Ukraine, Turkey deepen military alliance in Black Sea region

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2 November 2020

Ukraine and Turkey have moved further this past month to strengthen a rapidly growing military alliance that is aimed at cornering Russia out of the Black Sea region.

Meeting in Istanbul on October 16, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ukrainian President Volodomyr Zelensky publicly posed for photos while they happily signed a "goodwill" agreement between the two countries' defense industries as well as a "military framework" agreement. Details of the agreements are not publicly known. However, it was widely reported that the deals will involve large-scale technology transfer that will aid both countries in confronting Russia in any potential war.

Following the signing of the agreement, Erdogan made clear that Ukraine was quickly becoming a significant ally of Turkey in the region, stating, "Turkey sees Ukraine as a key country for the establishment (of) stability, security, peace and prosperity in the region."

The agreement is a sign of an increasingly complicated and intertwined system of military alliances in the region which threaten the world's working class with the outbreak of a major world war. Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991, the Black Sea region has become a focal point of the efforts of US imperialism to establish full control over the resources of the vast landmass that had previously been controlled by the USSR, and to encircle Russia. With the exception of Russia itself, every state bordering the Black Sea has been turned into a member of NATO or is working closely with the alliance.

NATO recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner earlier this year. In September, US and British troops, together with German, Polish and Lithuanian advisers, conducted joined exercises with Ukraine across the Black Sea.

The meeting between Zelensky and Erdogan occurred amid the ongoing war between a Russian-backed Armenia and a Turkish-backed Azerbaijan over the Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. Moreover, Turkey has been engaged in an increasingly heated conflict with fellow NATO member Greece over territorial and energy rights in the Aegean Sea in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is connected to the Black Sea through the Sea of Marmara. In the civil wars in Libya and Syria, Russia and Turkey are backing opposing sides.

In his remarks, Erdogan explicitly took Kiev's side against Moscow in the conflict over Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea. He bluntly stated, "Turkey has not recognized Crimea's illegal annexation and it never will." The peninsula was annexed by Russia in 2014 following a right-wing United States-backed coup that threatened to completely cut Russia's naval forces out of the Black Sea.

Crimea, which was previously a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire prior to being annexed by the Russian Empire under Catherine the Great in 1783, is home to a population of approximately 250,000 Crimean Tatars who share linguistic and cultural ties with Turks.

In 2016, Erdogan made clear that he views Crimea as part of a "Greater Turkey," stating, "Turkey cannot disregard its kinsmen in Western Thrace, Cyprus, Crimea and anywhere else."

The public summit in Ankara is the culmination of growing economic and military ties between the two countries, which have grown rapidly since the election of President Volodomyr Zelensky in April 2019. Immediately following his election, Zelensky, as president-elect, took an unofficial two-week "vacation" to Turkey but released no details of his actual activities or meetings there.

Later in February 2020, Erdogan visited Kiev where he met with Zelensky at the Maryinsky Palace and pledged $36 million in military aid to Ukraine. The two leaders also set a goal of doubling bilateral trade to $10 billion a

year by 2023.

While the relationship between Turkey and Ukraine grew much closer under Zelensky, prior to his election in 2019 Turkey sold six Bayraktar TB2 aerial drones to Ukraine for $69 million and Ukraine agreed to purchase six more. The drones at the time had been heavily used by Turkish-backed forces against Russian-backed troops of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the forces of General Khalifa Haftar in the civil war in Libya.

Turkey has significantly expanded its military aerial drone industry in recent years and is now widely considered by military experts to only be behind China, Israel and the United States in terms of drone technology. Between 2012 and 2019 the country more than doubled its defense and aviation exports from approximately $1.25 billion to more than $2.5 billion.

In Azerbaijan, videos of Turkish drones attacking Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh have circulated widely on social media. Armenia has accused Azerbaijan of violating several Russian and US-negotiated cease fires with the use of Turkish drones. Greek military experts likewise have warned that Turkish drones could play a decisive role in any potential war between the two NATO-member countries.

Despite its advances in drone technology, Turkey still lags behind its rivals in both engine and missile technology, sectors in which Ukraine still possesses significant advantages due to its former position as the major research and production center for the Soviet military. Accordingly, in 2019 in exchange for Turkish drones, Ukraine agreed to supply Turkey with $600 million worth of cruise missile engines.

In the run-up to this past month's summit in Istanbul, reports surfaced that as part of the military agreement Ukraine would purchase 50 more Turkish drones and even had plans to set up a large-scale assembly plant within Ukraine with an agreement to export the drones to solely joint allies of both Turkey and Ukraine.

The Ukrainian government has been mired in an over six-year-long civil war in eastern Ukraine that has claimed the lives of over 14,000, displaced 1.4 million and left 3.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance. Kiev views the possession of advanced aerial drones as an equalizer in its war against Russian-backed separatists.

The alliance between Turkey and Ukraine has not gone unnoticed by Moscow, which has had an ambivalent relationship with Ankara over Idlib in Syria, the Turkish backing of Azerbaijan in the war against Armenia, and its growing influence in the Black Sea region. Now, fears have been raised in Russia about a joint Turkish-Ukrainian naval force.

Writing in Russia's Gazeta.ru on the growing Turkey-Ukraine alliance, an unnamed Russian foreign policy expert warned, "This is a very serious challenge for Russia." Referring to the Ukrainian provocation in the Azov Sea in 2018, he noted, "It should be understood that a repetition of the Kerch incident [in the Azov Sea] is possible in the medium term. However, then [in 2018] there was no one behind Ukraine. And what if next time, not just a Ukrainian, but a joint Ukrainian-Turkish fleet maneuvers dangerously off the Russian coast? And Turkey, after all, is a NATO member."

The systematic NATO encirclement of Russia has turned seemingly isolated conflicts in the region into dangerous flashpoints that threaten to spark a major war involving the US, nuclear-armed Russia and countries such as Turkey.

A recent report by the RAND Corporation, "Russia, NATO and Black Sea Security," which was co-funded by the US military, warned that the "Black Sea region is a central locus of competition between Russia and the West for the future of Europe."

While the report criticized Erdogan for failing to sufficiently follow the dictates of the United States and NATO, it recommended a more "proactive approach" by the United States to win over Turkey and other "allies" in the Black Sea region in order to counteract Russian influence.

Tellingly, the report offered no possibility for a peaceful resolution of the conflicts between NATO and Russia in the region. Rather, it concluded by calling for more prudent "military planning, operations, and investment" by the United States and European NATO-member states.

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