

THE BLACK SEA CRISIS AND TURKEY'S ROLE

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ABSTRACT

That of the Black Sea has been for years now in an established way one of the main strategic regions in the world, due to the numerous interests that the major world powers have towards it; the coexistence of Russia, Turkey (and therefore NATO) gives rise to a difficult-to-manage coexistence that has led to the outbreak of numerous conflicts in the area from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the present, such as those that have seen Russia and Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Russia and Ukraine against each other. The current phase is marked, of course, by the ongoing conflict between precisely the latter two countries, which, after an initial phase of warfare erupted in 2014, have returned to arms since Feb. 24, 2022 after the invasion initiated by Moscow against the neighboring state.

This situation marked by chaos and conflict turns out to be difficult to read for the future, as the different turns it could take would lead to completely opposite situations that could upset the future not only of the region but of the entire world. The purpose of this article is precisely to try to analyze the different possible scenarios, which are the most likely and what they would lead to should they occur.

Keywords: Black Sea, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine.

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

After months of tensions and threats, Russia on Feb. 24, 2022, kicked off its invasion of Ukraine, either by penetrating the eastern part of the neighboring state or by moving up from Crimea, the peninsula still legally part of Ukraine but now de facto under Moscow's control after its occupation in 2014. Right from the start, around the world, leaders of major countries attacked Moscow for the deliberate invasion and threatened heavy sanctions. Zelensky declared martial law and announced a general mobilization of the entire able-bodied population to arms¹ .

On paper, the Russian army obviously seemed to enjoy an overwhelming advantage over the Ukrainian army in both numbers and equipment, but Kiev was able to benefit from military aid from Western countries worth billions of dollars from the outset, but the ability of the Ukrainian troops to contain the invasion so effectively did not depend on this alone: many of the soldiers had gained valuable experience during the 2014 fighting. Moreover, the Ukrainian apparatus had undergone major reforms since the annexation of Crimea, thanks in part to dedicated defense spending that has increased exponentially in recent years. The rapid growth of the military probably saw its most shining example on April 13, when the Moskva, Russia's main warship and flag bearer of the Black Sea Fleet, was struck off Odessa and then sank the following day² .

One of the most immediate consequences of the outbreak of the conflict was, predictably, the mass flight from the country of part of the population. Within about a month of the invasion, some four million citizens had left Ukraine: this represented the largest exodus of refugees in Europe since World War II. The vast majority of the fleeing population found refuge in Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic.

Another consequence of the invasion implemented by Russia was the response of major countries that immediately applied sanctions mainly economic and financial: for example, the U.S. imposed sanctions on 278 members of the Russian Parliament, in addition, major Russian banks were excluded from the Swift international payment system³.

The United Kingdom also excluded major Russian banks from its

¹ "Encyclopedia Britannica", History of Ukraine, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/History>

² "Encyclopedia Britannica", History...

³ "US Department of State", The Impact of Sanctions and Export Controls on the Russian Federation, October 20, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-impact-of-sanctions-and-export-controls-on-the-russian-federation/>.

financial system and froze the assets of all the country's banks while the EU cut Moscow off from the financial and trade markets and restricted entry to several diplomats and businessmen, going so far as to target 654 individuals and 52 entities only the day after the clashes began⁴.

The Kremlin responded to this sanctions package with the main weapon it could use: by restricting gas supplies. As is well known, most European countries are largely dependent on Russian gas imports for their needs, and this has created quite a few headaches for various governments when they have had to turn elsewhere for supplies. Data say that in 2021 Moscow was guaranteeing EU countries 40 percent of their gas needs, while this figure as of August 2022 has dropped to 17 percent⁵.

TURKEY'S ROLE AS MEDIATOR

Since the start of the invasion, Turkey has distinguished itself as the main mediating country, both because it was probably the only state around the Black Sea that could bear the burden of this commitment and because it regularly maintains fruitful relations with both Russia and Ukraine, despite differences in views on many key issues. The most influential and visible move made by Ankara during the first phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was undoubtedly the decision to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, as provided for in the 1936 Montreux Convention, which stipulates that the Turkish government may decide to prevent passage through the straits in the event of war to ships of belligerent countries, without prejudice to their right of transit to return to their bases in the Black Sea⁶.

Such a closure had been desired by the Ukrainian government since the moments immediately following the start of the invasion, until Ankara officially recognized the ongoing state of war on Feb. 28 and proceeded

⁴ "European Commission", Sanctions adopted following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, 2022, https://finance.ec.europa.eu/eu-and-world/sanctions-restrictivemeasures/sanctions-adopted-following-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine_e.

⁵ "European Council", Infographic - Where does the EU's gas come from?, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-gassupply/#:~:text=In%20August%202022%2C%20Russia's%20share,the%20US%2C%20Qatar%20and%20Nigeria>.

⁶ Valeria Talbot, Turchia: la nuova politica estera alla prova dell'Ucraina, [Turkey: new foreign policy tested by Ukraine], "ISPI", June 6, 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/turchia-la-nuova-politica-estera-alla-provadellucraina-35279>.

to implement the convention. An important success of Turkey as mediator was certainly the trilateral meeting held on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum held on March 10, in which the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia and Ukraine participated⁷. Subsequently, the agreement reached for the safe passage of ships containing grain through the straits, brokered by Ankara and the United Nations, was also very significant⁸. This active role of Turkey within the conflict was certainly appreciated by Western institutions; since the beginning of the invasion, the Turkish government has hosted heads of state and government of Greece, Israel, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands. Although some fear persists that the Turkish financial system could serve as a conduit through which Moscow could evade imposed economic sanctions, so far the West has looked on with satisfaction at the military and diplomatic support Turkey has lent to Ukraine⁹. As for a domestic picture of the Turkish country, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has certainly further worsened a situation that was already decidedly precarious in itself: the onset of the clashes and the consequent rise in global commodity and hydrocarbon prices has significantly impacted the Turkish economy, which was already severely tried by the pandemic and unhappy economic policies. All of this for a country like Turkey, which is largely dependent on energy imports for its domestic needs, has led to an increase in the trade deficit, a long-standing problem for the Turkish government, as well as a surge in consumer prices. The inflation rate rose from 21.3 percent in November 2021 to 70 percent in April 2022, the highest level since Erdogan's party came to government in November 2002¹⁰. As if that were not enough, discontent within the country continues to grow over the loss of purchasing power and worsening living conditions for large sections of the population.

TURKISH INTERNAL SITUATION: THE RESULT OF THE ELECTIONS

Recep Tayyip Erdogan will be president of Turkey for the third time and

⁷ Klaus Wölfer, *The Black Sea and Turkey in focus*, "GIS Reports", April 20, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/black-sea/>.

⁸ Talbot, Turchia...

⁹ Emin Daskin, Dries Lesage, Hasan Yar, *The War in Ukraine and Turkey's Hedging Strategy between the West and Russia*, "Ghent Institute for International and European Politics", March 2022, <https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/8748234/file/8748240.pdf>, p. 5.

¹⁰ Talbot, Turchia...

for another five years. The outgoing president, 69, was reconfirmed in the second round of the presidential election, with a margin of about four percentage points over his challenger (52.1 percent against the 47.9 percent obtained by Kemal Kilicdaroglu, 74); a result in line with what the polls predicted, and one that establishes him as the longest-serving statesman in the history of the Turkish Republic, whose centenary falls this year. Never before has it been necessary to resort to a runoff to express the name of the winner of an election, and it is there for all to see that the opposition-exceptionally united-has achieved a considerable result, coming close to a historic feat¹¹. It was not enough, however, to succeed in ousting Erdogan, who was reappointed president despite everything: the responsibilities of the ruling class in February's devastating earthquake, the economic crisis, and galloping inflation. voters gave a great test of democracy. Turnout exceeded 85 percent, down slightly from the record first-round turnout in which it had been close to 90 percent, but still very high.

Beyond the enthusiasm for the victory, the start of Erdogan's third decade in power will be far from easy. Proof of this is the fact that since the announcement of his reelection the lira has hit a new low after losing 18 percent against the dollar and 18.5 percent against the euro in a year. On currency markets, the Turkish currency is suffering from fears of new interference by the head of state in central bank decisions. Despite 44 percent inflation, in fact, interest rates are being kept artificially low at the behest of the government, which wants to avoid slowing economic growth. Foreign exchange and gold reserves have thus shrunk to only \$17 billion. According to analysts, who expect further declines in the lira, current monetary policies are unsustainable and sooner or later the government will be forced to reverse course. Whether anything changes after the vote will first be seen from the appointments of key figures such as the treasury and finance ministries, and the central bank governor. The fears of Erdogan's critics are not just about the economy: in his 20 years in power, Turkey has slowly but surely slipped into authoritarianism. The president has consolidated his grip on the country through constitutional changes, the erosion of democratic institutions, including the judiciary and the media, and has jailed opponents and critics, many of them journalists. In his victory speech last night in Ankara, the president showed no hint of restraint and instead harshly attacked the opposition and the LGBTQ community. Both could be targeted by new human rights and free speech could be further eroded in the years to come.

¹¹ Alessia De Luca, Turchia: Erdogan ricomincia da tre, [Turkey: Erdogan starts again from three], "ISPPI", June 6, 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/turchia-erdogan-ricomincia-da-tre-130123>.

The result enshrined in the ballot box was what Russian President Vladimir Putin had hoped for-so it is not surprising that he was among the first to offer his congratulations to the Turkish leader¹² Erdogan is not alone in envisioning a more independent foreign policy in a more multipolar world: other countries, such as India and Brazil, are seeking to preserve ties with Washington when and where it is needed, while maintaining strategic distance where it is not needed. The difference is that Turkey is a member of NATO. As Atlantic Pact allies ponder the significance of Erdogan's victory, the first test for Turkey's 'new course' will have a specific date: in July at the NATO summit in Vilnius Turkey will be asked to lift its veto on Sweden's NATO membership.

TURKISH RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

For most of their history, the Russian and Ottoman Empires were rivals, having fought as many as 13 conflicts between 1568 and 1918. Subsequent to the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the main reasons for conflict were the straits, which were much coveted by Stalin, who tried to intimidate Turkey into gaining control over them; an attempt that was also unsuccessful due to the intervention of the United States, which granted economic and military support in 1947. In the wake of this relationship, Turkey completed its entry into the Atlantic Alliance in 1952.

With the end of the Cold War and a geopolitical phase marked by bipolarity, Ankara sought to broaden its diplomatic horizons, pushing into the Middle East, Russia and the post-Soviet countries, with the hope of reconnecting more closely with the various Turkish and Muslim minorities in Eastern Europe. Improved relations with Moscow have enabled the construction of the BlueStream, a pipeline linking the two countries and passing under the Black Sea; it was opened in 2002 and made Turkey one of Russia's main clients¹³. The situation became more complicated following the Arab Springs that broke out in 2011, as in Syria Ankara supported the rebels along with Western countries and those on the Gulf, while Moscow supported the government of Bashar al-Assad. In this context, the downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish military provoked a reaction from the Kremlin, which imposed heavy economic sanctions on Turkey.

¹² De Luca, Turchia: Erdogan...

¹³ Daskin, Lesage, Yar, The War in..., p. 1.

Regarding history with Ukraine, the connections between the two nations, or at any rate between the two territories, go back as far as the 15th century, when the Crimean Khanate became a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire, until the Russian conquest in 1783. The Tatars are the main ethnic group in Ukraine with Turkic origins even today. Due to the wars between the Russian and Ottoman Empires of 1877-1878 and then in the context of World War I, tens of thousands of Tatars migrated from Ukraine and Crimea to take refuge in Turkey¹⁴ The Tatars are also one of the reasons why Turkey promptly condemned the 2014 invasion of Crimea¹⁵ When Ukraine gained independence in 1991, Ankara immediately presented itself as inclined to dialogue; in fact, Ukraine is one of the founding countries of the BSEC, the regional organization that came into being thanks to Turkey's determined initiative. In the latest bilateral meeting between Turkish President Erdogan and Ukrainian President Zelensky, held on Feb. 3, 2022, it was stated that the value of trade between the two countries in 2021 increased by \$7.5 billion. The two states also signed a free trade agreement that aims to achieve a growth of \$10 billion within the next five years¹⁶ Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine and Turkey have expanded cooperation in the military sphere as well: as of 2019, Ankara has sold at least 20 Bayraktar TB2 combat drones, but the two countries are also engaged in cooperation regarding the construction of such weapons. On the humanitarian level, Turkey has taken in 58,000 Ukrainian refugees, and in addition, already during the first days of the conflict, the Turkish Red Crescent (the country's main humanitarian organization) and the government's Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD) sent materials such as tents, medicine, food, etc., and national fundraising campaigns were launched to donate to Ukraine. On March 24, French President Macron announced that France, Turkey and Greece would undertake a mission to evacuate civilians from the besieged city of Mariupol¹⁷ In any case, Ankara's collaborative policy toward Kiev should not be confused simply as a "Western" strategy of a member country of the Atlantic Alliance, but rather as an autonomous move to gain definite

¹⁴ Daskin, Lesage, Yar, *The War in...*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Wölfer, *The Black Sea...*

¹⁶ Daskin, Lesage, Yar, *The War in...*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Daskin, Lesage, Yar, *The War in...*, p. 3.

benefits, both economic and political. In short, Turkey's strategy seems to be that of a country that clearly intends to maintain good and fruitful relations with both belligerent states.

From the beginning, Ankara has condemned the invasion, including in the March 2 vote in the UN General Assembly, and supported the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, Turkey has not joined the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and European countries¹⁸ This is because Turkey's economy is already precarious enough on its own, without considering the damage caused by the conflict, and could not withstand any cut in natural gas or grain supplies, or an impact on the shaky balance in the Syrian context, which could cause a new influx of refugees¹⁹ Ankara is highly dependent on the strong economic and energy ties it has had for years with Russia, its main gas supplier (about 33 percent of imports in 2021) as well as its third largest trading partner, after Germany and China, with an interchange of \$34.7 billion (29 of which is given by imports, mainly energy).

The Russian country also guarantees Turkey a high flow of tourists: in fact, its visitors account for the largest share of Turkey's tourism sector (19 percent of the total in 2021). Recently, cooperation, as well as with Ukraine, has extended to the defense sector: in 2017 Ankara purchased the aforementioned Russian S-400 missile defense system²⁰ In addition, Russia's state-owned nuclear energy company ROSATOM has been involved in the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant, which is scheduled to open during 2023. This power plant is set to be a source of pride and a symbol of productive bilateral cooperation during the 100th anniversary celebration of the birth of the Republic of Turkey²¹ Although cooperation between the two countries is countered by fierce competition in the major crisis theaters of the Mediterranean and Middle East, such as Syria and Libya, and Turkey's presence in the Atlantic Alliance dictates a certain amount of caution, Ankara cannot afford any definitive rifts with

¹⁸ Talbot, *Turchia...*

¹⁹ Thomas Clayton, Jim Zanotti, *Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Turkey's Response and Black Sea Access Issues*, "Congressional Research Institute", March 11, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11885>, p. 1.

²⁰ Talbot, *Turchia*

²¹ Wölfer, *The Black Sea*

Moscow in what appears to be a complicated asymmetrical relationship²². One stabilizing factor is certainly the mutual respect and long acquaintance between Turkish President Erdogan and Russian President Putin. Although both are well aware of the current difficulties as well as the centuries of wars and rivalries between their countries, this shared knowledge has seemed to prove more of an advantage than a burden in concluding bilateral relations characterized by thorny issues²³. At the same time, Turkey has no intention of spoiling its relations with Kiev; in addition to the collaborations successfully carried out in the military and economic fields, the motivations are also strictly geostrategic in nature: the territorial integrity of Ukraine is in fact absolutely crucial for Turkey with a view to maintaining a balance of forces in the Black Sea and containing Russia's influence and pressure in the region²⁴.

TURKISH RELATIONS WITH NATO AND THE EU

February 2022 marked the 70th anniversary of Turkey's entry into the Atlantic Alliance, but the celebrations have certainly not been of the highest profile; indeed, in recent years, there has been a deterioration in relations between Turkey and several other NATO members, which has had a negative spillover effect on the Alliance as a whole.

From Washington to Berlin, several Western capitals have shown concern about Turkey's estrangement from the West and, at the same time, its rapprochement with Russia. Turkish President Erdogan is often described in the Western press as a power-hungry autocrat who has abandoned the Western vision to embrace neo-Ottoman ambitions and has forged stronger ties with Putin²⁵. What might all this entail for the future? Judging both from the discourses brought forth by Turkey and its policies and strategies, there is no doubt that relations between Turkey and the West are not in the best of health. It is also true that, in most cases, these are not disagreements between Turkey and the Alliance in general, but issues between Ankara and individual member states. However, problems with member states

²² Talbot, Turchia...

²³ Wölfer, The Black Sea...

²⁴ Talbot, Turchia...

²⁵ Eleonora Ambrosetti Tafuro, Il doppio filo che lega la Turchia alla NATO, [The double thread that binds Turkey to NATO], "ISPI", June 24, 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/il-doppio-filo-che-lega-la-turchia-alla-nato35544>.

can only lead to problems with the Alliance as a whole; this is especially true for the United States. In fact, according to a parliamentary source, Turkey tends to indentify NATO with the U.S. and, as a result, most of the unresolved issues with the U.S., are considered to be NATO matters or ones that it should resolve anyway²⁶. This reading is also reflected in the analysis that many experts implement of the disparate NATO crises, such as the Turkish reluctance to consider positively the recent application of Sweden and Finland for membership (because of the two countries' support for the Kurdish cause) as they are concerned about Russia's behavior around the Black Sea. In this regard, the Turkish government seems willing to revise its positions only in exchange for certain concessions: the extradition, especially from Sweden, of members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Feto, both of which are considered to be terrorist organizations in Turkey; an end to the embargo on arms sales adopted by the two states; and an end to the support to the Syrian Kurdish forces of the People's Protection Units (YPG), which, from a Turkish perspective, are considered affiliated with the PKK²⁷. Other episodes of crisis included Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003: so beyond the albeit difficult relations with Sweden, Finland, and Cyprus, the real problem remains the relationship with Washington²⁸. These frictions with the West are among the main reasons for the rapprochement with Russia and the growing bilateral agreements; indeed, what Erdogan and Putin share is political language and this feeling of frustration with Western institutions.

The culmination of Turkish frustration, which came after problematic episodes such as Cyprus's entry into the European Union (which involved the Turkish decision to make the 2002 Berlin Plus agreement that would have deepened cooperation with Brussels practically null and void) and the positions taken by many European countries and the U.S. on the Armenian genocide or the Kurdish issue, is surely the reaction to the attempted coup in 2016. Indeed, this episode is yet another demonstration for the Turkish government of the total lack of solidarity from the West, which contrasts with Vladimir Putin's declared "unconditional support."

²⁶ Ambrosetti Tafuro, *Il doppio filo...*

²⁷ Talbot, *Turchia...*

²⁸ Ambrosetti Tafuro, *Il doppio filo...*

It is also not helped by the U.S. decision not to grant the extradition of Imam Fethullah Gülen, considered by Ankara as the main mastermind behind the attempted coup, and not to consider Feto as a terrorist organization; behaviors and decisions that only fuel distrust and deep resentment toward the alliance. A sentiment that, in public opinion, leads to the spread of the so-called “Sèvres syndrome” (from the treaty by which the partition of the Ottoman Empire was proposed after the Great War), a theory that dangerous internal and external enemies, the West first and foremost, conspire to weaken and subsequently partition the Turkish Republic. A theory that hints at Putin’s perceived encirclement by Western institutions

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²⁹ Ambrosetti Tafuro, *Il doppio filo*

be willing to sacrifice. The relationship between NATO and Turkey is thus marked by what is known as alliance dependency, i.e., the realization on both sides that an eventual separation would not be acceptable because they are too dependent on each other. The alternative is seen as simply worse: for NATO (and the EU) to move away from Turkey permanently in light of the current situation of open confrontation with Russia would not be rational³⁰. Thus, although the war in Ukraine seems to want to strengthen the values dimension in NATO, a good deal of pragmatism will essentially remain. The same is true for the Turkish government, which needs to preserve the balance between containing Russia in the Black Sea and maintaining good relations with Putin. Turkey's relationship with the West is summed up effectively by a survey conducted within the country in 2017 by the German Marshall Fund, which showed that only 13 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of NATO, but at the same time most said they wanted to stay there³¹.

POSSIBLE FUTURE SCENARIOS

Turkey has thus emerged as a key player during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict because of its very important mediation, which could also enhance its reputation on the international stage. On the other hand, the Turkish country knows how crucial it is to avoid the widening of the conflict, and it is of paramount importance to try to limit the damage caused by the conflict, which is already decidedly high now, amid difficulties in the energy and food sectors that have not failed to affect Turkish markets as well.

In managing this situation, after all, the Turkish government cannot disregard history: the Ottoman Empire's alliance with Germany in the context of World War I led to traumatic defeat and destruction. In 1931, Atatürk uttered the famous phrase "peace at home, peace in the world," summing up a Turkish foreign policy of restraint and moderation. During World War II, Turkey remained neutral, and the loyalty granted to NATO and the United States during the Cold War resulted in the loss of total political independence³².

³⁰ Ambrosetti Tafuro, *Il doppio filo...*

³¹ Ambrosetti Tafuro, *Il doppio filo...*

³² Daskin, Lesage, Yar, *The War in...*, p. 4.

The Turkish state does not like to take clear-cut positions in the case of conflicts between major powers, and it is therefore plausible that it will persevere with the hedging strategy in this case as well: this strategy involves a smaller country (in this case Turkey) moving in the middle between two opposing major powers or blocs of powers (in this case Russia and the West). Ankara certainly fears and consequently acts carefully with the two great powers, but at the same time it gains benefits from both one and the other. Recently, this is what Turkey has been doing; it has been swinging from one pole to the other, remaining tied to the Atlantic Alliance and continuing to cultivate cooperative relations with the European Union, but at the same time it has forged stronger ties with Moscow in several areas, such as economics, energy, military, and diplomatic³³. With regard to Turkey's future prospects within the Black Sea region, three scenarios could be analyzed: in the first, Ankara continues to skillfully juggle the protagonists and may even be able to obtain a truce in the short term, foreshadowing a formal peace agreement. In any case, there are plenty of obstacles that could derail such a peace process, such as a particularly bloody war campaign or the sabotage of Black Sea waters through the use of naval mines, as has already happened; or even statements such as those made by U.S. President Biden that tend to personally humiliate the opposing side, Vladimir Putin. Such attitudes could ruin efforts to mitigate, if not stop, the conflict. This is one scenario that is relatively plausible³⁴.

The second scenario sees a conflict inexorably prolonged, perhaps just after a failure of an attempt to conclude a lasting peace. Such a development could be accompanied by increased pressure from the United States on Turkey regarding the implementation of planned sanctions. Safe navigation in the Black Sea and the situation in Syria could be the Achilles' heel for Ankara. Thanks to agreements between Turkey and Russia, momentary stability is achieved around the Idlib region and Turkish aircraft can operate in Syria against Kurdish rebels. The fact that the latter are supported by the Americans would only amplify the confusion about who is an enemy and who is a friend and where. Even just one of these factors could lead to the collapse of today's fragile balance. To date, this scenario seems the most likely³⁵.

In the third scenario, Turkey and the Black Sea region in general find

³³ Daskin, Lesage, Yar, *The War in...*, pp. 2-3.

³⁴ Wölfer, *The Black Sea...*

³⁵ Wölfer, *The Black Sea...*

themselves in a context of expanded warfare, perhaps even global warfare with use of unconventional weapons, where there is no choice but to pick one faction. The effects of a deeper economic war against Russia would affect the development not only of Moscow, but also of the West and North African countries. Despite Ankara's deep distrust of the United States, NATO remains Turkey's only sure lifeline; thus, momentous changes would be needed to challenge the Turkish country's substantial loyalty to the West. However, this scenario, at present, remains the least likely one³⁶

A big question mark for the future of the Black Sea remains how NATO intends to behave in the region; indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has revived the theory that when Washington fails to lead, or at least does so poorly, instability follows³⁷. This principle applies well to the Black Sea region, a geographic space of vital strategic importance to the United States and its allies, but one in which American engagement has definitely waned in recent times. The results have not been long in coming: a newly aggressive Russia, a more influential China, and an opportunistic Iran; all contributing to instability on Europe's southeastern flank. This phase contrasts with the post-Soviet phase, during which the United States was very active in the new countries' transition, both political and economic. But subsequently a vacuum was left that China, Russia and Iran were ready to fill. A new opportunity for Washington to become present in the region again comes with the current conflict: there will be a Ukraine to rebuild, while other Eastern European countries, aware of Russian actions, may invest in defense and related infrastructure³⁸. But if the United States really wants to return to playing a significant role in the region, it will necessarily have to improve relations with Turkey, and to do so, the two countries will have to focus on the interests they have in common, regional stability above all. Washington should ensure that a role of its own in the Black Sea is complementary to Turkey's regional ambitions, rather than challenging them. The two states should accept that neither can gain everything it wants and look to the many positive outcomes that an effective relationship would ensure³⁹. In any case, the need to change

³⁶ Wölfer, *The Black Sea...*

³⁷ Arnold Dupuy, *To re-engage in the Black Sea, the US must look to Turkey*, "Atlantic Council", September 1, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/to-re-engage-in-the-blacksea-the-us-must-look-to-turkey/>.

³⁸ Dupuy, *To re-engage...*

³⁹ Arnold Dupuy, *To re-engage in the Black Sea, the US must look to Turkey*, "Atlantic Council", September 1, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/to-re-engage-in-the-blacksea-the-us-must-look-to-turkey/>.

strategy in the Black Sea was reaffirmed during the Madrid NATO Summit held on June 29. This position stems not only from the current conflict in Ukraine but also from the perception that Putin's ambitions go beyond that country's borders and have the potential to destabilize Europe⁴⁰. On the other hand, the February 24 invasion brought the eyes of the world to the Black Sea, especially its security; the blockade of grain exports has already caused very serious damage to food supplies around the world, and only on August 1 did the first ships leave Ukrainian ports.

Even before the war, in fact, several countries were already calling for more attention to security in the region, starting with Romania, but also Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, which share a desire to see the United States more involved in regional affairs⁴¹. The question to be clarified remains how to broaden its influence around the Black Sea; given that the Montreux Convention will most likely remain unchanged, with all the powers for Turkey that come with it, NATO will most likely seek to act through the deployment of anti-ship missiles, anti-submarine equipment, and increased air and sea situational awareness. Russia will try to respond through grey-zone tactics, such as aggressive information campaigns, bribery of officers and other tactics to halt or at least slow down operations. At the same time it will seek to increase its military dominance in the region.

The question mark is how ambitious NATO's intentions will actually prove to be in the long run; the alliance could broaden the spectrum of operations to include the eastern Mediterranean Sea, a move that could threaten Russian and Chinese interests in the Middle East and North Africa. Another factor is how much the United States will seek to deploy naval forces in the region on a permanent basis⁴². Certainly much will depend on the unraveling of the current conflict and how it develops. Again, three different scenarios of the course of the war can be envisioned: in the first scenario, a victorious Russia demands free passage of its ships through the straits. In addition, Putin demands absolute neutrality from Turkey in case of further military operations around the Black Sea at

⁴⁰ James Jay Carafano, The contest over the Black Sea in the new Cold War, "GIS Reports Online", August 16, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/black-sea-security/>.

⁴¹ Carafano, The contest over...

⁴² Carafano, The contest over...

the expense of Bulgaria, Georgia, and Romania. At this point, Moscow might even go so far as to force Ankara to share the recently discovered natural gas resources in the Black Sea, which Turkey hopes to develop and use for domestic consumption. If all this comes to pass, the Turkish country would become largely dependent on the Russian one, but in such a scenario Moscow would be absolutely isolated, which could leave some room for Ankara's maneuvering. As a NATO member, Turkey would not benefit from an aggressive Russia, but even if Moscow's actions were to destabilize the entire region, problems with the Atlantic Alliance would still remain an obstacle to a closer relationship, and whether that obstacle might be insurmountable is impossible to say. In this scenario, the economic situation in Turkey continues to deteriorate, and all the promises made by Erdogan's government about general improvement remain unfulfilled. Although Russia would be unable to directly support the Turkish economy, due to Western sanctions, nevertheless it could secure a major tourist flow and further open its markets to Turkish companies. In addition, the two governments sign a second agreement regarding the S-400 missile defense system, and Russia could also offer Turkey a discount on the price of gas in order to distance it even further from the NATO bloc and maintain cordial relations with President Erdogan. Finally, in the event of a final Russian victory, there would be the termination of any kind of Turkish-Ukrainian military ties and Ankara's sale of Bayraktar TB2 drones would stop⁴³.

In the second scenario, Moscow faces a defeat that would have far-reaching consequences. An eventual defeat could even lead to a dissolution of the Russian Federation, in the memory of what happened to the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. Such an event would cause a momentous change, altering from the ground up the regional balance of power, reducing the threat felt by countries such as Georgia, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania, which could then move much more freely. In any case, such a clear-cut defeat seems implausible, as Putin would do anything to avoid it, including a full-scale war that would risk prolonging for years, with serious military and economic consequences. Clearly, this scenario would strengthen Ankara's position in the Black Sea and the Caucasus, which was and is Erdogan's goal; however, one must take into account how

⁴³ Eugene Kogan, *The impact of the war in Ukraine on Russian-Turkish relations and Black Sea security: Three potential scenarios*, "Middle East Institute", May 26, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/impact-war-ukraine-russian-turkish-relations-and-blacksea-security-three-potential>.

the leaders of the various states in the 56 region, even those that actually enjoy excellent relations with Turkey, might resist a Turkish country with attitudes of exaggerated prominence. In the event of Russian defeat, cooperation between Ankara and Kiev would also flourish, while the Turkish economy would continue to struggle despite Erdogan's attempts to forge relations with wealthy Gulf countries. As long as Erdogan continues with his unorthodox economic policies and not listening to the suggestions of economists, foreign investors will remain inclined to stay away while the population will continue to bear the brunt of rising debt and inflation. Despite the defeat, relations between Russia and Turkey would not cease completely even in this scenario⁴⁴.

Finally, a third prediction shows us a frozen conflict, a stalemate in which Western countries cannot convince Putin to surrender. Turkey continues to bleed economically, dialogue with both sides, and experience tumultuous internal protest. In essence, there would be no happy ending for Russia, Ukraine or even Turkey. This scenario is definitely the worst for Ukraine as Western institutions would tire and their engagement would fade, although they would continue to send economic and military aid. Putin would probably proclaim that he had won the Great Patriotic War despite the huge human and economic costs and that Russia has become a major global power; thus, the sacrifices made would finally be justified. A stalemate would also mean that the other Black Sea countries would continue to be threatened; therefore, their governments would have to remain vigilant and continue to spend on defense⁴⁵.

CONCLUSIONS

The current conflict between Ukraine and Russia is only the latest in a long series of clashes that have rocked the Black Sea. However, Russia has shown that it has learned from the past, as is evident from the promptness with which it responded to the various economic sanctions imposed by EU and NATO countries. Moscow was obviously already prepared for anything and knew what tools would be used against it once the invasion was initiated. What Putin certainly did not expect was that after a year the war was still far from a conclusion, given the strenuous military resistance of Kiev, which can still count on full economic and material support from the West, however. Indeed, after a year now, the many sanctions are beginning to take their toll; Moscow's plans did not anticipate having

⁴⁴ Kogan, The impact of...

⁴⁵ Kogan, The impact of...

to endure them for so long, while the Ukrainian grain situation continues to slow down world supplies, with very serious consequences for access to food, especially in the poorer countries. Not to mention the energy sector, with Western countries having to find alternatives to the Russian mercator, with mixed results. Meanwhile, behind the scenes is Turkey, the only country that can really contend for the scepter as the region's leader to Russia and which perseveres in its strategy of gathering all the best it can from its relations with the various entities, especially Russia, Ukraine, NATO and the EU. Ankara probably continues to hope for a final landslide victory by Ukraine (supported by the West) so that it can take advantage of a major retrenchment by Russia's part, but such an event certainly remains unlikely.

In addition, Erdogan also has to deal with domestic problems, between his waning popularity and increasingly ever-increasing economic problems. Still, Turkey remains a key country for the region, and a large part of the Black Sea's future may depend on its moves, moves that will certainly be influenced by the outcome of the war and whether its relations with the Black Sea improve or furtherworsening of its relations with Western institutions. A question mark also remains over the strategy in the area of NATO and the European Union, which will have to consider whether to continue to openly dialogue and make agreements with Russia's neighbors, at the risk of trigger more conflicts from which Moscow will certainly not back down, or whether to choose to give up the expansion process to remain in its backyard.

Another country acting in the background is China, with its economic interests always lurking. Relations with Russia are no mystery and again it is to be seen how close they will actually be and how they may change the strategic set-up. In essence, the waters of the Black Sea turn out to be the center of one of the most strategically important on the planet, the future dynamics of which are highly unpredictable due to the many countries and numerous institutions seeking to assert their interests there. A situation already intricate in itself is made even more difficult to read by the ongoing war, a destabilizing element as such but in this situation even more so. On the outcome of that conflict, for now at a substantial stalemate, will depend a good slice of the future decisions of the various parties involved in it and it will be easier to see if indeed anyone will return to sit permanently on the throne of the Black Sea, and probably of Eastern Europe in general, awaiting its new occupant for more than 30 years now.