

The New Geopolitics of Europe & The Black Sea Region

Professor Ioannis Loucas

Naval Academy, National Defence Minister's Staff

Introduction

According to the traditional geopolitical view, inherited from the cold war period, the Black Sea is presented as simply an enormous liquid mass that connects Asia to Europe. In the analyses of the regional geopolitical environment of the Black Sea, this area is approached in connection with the type and the form of the forces exerted by the West (which takes economic advantage of the largest proportion of the production by the Asian part of the Black Sea periphery) to Asia (which constitutes the raw material producing area). The recent presentation by Aymeric Chauprade and Francois Thual in the "Dictionnaire de Geopolitique" published in 1998 is characteristic.¹ According to them the Black Sea belongs to the same geo-system as the Caspian Sea and is characterised by the tension that the friction between German and Russian interests creates, from which the first are considered to express the broader "western factor" while the second express the "eastern factor". From this point to the distinction between civilisations in "western" and "eastern" sides, according to the known typology by Samuel Huntington, the distance may not be substantial.² What is certain, however, is that even if this typology leads to the "clash of civilisations" or simply methodologically legitimises the base for the creation of crises or tensions in the western end of Asia and in the eastern border of Europe, it imposes the interpretation of the map in a way that, today, we have every reason to doubt. This is because, after the overall developments of the 1990-1999 period, it seems that the geopolitical reality of the western part of Eurasia has changed to such a degree that it allows the dissociation of the Black Sea from the Asian geo-system (in which only the Caspian Sea is in future a part of), and its full integration into the European geo-system. In other words, the Black Sea has effectively become a "European Interior Lake". The new situation clearly requires careful analysis.

At the expiry of the 20th century two changes of the first order can be observed in the European map. On the one hand, there is a new internal structure, which is the result of the increase in the number of European states, caused by the breaking up of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, there has emerged a new perception regarding the whereabouts of the eastern border of Europe, due to the broadening of the Euro-Atlantic space to the east, a fact confirmed also by the Helsinki Resolution of December 1999 on the accession of Turkey as a candidate for the sub-set of the European Union countries. These changes impose in turn a re-determination of the parameters of the European geographic entity, in the way that such parameters are set by the geopolitical approach.

Within the framework of this new reality major issues are raised, that concern in a direct manner the subject of the European identity in the political, economic and military field. It is obvious that such issues are connected with the expansion of

NATO and of the European Union on the one hand and with the formation of the new (post cold-war) International System on the other hand.

The New Internal Structure Of The European Entity

Central Europe & The Balkans

During the decade of the 1990's, the former Yugoslavia gave way to five new states: (New) Yugoslavia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia (FYROM). At the expiry of the 1990s, the potential for further breaking up of the Yugoslavian area emerged, with the autonomy (or independence) trends of Kosovo and of Montenegro. In addition there remains uncertainty concerning the future autonomy (or independence) of Vojvodina, a fact that could have direct impact both on Hungary and on neighbouring Romania, which faces long lasting administration problems with the Hungarian community of Transylvania.

Furthermore, these new states present the peculiarity of their immediate geopolitical integration in specific influence spheres. Bosnia-Herzegovina and FYROM can be seen as being American "protectorates", and in this group may also be added Kosovo, which has become a virtual military bridgehead of the American and the wider NATO presence in the area of the Central Balkans. This presence allows easy strategic access to the area of Eastern Europe. With regard to Slovenia and Croatia, these countries have been integrated, from the geo-economic and the geo-cultural point of view, in the sphere of Germany, with which they are rapidly developing a remarkable number of strategic alliances in various sectors.

The break-up of Czechoslovakia has also had important consequences. The division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia has created a new reality. The Czech Republic, which is the financially stronger of the two successor states, is now a basic factor for the promotion of the wider western interests in the area. Slovakia however, which faces problems with the Hungarian minority on its territory, seems to have a mistrust towards the West, to which however it is indirectly attached, through its strategic convergence with Ukraine and Austria. In any case, both countries belong to the zone of the Visegrad countries, which also includes Poland and Hungary and which, despite the financial penetration of the American factor, is an integral part of the German strategic area and plays a leading role in the German "eastern policy".

Regardless of their practical co-operation at NATO level as well as in basic sectors of the re-structuring of the International System, the United States and Germany have already formed their own geopolitical subsystems in the area of Central Europe and the Balkans. More specifically, when the clear pro-NATO orientation of the two major states of the Balkan peninsula is considered, particularly Romania and to a lesser extent Bulgaria, as well as the complete integration of Albania in the American complex, it becomes clear that the USA, through NATO, virtually controls the entire section of the Balkan peninsula which was the western border of the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 20th century. Beyond the European borders of the Ottoman territory, and until 1918, lay the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In other words it covered the area that today falls within the sphere of influence of Germany, which, despite its close co-operation with NATO, creates its own geopolitical space. The German geopolitical area is almost completely identified today with the corresponding one that existed until 1918 and included the German Reich and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The exceptions to this are the areas of

Yugoslavian Vojvodina and of Romanian Transylvania, which however, are both areas with significant Hungarian minorities, in which Budapest shows more and more interest.³ In the event of the secession or autonomy of Vojvodina from Belgrade and of Transylvania from Bucharest, the geopolitical reality created by the treaties that ended the First World War, by which the Austro-Hungarian/German domination in Central Europe and the Balkans was removed in 1918-1919, would have been fully reversed.

Eastern Europe - Russia

The Soviet Union has given way to fifteen states, which can be characterized as being distributed in three partial geo-systems:

1. The Geo-system of Eastern Europe: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldavia, Russia (Russian Federation).
2. The Geo-system of the Caucasus: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.
3. The Geo-system of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgizstan.

Of the three geo-systems, the first two belong to Europe and the third one to Asia. Of these, the geo-system of Eastern Europe plays a primary role in the formation of the new European internal structure because it permits for the first time the full implementation of the German (and at times wider western) geopolitical vision of the so-called "Middle Europe" ("Zwischen - Europa"). The "Middle Europe" (which should not be confused with the concept of "Central Europe", in German "Mittel-Europa") is the section of East Europe lying between the German-western area and the Russian-eastern one and constitutes a double-faced geopolitical field. On the one hand, it provides a sufficient defensive space for the defence of the West in case of hostile attack from the East, while on the other hand, it is also a sufficient field for the strategic advance of the West towards the East, should there be any return to the geopolitical dynamics represented by the "impulse to the East" ("Drang nach Osten") of Nazi Germany, as well as of any other partial advancement of the Western hegemony towards the area of the steppes.

The importance of the said geopolitical subsystem for the European internal structure becomes obvious in the geopolitical field because of its transformation to a real field of friction of the vital interests of East and West which can be seen with regard to disputes over:

1. The effort of the West and more specifically of Germany for the integration of the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) into the Western geo-system.
2. The effort of the USA for the immediate geo-strategic and geo-economic winning over of Ukraine.
3. The creation of a political "Union" between Russia and Belarus, in which Yugoslavia under Milosevic showed an interest in integrating, with the purpose of forming a counter to western "encirclement".

The New Eastern Border Of Europe

From the above geo-systems which have been created in the geographical area formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, that of the Caucasus plays a first order role in the establishment of a new reality in the eastern borders of Europe. From the geo-strategic point of view, the Caucasus geo-system "multiplies" the dynamics of

Europe's "eastern border", since this border no longer consists of one state – as was the case with the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. Rather it now consists of four states, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. This geo-system constitutes a geographical "unity" with Turkey, since the latter is now officially considered as "part" of Europe, invited by the Helsinki agreement to fulfil the "formal" political and economic criteria for its integration into the European Union. Regardless of the question of if and when Turkey might be finally integrated in the European Union as a full member, the Helsinki Agreement has a special importance for the geopolitical understanding that is likely to form in due course on Europe's eastern border, since as a result of it, that border is now effectively transferred to the line: Ural Mountains – Ural River – Caucasus – East Turkey (see Map 1).

Map 1:



If we take under consideration the wider geopolitical game in the area of the Caucasus and of East Turkey, within the framework of which emerges more and more the possibility of the establishment of an (autonomous or independent) Kurdish state, then the eastern border of Europe would become, at its southernmost section, the Euphrates river, the westernmost part of which is at a short distance from the Mediterranean.

Conclusively we may say that the new eastern border of Europe is being transferred from the line Ural mountains – Ural river – Caucasus – Black Sea – Straits – Aegean Sea to the line Ural Mountains – Ural river – Caucasus – Euphrates river – East Mediterranean. The idea that this will be the new geopolitical perception of matters in the first years of the 21st century is further supported by the fact of the

impending integration into the European Union of Cyprus, also pursuant to the Helsinki Agreement of December 1999. Cyprus would then constitute the southernmost edge of the European area.

Immediate Geopolitical Impacts

This restructuring of the European geopolitical dynamics has two primary effects on the periphery of the Black Sea region (see Map 2): In the new map, "South-eastern Europe" will not be the Balkans but rather the area comprising Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Cyprus. The Balkans will instead now form the south section of "Central Europe", which will comprise the following geo-systems:

1. The Scandinavian Geo-system: Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.
2. The German Geo-system: Germany, Austria, the Visegrad zone (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia), Croatia, Slovenia.
3. The Italian Geo-system: Italy, Malta.
4. The Balkan Geosystem: Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania, Bulgaria, FYROM, Albania and Greece.

Of the above geo-systems, the first three have an indisputable geopolitical internal coherence, in blatant contradiction to the fourth one, which is a field of friction between the interests of the three Great Powers, namely the USA, Germany and Russia. From a purely geopolitical point of view, Yugoslavia plays a double role in this new reality. It is a checking power for the further extension to the South of the German geopolitical field, which reaches to the Serbian north border. At the same time, it constitutes a potential area for further advancement to the North of the American-NATO geopolitical field, which reaches to the south Serbian border.

The new internal structure of the European entity as well as the new geographical determination of Europe's "central" and "south-eastern" sections clearly creates new geopolitical realities for the broader region of the Black Sea. These new realities need to be jointly examined in relation with the importance of the change in the area's balance of power.

Map 2:



Endnotes

¹ A Chauprade & Fr Thual, Dictionnaire de Geopolitique, (Paris, Eclipses, 1998), p437-439.

² S Huntington, The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996).

³ Undoubtedly, an “absolute comparison” between these two situations cannot be done, because the Hungarians of Romania enjoy all of their human rights.

Disclaimer

**The views expressed are those of the
Author and not necessarily those of the
UK Ministry of Defence**