

TURKEY'S CAUTIOUSLY ACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Abstract: As one of the key powers in the Black Sea region, Turkey's response to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has the potential to direct the course of the conflict and by extension the future of Europe. Turkey's calculus is influenced by a number of elements: its responsibilities as a regional power, its control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, and its economic and strategic engagements with Russia in multiple realms, including important partnerships in energy projects. This article argues that Turkey is following a cautiously active foreign policy in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Within the framework of the active part of its policy, Turkey has condemned Russia's aggression, provided significant political and military support to Ukraine, and has pursued mediation between Russia and Ukraine. However, Turkey has also acted cautiously due to its deep strategic and economic relations with Russia. Therefore, Turkey has refused to join the sanctions against Russia and has sought to preserve its strategic and economic relations with Russia. With this stance Turkey has been able to contribute to mediation efforts without risking its ties with Russia. A possible change in Turkey's stance could occur if Russia faces a decisive defeat in Ukraine or if Turkey and the West begin a more serious process of rapprochement.

Introduction

On February 24, Putin declared the beginning of Russia's "special operation" in Ukraine as he termed it.¹ The invasion began two days after Russia's recognition of the two breakaway republics in Eastern Ukraine and months after Russia began to amass troops on its border with Ukraine. Russian troops could capture a limited area in Ukraine's Southeast, but has faced massive casualties.² The humanitarian toll of the war in Ukraine is rising day by day. In response to the conflict, the West launched unprecedented sanctions that amount to economic war on Russia, and which have inflicted significant damage on the Russian economy.³ The sanctions spilled over to other areas where Russia and the West interact, with Russian athletes and national teams banned from competing in international tournaments, Russian festivals canceled, and even Russian cats banned from international competitions.⁴ In the course of a few weeks, Russia became an economic, strategic, and cultural pariah state.

Turkey is a key actor in the crisis due to its responsibilities as a regional power in the Black Sea region, its commercial and political relations with Russia and Ukraine, and important place in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. The regional tension has serious ramifications for Turkey's economy and security. Due to its deep ties with all parties, regional

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role, and desire to act as a mediator in the crisis, Turkey has followed a cautiously active foreign policy. Within the framework of its strategy, Turkey has condemned the aggression, called on the international community to undertake its duty against Russia's aggression while also trying to resolve the conflict by using its special relations with the involved parties. So far, Turkey's efforts have resulted in a meeting between two Foreign Ministers in Antalya on 10 March and a round of negotiations between the delegations from Ukraine and Russia in Istanbul on 29 March. As a result of the meeting in Istanbul, Russia agreed to scale down its military activities in the northern part of Ukraine. This expert brief explains the impact of the crisis on Turkey's relations with Russia and Ukraine, discusses Turkey's role in the conflict, and presents likely scenarios for Turkey's future policy towards the conflict.

The War's Impact on Turkey

Turkey has strong commercial, economic, and social ties with both Ukraine and Russia and it is a major Black Sea power. Turkey relies upon Russia for energy and has developed a mutually beneficial partnership with Ukraine on defense industry. The fact that Russia can afford to sacrifice these relations, as it demonstrated when it applied painful economic sanctions on Turkey after it inadvertently shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 jet in Syria in 2015, provides Russia an asymmetrical advantage in bilateral relations. Turkey's responsibilities over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean also give it a key role in the crisis. Aside from getting to decide which ships pass through the Straits into the Black Sea based on Montreux Convention, Turkey's continental shelf and exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea is the largest among the littoral states. The crisis impacts Turkey's relations with its NATO allies and European partners as well given that Russia's aggression has elevated the importance of the Russian threat on the West's security agenda. Turkey's domestic politics, crossborder operations, and economy are also crucially important, as its post-COVID economic recovery, engagement with Russia in Syria, and upcoming presidential elections in 2023 also influence Turkey's calculations while formulating its foreign policy.

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The economy is the main driving factor behind relations between Turkey and Russia along with energy and defense. The Turkish economy has become vulnerable to inflation and currency fluctuation over the past four years. Over the last year, the Turkish Lira lost half of its value against the US dollar, and the official inflation figures passed 60% as of April. Turkish exports to Russia and Ukraine plays a significant role in balancing the budget. Turkish products constitute 32% of Russia's imports of fruits and vegetables. The sale of these products contributes more than one billion dollars to the Turkish economy.⁵ Most importantly, Russian tourists make up 20% of foreign tourists coming to Turkey in the summer while the percentage of Ukrainian tourists reaches 8%.⁶ At 13%, Ukraine provides a significant portion of Turkey's wheat purchases following Russia, which provides 65% of Turkey's wheat imports even though Turkey has enough reserves for this year.⁷ Russia also provides a significant part of Turkey's natural gas via the Blue Stream pipeline, which is the backbone of Turkey's gas supply. Therefore, torpedoing its relations with Russia or Ukraine by over-reacting could jeopardize the flow of foreign capital from Russia to Turkey and energy security.

Turkey also engages with Russia in multiple regional crises. After the US deprioritized the Middle East and North Africa to focus on taming China's rise, both Turkey and Russia have expanded their footprints in Libya, Syria, and in several other African and Middle Eastern countries. Turkey would like to maintain its regional influence in the Middle East and North Africa to prevent another refugee wave, create business opportunities for its export-oriented hard industry and construction as well as securing its share of the Mediterranean gas resources. A potential spat with Russia could significantly harm Turkey's objectives towards these regions.

Turkey has developed partnerships with Russia in multiple strategic projects. Russia invested close to 20 billion dollars in Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, Turkey's first nuclear facility.⁸ Turkey values its defense cooperation with Russia, which recently sold Turkey S-400 air defense systems and signaled the possible joint production of S-500 missile systems.⁹ Russia

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and Turkey have also agreed to build the Turk Stream pipeline to complement the flow of Russian gas to Turkey. Even more importantly, Turkey will earn transit fees as the pipeline passes through Turkish territory. In summary, Russia has significant leverage to hurt Turkey economically and strategically should Turkey take a step in the wrong direction.

Nonetheless, Ankara also considers its relations with Ukraine as well when formulating its response to the Russian invasion. Over the past few years, Ukraine has become a vital customer of Bayraktar TB2 type Turkish drones. When Ukraine began using Bayraktar drones in late 2021, Russia considered it as a signal of a potential shift in the balance of power in the area.¹⁰ The Turkish drones act as major force multipliers in Ukraine's resistance to Russian forces by successfully striking missile launchers, tanks and supply trains.¹¹ Turkey and Ukraine have also taken steps towards joint production of Bayraktar drones. Ukraine's motor industry provides input for multiple Turkish defense products.¹² Even though the conditions that arose with the conflict will damage Ukraine's contribution to the Turkish economy, Turkey still give utmost importance to Ukrainian partnership in these areas.

Turkey's relations with the West are another significant dynamic that Turkey considers regarding this issue. Turkey has been continuing security commitments and deep economic relations with the West. Europe is a much bigger trade partner than Russia for Turkey, with Europe accounting for 40% of Turkey's total trade while Russia is below 20%.¹³ Similarly, Turkey's partnership with Russia cannot be compared to Turkey's defense cooperation with NATO. However, Turkey's relations with the West have soured over the past decade, particularly due to Turkey feeling that it had been abandoned while dealing with the reverberations of the Syrian crisis. The US has refused to provide Turkey with drones, fighter jets, and missile systems for the past ten years, meaning Turkey had had to either build its own systems or buy them from other sources at the risk of facing sanctions from its Western allies.¹⁴ Furthermore, the EU's assistance to Turkey in its refugee crisis was deemed insufficient. Turkey's EU membership process came to a halt. Several EU countries became competitors to Turkey over gas resources in the Mediterranean. More importantly, since the Obama Administration, the US has not been willing to commit resources to the

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Middle East and Black Sea regions within the framework of its objective of pivoting towards the Asia-Pacific to counter China. Therefore, Turkey needs to move carefully with regards to its already tense relations with the West.

Unlike many European and North American countries that participated in sanctions against Russia, Turkey lies within the Black Sea region that is the arena of conflict and has the longest coastline to the Black Sea. Along with all the other littoral countries, Turkey is a Black Sea Economic Cooperation member. Turkey also controls the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, the only naval conduit out of the Black Sea. All of this means that when the security environment in the Black Sea region is jeopardized, it will hurt Turkey more than other nations beyond the region. Hence, due to its responsibilities as a major Black Sea power, its relations with Ukraine and Russia, and its position in the NATO Alliance, Turkey does not want a further escalation of the conflict and is thus pushing for a resolution despite the difficulties.

Turkey's Cautiously Active Foreign Policy

Turkey has been following an active foreign policy through which it can positively impact the direction of the conflict. Turkey has condemned the invasion and made a crucial contribution to Ukraine's defense with the sale of Bayraktar TB2 type drones. Yet, Turkey did not join the sanctions against Russia, did not close its airspace to Russia and kept channels of dialogue open. With such a policy, Turkey could play a role in mediating the conflict and sustaining its relations with its Western partners, Ukraine and Russia. Turkey's policy is manifested in its communications with its Western allies, engagements with Russia and Ukraine, and general approach to the crisis.

Turkey has also manifested the cautious part of its foreign policy in how it has implemented the Montreaux convention. The "Montreaux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits" is a crucial document that governs vessels' passage to and from the Black Sea. According to

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the Convention, which was signed in 1936, Turkey is the main authority that decides which ships can or cannot pass through the straits. In peacetime, the Convention guarantees the passage of merchant ships and limits the passage of warships of non-Black Sea Powers. In the event of war, Turkey has the right to close the passage of all warships through the straits except for the warships of Black Sea powers returning to their bases. Since the year 1936, Turkey has almost unfailingly implemented the premises of the convention. On February 27, Turkey's Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu declared that if Turkey decides that what is happening in Ukraine is war, then it would take the appropriate steps.¹⁵ On February 28, Turkey warned the warships of all countries to not pass through straits.¹⁶ Article 19 of the Convention, however, limits the passage of vessels belonging to countries participating in a war. By refusing passage to "all" warships, Turkey in fact went one step beyond the actual article. The legalities of the issue aside, with such a move, Turkey could satisfy both Ukraine, which would like to see the passage of Russian vessels limited, and Russia, which would like to prevent Western ships from helping Ukraine.

The crisis did not make a significant impact on Turkey's policy towards the West or vice versa. Like its position regarding Syria, Turkey continued to blame NATO and the West for not taking concrete steps to deter Russia. The West does not seem willing to take steps to bring Turkey on board on this issue and Turkey does not want to risk facing Russia without adequate Western support. Turkey abstained from voting on Russia's suspension from the Council of Europe (CoE) and did not join the economic sanctions against Russia. Çavuşoğlu declared that Turkey's vote in CoE represented Turkey's desire to continue dialogue with Russia and maintain channels of diplomacy.¹⁷ In the latest phone call between Biden and Erdoğan, the two leaders agreed on their shared opposition to the Russian invasion.¹⁸ Nonetheless, no signs of repair in US-Turkey relations is on the horizon yet.

Turkey became one of the few countries that could keep contact with both Ukraine and Russia throughout the crisis. In his tweet, after his call with Erdoğan, Zelenskiy thanked Turkey for its support for Ukraine in this dire situation.¹⁹ Erdoğan also held a one-hour

long phone call with Putin where he reiterated his desire to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. Çavuşoğlu also talked with his Ukrainian and Russian counterparts Kuleba and Lavrov to complement Erdoğan's initiatives. With its active diplomacy, Turkey became one of the few players that is actively talking with both Russia and Ukraine in a constructive manner. Turkey was able to boost its diplomatic role by bringing the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba to have diplomatic talks on the margins of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on 11-13 March. However, the meeting did not bear any fruit due to Lavrov's maximalist demands.

Yet, on March 29, Turkey was able to summon the negotiators from both parties in Istanbul, where a significant progress was made in the de-escalation of the conflict with Russia's withdrawal from the northern part of Ukraine. This progress served to legitimize Turkey's policy vis-à-vis the conflict. As of current, Turkey is bidding to host a meeting between Putin and Zelenskiy. The conditions are not ripe for such a meeting. But should Turkey manage to convince both parties a negotiation between the Presidents could constitute a breaking point towards significant de-escalation.

Likely Scenarios for Turkey's

The basis of Turkey's stance towards the conflict is unlikely to change. By pursuing a cautiously active policy, Turkey is able to preserve its relations with the West, Ukraine and Russia. Moreover, such a policy also enables Turkey to prevent its economy from deteriorating through possible Russian sanctions. Turkey has already achieved some success in contributing to de-escalation of the conflict. Therefore, in order for Turkey to shift its attitude towards the conflict, there must be a drastic change in at least one of the dynamics that impacts Turkey's calculus.

A drastic change in Turkish relations with the West might impact Turkey's attitude towards Russia and towards the conflict. Turkey's relations with the West went downhill following the 2016 coup attempt. From then on, Turkey has followed an independent and assertive foreign policy to protect its security interests. The military operations in Syria, assistance to Azerbaijan in the Nagorna-Karabakh conflict and strategic deals with Russia have all been a part of this trend. The West has not been able to impact Turkish foreign policy neither with carrots, nor sticks. In order for the current Turkish government to be brought on board, it would want to see progress made in Turkey's purchase of F-35 jets, Turkey's process of accession to the EU

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or the extradition of Gulen and others deemed responsible for the 2016 coup attempt. The only signal that came from the West were reports that some in the US floated the idea that Turkey could abandon the Russian-made S-400 system by handing it over to Ukraine. Turkish officials quickly rebuffed the offer.²⁰ As things stand, Turkey will continue to consider the West as a destabilizing and comparatively ineffective actor in regional issues.

Turkey's relations with Russia constitute the other part of the story. As a result of its engagement with Russia, Turkey has been able to conduct multiple military operations in Syria and influence the situation in Azerbaijan. Turkey also values its strategic and economic cooperation with Russia. Provided that the conflict in Ukraine remains at a stalemate and Putin remains in power, Turkey can sustain its partnership with Russia. Despite Russia's slow advance and huge losses in Ukraine, the political leadership in Moscow is surviving the crisis. The sanctions are hurting ordinary Russians more than the leadership, as oligarchs and the political elite continue to support the Kremlin position.

A dramatic change in Turkey's position towards the conflict is also unlikely because the conflict's parties themselves have expressed appreciation for Turkey's current stance. In his phone call with Erdoğan, Biden expressed appreciation for Turkey's efforts to support a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, as well as Turkey's recent engagements with regional leaders that help promote peace and stability.²¹ Zelenskiy went as far as to demand seeing Turkey as one of the guarantors of a possible peace deal.²² Russian envoy to Turkey Yerkhov also appreciated Turkey's neutral position during the crisis.²³ Therefore, having already seen that its policy is working, it is hard for Turkey to change its course for uncertain gains with potential huge risks.

Conclusion

As a result of its cautiously active foreign policy, Turkey was able to host the most critical diplomatic negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. It is an indication of the confidence of the conflicting parties in Turkey as well as an important achievement of Turkish foreign policy

As a major Black Sea power with vested interests in the region Turkey has a lot to lose from a further escalation of the war and a lot to gain from its possible success in restoring peace

and diplomacy. Having already seen positive results of its policy, Turkey is likely to double down on this path by intensifying its diplomatic efforts to bring together the warring parties to end the conflict.

As a major Black Sea power with vested interests in the region Turkey has a lot to lose from a further escalation of the war and a lot to gain from its possible success in restoring peace. Turkey has invested in regional peace through various bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Among the institutions Turkey plays a major role in are BLACKSEAFOR (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group) and BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation), which played a significant role in sustaining peace and harmony in the region. The breakdown of harmony in the region will harm Turkey's security and economy. In addition, the rising commodity and energy prices and weakening of Turkey's trade ties with both countries will put a significant burden on the Turkish economy. These dynamics create responsibilities for Turkey to play a crucial role in maintaining security in the Black Sea region. Turkey is compelled to remain cautious even in the case of clear aggression from a Black Sea power.

Despite the wide support to Turkey's efforts of mediation, there is a lack of coordination between these efforts and the Western efforts to punish Russia. The restoration of peace and holding Russia accountable for violating many basic premises of international law are equally important. The coordination of the efforts to achieve both objectives might not be possible in short term due to the fragility and sensitivity of the negotiation talks. However, such coordination is needed in the long run in order to stop the bloodshed and possibly make sure Russia will not dare to repeat the same action in the future.

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