

TURKEY'S POLICY ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CRISIS

FİLİZ TUTKU AYDIN

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SUMMARY

Turkey has closer relationships with both Ukraine and Russia so it seeks to avoid a new episode of war between them.

Amid a military standoff with Russia, on Feb. 3, Kyiv hosted the 10th High-Level Strategic Council between Turkey and Ukraine. The heads of state, Tayyip Erdogan and Volodymyr Zelensky marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties by signing a series of trade and defense agreements. The long-awaited free trade agreement between Turkey and Ukraine was also signed on this occasion. Given the current tensions along the Ukrainian border and Turkish ties with both Russia and Ukraine, Turkey's policy on Ukraine is ever more critical for regional peace and stability. Turkey has close relationships with both Ukraine and Russia so it seeks to avoid a new episode of war between them. As a NATO member, heightened tensions in the region pushes Turkey to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis even if it may be forced to make difficult choices in case of a military conflict. This analysis provides a review of Turkey's relations with Ukraine and discusses foreign policy options available to Turkey in case of invasion of Ukrainian territory by Russia.

RUSSIAN EFFORTS TO BRING GEORGIA AND UKRAINE INTO ITS FOLD

Threatened by the possibility of similar movements inside Russia, the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine provided Russian President Vladimir Putin with pretexts to launch his revisionist foreign policy for the post-Soviet region. Although Russia's "near abroad" foreign policy had already been announced in the 1990s, Russia did not adopt this policy until the 2000s, as it had to focus on maintaining its territorial integrity with Tatarstan and Chechnya demanding sovereignty. "Near abroad" policy meant Russia's rejection of national independence movements in the former Soviet space. The Russian Federation was fearful of a potential domino effect that could influence its own Chechens, Tatars, Bashkirs, and a myriad of indigenous peoples, whose Soviet-given ethnic rights were rolled back in the post-Soviet period.

In the 2000s, it became clear that Russia never reconciled with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Putin characterizing it "the greatest tragedy of the century." For any "captive nation," the end of the Soviet Union was the beginning of decolonization in a sense. The color revolutions were a way to overthrow the oligarchs and corrupt remnants of the Soviet regime among their governing elites. Putin, a former member of the Soviet KGB, began punishing Ukraine after the Orange Revolution for trying to get out of the Russian "sphere of influence" by waging economic and political war. The natural gas wars between Russia and Ukraine between 2006-2009 affected the European gas supply, and some countries such as Germany and Italy understood the serious consequences of possible gas cuts. In 2010, Russia with its security advisors and media propaganda efforts inside Ukraine was successful in getting pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich elected. From the Russian perspective, this thwarted the danger of regime change in Ukraine, a country that matters more to Russia than any other for historical and cultural reasons.

Having consolidated his power at home in the early 2000s, Putin reconstructed the Russian foreign policy discourse. He openly criticized NATO in the 2007 Munich Security Conference, for example, for "expanding" despite "promises given to Gorbachev." This was also the first sign of the Russian hybrid war toward the Western world, as Russia utilized adversarial rhetoric by taking advantage of rising anti-Americanism around the world at the time. NATO did not actively seek new members, but post-Soviet republics sought the protection of the security umbrella provided by this organization to protect themselves against potential Russian occupation. But for Russia, NATO continued expanding into the Russian

“sphere of influence” and violated the “balance of power” in the region.

These new NATO members’ decisions were proven wise given the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 after the Rose Revolution. With this act, Russia showed that it did not accept multilateralism in the Black Sea or post-Soviet region, as it sought to be the regional hegemon. Russia applied a hybrid war strategy to invade a country for the first time in 2008. It distributed Russian passports to the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and argued that the “Russian diaspora” was under threat and occupied this region, practically cutting off them from Georgia. Georgia was punished for the Rose Revolution, and passports began to be distributed in Crimea in a similar scenario.

It is not an exaggeration to state that the Euromaidan Revolution constitutes the single most important and effective attempt to reverse Russia’s colonization in the post-Soviet geography, which became and will be an example for many generations in the regional countries. That is why it prompted such a decisive reaction as the occupation of Crimea. The occupation and annexation of Crimea effectively buried the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe and hence transformed the nature of Turkish-Ukrainian-Russian relations.

BACKGROUND OF TURKISH-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS

In 1649, the agreement signed between the Cossacks in Ukraine and the Ottoman Empire can be considered the start of Turkish-Ukrainian diplomatic relations. There are several episodes in history during which the Ottoman Empire, Ukrainian Cossacks, and the Crimean Tatar

Khanate, a major Eastern European power at the time allied against the growing Russian Empire. In a time when the Crimean Khanate received Ottoman protection, the Cossack State was taken over by Russia, which occupied Eastern Ukraine, naming it “Little Russia.” The Russian annexation of Crimea in 1783 not only ended the Crimean Khanate but also constituted the first time a Muslim majority part of the empire was lost.

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When the Russian Empire collapsed, the Ottoman Empire was one of the first states to recognize the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1918. After a short period of the Turkish-Soviet friendship Pact, because of Stalin’s claims in the Bosphorus and Eastern Turkey, Turkey had to join NATO. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey became one of the first countries to recognize Ukraine on Dec. 16, 1991. Turkish-Ukrainian relations were friendly during the 1990s, but they were relatively low-key. The most important element of these relations was the Crimean Tatars who were deported on May 18, 1944, by Stalin and returned to their homeland Crimea. Ukraine regarded Turkey’s material support for Crimean Tatars positively, as it increased investment in the country. Both Ukraine and Turkey supported multilateralism in regional relations as an alternative to the Russian vision of unilateralism (i.e. “near abroad” policy). The Turkish policy of balancing Russia and compartmentalization began during the

2008 Georgian-Russian War. Turkey, still a rising economic power, did not choose to contest Russian claims but rather successfully balanced its relations with the US and Russia while enabling the U.S. to balance Russia in the region.

After the invasion of Crimea by Russian “little green men,” Turkey adopted a clearer stance toward Russian unilateralism in the region. The Turkish government announced its support for Ukrainian territorial integrity. To this day, Turkish diplomats advocate in all international channels for Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and Turkey repeatedly underlines that it does not recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea. Turkey is a country that cares about the fate of its long-suffering kin, the Crimean Tatars, who have a large diaspora in Turkey. Particularly, Turkey has been concerned with both human rights violations against this Sunni Muslim group and their displacement to mainland Ukraine due to Russian pressure. Russia tried to turn the annexation into a *fait accompli* by excluding it from the Minsk process, as Germany and France went along with it. The Crimean Platform, launched by the Zelensky government and supported by Turkey, aims to correct this diplomatic mistake and bring the annexation to the world agenda. As the West failed to prevent Crimea’s annexation by Russia, today it must deal with a much larger problem – the possibility of further Russian incursion into Ukraine.

A significant breakthrough in the Crimean Tatar-Ukraine relations was achieved by Ukraine’s recognition of the indigenous status of Crimean Tatars. The country gave them rights for national-cultural autonomy, which helped build trust between Turkey and Ukraine. The Ukrainian history books are rewritten underlining periods of Ottoman-Crimean Tatar-Cossack friendship, and the Ukrainian diaspora in Turkey works alongside the Crimean Tatar

diaspora to boost the positive image of Ukraine in Turkey and for the recognition of the Ukrainian identity and national interests as separate from the Russian identity and interests. Ukrainian and Turkish diplomats always suggest that bilateral relations must be spoken without referencing the word “Russia” and it would be a mistake to state that Turkey supports Ukraine only to balance Russia’s power, as the two countries have a lot of common interests and areas of cooperation. At the same time, the relationship with Ukraine is part of the puzzle of Turkish-Russian relations.

THE PUZZLE OF TURKISH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

While refusing to recognize the Russian annexation of Crimea as legitimate, Turkey did not pursue economic sanctions and continued its political and economic relations with Russia. Similar to several European nations like Germany, Turkey’s economic relations with Russia are strong, including oil and natural gas imports. Turkish-Russian relations became more complicated after Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war and supported the Assad regime. The relations experienced an all-time low with the downing of a Russian jet in 2015. In addition to diplomatic initiatives, Turkish business interests played a significant role in resolving the crisis. Russian tourists flocked to Turkish hotels in the following years as a testament to the multilayered economic relations between the two countries. Turkey also became the transit country for an additional TurkStream pipeline from Russia to the Balkans, as Russia was now able to bypass Ukraine to export gas to Europe. Turkish economic relations shaped Turkish foreign policy towards Russia, but cooperation also spread to

strategic issues with the purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia as well as the Russian construction of the Akkuyu nuclear reactor in Turkey.

Many analysts argued that Turkey and Russia successfully compartmentalized isolating their long list of political disagreements in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean. While compartmentalization worked better in Syria, it was more strained in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine. While Turkey sought to compartmentalize areas of significant disagreements and avoided confrontation in a number of geopolitical issues, Gazprom and Russian economic dealings have often been in the service of geopolitical goals. Others characterize Turkish-Russian relations as competitive cooperation, as they back opposing sides in conflicts in Libya, Syria, and the South Caucasus without stepping onto each other's feet, so to speak. What is missing in many analyses, however, is the lack of understanding about foreign policymaking processes in countries like Russia and Turkey. U.S. officials, for example, generally following the more institutional approach to foreign policymaking, are often puzzled by the changing Russian demands and by how Turkey and Russia can compete and cooperate at the same time. Turkish and Russian foreign policymaking is pragmatic and leaders can maneuver rapidly, almost as fast as they can on a chessboard. Both the U.S. and Europeans often fail to appreciate the complexities involved in how Turkey pragmatically interacts with Russia.

Ukraine understands Turkey has strong economic ties with Russia just as Ukraine had difficulty diversifying its deep trade and infrastructural ties to Russia. Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars still expected Turkey to join sanctions against Russia, refuse to participate in the Turk-Stream project, and view the NATO presence

in the Black Sea more positively. While preferring to maintain a certain level of cooperation with Russia in these spheres, Turkey has recently upped its level of strategic partnership with Ukraine. Unlike some other European allies, Turkey expressed strong support for the prospect of Ukraine's NATO membership. Turkey advocated for Ukraine to obtain a Membership Action Plan in the near future and promoted interoperability of the armed forces of Ukraine with the armed forces of NATO allies.

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As evidence of the Ukraine-Turkish strategic alliance, in 2021, Turkish drones, which made a significant impact in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, finally arrived in Donbas. Israel had previously rejected Ukraine's demands for drones out of wariness of Russia's reaction. As drones redefined the battlefield in a number of conflicts in the region, Putin felt the need to discuss the issue with President Erdoğan. Turkey has shown its willingness to share the products of its national defense industry with NATO allies like Poland and strategic partners like Ukraine despite Russia's discomfort.

TURKEY'S POLICY OPTIONS

President Erdoğan reiterated Turkey's non-recognition of the Russian annexation of Crimea on his way to Sochi talks on Sept. 29, 2021. At the same time, on Nov. 29, 2021, Turkey offered to

mediate between Ukraine and Russia to solve the Donbas crisis, preferring to be a pragmatic actor interested in regional stability. This shows Turkey's efforts to compartmentalize its stance on Crimea with its position in Syria and treat them as separate matters. For Russia, however, different policy issues could be leveraged, especially in case of increased military tensions. Nevertheless, Turkey has a strong interest in lowering the chances for a military conflict between its two important regional partners.

In case of a military conflict in Ukraine, Turkey is likely to seek ways to find a diplomatic solution and reduce tensions all the while supporting NATO actions. It is clear that Russia pursues a posture reminiscent of Cold War dynamics with the West. However, unlike during the Cold War, Russia and the West have a much deeper set of economic relations, and Russia is a member of many international organizations. Unlike in the Cold War era, Turkey follows a foreign policy reliant much more on its own eco-

nomical and military power instead of being part of the Western bloc. Accordingly, Turkey might find itself in a different position on several issues between Russia and the West but in the case of Ukraine, there is more overlap than divergence.

Having strong relations both with Ukraine and Russia, Turkey will oppose an invasion in the possible scenario of a military conflict in Ukraine while trying to be pragmatic in brokering a diplomatic breakthrough. However, overwhelming common interests, shared concerns with Ukraine, and recent bold actions such as selling drones to Ukraine demonstrate that Turkey will not long sit on the fence if a conflict arises. Turkey will likely hesitate to join economic sanctions against Russia since that would hurt the Turkish economy, but the country will honor its NATO commitments while trying to ensure its national interests through diplomacy. Military escalation does not serve Turkish interests, and this is why President Erdoğan has been pushing for a diplomatic solution.

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