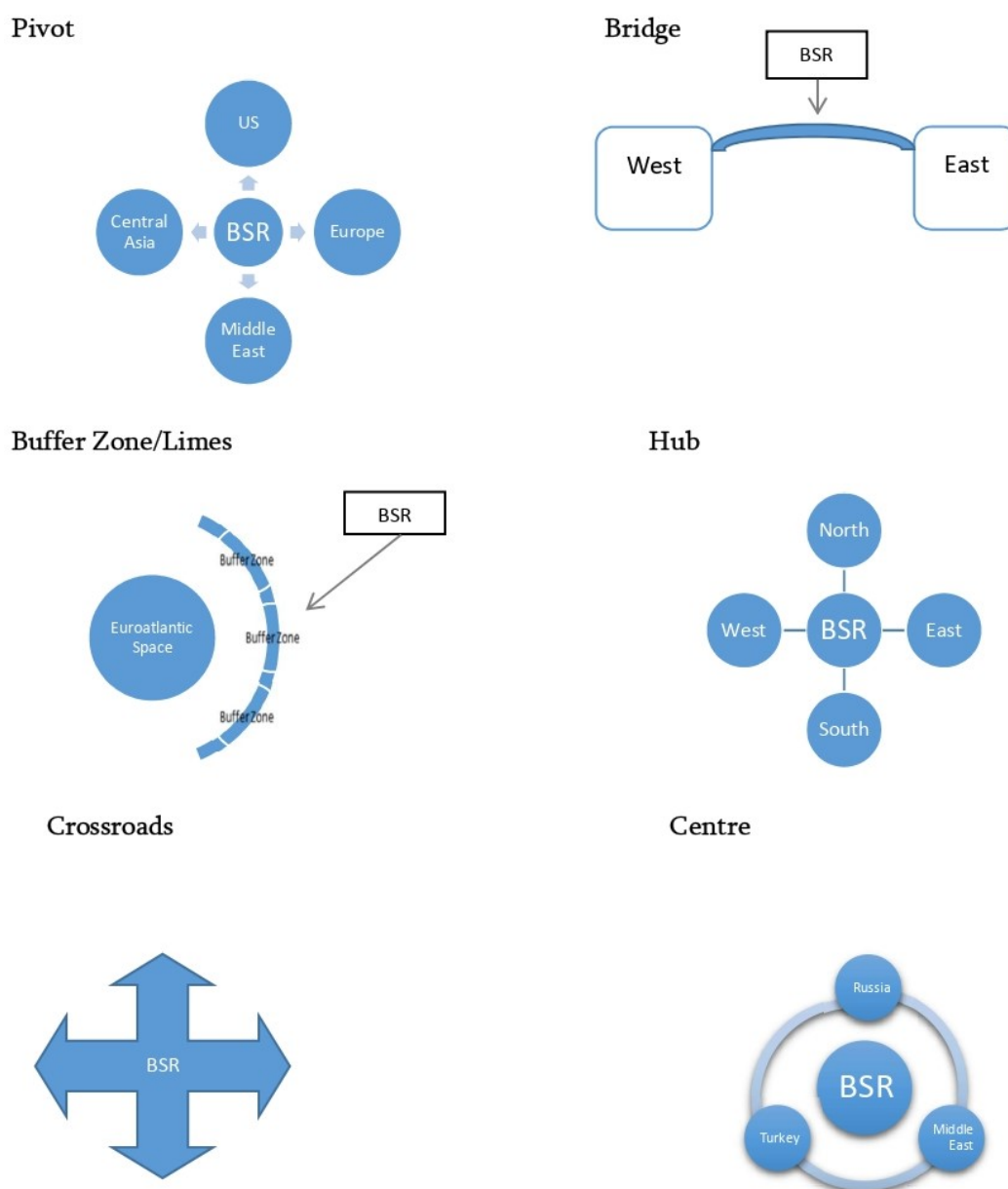


Figure 1. Spatial representations of the Black Sea region’s geopolitical configurations in Western concepts
 Source: (Tsantoulis, 2016, p. 203).

Thus, from the point of view of the logic of external subjects, the Black Sea region is considered a geopolitical axis (a space located in the centre of a Mackinder-type ‘geopolitical heartland’ as well as a civilizational fault line (Aydin, 2004, p. 5)), a bridge between the West and the East (the logic of cooperation in the fields of energy, security, economy and culture), a buffer zone (cordon sanitaire to protect the great powers from barbarian invasions (Cioculescu, 2013, pp. 1–2); the border between order and chaos (Walters, 2004; Tunander, 1997), hub (political and logistical one for projecting power into crisis-prone regions outside the Black Sea basin (Lesser, 2007)), crossroads and focus of interests (geographically located at the intersection of European, Eurasian and Middle Eastern security spaces).⁴

A significant contribution to the understanding of the geopolitics of the Black Sea region through its genesis and cycles has been made by the Crimean researcher A.R. Nikiforov. Two concepts of his theory are noteworthy. Firstly, in the Black Sea region, Crimea is a key space for controlling the Northern Black Sea region, while at the same time the Black Sea straits are critical for controlling the Southern Black Sea region. The imperial spaces in the region seek to control both points — Crimea and the Straits — simultaneously. Despite the initial simplicity of this thesis, it hides a modern formula for peace and stability in the region, which largely explains the logic of Turkish foreign policy and its search for condominiums with Russia, which we will discuss below. Secondly, the researcher identifies four phases of the Black Sea region development cycle.

1. The invasion of a non-regional geopolitical subject into the Black Sea region

⁴ “This is an extremely important and sensitive area on the edge between the Heartland and Rimland, with enormous natural resources and strategically important transport and energy corridors. Both today and in the future, control of the region actually means control of all of Eurasia” (Goncharenko, 2005, p. 9).

creates two forces and systemic trends in the development of the region: maritime and land ones. These two forces interact in both peaceful and confrontational spaces (8th — 5th centuries B.C. — 3rd — 5th centuries A.D.: confrontation and synthesis of the Hellenic-Scythian worlds, the balance of which was disrupted by the great migration of peoples).

2. Synthesis of the geopolitical opponents or their absorption by a third force (early 7th century — mid-13th centuries), extending its power to the entire region. This third force is trying to absorb the entire region by controlling the Black Sea straits and the Crimean peninsula. Without control over the straits and the peninsula, any hegemony is either impossible or turns out to be unstable (Byzantine power, which is replaced by the Ottoman Empire — until Russia reaches the shores of Crimea — the Black Sea as the Sultan’s harem).

3. The complete or partial absorption of the Black Sea region by a world empire up to its peripheralization, which entailed its stabilization through the freezing of the conflicts and its unification (Byzantine and Ottoman periods, second half of the 13th century — the end of the 20th century).

4. Disintegration of the region through weakening and fragmentation of the imperial space. Physically, this has taken the form of the explosive growth of political entities within the region and, as a consequence, the fragmentation of the coastline (late 20th century, first decade of the 21st century). The conditions for the first stage of the cycle are being prepared (Nikiforov, 2008, pp. 61–62).

To date, the actors operating in the Black Sea region can be divided into three groups:

1) world powers — USA, Russia, EU, China;

2) regional powers, represented primarily by Türkiye, which is striving to join the circle of great world powers;

3) weaker actors: Ukraine, Georgia, as well as other states which are objects of the policy

from a part of the first and second group; and international organizations: BSEC, NATO, Collective Security Treaty Organization, the European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Commonwealth of Independent States, Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, Commonwealth of Democratic Choice (Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2021, p. 501).

Türkiye and the Black Sea Region

After the signing of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, the regional stability of the Black Sea region has been largely built on the relations between Russia and Türkiye, with a short break for the period after the Crimean War and the abolition of its results by Prince A. M. Gorchakov (1870–1871).

The Ukrainian researcher Ye. Gaber notes that the logic of Turkish foreign policy in the Black Sea region is formed by two historical traumas.

Firstly, these are the Russian-Ottoman wars of the 18th — 19th centuries, which proved Russia's dominance in the region. They also created the myth of "Great Russia," whose interests "must be taken into account" in this part of the world, and whose overwhelming power forces regional states to cooperate with Russia.

Secondly, the so-called Sèvres syndrome refers to Türkiye's deep-seated mistrust of Western countries, which is etched in the collective memory as a threat of being betrayed and weakened by the West. This mistrust still shapes the political rhetoric of Turkish nationalist and conservative parties, including those in the governing coalition. In many cases, these sentiments are reinforced by strong anti-American, anti-Western and nationalist sentiments in Turkish society or find support in Kremlin-initiated concepts of Eurasianism. Supporters of closer cooperation with Russia gained more formal influence by occupying a number of positions in the Turkish government (Gaber, 2020, p. 44).

Although Gaber's article is ideologically loaded and expresses the worldview of the current Ukrainian political elite, it can be noted that these conclusions, although reasonable in the paradigm of Kiev's behavior in the Black Sea region, need to be supplemented with the following ideas to make the picture complete.

1. Despite the existing relationship between the Sèvres syndrome and the twelve Russian-Turkish wars, Russia has never posed a real existential threat to destroy Türkiye: on the contrary, St. Petersburg and Moscow twice saved Turkish statehood from complete destruction in 1833 and 1920.

2. The integration of Türkiye and Russia into the world (Western) capitalist economy as its periphery and semi-periphery has required catch-up modernization, which in its turn puts the states in a permanent dependent and vulnerable economic, financial and technological position, which affects the political psychology of the elites seeking to join the Western advanced development centre.

3. Both powers lack experience in integrating into the East-centric (Sino-centric) system of international relations and the world economy, the centre of which is now being formed in East and Southeast Asia.

However, there is an interesting plot here. The Ottoman Empire, as it developed, influenced the geo-economic transformations of the whole world, including stimulating the development of navigation and new geographical discoveries. After the conquest of Constantinople, the Ottoman Turks became the dominant naval power in the Eastern Mediterranean and gained control of a key point on the Silk Road; in the middle of the 15th century they made Christian Venice their ally, ensuring they have complete control of the Mediterranean Sea. The price of spices went through the roof, and European states, unwilling to give money to the Turks and Venetians, were forced to look for alternative routes to India, bypassing the Ottoman Empire (Friedman, 2016, p. 60).

If we accept this thesis, then the economic interaction of the Chinese and Ottoman imperial spaces contributed to new geographical discoveries and, ultimately, the emergence of the United States on the political map of the world. However, the issue of global influence and expansion of China, which woke up after a long period of isolationism, when neither Russia nor Türkiye, by and large, emerged as great Eurasian empires and powers, has posed new challenges for the two elites to develop and see their future in a rapidly changing world. In 1436 China, due to the land threat emanating from the north, abandoned the construction of ships suitable for navigation, and concentrated on meeting the land threat (Kennedy, 2018, p. 33). The Ottomans took Constantinople in 1453, and in 1523, the *Moscow — the Third Rome* concept by the monk Philotheus appeared which provided a powerful ideological impetus for the emergence and formation of the Russian Empire.

4. The Turkish researcher M. Aydin identifies two fundamental characteristics of the national elite: a siege mentality and a general sense of insecurity, which are the result of many factors, the most striking of which is the Sèvres syndrome mentioned above. Another characteristic shaping the psychology of the Turkish elite, according to Aydin, is the feeling of geopolitical loneliness, which forces Türkiye to constantly overcome it through various kinds of foreign policy combinations (Aydin & Triantaphyllou, 2010; Aydin, 2020).

5. The Kurdish factor is a core one for every Turkish elite, regardless of party affiliation, and is perceived as one of internal policy, but at the same time it is cross-border and forms Ankara's constant assertive policy against neighbouring states: Northern Iraq and Syria, and also forces them to negotiate and coordinate their actions with the power politics of its regional competitors: Syria, Iraq and Iran. The great powers are using the Kurdish factor not only to weaken and construct Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy, but also against its regional opponents. A paradoxical situation is

created when strong extra-regional powers use the Kurds to maintain and strengthen their influence in the vast region of the Middle East, at the same time this factor is an aspect of rapprochement and coordination of the actions of competing Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

6. For a long imperial period, the Black Sea and, therefore, the Black Sea region, was a closed internal space of the Ottoman Empire. With the expansion of the Western powers, France in 1535 and England in 1602 gained the right to do business in all the seas of the empire except the Black Sea. The principle that the Black Sea straits should be closed to all foreign states was abandoned in relation to Russia in 1774 under Article 11 of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, after which the restrictions began to be relaxed in relation to merchant ships and other countries (Akgün, 2003, p. 47). However, this was only for merchant ships. The logic of the Black Sea basin being closed to warships lasted longer and generally was reflected in the future models of the functioning of the Black Sea straits. This logic of closure and the “backyard” of the Black Sea region remains relevant for the Turkish leadership and largely explains modern approaches in Russian-Turkish relations.

Geography Matters

Modern Turkish statehood emerged as a result of the World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920, the national liberation movement and the Peace of Lausanne of 1923. At that historical moment, it was a compromise between the desire of the collective West to make a small puppet state from the Ottoman Empire and the struggle of the Turkish people together with the generals for the living space of the new national Turkish state. And in the 20th century Türkiye had to manoeuvre between the West and the East: between the Sèvres syndrome and the “Russian threat,” overcoming the feeling of loneliness and the state of siege of the Turkish elite. However, after the collapse of the USSR, the situation

changed, and Ankara has moved to an assertive foreign policy. Against the backdrop of Russia's temporary weakness, Türkiye is actively regaining its imperial spheres of influence in the Black Sea region. Moreover, Russia's "bogging down" in the fields of the special military operation in Ukraine only strengthens Türkiye's position in the region, but, on the other hand, it threatens to collapse the *Turkish balance*, as the US pressure on the possibility of the NATO navy's access into the Black Sea is increasing. In other words, the excessive weakening of Russia is disadvantageous for Türkiye in the logic of the *Turkish balance*; otherwise Ankara will not be able to balance the West in the Black Sea region at the expense of Russia.

The ratio of the coastline to the land border of modern Türkiye is almost one to three in favour of the maritime border. Moreover, the total coastline of Türkiye is 7 200 km long, and its Black Sea coastline is 1 700 km long (in comparison, the Mediterranean coastline is 1 707 km long, the Aegean one — 2 805 km long⁵).

At present, the Republic of Türkiye is a regional power in the Black Sea and Black Sea-Mediterranean region with sectoral leadership at the global level. Its project activities in the Black Sea region are correlated with the stages of internal development of Türkiye itself and with the impact of external factors. Two internal stages can be distinguished: the first one was before the *Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP)* came to power; the second has lasted from 2002 to the present. External factors form four stages of the Türkiye's project activities in the Black Sea region:

1) 1990–2002: Türkiye's active integration policy towards the region coordinated with its Western allies, especially the United States

(BSEC as a formal example and "Great Turan" as an unformalized project);

2) 2002–2008: from the AKP's coming to power to the five-day Russian-Georgian conflict: Russian-Turkish rapprochement and the development of the Russian-Turkish-Ukrainian *Black Sea Harmony* naval initiative as opposed to the US *Active Endeavor* operation in the Mediterranean Sea;

3) 2008–2014: establishment and promotion of the *Turkish Platform for Stability and Cooperation* in the Caucasus and rapprochement between Türkiye and Russia;

4) 2014 — to date: implementation of a more open and assertive policy in the Black Sea region, partly coordinated with the West to contain Russia after the reunification with Crimea in 2014 (Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2021).

It seems that the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 is a logical continuation of the fourth stage, but they must be separated chronologically.

The assessment of the Turkish position on the reunification of Crimea with Russia has two dimensions, which reflect opposing points of view, both within the framework of political realism.

The first is that Türkiye was not interested in this process, since it had invested in Crimea and the Crimean Turks for three decades (Avatkov & Gudev, 2021, p. 350).

The second is that Türkiye was interested in the reunification of Crimea with Russia due to the fact that all other options were much worse. For example, the question is what has changed for Türkiye and Russia after the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca from the point of view of dividing spheres of influence in the Black Sea? The answer is "nothing." At the same time the establishment of American naval bases on the territory of Crimea would be inevitable after the ousting of the Russian Black Sea Fleet from Crimea, and this completely overturned the regional balance and logic of the Black Sea as the "harem of the Sultan," which, after 1774,

⁵ According to the data presented in: CIA World Factbook: Turkey // CIA. URL: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkey-turkiye/> (accessed: 28.03.2023). See also: (Stanchev et al., 2011).

Türkiye was willing to share only with Russia. Finally, if the US presence in the Black Sea region expands, Türkiye will lose its place in the Western alliances as the mentor of Western interests and the main beneficiary.

Both research positions can be synthesized to explain the motivation of the Turkish political elite when emotional interests within the framework of the concept of the “Turkic world” contradict national interests in the field of real politics. In March 2014, the Turkish elite of the ruling *Justice and Development Party* encountered such a political dialectic and predictably chose the national interests and immediately established a new balance with Russia in the Black Sea region. Between 2014 and 2022, there were balance shifts in Russian-Turkish relations: in 2020, the 44-day Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict strengthened Türkiye’s position in the Transcaucasia as in essence, the Turks are returning to the region where they had been absent for 100 years.

With the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, the Ukrainian geopolitical space became the centre of Russian-Turkish interaction in building mutual Russian-Turkish balances. Before 2014 the Ukrainian coastline was 2 782 km long, after 2014 it became 2 032 km long; in 2023, after the Sea of Azov became a Russian inland sea, the length of the Ukrainian coastline decreased by another 1 000 km, and the length of the Russian Black Sea and Azov coastline increased by 1 800 km compared to the period from 1991 to 2014.⁶ In case of ousting of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation from Crimea in 2014, it would obviously trigger a domino effect of full expelling of the Russian Federation from the Black Sea — this explains the logic of the foreign policy decisions of V.V. Putin.

In historical retrospect, there is experience when the space of modern Ukraine was a zone of intense competition between the Russian and Ottoman Empires; Türkiye then took the

Ukrainian lands as its economic periphery, trying to use the Ukrainian black soils to overcome the crisis of the timar system: the first serious clashes between the Russians and the Ottomans took place on the territory of modern Ukraine during the Second Russian-Turkish war (1672–1681); in the middle of the 17th century, the inclusion of part of Ukraine into the Russian state led to new contradictions, when individual representatives of the Ukrainian Cossack elite, fighting against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and later Russia, sought the support of the Crimean Khanate and thus of the Ottoman Empire; but the economic reckoning of the Ottoman authorities for Podolia and other Ukrainian lands, which were then, as Ukrainian researchers of the twentieth century called them, “the Ruin,” did not come true. It was necessary to restore the destroyed and depopulated country, which did not attract the Ottoman Empire, weakened by recent wars and internal strife (Oreshkova, 2003, p. 22).

Subsequently, the geopolitical space of modern Ukraine has repeatedly become a battlefield between the Ottoman and Russian empires, which is an important aspect for understanding the modern policy of the Turkish leadership towards the Ukrainian space.

When the special military operation in Ukraine started, there was a complex, multifaceted system of checks and balances between Türkiye and Russia in some key regions: Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the Black Sea region, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East. In every contradiction, existing in these regions Türkiye and Russia are on different sides of the conflict resolution. Objectively, the special military operation limited Russia’s capabilities in these bilateral balances and increased the role of Ankara. In the Black Sea region, there are located all the frozen and unfrozen conflicts (Transnistria, Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia), in which Türkiye is either balancing or opposing Russia. The situation is similar in other key regions of their interaction. As a result Russia and Türkiye are

⁶ According to the data presented in: (Stanchev et al., 2011; Krylenko, Krylenko & Aleinikov, 2019).

forced to solve the most important political and geopolitical issues together.

At the national level, despite the secret character of Turkish doctrinal documents, it is possible to identify two concepts of Turkish foreign policy that significantly affect the Black Sea region: the Turkic World (*Türk dünyası*) and the Blue Motherland (*Mavi Vatan*) concept of maritime policy that is relatively recent. Publicly R.T. Erdoğan demonstrates his support for both in every possible way. If the concept of the Turkic world actually pits Russia and Türkiye both in the post-Soviet space and in the space of “deep” Russia, outlining the latter’s sphere of influence in the South and North Caucasus and Central Asia and claims on the actual territory of the Russian Federation, then the maritime expansion outlined in the Blue Motherland, takes into account the interests of the Russian Federation in the Northern Black Sea region, formulating the sphere of Türkiye’s national interests in the Southern and Central Black Sea region and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Since the beginning of the special military operation, Türkiye has been actively maintaining relations and cooperation with both Russia and Ukraine. It has intensified economic cooperation with Russia and military-technical cooperation with Ukraine. Moreover, Türkiye’s has taken the leading place in military-technical supplies to Ukraine and one of the first places in trade turnover with Russia.

The special military operation has turned Türkiye, which has been dependent on arms imports for decades but nevertheless actively invested in the military-industrial complex, into a major arms exporter. According to SIPRI, in the period of 2018–2022 Turkish arms exports increased by 69% compared to the period of 2013–2017 (Table 1), 80% of the country’s needs are provided by the Turkish military-industrial complex, while in 2004 this figure was only 20%. In 2022, arms exports to Ukraine amounted to 23% of Türkiye’s total military exports, which is more than 11 times higher

than in 2021. The volume of Turkish arms export amounted to 3.4% of the total arms supplies to Ukraine by all countries of the world (Table 2), which ensured Türkiye’s 6th place in the world after the USA, Poland, Germany, Great Britain and the Czech Republic.⁷

Table 1

Dynamics of SIPRI Trend-Indicator Values (TIVs) of Turkish Arms Exports by Country in 2021–2022, in millions of SIPRI TIVs

Country	2021	2022	Total
Bangladesh	25	16	41
Hungary	3	12	15
Kazakhstan	0	4	4
Kyrgyzstan	1	12	13
Philippines	0	43	43
Poland	0	8	8
Qatar	92	103	195
Turkmenistan	131	0	131
UAE	83	82	165
Ukraine	8	91	98
TOTAL (all the countries)	438	398	836

Source: compiled by the authors based on data from: Arms Transfers Database. Importer / Exporter TIV Tables // SIPRI. URL: <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/> (accessed: 29.03.2023).

Table 2

Main Arms Exporters to Ukraine in 2021–2022, in millions of SIPRI TIVs

Country	2021	2022	Total
Czech Republic	0	116	116
Germany	0	297	297
Poland	3	451	454
Türkiye	8	91	98
United Kingdom	0	276	276
USA	20	917	937

Source: compiled by the authors based on data from: Arms Transfers Database. Importer / Exporter TIV Tables // SIPRI. URL: <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/> (accessed: 29.03.2023).

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute *Turkstat*, in 2022 Russia came out on top among importers, and the share of Russian

⁷ Wezeman P., Gadon J., Wezeman S. Trends in International Arms Transfers // SIPRI. March, 2023. URL: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf (accessed: 29.03.2023).

imports amounted to 16.1% of the total, while in 2021 it was 10.7%; in financial terms, the volume of Russian imports in 2022 more than doubled compared to 2021 (Table 3). Turkish exports to Russia almost doubled in the same period, reaching the same level as in 2014 (Table 4).⁸

Table 3

**Top of Countries Importing from Türkiye
in 2013–2014 and 2020–2022, %**

Rank (2022)	Country	Share in total imports				
		2013	2014	2020	2021	2022
1	Russia	10.0	10.1	8.1	10.7	16.2
2	China	9.7	10.2	10.5	11.9	11.4
3	Germany	9.8	9.4	9.9	8.0	6.6
4	Switzerland	3.8	2.0	3.5	1.1	4.2
5	USA	5.1	5.4	5.3	4.8	4.2
6	Italy	5.2	5.2	4.2	4.3	3.9

Source: compiled by the authors according to the data from: Foreign Trade Statistics, June 2022 // Turkstat. URL: <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-June-2022-45541&dil=2> (accessed: 29.03.2023).

Table 4

**Top of Countries Exporting to Türkiye
in 2013–2014 and 2020–2022, %**

Rank (2022)	Country	Share in total exports				
		2013	2014	2020	2021	2022
1	Germany	9.2	9.8	9.4	8.6	8.3
2	USA	4.1	4.2	6.0	6.5	6.6
3	Iraq	8.0	7.9	5.4	4.9	5.4
4	United Kingdom	5.7	6.1	6.6	6.1	5.1
5	Italy	4.6	4.5	4.8	5.1	4.9
6	Spain	2.8	3.0	3.9	4.3	3.8
7	France	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.0	3.8
8	Russia	4.5	3.7	2.7	2.6	3.7

Source: compiled by the authors according to the data from: Foreign Trade Statistics, June 2022 // Turkstat. URL: <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-June-2022-45541&dil=2> (accessed: 29.03.2023).

Such a policy may seem inconsistent and contradictory at first glance, but it has deep foundations and is the most consistent with

Turkish geography and Turkish national interests.

This foreign policy strategy shows that Türkiye is playing out a kind of the British balance, but methodologically different. It found itself between opposing forces that are formed, among other things, by the British balance: Arabs and Jews, Persians and Arabs, Persians and Jews, Sunnis and Shi'ites, Kurds and all others, including Turks. In these opposing pairs, the Turks themselves turn out to be victims (objects), but the geopolitical position allows Türkiye, when manoeuvring, to become a beneficiary of the British balance, which is not realized by Ankara. Together with the West, it balances Russia, China and Iran in the Black Sea region; with Russia, it balances the West, while receiving maximum economic dividends. Such a mechanism can be referred to as the *Turkish balance*.

At the same time, the West, through Türkiye, balances Russia and China in Central Asia, Russia and Iran in the Wider Black Sea region; and balances Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and North Africa.

This mechanism of the Turkish balance in action could be described in three components:

1) balancing act between world and regional powers;

2) integration into the strategies and balances of stronger world powers in order to achieve a regional equilibrium that is as beneficial as possible for Türkiye;

3) achieving dominance through the first two mechanisms in regions critical to Ankara.

The goal of the Turkish balance in the Black Sea region is to maintain the borders unchanged after the collapse of the USSR by balancing Russia and entering into a state of flexible competition with it, its rivals and allies and thus achieving the balance and status quo that existed after the collapse of the USSR.

The grain deal, Türkiye as a mediator in the negotiations between Ukraine and Russia,

⁸ Foreign Trade Statistics, June 2022 // Turkstat. URL: <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-June-2022-45541&dil=2> (accessed: 29.03.2023).

the Istanbul Canal, the closure of the Black Sea straits to all warships as a tool to increase Türkiye's influence in the world and to promote geopolitical and geo-economic interests are examples of Ankara's successful strategy. A dialectical view of this methodology of the Turkish elite to increase Türkiye's role in the world as a world power may indicate that Türkiye uses Russia's military-political activity while simultaneously countering it, and this activity itself allows Ankara to increase its geopolitical status, bypassing the factor of limited resources for achieving the status of a world power. Meanwhile, Türkiye is actively using Western expansion, also opposing its national interests to it. The Turkish balance works at the intersection of these two opposing vectors.

Conclusion

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Türkiye's foreign policy strategy in the Black Sea region is being implemented within the following system of coordinates:

1) maintaining the status quo with the established borders of 1991 and countering the violation of this situation by any powers;

2) keeping the Montreux Convention as an imperative for the control of the Black Sea straits and at the same time expanding the national component of influence on the regime of the Black Sea straits through the possible launch of the Istanbul Canal;

3) applying the logic of the Turkish balance, where Russia, China and Iran are balanced with the help of the West, and the West is balanced with the support of Russia. Such a balance makes it possible, among other things, to raise the level of subjectivity of Türkiye itself in regional and global processes, making R.T. Erdoğan's slogan "The world is bigger than five" a reality;

4) the division of spheres of influence with Russia in the Black Sea region, which is based on the logic of control over two key spaces —

the Black Sea Straits and the Crimean peninsula.

At the present stage, the Russo-Turkish relations have a number of characteristics.

Firstly, the competition and cooperation between Ankara and Moscow under R.T. Erdoğan and V.V. Putin, whose political regimes are currently more similar than different, are not black and white, but have grey shades, which so far it suits both sides. Such a state of checks and balances is possible only if there is a historical balance of power that has developed over a long period of time at different levels of interaction between the two powers.

Secondly, the solution of all difficult problems and bilateral contradictions — geographically from Syrian Idlib to the South Caucasus, on Türkiye's claims of influence on the Turkic territories of Russia, on Russia's support for the Kurdish national movement, and so on — is consciously postponed to the future.

Thirdly, in bilateral Russo-Turkish relations, the real contradictions between Türkiye and Russia are resolved not through the activities of political institutions, but through the personal relations of the two presidents, which is very important, as political institutions have been replaced by personal trusting relations between the two state leaders. In this context, the "Erdoğan factor," as well as the "Putin factor," are the core of bilateral Turkish-Russian relations, and it follows that if one of the leaders leaves, it will likely provoke the collapse of the existing complex and multifaceted system of equilibrium, which allows the two leaders to balance on the brink of crisis and cooperation at the same time.

The special military operation of Russia in Ukraine has objectively boosted Türkiye's subjectivity in the Black Sea region, giving Ankara the opportunity to gain tactical initiative both in critical regions of interaction between Russia and Türkiye, and in bilateral

Russian-Turkish relations, but the very backbone of the Turkish balance will make the Republic of Türkiye to look for balancing act, which does not prevent it from getting impressive geo-economic and geopolitical dividends from a partner being temporary in trouble.

The nearest future will show whether Russia and Türkiye are able to maintain their de facto condominium over the Black Sea region, the central element of which is the Montreux

Convention. Since, according to Nikiforov's formula, complete imperial control over the Black Sea region requires control of both the straits and the Crimean peninsula, Ankara and Moscow again find themselves connected by invisible threads to preserve their sovereignty when, on the one hand, the USA strive to reset its unipolarity, and on the other hand, China strives to realize its Belt and Road Initiative. The Black Sea waters are where these two globalization projects are currently colliding.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 01.04.2023

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 05.08.2023

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 27.12.2023

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