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THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND TURKEY'S HEDGING STRATEGY BETWEEN THE WEST AND RUSSIA

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As a neighbouring country to Ukraine and Russia, Turkey has become indirectly involved in the 2022 Ukrainian war in multiple ways. This paper analyses various facets of the complexity that explains Turkey's current position.

Antecedents

Turkey's relation with Russia

For most of their history, the Russian and Ottoman empires have been rivals, having fought 13 wars between 1568 and 1918.¹ Russia not only conquered Ottoman territories, but consistently put pressure to gain control over the highly strategic Turkish Straits (Bosphorus, Sea of Marmara and Dardanelles) as the only permanently ice-free maritime route to the rest of the world. In 1946, when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin intimidated Turkey over the Straits, the US Truman administration – then the only nuclear power – successfully deterred Moscow's planned aggression with a strong commitment to fight for Turkey.² In 1947, Turkey received military and economic support following the Truman doctrine. In 1952 Turkey became a member of NATO, which accelerated the deep military cooperation between the US and Turkey.

With the end of the Cold War and the bipolar discipline, Turkey opened up its diplomatic

horizons, notably to the Middle East, Russia and the new ex-Soviet republics. In the post-Soviet space, Turkey hoped to resuscitate historical, linguistic and cultural ties with a multitude of Turkic-speaking and Muslim countries and minorities, which also have a diaspora in Turkey itself. Turkey's warming of relations with Russia resulted in the building of the Blue Stream gas pipeline connecting Russia and Turkey under the Black Sea, entering into operation in 2002 and turning Turkey into one of Russia's main customers. In 2010, Ankara also approved the construction by Russian companies of its first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, which is nearing completion.³

However, the Arab uprisings from 2011 onwards turned Turkey and Russia into adversaries. Alongside Western and Gulf states, Turkey supported rebels against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, which was staunchly backed by Russia. In November 2015, the downing of a Russian Su-24 jet by the Turkish military was retaliated with harsh Russian economic sanctions.

Turkey's hedging strategy between the West and Russia

In June 2016 president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed 'regret' for the downing of the Russian jet, after which a normalisation of relations with Russia followed. This happened

in the background of a deepening crisis of confidence between Turkey and the West. From 2007 onwards, some EU member states raised fundamental objections to Turkish accession to the EU. In 2013, the Turkish police crackdown on the Gezi protests sparked harsh criticism in Western politics and press. Turkey, in its turn, heavily objected the arming by the US of the Syrian Kurdish militia YPG in the fight against Daesh. The YPG⁴ is closely affiliated with the PKK⁵, which has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984, and is considered as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US, and the EU.⁶

The 15 July 2016 violent attempted coup further damaged the relations between Turkey and the West because the Gülen organisation – which is held primarily responsible by the entire Turkish political spectrum, several international media, as well as the current head of the British intelligence MI6⁷ – has been receiving ample sympathy from Western governments before and, when it became the subject of massive purges, after the coup attempt. In contrast to Western leaders, the Russian president Vladimir Putin was quick to express solidarity. Putin and Erdoğan held a summit on 9 August 2016 in Saint Petersburg. A widely held belief among Turkish nationalist circles – but unconfirmed – is that Russia offered intelligence support during the coup attempt.⁸

Anti-American, 'Eurasianist' elements on both sides, such as the left-wing Turkish-nationalist, Eurasianist Patriotic Party⁹ and its affiliates in the army, contributed to the Turkish-Russian rapprochement. In November 2016, the Russian ultra-nationalist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin visited the ruling Justice and Development Party¹⁰ (AKP).¹¹ The December 2016 assassination of Russian ambassador Andrei Karlov – by the Turkish authorities ascribed to the Gülenists – did not harm the improving ties between Moscow and Ankara. For Russia, this pro-Turkish policy was conceived as a tactic to weaken NATO.

Given the regaining of control over Syria by Assad and Russia from September 2015 on,

Turkey redefined its goals in Syria to more realist proportions. Toppling Assad was no longer an objective. Turkey now focused on curbing the YPG/PKK, securing some refuge for anti-Assad rebels, and a horizon to repatriate part of the 3.5 million refugees. Subsequently, from December 2016 onwards, Turkey took part in the Astana-Sochi peace process with Russia and Iran, side-lining the West, and allowing the presence of Turkish troops around the rebel-held region of Idlib.¹²

In 2017, due to the deteriorating relationship with the West as well as the US refusal to deliver Patriot air defence missiles with technology transfer to Turkey, Ankara decided to buy a batch of S-400 surface-to-air missiles from Russia, upsetting its NATO partners. Russia and Turkey also cooperated to build the TurkStream pipeline, for delivery of natural gas to Turkey and EU countries. TurkStream is operational since 2020. This constructive relationship does not preclude that Turkey and Russia remained rivals in the recent phase of the Libyan war (2019-2020), where Turkish drones and Syrian mercenaries in defence of the UN-recognised Tripoli government repelled the assault by general Haftar, who was supported by Russia and a few other countries.¹³

The abovementioned developments marked Turkey's hedging strategy between the West and Russia. Hedging refers to a strategy of a smaller power (Turkey) navigating between two great powers or blocs (the West and Russia). This is an alternative to bandwagoning with one to balance the other. In this case, Turkey fears the two major powers/blocs, but also benefits from cooperation with each of them. Furthermore, it plays off one against another. This seesaw strategy amounts to a form of power, as Turkey signals to both sides that, if one behaves too unfriendly, it can tilt more definitively to the other. In recent years, Turkey has been oscillating back and forth, remaining committed to NATO and cherishing its paramount trade relationship with the EU, but also collaborating with Russia on the economic, energy, military and diplomatic

fronts (e.g. concerning Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh).¹⁴

Turkey's relation with Ukraine

The strong links between Turkey and Ukraine go back to the late 15th century, when the Turkic-speaking and Islamic Crimean Khanate became an Ottoman protectorate, to last until the Russian take-over in 1783. The Tatars are the main ethnic group of Ukraine with Turkic background. Because of the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1877-1878 and the First World War and its aftermath, tens of thousands of Tatars from Crimea and Ukraine migrated to Turkey.

When Ukraine became independent in 1991, Turkey was quick to develop strong relations. Ukraine became a founding member of the Turkey-led organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). A sensitive issue in the relationship used to be the return of citizens of Tatar origin from Turkey to the Crimean peninsula. Ankara supported this reintegration, whereas the process was obstructed by the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, dominated by Russian-speakers.¹⁵

In the latest bilateral High-Level Strategic Council meeting, chaired by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Erdoğan in Kyiv on 3 February 2022, it was stated that the trade volume between Ukraine and Turkey in 2021 had increased to more than USD 7.5 billion. Both countries signed a free trade agreement with a view to an increase to USD 10 billion within 5 years.¹⁶ Food imports from Ukraine are notably important for Turkey.

In 2014, Turkey condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support to pro-Russian rebels in Donbas. Turkey interprets transforming the Black Sea into a 'Russian Lake' as a threat to its national security. Since 2014, Turkey and Ukraine have stepped up cooperation between their defence industries. Starting in 2019, Turkey sold at least 20 Bayraktar TB2 combat drones to Ukraine. Both countries are also cooperating on drone production.¹⁷ Turkey's cooperation with Ukraine is not necessarily to be interpreted as

NATO member Turkey implementing 'Western' policy. In line with its own search for strategic autonomy, it is plausible that Ankara intends to foster a more independent, even non-aligned position of Ukraine as well.¹⁸

Turkey's reaction to Russia's 2022 aggression against Ukraine

Political stance

On 27 January, the Turkish National Security Council (MGK) called upon Russia and Ukraine to reduce tensions.¹⁹ On 22 February 2022, the Turkish president called Russia's decision to recognise the independence of "the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk Republics" unacceptable.²⁰ On 24 February, he condemned the Russian invasion: "This step, which we see as a violation of the international law, is a heavy blow dealt to regional peace, calm and stability. [...] Türkiye supports the struggle Ukraine wages to protect its territorial integrity."²¹ On 2 March in the United Nations General Assembly, Turkey voted in favour of the resolution denouncing Russia's aggression.

However, the Turkish government stresses its willingness to maintain 'good relations' with both Moscow and Kyiv. Turkey does not join US and EU sanctions against Russia; it states only to follow United Nations sanctions. To mitigate Russia's ire, Ankara distances itself from the Ukrainian glorification of the Turkish drones, referring to them as a merely commercial transaction between a Turkish company and Kyiv. Still, the Baykar company is led by Erdoğan's son-in-law, and the drones have already been used in recent years against pro-Russian rebels in the Donbas.²²

At the humanitarian level, Turkey received more than 58,000 Ukrainian refugees.²³ In addition, from the first days of the war, the Turkish Red Crescent and the government disaster relief agency AFAD²⁴ sent aid convoys with tents, medical equipment, food, etc. National fundraising campaigns have been started and donated to Ukraine. On 24 March, the French president Emmanuel Macron announced that France, Turkey and

Greece will undertake a mission to evacuate civilians from the besieged town of Mariupol in consultation with Russia.²⁵

Hedging throughout the war?

The war poses serious risks to Turkey's security and economy. Regardless of Turkey's reaction, the rising international energy and food prices and the loss of business opportunities in Ukraine and Russia, add to the already ongoing deep currency and inflation crisis in Turkey. In addition, support to Ukraine could be met with Russian retaliation in one way or another. Turkey is vulnerable to Russian economic sanctions, as it depends for 33.59% of its natural gas imports on Russian gas (even though this dependency has spectacularly decreased in recent years)²⁶, while Russians are important for Turkish tourism. Turkey also takes into account the fragile military status quo in the North Syrian Idlib region, where its troops – following the Astana-Sochi agreements with Russia and Iran – form a buffer between a concentration of rebels and 3 million civilians on the one hand, and Assad's army on the other. On 27 February 2020, 33 Turkish soldiers died in an air attack by Syria and/or Russia.²⁷ Without Ankara directly blaming Moscow, this incident seriously damaged the Turkish-Russian relationship. Neither Turkey nor the EU look forward to renewed Russian/Syrian pressure on Idlib and a new wave of Syrian refugees.

Finally, Ankara might have doubts about NATO's collective defence pledge under Article V, in the case of a major international escalation of the war and a Russian attack on Turkey. In assessing the situation, the Turkish political elite and public also have history in mind. The Ottoman Empire's alliance with Germany in the First World War led to traumatic defeat and destruction. In 1931, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced the adage 'peace at home, peace in the world', underpinning a Turkish foreign policy of restraint. During the Second World War Turkey avoided devastation by remaining neutral. Turkey's loyalty to the US and NATO during the Cold War, in its turn, came with the

loss of political independence and tutelage by a largely US-backed, coup-prone military. Across the entire Turkish political spectrum there is little enthusiasm for taking sides in conflicts between great powers. It is fair to assume that Turkey will continue its hedging strategy far into this war.

Application of the 1936 Montreux Convention

From the beginning of the Russian invasion, Ukraine asked Turkey to close the Turkish Straits for Russian warships. On 28 February Turkey called the hostilities 'a war' and decided to implement article 19 of the 1936 Montreux Convention, providing for the prohibition of "vessels of war belonging to belligerent Powers [to] pass through the Straits". Only vessels "which have become separated from their bases" may return. The latter provision may apply to returning Russian warships in the Mediterranean or beyond. The Turkish government indicated that these ships should be registered in a Black Sea port and not be involved in the war. At the same time, Ankara warned both Black Sea and non-Black Sea countries not to pass warships through the Straits²⁸, even though Montreux still allows a limited presence of non-belligerent navy. Since the bulk of the Russian navy that can play a role in the aggression against Ukraine is already in the Black Sea, the Turkish decision can only have a limited impact on the war. Furthermore, the decision can hardly be seen as a proactive move against Russia, since according to a wide political consensus in Turkey, the correct implementation of the Montreux Convention is regarded as a cornerstone of regional security.

Turkey's mediation efforts

In response to the mounting tensions and in line with its strong interest in peace in the Black Sea region, in January 2022 Erdoğan invited Zelensky and Putin for a summit. After the start of the invasion, on 10 March, Turkish foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu hosted a meeting of the Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Antalya. Afterwards, Erdoğan held phone calls with Putin and

Zelensky. Until this day, these talks did not produce a breakthrough. However, the high-level nature of the talks confirms the existence of a solid diplomatic relationship between Turkey and both belligerents, and that Russia does not fully identify Turkey with the rest of NATO. For Turkey, which has a tradition of mediation, it is a next step to mediate between non-Muslim countries.

The 2022 Ukraine war comes at a time when Turkey has been improving its fraught relations with the EU, France, Greece, Armenia, UAE, Egypt, and Israel. These efforts are partly motivated to boost the Turkish lira, trade and investment, and lift the country out of its economic troubles. Since the invasion, Turkey hosted the heads of state or government of Greece, Israel, Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands. Turkey's mediation is welcomed by its Western allies. Even though there is some concern that the Turkish financial system could become a conduit for Russian circumvention of US and EU sanctions, so far Western capitals have appreciated Turkey's military and diplomatic support to Ukraine, while understanding its specific situation.

The Turkish societal dimension

As of day one, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was visible in the major news outlets and in the streets of Istanbul in the form of small size protests. However, these two were not much related. On television, an inflation of 'strategists' and 'Russia-Ukraine experts' held multi-hour discussions on the war. Many have established a link between NATO enlargement and the war. The Turkish public opinion continues to be highly sceptical of NATO. These sentiments are widely shared across Islamists, nationalists and leftists.²⁹ The Turkish public opinion and all political parties support variants of a cautious, middle-of-the-road, even neutralist Turkish foreign policy concerning this war.

Street protests against Russia's war have not made it to the Turkish mainstream media. The heterogeneity of the participants and the flags varied according to the location of protest, being more homogenous (Ukrainians) during

the protest in Beyoğlu area (lacking the support of liberal and socialist circles), and being a more heterogenous mix of Ukrainians, Turks, Tatars, Azeris, Georgians, Kazaks, Uzbeks and Circassians during protests at the Beyazit Square in the conservative Fatih area.³⁰ Public support for the protests were motivated by ethical empathy towards the Ukrainian people, mutual fear of being the next victim of future Russian aggression, and religious and nationalist motivated support for the Ukrainian Tatars. Some protests were co-organised by the Ukrainian Cultural Association and the Crimean Turks Culture and Assistance Association.³¹ The main messages given were a call for a no-fly zone by NATO, a Turkish boycott on Russian products and demands for active support by Turkey to Ukraine.

The slogans and speeches during the protests showed that the deep-rooted perception of the 'Moskof', a pejorative word referring to the Russians as barbaric and brutal enemies, was still alive.³² This perception was created by historical brutality by (Soviet) Russian governments towards Turks and Muslim minorities that were massacred or forced to leave their homelands. It was resuscitated during the Cold War as part of the anti-communism agenda, for example through the book *Moskof* (1973) by the conservative nationalist Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, who remained influential among members of the ruling AKP. Furthermore, the idea that Russia aggressively pursues control over the Turkish Straits remains part of the standard Turkish high school curriculum.

Conclusions

In the face of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey takes a cautious position in line with its hedging strategy between the West and Russia, with the aim to maintain positive relations with both sides. Turkey has armed Ukraine and condemned Russia's aggression. But it does not join Western sanctions against Russia. Due to traumatic historical experiences, Turkey does not want

to be caught up in a conflict between major powers/blocs and prefers to retain its strategic autonomy. Recent crises of confidence between Turkey and the West reinforce this stance. Due to its geographical location and bad economic situation, Turkey has a direct interest in a rapid end to the war.

This explains its active mediation role, where theoretically a more passive stance was possible. In addition, this high-profile mediation might also enhance Turkey's international standing and help stem the decline of popularity of the incumbent leadership domestically.

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