Turkey needs renewed strategy for Black Sea, experts say

Experts call on Ankara to develop a fresh plan to develop quality relations with regional countries.

By Menekse Tokyay for SES Türkiye in Istanbul -- 29/01/14

The Black Sea is a key region where Turkey needs to redirect its foreign policy moves toward a more co-operative stance.

Turkey can play a constructive role promoting co-operation in the Black Sea region, experts said. [AFP]

That is one conclusion that came from a recent discussion at Istanbul's Kadir Has University, hosted by the Centre for International and European Studies (CIES) and the German Marshall Fund.

"It would seem that the Black Sea region has lost its priority and importance in terms of Turkey's main foreign policy focus," Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, director of the CIES at Kadir Has University, told SES Türkiye.

"Its principle aim is to ensure that it has a right to supervise what goes on in the Black Sea region. This implies ensuring that the Montreux Convention of 1936 is operational and not disputed," Triantaphyllou said.

The Montreux Convention allows freedom of passage to merchant vessels through the Turkish Straights but restricts the passage of war vessels.

According to Triantaphyllou, Turkey also has an interest in the sub-region of the South Caucasus. Ankara seeks quality relations with Armenia, but that goal is complicated by its close ties with Azerbaijan, which has a long-running territorial dispute with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

"The third major interest for Turkey in the Black Sea region is the energy one whereby Turkey aspires to become a major transit state with oil and gas flowing through it via pipelines from Azerbaijan and northern Iraq," Triantaphyllou told SES Türkiye.

Since 1992, Turkey has been co-operating with the Black Sea countries through the Organisation of Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC), as a multilateral platform aimed at fostering regional stability. The BSEC is regularly convened at the level of ministers, civil society and the private sector to develop ideas for co-operation in fields like business and communication technology.
Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu called for regional co-operation in a speech at the 29th meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the BSEC on December 12th in Yerevan.

"BSEC is regarded as an important contributor to peace and stability in the region and beyond by bringing all countries of the wider Black Sea area together in a spirit of close co-operation," Davutoglu said. "Energy is another sector which demands our greater attention. The strategic importance of the Black Sea region derives primarily from its location at the intersection of the major energy routes of Eurasia."

This week, Bucharest will be hosting the Black Sea Stakeholders Conference on the sustainable development of Black Sea economy with the participation of the European Commission, and representatives of Turkey and other regional countries.

The conference intends to enhance co-operation across the coastal states to ensure the growth and sustainable development, while showing the benefit of regional co-operation in more technical fields like fisheries management, aquaculture, and environmental protection.

Kamer Kasim, vice-chairman of Ankara based think tank International Strategic Research Organisation (USAK), said Turkey should realise its regional potential with a reinvigorated Black Sea policy.

"The Black Sea is a region free of security risks and there are no major problems between the regional countries in terms of energy or transport. However, Turkey has not invested so much over its transport infrastructure intended for this geography. There is no active means of passenger transportation, while the harbours also need improvement," Kasim told SES Türkiye.

Kasim said that it is natural for Turkey's interest in the region to have decreased, considering the current turmoil in the Middle East.

"However, there is a serious potential in the Black Sea region, especially with Ukraine, which has a large population and high trade potential which has not been tapped yet by Turkish authorities through effective strategies. The maritime liaison between these two countries should be strengthened," Kasim said.

Mitat Celikpala, associate professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University, said Turkey's Black Sea policy has focused on developing trade relations, and was relatively pro-status quo.

"In this way, Turkey opted for a slow-pace policy in the region, with the aim of resolving conflicts through trade and economy," Celikpala told SES Türkiye.
"Turkey does not see the Black Sea region as a political space to deepen its policies, it rather prioritises bilateral relations. Turkey only shows increased interests in the Black Sea policies if any other major power increases its presence in the region, especially through energy projects," Celikpala added.