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**A NEW FORMATION IN THE
BLACK SEA: BLACKSEAFOR**

HASAN ULUSOY

Hasan Ulusoy, PhD candidate at METU, is a First Secretary at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

INTRODUCTION

On 2 April 2001, Turkey hosted a signing ceremony of historic significance in the Çırağan Palace, Istanbul. At the ceremony, the littoral states of the Black Sea inked an Agreement on the establishment of the Black Sea Naval Co-operation Task Group, known as BLACKSEAFOR. By this Agreement, all the littoral states came together for the first time in the history of the region to pull their naval forces into a joint formation for realisation of common tasks.

This paper provides information on this formation from an empirical perspective. However, before embarking on this, it will be of practical value to mention certain characteristics of the Black Sea itself.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BLACK SEA

Geographically, the Black Sea is a semi-enclosed sea. According to international law, a 'semi-enclosed sea' is defined as a sea surrounded by two or more states and connected to another sea by a narrow outlet.¹ This definition clearly fits the Black Sea because six littoral countries—Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine (except for the tiny coast of Moldavia, which is not regarded as a littoral country)—surround it. Moreover, the only maritime exit from the Black Sea to another sea is through the Turkish Straits. Thus, these Straits are also worth mentioning in the Black Sea context.

The Turkish Straits are noteworthy because maritime transit and navigation in and out of the Black Sea through the Straits is subject to regulations set forth in a multilateral treaty, the Montreux Convention. In 1936, the Black Sea littoral states and some non-littoral states signed this Convention, which aims at safeguarding freedom of transit and navigation in the Straits within the framework of Turkey's security.²

The importance of this Convention for security in the Black Sea context stems from the fact that it also regulates the passage through the Straits of warships of both littoral and non-littoral states and, therefore, it concerns the presence of naval forces in the Black Sea as well. To cite an example in this regard, warships of non-littoral states entering the Black Sea are subject to regulations in terms of tonnage and the number of ships, as well as of the duration of their stay in the Black Sea.

Obviously, these two geographical and legal characteristics make the Black Sea unique and thus

distinguish it from other seas in the world.³

IMPORTANCE OF THE BLACK SEA IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

The Black Sea has always been important for the livelihood of the littoral states and for the whole region, providing east-west and north-south passages. In this regard, the end of the Cold War has had a considerable impact on the strategic significance of this sea.

Referring to the Cold War, it is well-known that the fall of the Berlin Wall, which symbolised the end of this era, also meant the fall of ideological walls that had long divided not only the continent but also the whole Euro-Atlantic region. The Black Sea was no exception to this rapprochement as its littoral countries belonged to opposing blocs: Turkey was a member of NATO; the other countries were in the Warsaw Pact. The elimination of this ideological divide has offered new opportunities for the promotion of co-operation and joint action between Black Sea countries.

While this historic change was taking shape, the post-Cold War era also began to witness a multitude of non-conventional security threats. These threats, or to put it more mildly, these risks, range from ethnic conflicts to terrorism to environmental disasters. This fact, coupled with transboundary implications of the heavily globalised world, attests to the importance of co-operation and joint action in tackling these threats more efficiently.

With all these, one can easily see that co-operation and joint action stand as valuable instruments for security from both a political and a practical perspective.

Against this background, it seems obvious that one cannot indulge in comforting but deceptive illusions of the post-Cold War era. With this understanding, Turkey, too, has taken the necessary steps for the promotion of co-operation and joint actions. This is because through co-operation and joint actions one can better develop common understanding. And, as the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, said, “It is common understanding rather than treaties that makes peoples united.” In fact, surrounded by the famous triangle of conflicts, i.e. the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the promotion of regional co-operation has always been valuable for Turkey’s security. It is because this policy contributes to regional peace and stability enhancing Turkey’s security.

Similarly, Turkey’s policy of promoting co-operation and joint action has also contributed to its common efforts within the NATO Alliance of strengthening collective security in the Euro-Atlantic region.

In this context, parallel to its endeavours in its vicinity, Turkey also has from its very beginning formulated initiatives in the Black Sea region.

Referring to the Black Sea, one should mention certain characteristics of the people in this region. They are known for their tough but vivid nature —the natural outcome of a life full of struggle with a rough sea. To survive such a sea, sailors certainly need to co-operate closely with each other. Thus, the concept of co-operation, one of the guiding principles of the Turkish foreign policy,⁴ perfectly fits the Black Sea context.

FORMATION OF BLACKSEAFOR

Historical Background

BLACKSEAFOR⁵ is the most recent Turkish initiative in the Black Sea context. It is a tangible outcome of Turkey's vision of bringing together the naval forces of the littoral states for the realisation of certain tasks at sea.

This initiative, which the Turkish side tabled in the first half of 1998, was wholeheartedly welcomed and endorsed by the other littoral states. Hence, in October 1998, the negotiations, which Turkey headed, were commenced. The result was the Agreement establishing the Black Sea Naval Co-operation Task Group, BLACKSEAFOR.⁶

All the Black Sea littoral states signed this Agreement, as mentioned above, on 2 April 2001 in Istanbul, Turkey, which is also the depositary of the Agreement. The fact that this Agreement was finalised in a relatively short time is testimony to the strong determination of all the littoral states in this regard.

The entry into force of the BLACKSEAFOR Agreement requires the deposit of instruments of ratification from at least four signatory states. However, the Agreement also allows provisional implementation, for BLACKSEAFOR tasks to be carried out. In this regard, each Party has the right to apply the Agreement provisionally to the extent that such implementation is consistent with its domestic legislation.⁷

General Features of BLACKSEAFOR

BLACKSEAFOR, being a regional formation, is an on-call force composed of naval units the littoral states have assigned.

The BLACKSEAFOR Agreement aims at fostering peace and stability in the Black Sea as well as promoting regional co-operation and interoperability among the naval forces of the littoral states. By signing the BLACKSEAFOR Agreement, the signatories confirmed that their purpose is also to contribute to the further strengthening of regional security, friendship, good relations and mutual confidence among the Black Sea littoral states.

Although it is composed of naval forces, BLACKSEAFOR is not purely a military organisation. Nor is it directed against any state, or intended to be a military alliance. This is clearly set forth in the Agreement. Similarly, the Parties undertake that BLACKSEAFOR activities are consistent with the purposes and the principles of the UN Charter.⁸

BLACKSEAFOR is a transparent formation. Thus, it is open to participation of third states that are able and willing to contribute constructively to its tasks. Similarly, third countries can also become observers to BLACKSEAFOR. The Parties will decide these issues by consensus.⁹

According to the Agreement, BLACKSEAFOR is assigned to carry out certain tasks: search and rescue operations, humanitarian assistance operations, mine counter measures, environmental protection operations and goodwill visits. Subject to the decision of all the Parties, BLACKSEAFOR can carry out other tasks as well.¹⁰

Naturally, as an on-call force, carrying out exercises is of practical value because they help increase BLACKSEAFOR's level of readiness. As a rule, BLACKSEAFOR is to be activated at least once a year.

As regards deployment, BLACKSEAFOR's operational area is the Black Sea. However, if required, it could be deployed elsewhere, should the parties so choose by consensus.¹¹

Although it is a stand-alone formation, the Agreement also allows the deployment of BLACKSEAFOR in operations under UN or OSCE mandates. It may also participate in other international activities in conformity with its aims and tasks. The Parties shall approve their participation in BLACKSEAFOR for such activities in accordance with their national legislation.¹²

BLACKSEAFOR is formed exclusively of naval units. However, units from other services can support it as and when necessary. BLACKSEAFOR is composed of a minimum of four ships. As an on-call force, units allocated to BLACKSEAFOR will remain at their permanent bases during non-activation periods. Similarly, as an on-call force, BLACKSEAFOR has no permanent headquarters but the state that assumes its command will also provide the headquarters.¹³

Organisational Set-up

The Agreement foresees that during activation the Parties' allocated ships will together form BLACKSEAFOR under a commander, COMBLACKSEAFOR. This commander is a naval officer of Rear Admiral or Captain rank. The first COMBLACKSEAFOR is a Turkish admiral and successive commanders will come from the Parties in English alphabetical order. The COMBLACKSEAFOR will command an international staff composed of officers from the Parties. The Party that will assume command of the COMBLACKSEAFOR in the following year nominates the commander's Chief of Staff, COSBLACKSEAFOR.¹⁴ So, Ukraine will provide the first COSBLACKSEAFOR.

The foregoing explains BLACKSEAFOR's naval command structure during activation. In addition the overall organisational set-up of the BLACKSEAFOR is as follows:¹⁵

According to the Agreement, meetings of foreign or defence ministers, or their authorised representatives, carry out political decision taking. They will, in principle, meet annually and/or in response to a Party's invitation. They will focus on political aspects of BLACKSEAFOR and provide overall political guidance to the Black Sea Naval Commanders Committee.

This committee, BSNC, is an executive body. It is composed of the Parties' naval chiefs or Black Sea fleet commanders. The BSNC's main task is to provide the COMBLACKSEAFOR with guidance and to supervise the scheduling and activities of BLACKSEAFOR. This committee is also charged with deciding on general planning, co-ordination and execution of activities.

In addition to these responsibilities, the BSNC will also approve the appointment of the COMBLACKSEAFOR and report annually to the Parties' foreign or defence ministers and chiefs of general staff about developments in the Black Sea context.

The BSNC delegates operational command to a flag officer, OPBLACKSEAFOR. This officer is

from the same Party as the COMBLACKSEAFOR. In other words, the first OPBLACKSEAFOR is from Turkey. This post will also be rotated among the Parties. The COMBLACKSEAFOR will be directly responsible to the OPBLACKSEAFOR.

Furthermore, BLACKSEAFOR provides for consultation meetings. Such consultations can be held by the Parties' foreign or defence ministers, or their authorised representatives, or by chiefs of general staff.

As one can see, all posts are subject to rotation among the Parties according to English alphabetical order. Rotation will begin with Turkey, according to the other Parties' unanimous agreement, which can be seen as a sign of appreciation for Turkey's efforts in this process.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In view of the above, one can argue that the formation of BLACKSEAFOR is of particular significance from certain viewpoints. First, from the political viewpoint, BLACKSEAFOR is noteworthy because it brings together all the littoral states, which were in opposing blocs during the Cold War era. The Black Sea is a common heritage among these states. Throughout history, it has linked them to each other. However, in the past, it was mainly associated with potential conflict rather than co-operation among these countries. In this regard, the post-Cold War era has contributed to furthering co-operation and friendship in this region.

Second, these countries are gathered for the first naval formation in the Black Sea consisting of all the littoral countries. No doubt, this makes BLACKSEAFOR even more significant from the military perspective.

This co-operation through joint actions will enhance interoperability among the naval forces and thus the peoples of these littoral countries. As foreseen in the Agreement, BLACKSEAFOR can help make not only the military practises interoperable but also the mindsets of the littoral countries. In this context, the issue of interoperability is of particular importance, given the fact that all these countries co-operate in NATO's various fora.

Last but not least, BLACKSEAFOR is also praiseworthy from a humanitarian perspective. Its tasks are related to the protection of the wellbeing of the populace in and around this region.

BLACKSEAFOR, at high readiness thanks to regular exercises, will be a valuable asset for deployment in humanitarian or environmental emergencies in the region. This will surely enhance the countries' ability to co-ordinate and act promptly to tackle such predicaments.

It is promising that the signatory states have managed to activate BLACKSEAFOR just five months after signing the agreement. The first activation of this task force, composed of naval ships from all the signatory states, was inaugurated in Turkey on 27 September 2001. After the activation ceremony, the ships forming BLACKSEAFOR visited various ports of other signatory states from 27 September to 16 October 2001, while conducting small-scale exercises at sea.

In light of all this, one can clearly see that the littoral states of the Black Sea are successfully navigating this process to its final destination, that is the harbour of strengthened friendship. By inking the BLACKSEAFOR Agreement, they have jointly generated the first formation of such significance. As the Turkish Foreign Minister, HE İsmail Cem, once said, "Our diversity in this region is a source of enrichment in our close co-operation." One can thus conclude that with the

stern wind of BLACKSEAFOR, the naval men of the Black Sea will be setting sail to new horizons of co-operation in the period ahead.

1 See Article 122 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

2 See the preamble of the Montreux Convention.

3 In Europe, the Baltic Sea has similar geographical features to the Black Sea. However, what makes the Black Sea unique is the existence of a multilateral agreement such as the Montreux Convention. The Baltic Sea is not governed by such agreement for the regulation of the presence and navigation of warships.

4 See the Turkish Foreign Ministry's web site at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr>.

5 In the Baltic, there is a similar formation called BALTRON. However, this formation is limited in scope as well as in membership as it only covers mine counter measures and consists of only three Baltic states —Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, excluding other littoral states.

6 See for details the official BLACKSEAFOR site at <http://www.blackseafor.org>.

7 See Article 16 of the Agreement. Furthermore, at the signing ceremony, the signatories underlined their willingness for the first activation of the BLACKSEAFOR to occur in 2001 and for an early conclusion of national ratification procedures (see the joint press release issued on the signing of the agreement, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr>).

8 Ibid. Article 2.

9 Ibid. Article 19 and Annex-A Article 4. The Agreement also states that the Parties may consider requests of third states, which are able and willing, to become party to the agreement. Any decision to consider third country requests will be by consensus.

10 Ibid. Article 4.

11 See Article 7 of the BLACKSEAFOR Agreement.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. Article 5.

14 Ibid. Article 9.

15 See for details Article 6 and Annex-A.
