

Walking a Fine Line: Turkey's Mediation between Russia and Ukraine, and Relations with the West

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Russia and Ukraine have clearly been willing to give Ankara a significant role to play in talks on how to end the war and to participate in Turkish mediation efforts. The position of mediator has eased Turkey's situation not only in relation to some of the dilemmas posed by the war, but also in providing an opening for improving its relations with NATO. As tensions escalate, the Turkish dilemma will worsen, as the pressure on Ankara to adopt a consistent line in favor of one side increases. The war in Ukraine is underway in parallel with the thaw in relations between Israel and Turkey, and although Israel has also tried to mediate an end to the fighting, it does not appear that the parallel mediation attempts are an arena for competition.

Turkey is among the countries trying to mediate between Russia and Ukraine in an effort to bring an end to the war, and indeed, both sides are willing for Ankara to assume a significant role in the talks. Ankara organized a joint meeting of the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers on March 10, 2022; the Turkish foreign minister traveled to Russia and Ukraine; and on March 29 a round of direct contacts between the parties took place in Istanbul in the presence of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. For Ankara, this mediation not only resolves some of the dilemmas the war has posed, but also provides an opening for improving its relations with NATO.

The war in Ukraine has added to Turkey's existing economic plight. Coming after a sharp fall in the value of the Turkish lira since 2018, rising energy and grain prices are challenging the Turkish economy. Russia is a significant energy supplier for Turkey: approximately a third of natural gas imports to Turkey in 2020 came from Russia, and Russia is also an important source of oil and fuel. The Russian company Rosatom is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant, and the first unit of the plant is scheduled to start operating in 2023. In addition, Russia and Ukraine are important providers of wheat for Turkey (the source of some 3/4 of its consumption) as well as

of sunflower oil. Russia has the highest number of tourists to Turkey relative to other countries, and Ukraine is the third most important country in this regard – in 2021, about five million Russian tourists and about two million Ukrainian tourists arrived in Turkey. The volume of this tourism is expected to be considerably reduced in the wake of the war.

Like Jerusalem, Ankara is also influenced by the Russian presence in Syria. The Turkish army faces the Syrian army around the Idlib province, and Turkey fears that Russia may allow Assad to launch a military move that will harm Turkish soldiers and lead to a wave of refugees that will add to its internal challenges. In addition, Russia has a good relationship with the Kurdish underground and its Syrian affiliate.

Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine has put the foreign policy led by the Turkish President in recent years to the test, especially in the context of Turkey's positioning between the West and Russia and Ankara's efforts to lead an independent foreign policy. Since 2016, Ankara has been closer to Moscow at the expense of its relations with NATO allies. The most problematic move in this regard was the Turkish decision in 2017 to buy the S-400 air defense system from Russia, whereupon it was removed from the F-35 project. Relations between Turkey and Russia developed despite disagreements between the two countries in several regions: Syria, Libya, the Caucasus, and the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, where there is a Tatar minority with whom Turkish public opinion feels a special bond. Against this background, the confrontation between Russia and NATO over the war in Ukraine obliges Turkey to take a stand, however cautious.

The Turkish position regarding the war is therefore a function of various and sometimes contradictory considerations in the context of relations between Ankara and Moscow and Kyiv, as well as in the context of relations between Turkey and its NATO allies. On the one hand, Turkey publicly opposed the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and closed the straits between the Aegean and Black Seas to Russian warships, with the exception of those returning to their bases, in accordance with the

Montreux Convention (1936). On the other hand, aside from Hungary, Turkey is the most moderate NATO member vis-à-vis Moscow. It did not impose sanctions on Russia and did not close its airspace to Russian aircraft. Ankara officially claims that not taking these measures is necessary to allow it to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, but at the same time its ambivalent policy allows it room for maneuver without provoking any side. The Turkish Foreign Minister also stated that Turkey does not intend to take action against Russian oligarchs seeking refuge in its territory, provided their business in Turkey does not violate international law.

It is doubtful whether Turkey's tightrope policy is sustainable, especially if the level of tension between Russia and the West increases and each side demands that Turkey adopt a consistent stance. But in the meantime, Ankara's decision to side with the West, albeit in gradual and limited fashion, contrary to pessimistic estimates that it would side with the pro-Russian camp, was positively received by its allies. In addition, after years in which NATO members criticized – often harshly – the Turkish government for its rapprochement with Russia, the ties that Turkey developed with Russia in recent years are now perceived by Western countries as an asset, allowing a channel of communication with President Putin. Therefore, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine there has been a change in the tone among many leaders toward Turkey's position within NATO.

At the most recent NATO summit, held on March 24, Erdogan met with the Prime Ministers of Spain, Italy, Britain, and Estonia, and with French President Emanuel Macron. The leaders, including Macron, who had previously verbally confronted Erdogan amid tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, displayed a friendly attitude toward the Turkish President. At the summit France, Turkey, and Greece announced a joint humanitarian operation in Mariupol. Macron, Erdogan, and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi have also announced the resumption of talks on the possibility of Turkey adopting a European-made missile defense system. However, Turkey rejected an American idea that it would transfer its S-400 system to

Ukraine, and Ankara failed to persuade the Americans to arrange a meeting between President Biden and Erdogan.

Despite contacts between Erdogan and European leaders before and during the NATO summit, no progress has been made in Turkey's relations with the European Union. Calls from Ankara to resume talks on Turkey's accession process to the EU have not been met in Brussels. In addition, compared to this cold reception, the demonstrated enthusiasm that greeted Ukraine's application to join the EU has hurt feelings in Turkey, and was deemed another sign of the discrimination existing against Ankara.

Another Turkish interest associated with the war in Ukraine is Turkish-made drones. Ukraine was the first country to purchase UAVs from Turkey and owns between 20 and 50 TB2 aircraft made by the Turkish company Bayraktar. In fighting against the Russian forces, the Ukrainian army has used these drones with great success and a number of videos were released proving the effectiveness of TB2. The enthusiasm that these successes created in Ukraine, expressed inter alia in songs praising Bayraktar that gained popularity on social networks, made the war a backdrop for successful public relations for TB2 producers. Its operational achievements in the fight against the Kurdish underground in northern Iraq, Syria, the civil wars in Libya and Ethiopia, and in the second Nagorno-Karabakh War, in addition to its relatively low price, made TB2 a sought-after product even before the war in Ukraine. Its accomplishments against the Russian military constitute an even stronger proof for its lethal capabilities that may increase world interest in the UAV, which has already acquired a good reputation.

However, the process of Bayraktar manufacturing is also sensitive to the consequences of the war in Ukraine. In 2021 Kyiv announced that it would build a plant to manufacture parts of the TB2, and the engines of the more advanced Bayraktar models were also planned to be manufactured in Ukraine. A Russian victory may end this cooperation, and the continuation of the current situation, which has harmed Ukrainian industry, will interfere with the production of Turkish drones. Therefore, Turkey is in a paradoxical

situation: its UAVs are championed as a great success, but its ability to produce them is impaired. Ukraine's importance increased in this regard because in 2020 Canada imposed an embargo on the supply of UAV-related components to Turkey, due to Ankara's policy in northern Syria and in relation to the second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Today there are voices in NATO that push to rethink the wisdom of the arms embargo measures against allies. If Canada is persuaded to lift the embargo, Turkey may find an alternative to production in Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine coincides with a thaw in Israeli-Turkish relations, culminating in President Yitzhak Herzog's visit to Turkey on March 9-10. Although Israel has been involved in the effort to mediate a compromise between Moscow and Kyiv, it does not appear that Jerusalem and Ankara perceive their mediation attempts as competitors. On the contrary, during a press conference in Ankara, President Herzog welcomed the Turkish efforts. Moreover, Turkey, as a country on the coast of the Black Sea, has clearer and more direct interests in the conflict in Ukraine than does Israel. And unlike Israel, Turkey is also a NATO member and therefore its steps in the context of the war are of greater significance. With the Israeli leadership turning its attention to coalition problems and urgent security issues, it is likely that the Turkish mediation efforts will be more determined and persistent than the Israeli effort in this context.