

Turkey As A Mediator Between Russia and NATO

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The conflict over Ukraine put Turkey in a very difficult place, since it is known to have built friendly relations with both Moscow and Kyiv. At the same time, against all odds, Ankara turned out to be a key mediator (notwithstanding the fact that it is a NATO member state), if not the only one, in the quest to reduce tensions in the unprecedented confrontation between Russia and the West.

Relationship Evolution

After joining NATO in 1952, Turkey has always been in a special position in the North Atlantic Alliance. During the Cold War, Ankara was acknowledged as the southern outpost of NATO due to Turkey sharing a border with the Soviet Union (as well as the southernmost Warsaw Pact state, namely Bulgaria, not to mention two anti-Western bastions in the Middle East, namely Syria and Iran). During this period, Turkey's foreign policy was uni-dimensional and dependent on the consolidated policy of its partners in the military alliance.

With the collapse of the USSR, Turkey began to show more independence, seeking a role in line with its burgeoning desire to become more of a fully-fledged subject of a nascent, post-Cold War international order. Ankara asserted that compulsory coordination with the United States and other Western states was no longer its default foreign policy posture.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party have governed the country since achieving victory in the 2002 elections. Since that time, divergences between Ankara and its Western partners began to increase. The first clash took place in March 2003 when Turkey's parliament narrowly refused (in closed session) to endorse a government bill authorizing the deployment of more than 60,000 U.S. troops on Turkish soil for the purposes of opening a northern front in its then-imminent attack on Iraq in exchange for a \$15-billion aid package that included \$6 billion in cash and other incentives.

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In addition to international issues, divergences also arose because of the situation in Turkey itself, with Western countries criticizing Ankara on human rights grounds. In response, Turkey accused its treaty allies and partners of interfering in its internal affairs. All this largely hindered Turkey's EU accession process, which was subsequently put on ice.

In addition, Turkey's outrage was caused by the fact that its allies in NATO provided asylum to members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey and some other countries define as a terrorist organization, as well as to the religious preacher Fethullah Gülen and his supporters, whom Ankara has accused of plotting the July 2016 failed coup d'état. (The former issue has played a principal role in Turkey's unwillingness to fast-track the recently-tabled NATO membership applications of Sweden and Finland, as will be discussed below.)

In recent years, the situation around Syria remains the most sensitive issue in relations between Turkey and other NATO member states. Ankara accuses the U.S.-led anti-terrorist coalition of financing and arming Kurdish units in Syrian territory. However, Washington responds that the Kurds are making a significant contribution to the fight against terrorist groups such as the Islamic State. This effectually amounts to a "the enemy of my ally is my friend" argument, which is evidently unacceptable to Ankara.

Simultaneously, there was a gradual rapprochement between Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin. In addition to joint economic projects, including the launch of the TurkStream gas pipeline and the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant (NPP), Ankara signed a contract with Moscow in 2017 for the purchase of Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. This provoked a painful reaction from Washington, which excluded Ankara from the program for the production of fifth-generation F-35 fighter-bombers, which in turn led to a further worsening of relations between the Turkish authorities and other NATO member states.

It is worth mentioning that Turkey and Russia managed to overcome a very difficult period in relations after a Turkish Air Force F-16 fighter jet shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M near the Turkey-Syria border on 24 November 2015. This page was turned in June 2016 when Erdoğan formally apologized to Putin, a move the Russian leader had long demanded. Then Putin commiserated with the Turkish president after an abortive coup in Turkey in July 2016: the Russian leader was the first to immediately call his Turkish counterpart, which paved the way to a full reparation of ties.

A New Reality for Turkey Amidst the War in Ukraine

On 24 February 2022, when Putin announced Russia's "special military operation," Erdoğan unequivocally condemned the Kremlin's actions, indicating that Ankara "supports Ukraine's struggle to defend its territorial integrity." For its part, the Turkish Ministry of

Foreign Affairs described Russia's actions as "a gross violation of international law" that "poses a serious threat to the security of the region and the whole world."

In addition, on 2 March 2022 Turkey voted in favor of a Western-led resolution in the UN General Assembly condemning what the text defined as Russia's "aggression" against Ukraine, and on 7 April 2022, Ankara voted to suspend Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council.

Such a rigid Turkish posture did not take the Kremlin by surprise. In recent years, the Turkish authorities had made it clear that Ankara would never recognize Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and that it would also support Ukraine in its bid to become a NATO member state.

The population of Turkey also has a negative attitude towards the Russian military operation in Ukraine. According to the results of a March 2022 poll conducted by the Turkish research center AREDA Survey, 68.8 percent of respondents condemned the Kremlin's policy in Ukraine, with only 31.2 percent indicating approval.

However, Ankara neither joined the Western-led sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia nor closed its airspace for Russian aircraft. Turkish officials stated that, in their view, such measures were ineffective foreign policy tools.

Traditionally, Turkey is very sensitive to any challenge to its economic relations with the Russian Federation. For instance, Ankara has not forgotten the severe consequences of the crisis in relations with Moscow in the year prior to the attempted coup, when leading sectors of the Turkish economy (e.g., tourism and agriculture) suffered due to Russia's imposition of de facto sanctions. From the perspective of the Turkish economy, the Western-led sanctions could not have come at a worse time: in February 2022, inflation in the country reached almost 50 percent, a historical high over the past 20 years. It thus is not in Turkey's national interest to attach itself to a policy that would further deepen an already acute crisis.

It is also worth noting that in 2021 at least 4.7 million tourists from Russia visited Turkish resorts (this number amounted to 19 percent of overall tourist flow into the country). Ankara is also significantly dependent on Russian energy supplies. Russia is a major source of energy supplies to Turkey, with market shares of 35 to 50 percent for oil, gas, and coal. Suffice it to say that Ankara and Moscow possess supply contracts for some 21.75 bcm of Russian gas that expire at the end of 2025. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has already said that his country is not able to refuse Russian gas supplies in the short term. In addition, Turkey buys about 80 percent of its grain from Russia and Ukraine.

Then there is the fact that the Turkish authorities do not want to sever contacts with the Russian side on a number of pressing security issues in various theaters (e.g., Syria, Libya, Armenia-Azerbaijan).

Moreover, Turkey will not abandon its purchase of Russia's S-400 SAM system, with Turkish Interior Minister Süleiman Soylu going so far as to say that it would be "stupid" to expect the country to do so. Turkey remains committed to this weapons system notwithstanding the fact that the West considers it to be a controversial purchase: the reaction by the United States and other NATO member states has not been positive, perhaps out of fear that this entire episode is enhancing Ankara's ability to play on tensions between Moscow and the West (not to mention helping to meet its security needs as it defines them).

Despite Ankara's double game and concessions perceived to be in favor of Moscow on a number of issues, Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who has criticized some Western leaders for their mildness on Russia, has not criticized his Turkish counterpart. The impressive role that Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones have played in the war may be reason enough for him to have tempered his criticism.

The Key Mediator

On the contrary, Turkey has become the key mediator between Moscow and Kyiv. At the end of March, Istanbul turned out to be the central and the only negotiating platform acceptable to both governments. Furthermore, the broad parameters of a would-be peace treaty between two sides were hammered out there, although it seems that both sides subsequently wanted to change some of the terms of the deal and thus that episode came to naught. At that moment, in any event, it seems that Ukraine had been willing to agree to a non-bloc status and reaffirm its commitment to being a non-nuclear country in exchange for foreign guarantees of its security.

Still, the unraveling of that round of peace talks was not attributed to Turkey. Both parties have no reason to wish to see Turkey abandon its key role in the negotiation process—in fact, Turkey is likely to play such a role not only between Russia and Ukraine but also between Russia and the West. As a result of this, Turkey's government has earned some goodwill among its NATO allies, all of whom oppose Russia's invasion.

Having earned certain points due to its mediation efforts, Ankara increased its room for maneuver and, in turn, cashed those IOUs in almost immediately, as it were, by putting forward demands on outstanding issues. The most striking episode in this regard was Erdoğan's demarche against the applications for NATO membership by Sweden and Finland. Important to underline is that the Turkish leader did not say "no" but rather attached conditionality to saying "yes." The conditions he put forward in public were entirely in accordance with Turkey's national interests as understood and defined by Ankara. The point was elementary: we are not just a 'go-along' ally but a fully-fledged member of a consensus-based alliance whose representatives meet at

a round table. Certainly, this gesture was also made in order to appease Moscow and confirm the friendly nature of Erdoğan's relations with Putin. But this was not the main reason he raised an objection to the membership applications of the two Scandinavian countries.

Turkey's Future Strategy Towards NATO

Erdoğan has not abandoned Turkey's attempts to facilitate a peace agreement between Moscow and Kyiv, vacillations of both parties' demands, red lines, and willingness to compromise.

All in all, Ankara will obviously try to hold its position as the only trusted mediator between Russia and the West. Moreover, Erdoğan has announced Turkey's readiness to act as a guarantor of Ukraine's security, which the Kremlin presumably would be willing to accept. This will make Ankara a key player in further negotiations between the Kremlin and NATO.

As for the possible accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, Turks will strive to squeeze the maximum out of this situation. Thus, the Turkish Ministry of Justice requested the extradition of 6 alleged PKK members from Finland and 11 alleged PKK members from Sweden. In addition, Ankara insists that Helsinki and Stockholm lift their arms embargo against Turkey, which they imposed in 2019. After all, it is rather paradoxical to desire to join a military alliance whilst at the same time sanctioning one of the members whose assent is a prerequisite to one's desire.

In the same vein, Turkey sent a request to the United States to lift its own defense industry restrictions against Ankara. In particular, Turkey's government requested from Washington 40 F-16 Block 70 fighters and 80 Block 70 upgrade kits for aircraft already in service with its Air Force. An example to emulate: the UK has already lifted its ban on supplying British defense industry products to Turkey.

Along with this, Ankara has indicated an interest in reviving its moribund EU accession negotiation process. Erdoğan has been clear on this point: Ankara expects its NATO allies who are EU member states to take certain steps in this regard, with the end point being full EU membership for Turkey.

Moreover, the Turkish leader has sought to take advantage of the current situation to gain leverage in the Syrian theater. Thus, in April 2022, Turkey banned Russian airplanes from flying to Syria through its territory. In addition, Erdoğan said on 1 June 2022 that Ankara is starting a new military operation in Syria against Kurdish forces—something that in the past has caused consternation in some Western decisionmaking circles. Obviously, Turkey is confident that in the current situation, its NATO allies will turn a blind eye to a renewed offense engineered by Ankara.

In an effort to get the most out of its negotiations with the West, sooner or later Turkey will likely agree to endorse the petitions of Finland and Sweden, also given the restrained reaction of the Kremlin on this score. Putin has already emphasized that the accession of the two Scandinavian states “does not pose an immediate threat to Russia.”

Thus, while the war in Ukraine is going on, Turkey will continue to maneuver between NATO and Russia, trying to extract the maximum benefit for itself from the escalating confrontation between the two staunch opponents.

Turkey and the South Caucasus

As for the South Caucasus, Turkey might further deepen its presence in the region, especially via forging ahead with economic projects involving Georgia and Azerbaijan, but also in trying to make a deal on normalizing relations with Armenia (in parallel to Baku’s effort). In this regard, Ankara may manage to fill the void caused by Moscow’s temporary absence, due to its focus on the Ukraine gamble.

Azerbaijan, which, of course, always has to keep a close eye on the Kremlin red lines, now has an opportunity to intensify its contacts with Turkey and other NATO member states. Baku, using its close ties with Ankara, has a chance to test how ready Moscow is to allow Azerbaijan to move further in the direction of the non-Russian sphere of interest: not to the West exactly—at least not in institutional terms—but in terms of executing the next stage of its longstanding multivectoral foreign policy. This amounts to the furtherance of Azerbaijan’s quest to entrench its position as a keystone state or middle power, a theme outlined in the pages of *Baku Dialogues* and elsewhere by the likes of Nikolas Gvosdev and Damjan Krnjević Mišković, writing both together and separately. In this regard, new economic and military-technical projects might be paramount. If these moves can be made with the Kremlin’s tacit acceptance (if not exactly approval), then Baku has a chance to take a step or two forward.

All of this points to an intriguing possibility: Azerbaijan, along with Turkey, serving as an alternative negotiating platform between the West and Russia. It would certainly not be the first time. In any event, such a possibility—if actualized—would certainly open up new perspectives and strengthen Baku’s political weight as an independent and leading regional player.

Takeaways

The following takeaways may be said to summarize the abovementioned considerations:

- Ankara will try to hold its position as the only mediator between Russia and Ukraine, and also between Russia and the West.

- Turkey is ready to act as a guarantor of Ukraine's security that will make it a key player in further Russia-NATO negotiations.
- Turkey will continue to maneuver between NATO and Russia, trying to extract the maximum benefit for its national interests from the escalating confrontation between the two staunch opponents.
- Ankara is going to fortify its presence in Syria and in the South Caucasus as its NATO allies and Russia are preoccupied with the bloody conflict over Ukraine.
- Azerbaijan, using its close ties with Turkey, can intensify its cooperation with the West as a consequence of Russia's strategic distraction.
- Baku has a chance to become an alternative (along with Turkey) negotiating platform between the West and Russia.