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**The Crimean Standoff:
Implications for Turkey**

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Introduction

Standing in between the West and Russia, Ukraine's geostrategic significance for these two rivaling powers is matched by few others.

But as a Black Sea littoral nation and also as a NATO member, the outcome of the crisis will have major geopolitical impacts also for Turkey. Ankara's improving economic and diplomatic relations with Russia in the last decade, constraints of its energy dependency to Moscow, and its 62 years long membership of NATO will likely be tested in this standoff. Moreover, since it controls the only access point to the Black Sea (Dardanelles and the Bosphorus), Turkey might play a significant role on how a potential escalation and/or war proceeds in the Black Sea. Lastly, the current trajectory of swiftly unfolding events suggests that Ankara may soon face a Crimean Tatar problem in a geostrategically important peninsula with a historical Turkish legacy at its northern waters, along with a kinship aspect of the Turkish foreign policy that has been used to foster Ankara's soft power projection towards its hinterland. Such a development would test Turkish national capacity's limits as a regional power.

This paper analyzes the geopolitical essence and security parameters of the Ukrainian crisis with respect to Turkey's and the West's policy options as well as the Russian strategic thinking towards the post-Soviet regions.

Assessing the Russian Military Intervention and Moscow's Geopolitical Rationale

Russia's military intervention in Ukraine cannot be fully understood without getting a good grip on the previous "Georgia template" in terms of geopolitics and the military aspect.

By the 2008 Russo–Georgian War, the Russian geopolitical thought under the post-Soviet security elite, *Siloviki*, had already made it clear that former Soviet regions, especially the ones at Russia's immediate and critical borders, remain top priority to Moscow. In this regard, Ukraine holds a special place in Moscow's "area of privileged interests" due to its transit position for the Russian gas supplies to Europe, being a buffer zone between topographically disadvantaged plains of Russia and the West, because of its ethnic and linguistic Russian community, and lastly, given the importance of Crimea to the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Furthermore, the possible annexation of Crimea, should be assessed in conjunction with the 2008 Russo–Georgian War, as the 2008 experience falls under the same geopolitical context of exerting influence over the former Soviet Union area, and denying further Western enhancements through granting EU and/or NATO memberships, close economic ties, and security assistance to former Tsardom-Soviet geography.

A brief overview of Moscow's operations in Georgia in 2008 would hint some critical parallels with the current Russian military efforts in Ukraine. Firstly, the forces committed show key similarities. In

2008, the elite Airborne Forces (*VDV in the Russian acronym*) had played a critical role in Moscow's intervention. For instance, the 45th Reconnaissance Regiment and the 76th Airborne Division, both fall under the VDV¹, actively operated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War². Notably, elements from these units, as well as other alike Russian high-readiness forces, are reported to be already operating in the zone of action³⁴. This is an important military trend that Turkey, as a part of the North Atlantic Alliance, and the West should carefully monitor. Second, the use of local allied militia looms large as a similar military pattern in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War⁵ and the current operations in Ukraine. Thirdly and more importantly, the Russians were very fast and organized at the strategic level in 2008, which granted the success despite tactical caveats⁶, and also in the current invasion they are playing the cards well by taking advantage of the Ukrainians and the Westerners off-guard. Yet, there remain differences as well. While Moscow was operating militarily in order to initiate a *political fait accompli* in Georgia 2008, this time, Russian units are safeguarding and accelerating an already ongoing *fait accompli*.

Current and Future Geopolitical Implications for Turkey:

The current crisis could pose significant challenges for Ankara at different levels. In a complicating security environment, Turkey might have to reconsider its policies with respect to the current developments in Ukraine.

- Firstly, from a geopolitical perspective, a drastic increase in Moscow's political – military control over Crimea would alter the Black Sea strategic balance against Turkey's interests in this region. In such a way that following the Russo–Georgia War in 2008, a second Black Sea littoral state is about to partially fall under *de facto* Russian control. Any increase in the Russian Black Sea Fleet capabilities would be an issue of concern for Turkey. Although the Turkish naval modernization has shown a successful uptrend in the recent years, which culminated by the ongoing MILGEM project and a proceeding Landing Platform Dock (LPD) acquirement, the Turkish Navy will always be stretched between keeping the Aegean balance of power vis-à-vis Greece, protecting key geopolitical interests in the Mediterranean, and

¹ Rod Thornton, *Organizational Changes in the Russian Airborne Forces: The Lessons of the Georgian Conflict*, SSI, 2011. p.9.

² Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton. *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, SSI, 2011, p.10.

³ Arto Pulkki, "Crimea Invaded by High Readiness Forces of the Russian Federation", <http://www.suomensotilas.fi/en/artikkelit/crimea-invaded-high-readiness-forces-russian-federation>, Accessed on 06 March 2013.

⁴ <https://medium.com/editors-picks/af7a59ff4ad8>, Accessed on: 7 March 2014.

⁵ Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton. *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, pp.41-43.

⁶ Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton. *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, pp.14 – 28.

maintaining a strong posture in the Black Sea. It should also be recalled that in case Moscow exerts and maintains full de facto control over Crimea, this would be the second annexation of the peninsula to the Russians. In the first annexation in the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire had lost this strategically important region to its arch rival. Thus, in a historical context, this is could be the second time that the Turks see their critical Black Sea hinterland being snatched up by the Muscovite geopolitical expansion.

- Secondly, Ankara might soon face a Crimean Tatar problem in its immediate hinterland. Crimea hosts some 300.000 indigenous Turkic-origin Tatar population that has been siding with anti-Yanukovich protests, and now opposing the Russian intervention⁷. Notably, at the time of writing, Crimean Parliament voted to annex the region to Russia through a referendum that would be held in mid-March⁸. If accomplished, such an annexation could drastically alter Crimean Tatars' situation in the peninsula. Historically, Crimean Tatars have been victimized by the Russian geopolitical expansions and control over Crimea. Moreover, up until now the Crimean Tatar community has supported pro-Western figures in Ukraine while opposing the annexation plans and pro-Russians diligently. This stance has put Crimean Tatars on a course of collision with the ethnic Russian groups of the peninsula. Therefore, under a future ethnic-Russian ruled, Moscow-satellite Crimea, the Tatar community could find their cultural freedoms curtailed. Both in the past and at present, Turkey has had to deal with the problems of ethnic-Turk communities in its regional politics ranging from Cyprus to Iraq. Furthermore, there is a significant Tatar population in Turkey as well, which could turn to be a critical domestic political factor at a time of upcoming critical elections for municipal, parliamentary, and presidential posts in 2014–2015 period⁹. As a matter of fact, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu immediately visited Kiev following the Russian maneuvers in the Crimean Peninsula stating that Turkey would seek to protect the rights of Crimean Tatars. Another possible outcome of the newly emerging Tatar problem to Turkey could be understood under the “kinship aspect” of the Turkish foreign policy. Turkey’s *Presidency for the Turks Abroad and Related Communities (PTARC)* institution, which operates under the Prime Ministry, is the primary organ of running the relations between Ankara and kin peoples. Under the new paradigm of Turkish foreign policy, opening to kin communities has been seen as a lever of fostering Ankara’s influence zone and promoting soft power capabilities. As Kemal Yurtnac, former chairman of the PTARC, notes in his article for the Turkish Foreign Office’s Strategic Researches Center in 2012, “developing policies addressing the needs of those communities

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/01/crimea-crisis-deepens-as-russia-and-ukraine-ready-forces-live-updates>, Accessed on 6 March 2014.

⁸ <http://rt.com/news/crimea-referendum-status-ukraine-154/>, Accessed on 6 March 2014.

⁹ Soner Cagaptay and James Jeffrey, “Turkey’s Muted Reaction to the Crimean Crisis”, Policywatch 2219, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 March 2014.

*partly stemmed from a sense of historic responsibility, while in other occasions it was a good way to bolster Turkey's public diplomacy efforts and soft power. In any case, the transformations in Turkish foreign policy in recent years facilitated its quest to have richer relations with the citizens and kin communities abroad*¹⁰. Moreover, having a widespread historical legacy around different regions from the Central Asia to the Middle East, Caucasia, and Balkans, any crisis with an ethnic aspect can have resonances in the Turkish domestic political agenda. As a matter of fact, Prime Minister Erdogan has expressed Turkey's support to the Tatar Community of Crimea during his municipal elections campaign speech in one of the mostly Tatar populated cities of Turkey, Eskisehir, stating that he asked Putin to protect the rights of the Tatar Community of Crimea. PM Erdogan firmly underlined that Turkey would not let Crimean Tatars alone¹¹. Yet, despite the high moral character of its foreign policy efforts towards Crimean Tatars, this time, Ankara does not seem to be capable of showing more than a rhetorical support due to overwhelming Russian leverages against Turkey ranging from the energy wildcard to key economic ties¹². Clearly, despite Turkey's higher profile in foreign policy rhetoric in the recent years, this time, Ankara is not facing the Greek ultra-nationalists in Cyprus or Baathist Arab dictators of the Middle East, but one of the world's top defense spenders, a giant energy supplier that holds Turkey's key energy needs at its hands, and a strategic nuclear-capable power at its doorstep.

Ankara's Limited Options and the Essence of Turkish-Russian relations:

In order to understand the Turkey's limits and restraints in the ongoing crisis, one should understand the essence and determining patterns of Turkish–Russian relations. Traditionally Turkish–Russian relations have been mired with geostrategic rivalry that goes back centuries. The sides have seen a de-escalation in their tense relationship in the last decades of the Cold War and a normalization process in its aftermath. After the dawn of the 21st century, the two countries increasingly focused on improving economic relations. According to data from the Turkish Statistics Institute, Turkish exports to Russia have nearly quadrupled between 2004 and 2013, and Russian exports to Turkey in the same time frame have just about tripled. Russia is currently Turkey's second largest trading partner after Germany and briefly became the first in 2008 by reaching 38 billion USD. Yet in terms of bilateral trade, Turkey's imports greatly surpass its exports to Russia – a major proponent of this gap is Turkey's heavy reliance on Russian oil and natural gas.

¹⁰ Kemal Yurtnac. *Turkey's New Horizon: Turks Abroad and Related Communities*, SAM Papers No:3, Ankara, 2012. p.4.

¹¹ http://www.rsfradio.com/2014_03_07/Putin-le-Kirim-Tatarlarini-konustum/, Accessed on: 9 March 2014.

¹² Stratfor, "Turkey Worries about Russia's Intentions in Crimea", 5 March 2014.

In addition to dramatically increasing foreign direct investments and trade volume between the sides, Turkey and Russia have begun to cooperate on more strategic investments. For one, Russia will be building Turkey's first nuclear energy reactor in Akkuyu. The agreement, signed in 2010, was achieved through direct intergovernmental talks between Ankara and Moscow. Russia was also among the competitors in a USD 4 billion bid for Turkey's acquisition of long range high altitude air and ballistic missile defense systems. Moreover, in 2012 Turkey became a dialogue partner with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) led by Russia and China, and Prime Minister Erdogan has suggested later on two separate occasions that Turkey may try to become a member of the SCO if it continues to be stalled by the European Union. In addition to the improvements in economic and diplomatic ties, Erdogan and Putin have also developed good personal ties. Erdogan recently attended the opening ceremony of Sochi Olympics against strong objections from the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. Turkish construction companies had their share in preparing the facilities for the Olympics, and President Putin gratified his counterpart by suggesting that the Olympics had been their "joint strength"¹³, while lighting a green light for the heavy involvement of Turkish contractors in the preparations for the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

Although the sides have found themselves at opposing sides on major issues such as the Syrian Civil War, they followed pragmatic approach in their relationship and downplayed their differences in favor of improving economic and diplomatic ties. Therefore it has been in Ankara's best interest to foment cooperation between Russia and NATO. If tensions between Russia and NATO were kept at a minimum, Ankara could both continue to improve its relations with Russia without raising the eyebrows of its transatlantic partners and continue to be an active member of the Alliance without compromising its ties with Russia.

Yet it appears that the Ukrainian case will be harder to dodge for Turkey. If Ankara is asked to join economic sanctions, or worse, military measures against Moscow, it would have to weigh between its allies and its newly found partner. Ankara has been heavily criticized by its Western partners since mid-2013 on several issues including its harsh crackdown on peaceful protesters in June, its preference to favor the Chinese competitor in the aforementioned missile defense bid and the ongoing corruption and judiciary scandal. Disregarding or refusing NATO's demands would cause the Allies to question Turkey's commitment to the Alliance. On the other hand by supporting NATO measures, Ankara would risk ruining its relations with a major economic and energy partner. Either way, Turkey can end up compromising an important relationship.

¹³ Anadolu Ajansı, "Olimpiyatlar barışın ve özgürlüğün simgesi olacak" (2014, 7 February). Accessed on 8 March 2014 from: <http://www.aa.com.tr/tr/manset/284550--erdogan-putinle-gorustu>.

The Montreux Convention: The Real Meaning of Holding the Gate to the Black Sea

The Montreux Convention which was signed in 1936 oversees the passage of naval vessels through the Dardanelles Straits and the Bosphorus which Turkey controls. The Convention imposes different limitations for Black Sea Powers (BSP) and external powers. In times of peace:

- a) BSP may use the Straits to transit into the Black Sea capital ships of any tonnage on condition that they pass through the Straits singly (escorted by no more than two destroyers).
- b) Submarines belonging to BSP may use the Straits for the first time after their construction or purchase to join their base in the Black Sea, or after they were repaired at docks outside the Black Sea.
- c) The BSP have to notify Ankara 8 days in advance in order to use the Straits for transit.
- d) Neither the BSP nor external powers may use the Straits to transit Aircraft Carriers into the Black Sea.
- e) At any given time, the total maximum aggregate tonnage and number of all foreign naval forces that may pass through the Turkish Straits are limited to 15.000¹⁴ tons and 9 respectively.
- f) The aggregate tonnage of military vessels that external powers may deploy in the Black Sea shall not exceed 30.000 tons. This limit can be raised up to 45.000 tons depending on increases in tonnage of the strongest fleet in the Black Sea. External powers cannot use the Straits to transit submarines to the Black Sea. While submarines of the BSP can transit through the Straits, they have to do so singly and visibly (in daylight and while surfaced).
- g) External powers have to notify the Turkish government 15 days in advance of intended passage, and their vessels may not stay in the Black Sea for more than 21 days.
- h) External powers do not need to notify Turkey 15 days in advance if they intend to respond to humanitarian crises. The aggregate tonnage of these vessels may not exceed 8.000 tons¹⁵.
- i) In an amendment in 1982, Turkey was given the right to close the Straits at its discretion in both peacetime and wartime.

¹⁴ The tonnages of vessels of war are roughly as follows: 30-50.000 tonnes for aircraft carriers, 8-20.000 tonnes for landing craft, 8-12.000 tonnes for cruisers, 4-8.000 for destroyers, 4-5.000 tonnes for frigates, 2-4.000 tonnes for covettes, and less than 400 tonnes for fast attack craft and patrol boats.

¹⁵ According to Article 18 of the Convention, if the limitations listed in paragraph (f) above were not exceeded and would not be exceeded with the deployment of the forces that the external power desires to send "Ankara needs to grant the said authorisation within the shortest possible time after receiving the request which has been addressed to it; if the said figure has already been reached or if the despatch of the forces which it is desired to send will cause it to be exceeded, the Turkish Government will immediately inform the other Black Sea Powers of the request for authorisation, and if the said Powers make no objection within twenty-four hours of having received this information, the Turkish Government shall, within forty-eight hours at the latest, inform the interested Powers of the reply which it has decided to make to their request."

If war ensues and Turkey remains neutral, the aforementioned conditions and others listed in the Convention apply to all parties. If Turkey is belligerent, the passage of warships is left entirely at Turkey's discretion.

Since Ukraine is not a NATO member and does not have a mutual defense agreement with any NATO members, a Russo-Ukrainian war would not automatically make Turkey a belligerent. If one or some NATO members decide to align with Ukraine in such a scenario, Turkey would still have the option to remain neutral, since the Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty only applies to cases of self-defense, meaning that Russia would have to attack a NATO member first before the self-defense clause becomes binding for all members of the Alliance. Therefore in these two scenarios, Turkey would need to allow the passage vessels belonging to the Russian Navy if they satisfy the conditions set forth in the Montreux Convention. The only case in which Turkey does not have to abide by the conditions of the Montreux Convention mentioned above is when it also decides to take part in the war.

For Turkey, the Montreux Convention had two major effects; by limiting the level of militarization in the Black Sea, it created a breathing space for the Turkish Navy which also faced threats at the Aegean and the Mediterranean, and it bolstered Turkish sovereignty over the Straits. If Turkey decides to remain neutral during a potential confrontation or escalation in the Black Sea, Moscow would prefer Turkey to strictly abide by the rules set forth in the Convention in order to limit the naval presence of the U.S. and its allies in the Black Sea (ironic, considering Stalin wanted to revise or tear up the Convention seven decades ago), while the U.S. would most likely push Turkey to find ways to circumvent the Convention or join any military efforts actively.

In the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Turkey was faced with a similar dilemma. Washington tried to convince Turkey to allow the passage of five vessels, two of which exceeded the tonnage limit of the Convention¹⁶. These two ships were hospital ships each of which weighed around 69.000 tons, and were not allowed into the Black Sea. Ankara only allowed the transit of three smaller vessels that carried humanitarian aid to Georgia, in addition to ships from Spain, Germany and Poland, all of which satisfied the conditions of the Convention. While praised by its Russian counterparts, Ankara's stance was met with disappointment in Washington.

Assessing the Allied Options in Ukraine: Limits and Realities

Following the mounting Russian military activity in Ukraine, the Trans-Atlantic strategic community is debating various options to deter further Russian aggression. Yet, there seems to be limited options to counter the Russians in military ways.

¹⁶ Hurriyet, "Russia calls full compliance to Montreux Convention" (2008), Accessed on 08 March 2014 from: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/world/9759360.asp?scr=1>

An Atlantic Council paper by Ian Brzezinski offered four steps that NATO can pursue to support Ukraine which considers security assistance to Ukraine, deployment of NATO surveillance capabilities, activation of the NATO Response Force, and deployment of NATO Naval Forces to the Black Sea¹⁷. EDAM's military assessment concludes that although these steps would have more than a symbolic meaning, such a strategy of relatively modest-scale military buildup and security assistance support would not be adequate for deterring Moscow in its current path.

First, although NATO Response Force is a highly elite force with advanced technology, concepts, and capabilities, it possesses only a brigade-size land component and additional naval, air, and special operations units along with a chemical-biological-radiological-nuclear defense task force¹⁸. Thus, if NRP stays as a stand-alone force in Ukraine, it could send a firm signal to the Russians without a doubt, but on its own, would not be adequate to defend the Ukrainian territory or clear Crimea. And if it is to be considered as an initial entry force, then a NATO – Russia escalation could quickly mount due to additional military buildups by both sides. Second, NRF can only be used by consensual decision in the North Atlantic Council, thus differentiating views and interests among the allies on relations with Russia may make it harder to initiate this option.

Likewise, sending the NATO Standing Maritime Group close to the zone of crisis could send a strong signal to Moscow, yet, this move's tangible military deterrence on the Russians would also be debatable. First, capabilities and possible rules of engagement probably would not deter Moscow. And second, unless there ignites a war in which Turkey takes part, heavier classes and greater numbers of naval assets cannot be used to support NATO's Black Sea posture due to the restrictions of the Montreux Convention.

Last but not least, any military option in the crisis is also limited due to the Ukrainian Armed Forces' limited capabilities, and Moscow's careful planning on the scope of the operation. Clearly, the Ukrainian Armed Forces cannot match the Russians on the ground due to the ageing equipment, as well as poor maintenance and inadequate combat-readiness¹⁹. Moreover, the Ukrainian troop concentration and logistical capabilities are not suitable for a rapid military buildup in the Crimean Peninsula²⁰. Besides, the Russian Navy successfully blocked Donuzlav Lake and crippled Ukraine's already ineffective naval options²¹. In sum, even if the West opts for supporting the Ukrainians to get back their territories, "support" by itself could not be a panacea for repelling the Russians back.

¹⁷ Ian Brzezinski, "Four Steps NATO can Take to Support Ukraine", Atlantic Council, 3 March 2014.

¹⁸ NATO official website, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49755.htm, Accessed on: 7 March 2014.

¹⁹ IISS, *Military Balance 2014: Russia and Euroasia*, Routledge, London, 2014. pp. 194 – 197.

²⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/02/27/world/europe/ukraine-divisions-crimea.html? r=0>, Accessed on: 7 March 2014.

²¹ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/495813.html>, Accessed on 7 March 2014.

Conclusion

The Crimean standoff is geostrategically one of the most significant confrontations between the West and Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The crisis over Crimea represents a substantial geopolitical challenge to Turkey's regional influence and interests.

Notably, Turkey's two critical hinterlands, the Black Sea and Caucasus, have come under a gradually growing Russian political – military control in the past decade. Furthermore, the Baathist Regime of Syria, which became Ankara's archenemy by the ongoing civil war at Turkey's doorstep, has been supported and kept alive by Moscow. Thus, Turkish–Russian strategic balance is moving in favor of Moscow in different geopolitical arenas. The Crimea case adds a new layer to the regional balance. Matched with Turkey's energy dependency on Russia, a more unfavorable geopolitical *status quo* could be expected for Turkey in short term.

It would be in Ankara's best interest to facilitate a diplomatic solution in which Crimea remains under the Ukrainian administration, and if possible, the Ukrainian administration remains pro-Western. However, on the one hand the presence of anti-Russian and nationalist sentiments in the newly founded Ukrainian government, and on the other hand Moscow's robust aggression in the absence of a firm Western response, make this option hard to accept for Moscow. If the West prefers to secure a diplomatic solution, it will have to give strong guarantees to Russia that it will not be deprived of its naval base in Crimea and that ethnic Russians will not endure hardships due to the rise of nationalist reactions in Ukraine.

In case of a strategy of pushing for coercion, the West will have to brave the economic consequences of severing its ties with Russia, which would especially be challenging for the EU member states due to their energy dependency. In either case, Turkey seems to get stuck between a rock and a hard place. While military action, let alone full-scale war, is the most undesirable option for all the parties involved in the crisis, the Russians' plans and tendencies on the scope of the operation could still change the trajectory of the events.