

The wider Black Sea area and its Challenges

The wider Black Sea area is in flux and at the centre of increased international interest. This momentum is due to several factors which when considered as a whole reflect an enhanced role for the region in international relations. What are these factors?

- A spate of anniversaries reflecting the existence of regional cooperation in the region
- The enhanced interest of the European Union linked to its emerging role as a foreign policy actor on the global arena
- The region's importance as a key transit region for energy supplies
- The region's geopolitical location and its transregional dimension
- Russia's priorities and approach
- The necessity to assure that all the aforementioned factors contribute to rather than disrupt the area's potential.

Anniversaries galore

The wider Black Sea area has bucked the trend toward regionalism that emerged in the Post Cold War era leading to the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in June 1992. A regional initiative of eleven area states at that time with a bevy of institutional layers which became a full-fledged regional organization in 1998, the BSEC celebrated its first 15 years of existence with an extraordinary Summit meeting in Istanbul in June 2007. The commemoration was also marked by the acquisition of Observer Status to the BSEC by the European Commission (EC). In 2008, the BSEC marks its tenth year anniversary as an organization while its parliamentary dimension, the Parliamentary Assembly of the BSEC (PABSEC) celebrates its 15th anniversary. The importance, however symbolic, of these celebrations is that they reflect comprehensive regional interaction over a long period of time thereby giving rise to the need to take stock of achievements, failures and obstacles. The fact that the BSEC is an inclusive organization in that it includes all the states of the wider Black Sea area, and in

particular the Russian Federation is no small feat. Also of relevance is that the aforementioned commemorations coincide with the fact that since early 2007, the Union has become a Black Sea entity. In other words, these ceremonial landmarks signaling the passage of time and concrete cooperation between disparate states have raised awareness about the region.

In comes the European Union

The European Union has also awakened of late with regard to the Black Sea area. Though the first act of its interest dates back to 1997 when the EC had issued a Communication about regional cooperation in the Black Sea region, it was the momentum of the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU on 1 January 2007 that allowed the EU to adopt a regional cooperation initiative titled “Black Sea Synergy” as part of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The new policy stresses the need to build synergies in a number of functional thematic domains such as transport, energy, environment, fisheries, good governance, trade, science and technology, and research among others. The Union also emphasizes the need to find ways to resolve a number of unresolved conflicts – the so-called “frozen conflicts” – such as those in Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorny-Karabakh. The focus on “hard” security issues, though consistent with and necessary for the Union’s efforts to become a major foreign policy actor in this part of the world, does not necessarily sit well with some of the region’s stakeholders such as Russia. Not a party to the ENP, Russia has its own framework agreement with the EU – the four Common Spaces – which in the relevant road map makes no reference to the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Russia has also expressed its reservations with regard to the Black Sea Synergy by refusing to be a signatory to the Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the European Union and the wider Black Sea area which was the culmination of the first Black Sea Synergy Ministerial meeting in Kyiv on 14 February 2008. Nevertheless, the EU by virtue of its new policy is becoming more engaged in the

region and the dynamics of interaction with it are bound to bring about new momentum as well as problems to regional cooperation in the wider Black Sea area (more below).

The North Atlantic Alliance in search of a role

Contrary to popular belief, NATO does not have a specific policy for the region. In fact, the interest of the United States and other NATO member states such as Poland and the three Baltic countries for a more active involvement by the Alliance and the search for a Euro-Atlantic strategy for the region has often led to confusion. This attention derives from the continued NATO expansion eastwards and the expectations raised a few years ago by the Orange and Rose revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia respectively. There is also an element of standing up to a resurgent Russia behind this thinking widely supported by neoconservatives and neoliberals ideologues alike in the United States. Nevertheless, NATO has not been able to date to act in concert with regard to the region except to “reaffirm the continued importance of the Black Sea region for Euro Atlantic security” as it did in its April 2008 Bucharest Summit. The failure of Ukraine and Georgia to receive Membership Action Plan (MAP) status in spite of the Bush Administration’s strong support indicates that many NATO member states are not ready to challenge head on Russia in its “near abroad”.

Oil, Gas, and Pipelines

The energy security question is linked to Europe’s (and the rest of the world’s) quest for alternative sources of energy supplies given the greater Middle East’s woes. Energy-dependent Europe is in desperate need of steady and reliable energy supplies at a time when the rapidly developing and expanding economies of China and India among other also seek more oil and gas to fuel their growth. This makes the wider Black Sea area together with the Caspian important energy producing

and transit regions. The debate as to whether energy supplies should be held hostage to the monopolistic energy power of Russia or should be assured through market rules is one which will not go away any time soon. As a consequence, the region has become the central battleground for competing energy corridors and alternative pipelines thereby reflecting the need to assure the security and stability of the region and its oil and natural gas wealth. The EU has been struggling to define a common energy policy given the energy security dimension; this will undoubtedly be reflected in the forthcoming revision of its European Security Strategy. NATO for its part has prepared a report on “NATO’s role in Energy Security” which identifies the principles which will govern the Alliance’s approach in this field.

Transregional Considerations

The geographic proximity of the wider Black Sea area to the greater Middle East makes it a central player in the need to address terrorism and other destabilizing forces (such as radical Islamism or the prospects of a nuclear Iran) stemming from the Middle East. The transregional dimension is also linked to more proactive and constructive examples of regional cooperation whereby energy pipelines from Central Asia via the Black Sea feed into Southeastern Europe or transport networks passing through the region link Europe to Asia and Northern Europe with the Middle East. The Danube region’s links with the Black Sea is another growing transregional development where environmental concerns and rights of navigation factor into play. In other words, the Black Sea region is an ever-growing transit hub for transport networks (both land and sea based), oil and natural gas pipelines as well as threats from elsewhere. According to an American analyst, “the wider Black Sea region is the linchpin between core Europe and the wider Middle East.” As a consequence, competing strategies have emerged with regard to whether the region should look to the West, stay within Russia’s (and Turkey’s) sphere of influence or pursue a model of regionalism to the benefit of all.

The Russian Perspective

For Russia, the wider Black Sea area is an important part of its foreign policy given that it constitutes part of Russia's 'near abroad' and its relevance as an energy transit region. More specifically, Russia seeks to remain as one of the main stakeholders in the region given the emergence of new strong regional (Turkey) and external actors (the US/NATO); it wants to counter and curb extremism, separatism and terrorism in the region; it wants to secure continuous energy, trade, civil and military communications within and throughout the Black Sea and the Bosphorus Straits; and it seeks to prevent new dividing lines in the region including the expansion of military coalitions which exclude Russia as a full member.(Alexandrova-Arbatova 2008) At the same time, Russia is not convinced that the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy could successfully contribute to making the shared neighbourhood more stable (an objective shared by Russia) as it does not effectively bar the road to further future EU enlargement. The analysis by Arkady Moshes could not be more telling:

Brussels cannot ignore a consolidated push of EU new member states to be more active on the eastern periphery. As long as it denies membership perspective for its neighbours, the policy of Wider Europe that it pursues, (however palliative it may look) nevertheless stimulates their search for alternatives to staying within the same geopolitical and geo-economic space as Russia. Moscow, in this situation, starts viewing the EU not so much as a partner, but rather as a systematic rival to its foreign policy goals in the Western NIS and the Caucasus; a revisionist power; and is instinctively inclined to get involved in a "zero-sum game" type of relationship with the EU. (Moshes 2006)

This implies that while there is conjunction on dealing with fundamental concerns between the EU and Russia, major differences remain as to how Russia perceives the interest and approach of the EU in the common neighbourhood.

Concrete Synergies or an Uncertain Future?

The contrasting and competing interests of the various stakeholders, a few of which have been highlighted, above raise serious questions about the ability of the wider Black Sea area to continue with its emphasis on regional cooperation. Can the region survive this enhanced international interest? Can it find a *modus vivendi* between the various forces that have made their presence and interests felt? The challenges ahead are many as each new initiative, policy or issue could potentially destabilize an existing one. For example, the enhanced interest of the European Union could conceivably disrupt the BSEC – an organization through which the Russian Federation has clearly stated that it is willing to promote cooperative projects and policies in the region. The spreading of the process of europeanisation through BSEC member states Greece, Bulgaria and Romania combined with the desire of all other BSEC member states – except Russia – to eventually join the EU, could disrupt the delicate balance among BSEC member states.

After the Bucharest Summit, five of the twelve BSEC member states are (or soon to be) members of the Alliance (Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania) with Georgia and Ukraine lobbying for an invitation to join in the near future. The implications of this development in conjunction with peaceful co-existence with Russia remain to be seen. The energy question will continue to fuel discontent among the countries of the region as different interests (political, economic and strategic) make a common approach extremely complicated. The list of challenges is long and is bound to grow. Within this context, the wider Black Sea area, which is more than the sum of its parts as extraregional actors and extraregional concerns also need to be factored in, faces the daunting task to enhance its existing synergies while addressing issues it has avoided for lack of consensus to date. Failure to do so will ultimately reflect badly on all involved: The European Union is its quest to become a leading foreign policy actor in its neighbourhood and

beyond; Russia is its resurgence as a benign and positive contributor to regional and global stability; the United States in its efforts to regain the moral authority as a constructive and respected world leader after its deviations over the last few years; and the countries of their regions in their attempt to consolidate regional cooperation so that their political, economic, and social betterment remain on target and their integration in the structures, bodies and organizations they aspire to join becomes a reality.

Can a common strategy for the region be formulated or are the differences between all stakeholders concerned so disparate and insurmountable? Symbiosis is the issue at hand.

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