

TURKISH MARITIME POWER: THE MEANS OF AMBITION

If we agree with Napoleon that "the politics of a state is its geography," Turkey can only be a maritime power. However, despite major geographical advantages, the Turks have traditionally not put maritime at the center of their power strategy. This is a situation very much like that of France, which has not always taken advantage of its exceptional location.

AN UBIQUITOUS SEA... MISSING FROM THE MINDS

The Turkish Republic has 8,300 km of coastline within a rectangle surrounded by the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean. This unique position is reinforced by the presence of the Straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, the fourth busiest seaway in the world, located in Turkish territorial waters. The Montreux Convention (1936) provides freedom of transit and navigation for the Merchant Navy. Istanbul, the economic capital of the country with nearly 20% of the population, is located on both sides of the Bosphorus.

Despite these advantages, Turkey remains a largely land focused country. The Turks who settled in Anatolia in the eleventh century were nomads from the steppes of Central Asia. Later the Ottoman Empire flourished in a largely terrestrial military tradition, combined with the Arab-Persian cultural influence. During the early years of the Republic, the Turkish Navy was regarded as a reactionary institution of questionable loyalty and was therefore neglected. No admiral has ever been chief of staff of the armies in the history of modern Turkey.

POWER AMBITION AND NAVAL AMBITION

Nevertheless, the entry into NATO in 1952 allowed modernizing the fleet by acquiring American and British ships. Later, the heightened tension with Greece gave a new role for the Navy and the surface fleet doubled in size between 1960 and 1975, while the intervention in Cyprus in 1974 recognized the importance of the Navy forces in armies.

Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has been developing a power strategy to establish itself as an autonomous actor in international relations, and not as a NATO advanced frontier. This is reflected by an increased naval ambition, as evidenced by the evocative title of a book published by the Navy in 2000, "Towards open seas: a portrait of Turkish naval forces". Modernization of the fleet is a major part of this strategy: in the next twenty years the Navy is planning to acquire a helicopter carrier, air defense frigates and submarines drones.

These ships will add up to the six submarines built in cooperation with Germany and the eight *Ada* class corvettes of project Milgem (*milli gemi*, national ship).



Ada class corvette

This program, announced with great national pride, will confirm the country's new capacity for autonomous military shipbuilding. The first corvette, the *TCG Heybeliada*, was admitted to active duty on September 27, 2011. Since then the authorities have announced their intention to export the series and leverage this experience to undertake the construction of frigates (project TF-2000).

FROM THE ASSUMED WILL TO THE PRINCIPLE OF REALITY

While the Turkish Navy is now identified as a means to the global ambitions of the country, it remains constrained by structural weaknesses of the latter: adversarial relationship with some border states (prohibition for Cypriot vessels to call at Turkish ports, air incidents in the Aegean ...), tension with the military hierarchy (the penultimate Chief of Staff of the Navy resigned in 2011 together with his counterparts from the Air and Land Forces, his own predecessor was briefly detained during an investigation into a conspiracy to overthrow the government ...) and economic fragility despite robust growth (annual GDP per capita is still 10,500 dollars in 2011, against 42,400 in France).

The Turkish example is instructive. The naval forces are a great lever of power on the world stage. Maritime policy must be conducted in the long run. Geographical location, as exceptional as it is, does not make a naval power. Political will is crucial.