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Turkey's Muted Reaction to the Crimean Crisis

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Issues such as energy dependence, deep-rooted fears of the Russian military, and Black Sea navigation policy all offer clues to Prime Minister Erdogan's vacillating response to Russian activities in Crimea.

Russian troop deployment in Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula is likely to trigger a reaction from Turkey. Crimea lies only 173 miles from the Anatolian coastline, across the Black Sea. It is home to a community of Turkic Tatars, who are ethnic and linguistic kin of Anatolian Turks and oppose potential Russian annexation of the peninsula. Turkey has established close ties with Ukraine, a useful buffer with the bear to the north, since that country's independence and will take issue with violation of Kiev's sovereignty.

At the same time, Turkey's dependence on Russia for around half of its natural gas imports and historic Turkish fears of the Russians will temper Ankara's reaction to Moscow's takeover of Crimea. In case of NATO action in the Black Sea, for instance, Turkey would balance its NATO affiliation with its treaty obligations, rooted in the 1936 Montreux Convention, which limits the access of nonlittoral powers into the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits, including the Bosporus. Ankara could adopt a position in the Crimean conflict similar to its stance in 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia, another of Ankara's Black Sea neighbors, with Turkey playing a balancing game between NATO and Russia. In no case will Turkey ignore the treaty, essential to the country's sense of Great Power status.

Crimean Geography, the Tatar Issue, and Russia

Covering ten thousand square miles and home to two million residents, the Crimean Peninsula is connected to the mainland through a narrow, swampy isthmus. It is, however, effectively an island, separated from mainland Ukraine and Russia by the Sea of Azov, a Black Sea gulf nearly as large as the peninsula itself.

Crimea's peculiar geography has allowed it to maintain an identity distinct from the Eurasian mainland to its north for much of its history. In the medieval period, Genoa maintained colonies in Crimea. And in the premodern period, Crimea's population was almost entirely ethnically Turkic and Tatar speaking, making Crimea a khanate in commonwealth with the Ottoman Empire.

Nevertheless, the Russian Empire gradually established control over the territories of the Crimean khanate as it expanded into the Black Sea basin. In 1774, the Ottomans relinquished control of the Crimean khanate, which then became autonomous but was soon absorbed into the Russian Empire. Thereafter, Russia saw Crimea as a vital outlet to the warm seas, establishing its Black Sea fleet in the Crimean deepwater port of Sevastopol in 1783.

During the ensuing centuries, the czars settled many Russians in the peninsula to solidify their rule. Yet even as religious and political persecution of the Tatars led to their mass migration, Crimea's population was still 39 percent Tatar at the onset of World War II. After the war, Joseph Stalin furthered Crimea's Russification by deporting the Tatar population en masse to the Soviet interior, together with other targeted groups, alleging that they had collaborated with Nazi Germany.

In 1954, Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, transferred Crimea from the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as a "gift" to Ukraine. Even then, given Crimea's strategic importance in Moscow's eyes, the Tatars were not allowed to return to their homes, although other nationalities deported by Stalin were eventually repatriated to their homelands. In another sign of Crimea's strategic importance to Moscow, Russia kept its military presence in Crimea. As recently as 2010, Russia and Ukraine signed a treaty leasing the Crimean port of Sevastopol to Moscow for use by the Russian navy until 2042.

Since the collapse of communism, many Tatars have returned to Crimea. As of the most recent official Ukrainian census, in 2001, the Tatars constitute more than 11 percent of Crimea's population. According to the same census, ethnic Russians and Ukrainians constitute 59 and 24 percent of Crimea's population, respectively.

The Tatars vehemently oppose the return of Russian rule to Crimea. Following the ouster of Ukrainian leader Viktor Yanukovych on February 22, many Tatars took part in anti-Russia rallies in Crimea, otherwise a bastion of pro-Russia sentiment. On February 26, two Tatars were killed and thirty-five injured in these rallies.

Crimean Diaspora in Turkey

Turkey's large Crimean Tatar diaspora, numbering in the millions, is concentrated in certain provinces, including Eskisehir, Ankara, and Konya, as well as elsewhere in central Turkey. No doubt, the killing of Tatars in Crimea will rile Turkey's Tatars, resulting in pressure on the Ankara government to oppose Russian control of Crimea. At the same time, while many of Turkey's Tatars have a secular outlook in politics and tend to support the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), the Ukraine issue could be a complicating factor for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government as the country prepares for the March 30 nationwide polls for local government.

Turkey's Energy Dependence on Russia, and Turkish Views of Russia

Turkey imports around 55 percent of its natural gas needs and 12 percent of its oil from Russia, and it curiously turned to Russia for its first nuclear plant as well. Dependence on these resources has shaped Ankara's foreign policy toward Moscow, tempering Turkish frustration with Russian policy. For instance, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is known for his mercurial style in foreign policy, often criticizing foreign heads of government in public. That tendency notwithstanding, Erdogan treads carefully around Russian president Vladimir Putin. A case in point is Turkish policy in Syria. Even though Russia has blocked international action against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus, effectively undermining Ankara's policy of helping Assad's opponents, Erdogan has shied away from picking a fight with Putin, knowing that his country's economic growth and his political fortunes depend on his ability to maintain a steady supply of Russian gas and oil. Finally, Turkey does considerable nonenergy business with Russia, ranging from massive Russian tourist flows to Turkish investment, exports, and construction and other contract deals involving Russia.

Beyond the energy issue, Ankara suffers from a deep-rooted historic reluctance to confront the Russians. Between 1568, when the Ottomans and Russians first clashed, and the end of the Russian Empire in 1917, the Turks and Russians fought at least seventeen wars. In each encounter, Russia was the instigator and the victor. Having suffered at the hands of the Russians for centuries, the Turks have a deeply ingrained fear of the Russians. This is the reason Turkey opted for NATO membership and U.S. protection when Stalin demanded territory from Turkey and a base on the Bosporus in 1945. Fear of the Russians made Turkey one of the most committed Cold War allies to the United States. The same fear will now make Turkey reluctant to confront Moscow in Crimea.

Turkish Views on the Black Sea

A third factor that will dampen Turkish policy against Moscow in Crimea is Ankara's static view of Black Sea navigation, which is embedded in the Montreux Convention of 1936. As already noted, this treaty limits the navigational rights of nonlittoral states' navies on the sea. Unlike the post-World War I treaties, which limited Turkey's control over the Turkish Straits, the 1936 treaty benefited Turkey, allowing it to militarize the straits and manage traffic coming in and out. The weight limitation for nonlittoral states to sail in the Black Sea can be as low as 15,000 tons, limiting a naval presence to two or three surface combatants. If the United States or NATO were to attempt to patrol actively and frequently in the Black Sea to deter Russian policies, Ankara's vigorous application of the Montreux Convention would have an impact on operational flexibility.

Turkey's Crimea Policy Likely to Follow Its Georgia Policy

In the 2008 Georgia crisis, all these factors came to bear. Ankara recognized that part of Russia's motivation for its invasion was to limit competition from Azeri and other Caspian Sea states' gas and oil shipments to Turkey and on to the outside world via Georgia. But concern about Russia's retaliatory capabilities, particularly with gas sales, and what Turkey

saw as the Georgian president's reckless behavior tempered Turkish reactions. With some hesitation, Turkey facilitated U.S. naval and air movements into the Black Sea and Caucasus region, but it made clear it wanted full coordination in advance and did not want to be dragged into a confrontation with Moscow.

U.S. Policy Suggestions

Putin's gambit in Ukraine will hit a cultural-historical nerve focused on Crimea. But if he moves to neutralize or dominate all of Ukraine, then Turkey will be in an uncomfortable position. Ukraine has served as a buffer between Russia and Turkey -- apart from minor Russian holdings on the Black Sea from Rostov to Sochi -- since 1991. If Ukraine cannot maintain full independence, Turkey will be faced to its north with a Russia looking more and more like its czarist predecessor, with a record of successful Black Sea aggression, first against Georgia, then against Ukraine. All this comes at a time when the situation to Turkey's south is extremely unstable. Normally, these factors would suggest closer Turkish consultations with, and reliance on, the United States. But with Prime Minister Erdogan, times are not normal. His view of democracy has a troubling resemblance to that of Putin, with whom Erdogan has a good relationship. Furthermore, and most dangerously, both share a sense of inferiority vis-a-vis a "West" that supposedly ignores their unique past glories and perceived global potential. In sum, while the United States should consult closely with Turkey, as an ally and as the "corridor" for power projection into the Black Sea, Washington must be aware of how erratic Erdogan is likely to be concerning Russia for ideological, historical, strategic, and energy reasons.

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