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***Black Sea, Turkey and Ukraine:
the compensation factor against Russia***

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The intensification of Turkish–Ukrainian relations is one of the main new developments of recent years. It represents an important stability factor as it re-establishes a balance that had been troubled by Russia’s annexation of Crimea, illegal from the point of view of international law.

Russia and Turkey are “united” by common interests such as: the energy trade; the sale of weaponry systems (in particular the S-400 missile system, that allows to cover the Black Sea as well as parts of the Mediterranean); political specificities and, above all, by the need to keep the Black Sea under the exclusive dominance of main coastal powers. Turkey remains a NATO member, but its relations with other Member States have progressively and seriously deteriorated.

Erdogan skilfully uses NATO membership to oppose Russia in case of necessity, while at the same time threatening to expand relations with Russia to obtain concessions from NATO, insofar as it plays a key role for US military protection in the Middle East and beyond. Therefore, Erdogan consummately triangulates between diametrically opposing interests, the third angle being the growing synergy between Ukraine and Turkey; this is fundamental for Turkey as a means to protect the residual Tatar population in Crimea, strongly controlled by Russian authorities. The latter issue represents a powerful irritant between Russia and Turkey.

Thus, a long-lasting entente between the main powers of the Black Sea is still lacking, because Russia and Turkey are divided by regional problems too: the southern Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh in particular; and Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, where Pan-Turkism, or Pan-Turanism, inevitably clashes with the expansionist aims of the Russian neighbour. These irritate further a militarily powerful state like Turkey (the military strength of which was however weakened after the army purges that followed the July 2016 coup attempt).

The question of the Tatar minority in Crimea is particularly prickly. This population denounces a persecution by the Russian authorities, justified by the presence Islamic terrorism cells, and by the Tatar opposition to Russian occupation of Crimea. At the international level this prevents the world from getting the unanimously pacified image of the occupation that the majority of the local Russian population (65–70% of Crimean residents) overwhelmingly voted for, albeit in a referendum that was questionable vis-à-vis international standards. There exists therefore a problem of internal divides within the Crimean population on which the Russian government is working, sometimes resorting to violence.

Russia is trying to reinforce a degree of internal unity, above all to show the world a good level of cohesion in order to receive international recognition of the annexation and bring an end to the sanctions imposed by major countries, as well as assuring for good the recognition of Crimea as an integral part of the Russian Federation.

This is something that the new Russian Constitution has recently recognized with a reference to Crimea as non-separable (неотделими) from the Federation and that has also been visibly concretized by the railway bridge on the Kerch strait, linking physically, as well as symbolically, Russia and Crimea.

Politics use symbols as well as of concrete facts, and the remarkable symbolic importance of Crimea for Russian national pride, as well as its intrinsically strategic importance (southern borders protection and vital air-naval bases) will make any negotiations for a future restoration to Ukraine very difficult.

They could even fail notwithstanding the mediation of the UN, the EU, or OSCE; this is an organization that plays a prominent role in the post-Soviet area and in eastern Ukraine in particular, more precisely in the Donbass – where it tries to mediate and interpose between the anti-Kiev rebels and the Ukrainian army.

In the background to this state of affairs we find an intensification of commercial relations through a free trade and military cooperation agreement between Turkey and Ukraine. In addition, a sort of twinning is on the cards, in the sense that Ukraine has declared an interest in promoting cooperation with Turkey in the religious field too. This even contemplates the building of an important new mosque in Kiev, a way to acknowledge and reward the small Ukrainian Muslim community.

This understanding with Islam and Turkey, however tactical and non-ideological, functioning as an anti-Russian counterbalance, will have negative repercussions among the more conservative, nationalist and extremist sectors of Ukrainian society, the so-called Identitarian and Monistic currents. These call for a purely “ethnic” and linguistic identity of the Ukrainian people, who after the two world wars (and particularly the Second), became more homogenous because of the territorial changes and “ethnic cleansings” of foreign populations such as Jews and Poles.

At the international diplomatic level, this unique alliance between Turkey and Ukraine will end up shifting the votes of many Islamic states towards Ukraine when the UN will decide on the clearing process for Crimea, something already sanctioned by the UN more than once. What is clear is a sort

of heated competition between Russia and Ukraine to obtain the favour of the Arab world internationally and within the United Nations, and to gain access to Middle Eastern markets, for which the control of the Black Sea is essential. The latter is also key for the extraction of gas and oil, which is a further element of tension between Moscow and Kiev.

Crimea is of course the main attrition point, that in time could lead to a political clash of unprecedented dimensions, as the one that followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Today the line-up of powers would be different with Russia and Iran and China aligned purposefully against the USA and the rest, but with Turkey (notwithstanding its present “ideologically” motivated anti-US course), that has clearly no interest in a further Russian military strengthening or encroaching into the Black Sea whose access in turn is controlled through the Montreux Convention (1936) by Turkey.¹

The Crimean issue, depending also from the new US Presidency, could also become one of the rallying points in order to decide much wider stakes, such as: the final establishment of democracies or authoritarian states in the region and the definitive supremacy of the trans-Atlantic bloc pivoting on Asia or of the Eastern grouping of powers, exemplified by Iran, China and Russia.

In the meantime, Turkey and Ukraine can be seen restraining actors vis-à-vis the Russian military power in the Black Sea, working therefore as proxy containment factors, broadly serving US and EU’s interests.

Needless to say, this convergence between Turkey and Ukraine is frowned upon by Moscow and followed with a degree of alarm as intrinsically aimed at containing Russia’s expansionistic aspirations. On the other hand, certain actors outside the region, the US in particular, view an alliance between Ankara and Kiev positively, as one specifically aimed at holding back Moscow from satisfying its strategic requirements for projection, thus exempting it from a considerable increase of its military presence in the Black Sea.

This military presence should be aimed above all at:

- protecting free and unfettered navigation in the Black Sea – as guaranteed by the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates the transit of civil and war ships from other coastal

¹ A rather different regime would come into existence if Ankara succeeds in building the Istanbul Canal doubling the Turkish Straits, overcoming the Montreux Convention and underestimating the consequences such an unregulated transit would mean.

countries in the Turkish Straits and of vessels from non-coastal countries (with certain added restrictions);

- guaranteeing free trade;
- and avoiding the imposition of any naval blockades to the detriment of the coastal states (a guiding principle of international legality, opposed to policies of “areas of influence” by the more powerful states) or any strategic projection towards the Caspian Sea, the south Caucasus and the Middle East.

These aims are symmetrically and diametrically opposed to the interests of Moscow (that benefits from the silent backing of powers such as China and Iran, strongly interested in containing any US economic expansion or the projection of US and NATO naval air forces towards the Caspian Sea – for which the 2018 Convention between the five coastal states explicitly bans the presence of foreign military bases in the area – and Central Asia, notably rich in energy resources and that is crucial for them to maintain or increase their political weight at the worldwide level).

Moscow considers the Black Sea an indispensable lever for its commercial and energetic expansion and military security in the Mediterranean and in other parts of the globe, with the increased risk of military incidents that this involves. A further factor is that the 1936 Montreux Convention still makes it very difficult for non-coastal states such as the USA and Great Britain, which have the most difficult and tense relations with Russia, to have a naval military presence, even in rotation, in the area.

The Ankara-Kiev waltz is making sense for the moment, but it is unclear if it will evolve into a lasting partnership.



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