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Turkey and the War in Ukraine

How Has Ankara's Foreign Policy Changed Since February 2022?

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Summary

Turkey has played a unique role as the intermediary between Moscow and Kyiv since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ankara has been trying to keep a balanced position between the two sides in the conflict, favouring neither one nor the other; but as time goes on it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain such a position. The uncertainty of Turkey's approach has led to certain disagreements, especially in the country's relations with the Kremlin.

Turkey has taken advantage of Moscow's distraction with the war in Ukraine to strengthen its geopolitical position in Syria, the South Caucasus and Central Asia – at Russia's expense. However, it is too early to say that Russia has lost all of its influence. Should there be a direct military confrontation between the Kremlin and NATO, it is highly unlikely that Turkey would take part in an armed conflict. In such a situation, Turkey would try once again to act as an intermediary – a role which would be more vital than ever.

Turkey's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Turkey condemned Russia's invasion and supported Ukraine's territorial integrity but did not back sanctions against Russia

The Turkish leadership's position on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was clearly defined on 24 February 2022, the day of the invasion.

The Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, strongly criticised the Kremlin's actions, emphasising that Ankara 'supports Ukraine's struggle to defend its territorial integrity'. In an announcement from the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Russia's actions were described as nothing less than 'a crude violation of international law', which 'represents a serious threat to the security of the region and of the whole world.'

On 28 February 2022, Turkey closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to all warships from any country in response to Russia's invasion. On 2 March, the Turkish delegation to the UN General Assembly approved a resolution which condemned the invasion. On 7 April, Turkey voted in favour of suspending Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council.

Turkey's principled position did not come as a surprise for Moscow. In recent years, Turkey had made it very clear that it would never recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea, and that it would support Ukraine's bid to become a member of NATO.

Turkish society was also against Russia's invasion. According to a March 2022 poll conducted by the Areda Survey research centre, 68.8 per cent of Turkish respondents strongly condemned the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, Ankara did not join Western sanctions against Russia, nor did it close its airspace to aircraft from Russia. As it had done previously, it described such moves as an ineffective way of conducting foreign policy.



In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 28 February 2022, Turkey closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits

At a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow in September 2024, the President of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Numan Kurtulmuş, declared, 'We have never supported the sanctions nor the embargo which has been placed on the Russian Federation. It is not right that in Western circles they wish to punish Russia in this way, and we have never supported such an approach.'

Zigzags in Russian-Turkish relations

Turkey navigates a delicate balance between economic ties with Russia and a pro-Western stance, leading to strained relations with Moscow

Ankara's position on sanctions against Russia is dictated by various factors. Firstly, Erdoğan is trying to play the role of intermediary between Russia and Ukraine. Secondly, Turkey and Russia are key economic partners. Russia supplies 45 per cent of Turkey's natural gas imports. In 2022, the trade turnover between the two countries rose by 86 per cent, reaching a record \$62 billion.

It is also important for the Kremlin to have a partner who can act as a bridge between Russia, on the one hand, and Ukraine and the West, on the other. This was why before the Turkish general election in May 2023 Russia pinned all its hopes on Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party, and ignored the Turkish opposition.

Among other things, the Russian side granted Turkey a \$20 billion payment deferment for the gas, and also set aside a further \$20 billion for the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant in Mersin Province, with the participation of Russia's state-owned nuclear energy company, Rosatom.

However, after Erdoğan was re-elected in the second round of the presidential election on 28 May 2023, he clearly failed to fulfil Putin's expectations. In foreign policy, Erdoğan began to put in place what Turkish specialists termed his own 'turn towards the West.'

This was due to Turkey's dire economic situation. In November 2022, the country's annual inflation rate was running at more than 85 per cent. Despite Erdoğan's attempts to shift focus away from the country's economic situation during his election campaign, it remained the electorate's primary concern.

The fundamental problem for the Turkish economy is its huge dependence on foreign capital. This is a situation which has grown under the rule of the Justice and Development Party.

As before, the key investors in the Turkish economy remain the Netherlands, the US and the UK (the total share of these three countries is around 30 per cent).

In order to solve an increasing number of problems, the Turkish leader carried out major personnel changes in his economic team, placing supporters of the so-called 'orthodox economy' in key positions. This was welcomed by the West. In particular, Hafize Gaye Erkan, a former employee of Goldman Sachs, became Governor of the Central Bank of Turkey in June 2023. She was the first woman in the history of the republic to hold this position, although she resigned in February 2024.

Erdoğan himself has made a number of bold gestures towards the West, clearly with the aim of attracting more investment into the country. For example, he called on Brussels to re-activate talks on Turkey's accession to the European Union that have been at a standstill since 2018. Next, during the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, in July 2023 he finally consented to Sweden's admission to the Alliance.

Against this background, also in July 2023 the Russian side refused to extend the deal to allow the export of grain from Ukraine, in which Turkey had been the intermediary. Following these events, Putin cancelled his visit to Turkey scheduled for August.

In the autumn of 2023, circumstances dictated a rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara as a result of the worsening conflict between Israel and Palestine. The Kremlin noted with a certain satisfaction that the positions of Russia and Turkey were 'almost identical'. But in the following months, events dictated another downturn in Russian-Turkish relations. Starting from 1 January 2024, Turkish banks ceased all financial operations with Russia due to the threat of US secondary sanctions. This hit the trade turnover between the two countries, and in the first six months of 2024 it fell by around 30 per cent.

Turkish weapons supplies to Ukraine remain another irritant in relations between Russia and Turkey. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, described it as 'bewildering' for Moscow.

Speaking at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2024, Putin reproached Erdoğan for his ignorance of what was happening in the Black Sea, where Russia was shooting down Ukrainian drones – the insinuation being that they were Turkish-made. The Russian president also expressed his concerns over Turkey's active cooperation with Western financial institutions.

Tellingly, in May 2024 the Russian Ambassador to Ankara, Alexei Yerkhov, met Özgür Özel, the head of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, which had won the local elections held on 31 March. Such a meeting would have been impossible just a year earlier, when the then-leader of the party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, accused Moscow of interfering in Turkey's elections. It is now acknowledged in Moscow that Erdoğan's party, and perhaps Erdoğan himself, could lose power in the next elections scheduled for 2028. Snap elections are also a possibility.

Mistrust of his Turkish counterpart, representing a NATO member country, is preventing Putin from making a visit to Turkey. It is indicative that ever since 2020 the nine meetings which have taken place between the Russian president and Erdoğan have all been held either in Russia or on neutral territory – in Iran, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Ukraine's partnership with Turkey: more than just drones

Turkey is strengthening its military and economic ties with Ukraine, while remaining an intermediary in the war

Despite Turkey not joining Western sanctions against Russia, the Ukrainian authorities have not allowed any criticism of Ankara or Erdoğan personally since 24 February 2022.

Firstly, this is because of Turkey's unique role as the key intermediary between Moscow and Kyiv.

Secondly, the Ukrainian side is satisfied with Ankara's consistent position on the inviolability of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea. In June 2024, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, took part in the Ukraine Peace Summit in Switzerland, an event the Kremlin described as 'an absurd gathering'. In addition, Turkey was among the countries that signed the Summit's final declaration (unlike, for example, the United Arab Emirates, South Africa or India).

Thirdly, Kyiv greatly values its military cooperation with Ankara. This especially concerns Turkish drones which, in the words of the Ukrainian President, Vladimir Zelensky, 'play a vital role, and were especially important during the first days of Russia's invasion.'

It is not known exactly how many Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones Ukraine has in its arsenal. Western experts reckon that since the start of the Russian invasion Ukraine has received at least 50 drones from Turkey. It was revealed in February 2024 that the Turkish defence company, Baykar, began construction of a factory in the Kyiv Region to produce TB2 and TB3 drones.

The statement made in August 2022 by the head of the Baykar company, Haluk Bayraktar, is very telling in this context. He announced that Turkish drones would never be provided to Russia, because they have become 'the symbol of resistance to Russian aggression.'

Along with this, Kyiv appreciates the Turkish leadership's support for Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations. At a joint press conference with Zelensky in Istanbul in July 2023, Erdoğan announced, 'There can be no doubt that Ukraine deserves to be a NATO member.' That visit to Turkey by the Ukrainian leader was remarkable also because Ankara handed back to Kyiv five commanders from the 'Azov' battalion, the fighting unit which in Russian propaganda is seen as the main symbol of 'Ukraine's neo-nazism.'

Moscow expressed measured disappointment in response to this pro-Ukraine gesture by Erdoğan, describing it as 'a violation of our agreement'. According to the Kremlin, the agreement stipulated that the 'Azov' commanders, who had been released from Russian captivity, were to remain in Turkey until the end of the war in Ukraine. Ankara's move appeared to exploit the Kremlin's vulnerability at the time, since Moscow was contending with the mounting threat of an uprising led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the 'Wagner' private military company.

During the war, Turkey has remained one of Ukraine's key economic partners. The two countries' trade turnover amounted to \$7.3 billion in 2023. By comparison, in 2021 the figure stood at \$7.4 billion.

The creation of a free trade zone provides a new stimulus for economic cooperation between Turkey and Ukraine. According to the agreement, which Erdoğan and Zelensky signed on 3 February 2022, Turkey will remove the duty from 10,337 goods which Ukraine exports to the country. This represents 95 per cent of all Ukrainian exports. This document was ratified by Turkey in August this year. It is currently awaiting ratification by the Ukrainian parliament.

Ankara warmly welcomed the appointment in September 2024 of Andrii Sybiha as the new Ukrainian Foreign Minister. From 2016–2021 Sybiha was Ukrainian Ambassador to Turkey. As the Turkish Foreign Minister, Fidan, said, Sybiha 'is someone who has played a major role in the development of Turkish-Ukrainian relations.'

The appointment of Sybiha may serve as a sign that Kyiv is giving Ankara the leading role as the intermediary between Russia and Ukraine. If talks resume between Russia and Ukraine with the assistance of Turkey, Sybiha's role is likely to be considerable given his close links with the powers that be in Turkey.

Turkey as the intermediary between Russia and Ukraine

Turkey is in favour of peace talks but the irreconcilable positions of the two sides have limited its role

From the first day of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey, as the intermediary, has been trying to find some kind of agreement between Moscow and Kyiv.

Turkey has so far been the venue for the only talks that have offered the possibility of even a temporary ceasefire. It was in Istanbul in late March and early April 2022 that Russian-Ukrainian talks took place which considered the specific outline of a plan to stop the war.

It was assumed that if it were provided with security guarantees, Ukraine might agree to accept the status of a non-aligned, non-nuclear country. One reason put forward as to why an agreement could not be reached in Istanbul was the position of some Western leaders. For example, it is widely believed in Moscow that the then British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, persuaded Zelensky to leave the negotiating table and liberate Ukrainian territory by military means.

Another significant obstacle to the talks in Istanbul was the emergence of reports detailing the horrific crimes committed by Russian soldiers, particularly in places like Bucha, a town near Kyiv, where at least 400 civilians were killed.

The Turkish leadership believes that these actions by Russian soldiers became a major factor in the collapse of the talks in Turkey. As the then Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, said at the start of April 2022:

‘The events in Bucha are shameful from the point of view of humanity... What happened in Bucha destroyed what looked like a promising process for talks in Istanbul.’

Since then, Turkey has not ceased trying to restart talks. Erdoğan believes that Turkey is, ‘the only country which can maintain close relations with both sides in the war and achieve some definite progress.’

There is some sense behind what the Turkish leader said. Istanbul is indeed a place where talks between Moscow and Kyiv could be restarted. Even Putin suggested that the previous agreements reached in Istanbul are seen in the Kremlin as ‘the basis for talks’.

Furthermore, it is not the absence of a suitable intermediary which is preventing talks between Moscow and Kyiv, but the stalemate on the frontlines and the irreconcilable positions of the two sides. The Kremlin is against withdrawing Russian troops from the occupied Ukrainian territories. In turn, Ukraine is not prepared to give up these territories to Russia.

From Ankara’s point of view, the main condition for achieving any success in talks must be adherence to the principle of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Foreign Minister Fidan recently spoke about this once again:

‘Only a friend will tell you the bitter truth... A just solution to the war in Ukraine must be found within the boundaries of the territorial integrity of Ukraine.’

Among the various options available, Turkish experts tend to put forward three scenarios for the development of the conflict in Ukraine.

First scenario: an immediate ceasefire and a freezing of the conflict, in which Moscow and Kyiv retain their current positions.

Second scenario: total occupation by Russia of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia Regions, which in theory may give the Kremlin acceptable conditions for a cessation of hostilities.

Third scenario: a partial liberation by Ukraine of the occupied territories, which might encourage Moscow to start talks.

What worries the Turkish expert community most of all is a scenario where Ankara becomes directly involved in the war, with Turkey having to side with one party or the other.

Many specialists believe that Ankara should focus on what is sometimes called ‘humanitarian diplomacy’. The clearest example of this was the grain deal which was agreed in Istanbul in July 2022.

A deal was needed to solve the problem of providing food and fertilisers for the global market. It collapsed in 2023 when the Kremlin pulled out of the agreement.

In any case, Turkey remains a key bridge both between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West. It is no coincidence that the unprecedented exchange of 26 prisoners from seven different countries which happened on 1 August 2024 took place at Ankara airport.

Turkey's role in a global context

Turkey's increasing influence in Syria, Central Asia and the South Caucasus is coming up against Moscow's interests

The war in Ukraine has not only pushed Turkey to the forefront as the key intermediary between Moscow and Kyiv. It has also changed the balance of power in certain regions, where Russian and Turkish interests are in competition.

SYRIA

The rapid advance of the armed rebels in Syria at the end of November and beginning of December 2024, followed by the collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, wiped out all of the achievements made in recent years within the framework of the Astana process for de-escalation in the Arab republic, in which Russia, Turkey and Iran participated.

For the last few years, the terrorist grouping Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, which is banned by the UN Security Council) and their ally, the opposition Syrian National Army (which is supported by Ankara), have been located in the north-western province of Idlib. Turkey is responsible for this region, and it would be impossible to imagine that they were unaware in Ankara that the rebels were preparing to attack. It seems that Turkey gave them the green light to do so.

As a result of this, Turkey is the main beneficiary of the power vacuum which Moscow and Tehran have left behind after their withdrawal from Syria. This is unlikely to complicate Russian-Turkish relations; however, it will certainly deepen the Kremlin's mistrust of the Turkish leader. Russian state propaganda has already described events in Syria as 'yet another stab in the back by Erdoğan.'

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

The Kremlin's involvement in Ukraine has also had an effect on its position in the South Caucasus. In October 2022, during the European Political Community summit in Prague, Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed to recognise

each other's territorial integrity within their 1991 borders. This did not go down well in the Kremlin. Moscow insisted that the question of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh should be dealt with later.

The joint Russian-Turkish monitoring centre in Nagorno-Karabakh concluded its activity in April 2024 – after the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh a few months earlier, following its seizure by Azerbaijani forces in September 2023. This did not mean, however, that Baku was adopting a more independent stance. As before, Azerbaijan lacked the leverage to dictate terms to either Moscow or Ankara. Contacts were simply reconfigured. Against the background of a cooling of relations between Russia and Armenia, Azerbaijan – with Turkey's support – is now representing Moscow's interests in the South Caucasus, thus playing the role which Armenia used to play.

Russia no longer maintains a military presence in Azerbaijan through its peacekeepers, yet relations between Moscow and Baku have become more pragmatic. Following Putin's visit to Baku in August 2024, the two sides are focused on economic projects, such as the 'North-South' transport corridor (with the participation of Iran), and cooperation in the oil and gas sphere. The coming together of these two countries has led to an angry response in Ukraine. For example, there have been calls to boycott filling stations operated by the Azerbaijan state-owned oil company, SOCAR.

In recent times, there have been prospects of rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. In March 2023, Ankara and Yerevan agreed to open their border for citizens of third countries and diplomatic passport holders, although this agreement has still to be put into practice. In July 2024, a meeting took place on the Turkish-Armenian border between special representatives of the two countries. As a result of this meeting, the two sides confirmed their intention to continue the process of normalising bilateral relations without any preconditions.

This positive mood was strengthened when Erdoğan met the Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, in New York in September 2024. However, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains an obstacle for the normalisation of relations between Ankara and Yerevan. From time to time, Turkish officials say that relations between Ankara and Yerevan can be normalised only after a peace deal is signed between Yerevan and Baku.

The Turkish factor plays an important role for Georgia, too. Ankara is committed to the country's territorial integrity and, according to the website of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Turkey 'does not recognise the so-called "independence" of Abkhazia or South Ossetia'.

Over the past two years, the '3+3' format for talks has become more active. This brings together Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Russia and Turkey. Officially, Tbilisi does not participate in this format, because it does not want to be in the same discussion forum as Moscow. However, considering the pro-Russian orientation of the current Georgian government, this measure seems more like a façade.

At the same time, Turkey periodically conducts joint military exercises with Georgia, as well as with Azerbaijan. Closer contacts between Tbilisi and Ankara appear to be a stabilising factor which prevents the Kremlin from carrying out any aggressive actions against Georgia. Such a move on Moscow's part would inevitably lead to a serious disagreement with Ankara, which wants to avoid further tensions in the region.

CENTRAL ASIA

Turkey is also strengthening its influence in the countries of Central Asia, both bilaterally and within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). Military partnership is one of the key areas for cooperation. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan are actively purchasing Turkish drones, and Kazakhstan has even obtained a licence to manufacture them on its own territory. As well as this, officers from the OTS countries regularly visit Turkey for improved training.

Turkey occasionally raises the issue of strengthening cultural ties at joint gatherings of the OTS. At the organisation's summit in Bishkek in November 2024, Erdoğan once again underlined the need to create a single Turkic alphabet.

Despite this, Moscow still retains strong influence in Central Asia, particularly in economic terms. For example, some 80 per cent of the oil exported by Kazakhstan goes to Russia. When necessary, Central Asian leaders continue to demonstrate their loyalty to Putin. One example of this came in May 2023, when, as if obeying an order, the five heads of the Central Asian states attended the Victory Day parade in Moscow.

BRICS

As the intermediary between Russia and the West, Turkey skilfully plays on the contradictions between the two opposing sides, at times leaning one way, then the other.

There has been increased talk in 2024 of Turkey's possible participation in the BRICS group (its original members were Brazil, Russia, India and China; with 'S' for South Africa, which joined later). However, this is nothing more than one element of Erdoğan's cunning game, in which he attempts to keep a foot in both camps.

The BRICS coalition has positioned itself as a club of anti-Western states, enabling the participating countries to test the nerves of their partners in European capitals and the US. At the same time, membership in BRICS – which does not even have a charter – does not entail any obligations.

Ankara does not need to join the organisation in order to interact with the BRICS member countries. It is sufficient merely to attend its major events, which was what Erdoğan did in October 2024, when he took part in the BRICS summit in the Russian city of Kazan.



President Putin greets President Erdoğan at the recent BRICS summit

Turkey's potential membership in BRICS is still rather vague, given that there are no definite criteria or obligations for the member countries. As Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan said in September 2024, 'The EU, for example, has a common currency, methods of financing, models, investment programmes, criteria, infrastructure and so on. The BRICS countries have yet to decide such issues definitively.'

In any case, Turks do not find the prospect of joining BRICS appealing. According to an opinion poll published by the Ank-Ar company, only 5.1 percent of citizens consider membership in BRICS a priority for Turkish foreign policy. In contrast, 35.7 percent view membership in the European Union as a priority.

Whatever happens, according to Erdoğan, becoming closer to BRICS, 'does not mean that Turkey will leave NATO.'

Turkey's position in a possible conflict between Russia and NATO

Turkey will maintain its neutral position and will refuse to participate directly in military operations in Ukraine

Turkey is continuing to maintain a careful balance between Russia and Western countries, while gaining some benefit from Moscow's weakening influence in various regions. At the same time, the development of the war in Ukraine makes this balancing act ever more difficult.

Should there be a direct military escalation between Moscow and NATO, Ankara will find itself divided: Turkey will have to show discipline within the boundaries of the North Atlantic Alliance, while still trying to protect its relations with Russia.

On the other hand, as Erdoğan confirmed in July 2024, Turkey does not plan to take part in military operations on the territory of Ukraine, which might mean that its role as the intermediary could increase significantly. In any case, in present circumstances there is no other country which could take on this role.

Conclusions

As in recent years, the dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations will depend in future on the personal relations between Putin and Erdoğan. Some Turkish experts believe that for a long time now, ties between Moscow and Ankara have moved to the level of personal contacts between the two leaders since they are capable of solving intractable problems with just one phone call or meeting.

Erdoğan said recently that by some criteria, there are only two political leaders left in the world – himself and Putin. Nevertheless, the events in Syria, where Ankara has become the main beneficiary, and Moscow has lost all its positions overnight, will undoubtedly increase the level of mistrust on the part of the Kremlin. At the very least, Russian state propaganda has already described events in Syria as ‘yet another stab in the back by Erdoğan.’

However, the lack of alternatives to Turkey as a mediator between Russia and the West (and now between Russia and the new Syrian authorities) will definitely not allow the Kremlin to adopt sanctions against Erdoğan, as was the case in late 2015 – early 2016.

In the event of a pause in the Russian-Ukrainian war – a scenario that is looking much more likely with the return of Donald Trump to the White House – Ankara’s role as a mediator between Moscow and Kyiv will only increase. In general, achieving any form of compromises between Russia and Ukraine, including a possible ceasefire agreement, is unlikely to be possible without Turkey’s participation.

About the New Eurasian Strategies Centre (NEST Centre)

Based in London and Washington D.C., NEST Centre brings together the best expertise on Russia and the surrounding region. Its mission is to identify the forces shaping Russia's long-term future, analyse their impact and develop strategies to bring about peaceful and positive development of the country.

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