

The Ukraine War and Turkey as a “Third Pole” in a New International Order

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After annexing Crimea and facilitating the secession of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a large-scale military invasion of Ukraine to supposedly “denazify” the country, prevent its prospective accession to NATO and the European Union (EU), and demand its demilitarization. The invasion has unfolded much more slowly than expected owing to the fierce resistance of Ukraine and the serious operational and planning weaknesses and mistakes of the much stronger Russian army. The international community reacted immediately and decisively against Russia, imposing a series of costly sanctions. Turkey was among the countries that refused to follow suit, instead attempting to act as a mediator between the warring camps. This approach reveals the continuation of certain Turkish foreign policy tendencies, and aims to secure a new international role for Turkey.

Brief Points:

- The war in Ukraine will have a great impact on the international order.
- In principle Turkey maintains a pro-Western stance on Ukraine but refuses to follow the rest of the West in sanctioning Russia.
- Turkey is looking to minimize the cost to its interests, but also aims to become a “third pole” in the emerging international order.
- Developments may present a chance for improved Turkish-Western relations, but before this can be realized, the West must clearly understand Turkey’s strategic objectives and adjust its expectations accordingly.

Between Ukraine and Russia

Since the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian government has thanked Turkey at least twice for its support. At the start of the invasion, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for both his military and humanitarian support and his refusal to allow Russian warships passage to the Black Sea (in accordance with the 1936 Montreux Treaty), albeit the latter was premature.¹ A few days later Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov thanked Turkey for the delivery of new Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UACVs/drones)² – in addition to those sold to Ukraine the previous year.

For years, Turkey's stance on Ukraine has been pro-Western—in principle. Turkey condemned the Russian annexation of Crimea and the secession of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, and since 2015 has provided Ukraine a \$50 million loan and \$10 million in humanitarian assistance. Moreover, the two countries signed a military cooperation deal in 2020 and a free trade agreement in 2022.³ Finally, although with some delay, Turkey described the Russian invasion as a “war,” which gave them the legal basis for closing the Straits to the passage of belligerent vessels, and voted against it in the United Nations General Assembly of 2 March 2022.⁴

At the same time, however, Turkey has been careful not to upset Russia too much. Soon after the European capitals, and the European Union more specifically, adopted further sanctions against Russia, Turkey's presidential spokesperson, İbrahim Kalın, took a different approach: “We are not in the opinion of imposing sanctions against Russia. We have commercial ties such as natural gas, tourism and agriculture. We do not want to make a harmful move for our country [...] There should be an actor who can talk to Russia. [...] We are not planning a sanction package in order to keep this channel open.”⁵ Ankara was very transparent about its strategic play, which by now is not unfamiliar: first, Turkey does not wish to compromise its relations with Russia in a way that could further affect its deteriorating economy and; second, it has been trying to remain as neutral as possible to present itself as a credible mediator (or “honest broker”) and agent of stability.

Consolidating a “Third Pole”

Turkey's stance is not unrelated to the broader dynamics of its over two decades-long, ever-changing foreign policy, which includes a desire to emerge as an independent or autonomous strategic actor in the international system. This foreign policy vision, under the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has been inspired by an Ottoman imperial nostalgia and a Eurasianist outlook,⁶ and, at least in part, drives Turkey's effort to emerge as a great power⁷ in the context of a transitioning international system. As the international order swings between multipolarity and a peculiar bipolarity, as the power equilibrium shifts to the East, and as the war in Ukraine seems to be bringing China and Russia closer, Turkey is increasingly striving to play the role of a “third pole”⁸ between the West and the East.

Although Turkey is a traditional Western partner and NATO member, it has been trying to redefine and renegotiate its position within the West and develop closer ties with actors in the East, including Russia, China, Iran, the Central Asian countries and beyond. It often does so by promoting the compartmentalization of relations, i.e., by making an effort to prevent areas of friction from affecting the positive aspects of a given relationship. This is precisely what has happened with Russia, and is encapsulated in a statement that Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's, made while the Russian invasion was unfolding: “Despite the differences of opinion, we are the country that has developed cooperation with both countries [Russia and Ukraine]. When there is a war, we don't have to take sides. On the contrary, we are the country that can establish a dialogue on both sides in order to end the war.”⁹

To be sure, the logic of compartmentalization is not unique to Turkey. It is a rather common way of navigating the uncertainty and instability of the international system in an age of multiple power centers, rising powers, and fluid alliances. However, in Turkey's case it involves more, and stems from broader strategic aspirations: in fact, it has become the default modus operandi in Turkey's relations with both East and West and complements its efforts to be an agenda-setter and security provider (particularly vis-à-vis its “kin” communities abroad),¹⁰ not to mention its efforts to expand its geopolitical sphere of influence using various revisionist strategies.¹¹ Another interesting feature of Turkey's foreign

policy is evidenced in President Erdogan's bid for a reformed United Nations (including the Security Council) that would be more inclusive and reflect multiculturalism and multipolarity, two dominant characteristics of today's world order.¹²

From this perspective, Turkey's aspiration is not limited to becoming an autonomous and independent pole within the framework of a multipolar-cum-bipolar dynamic. In actual fact, Turkey seeks to restructure (or revise) the post-World War II and largely liberal/Western international order, including its institutions and norms.¹³ In this context, it is not coincidence that Russian President, Vladimir Putin, in 2019 suggested that China, India and Turkey should join the West-dominated G7 – the world's strongest economies. These states may have different views and different objectives, but such dynamics demonstrate the diffusion of global power which includes the rising powers' pursuit of a new, non-Western international order.¹⁴

Ukraine, Turkey and the New International Order

The Ukraine war is in many ways a world-changing event. Overnight it has led to greater unity and cohesion in the EU and NATO than that seen in the previous thirty years. And despite the conflict's eventual outcome, the war has also debunked the myth of the great Russian military might. In fact, the war has led to the imposition of such harsh international sanctions that it will be a long time before Russia will either be able to compete on equal terms in the coming geopolitical antagonism between East and West or normalize relations with Europe and the United States (US). As a result, Russia will have to resort to a closer partnership with China, in which the latter will have the upper hand. In this context the US will likely try to make a hegemonic come-back even as a new international bipolarity will start to consolidate.

While all these dynamics are unfolding Turkey is trying to hold the middle ground and become part of the change, seeking a greater role for itself rather than being attached to either the West or East. The Ukraine war very clearly exposed this position: Ankara has purchased S-400 missiles from Russia but sold combat drones to Ukraine; it has condemned Russian actions in Ukraine but refuses to impose sanctions on Russia; it remains among the steady buyers of Russian energy but seeks to diversify its imports; it is in opposite

camp with Russia in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, but collaborates diplomatically and “on the ground” in all three; it is a NATO and US ally but it often pursues different interests in areas such as Syria, Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean. And these are only a few examples.

Eventually, Turkey hosted the first high level meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian Foreign Ministers on 10 March 2022. Although no progress was made in the discussions for a ceasefire, the meeting demonstrated that Turkey's new role has potential and can be at least to some extent effective despite its inherent limitations, paradoxes and the challenges it poses for the West. The degree to which Turkey can maintain this role, especially if the West-East divides deepens, remains to be seen.

Dealing with Turkey

On the one hand, Turkey has been leveraging its geostrategic value to develop transactional international relations even with antagonistic actors. On the other hand, it has been trying to normalize its relations with states such as Greece, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Armenia, and Egypt. Even before the election of Joe Biden to the US presidency Ankara started to look for ways to alleviate costly tensions with Washington, not least in view of Erdogan's first priority - to win reelection in the 2023 general and presidential elections. For its part, the US has long been waiting for an opportunity to lure Turkey back into the Western camp and away from Russian influence. The war in Ukraine could be this opportunity, and the positive tone of the phone call between Erdogan and American President, Joe Biden, on the day of the Russia-Ukraine talks in Turkey was a sign that Washington thinks so.¹⁵

However, considering the above reading of Turkey's strategic objectives, it is important to be realistic and not expect too much from a possible rapprochement between the West/US and Turkey. This relationship cannot return to what it was 20 or 30 years ago. On the other hand, bilateral tensions serve no one's interests. A new *modus vivendi* must be found and efforts to that end should be made. And yet, the new state of affairs cannot be purely transactional, unconditional or devoid of principles; otherwise, instead of serving regional and international stability, it will instead facilitate Turkey's efforts for a revised international order and the new role that it envisions, which will—in all likelihood—develop at the expense of other actors, as recent history has shown.

Notes

¹ Zelenskyy's tweet:

<https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1497564078897774598?s=20&t=znVe1zHk2qXNhlPQblsW3Q>. It should be noted that 6 warships and a submarine had already passed the straits in the beginning of February in the build up to Russia's campaign. See, H. I. Sutton, "6 Russian Warships And Submarine Now Entering Black Sea Towards Ukraine," *Naval News* 8 February 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/02/6-russian-warships-and-submarine-now-entering-black-sea-towards-ukraine/>

² Gareth Jennings, "Ukraine conflict: Turkey airlifts additional TB2 UCAVs to Ukraine," *Janes* 2 March 2022, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/ukraine-conflict-turkey-airlifts-additional-tb2-ucavs-to-ukraine>.

³ Natalia Zinets, "Turkey offers \$50 million loan to Ukraine, urges protection of Crimean Tatars," *Reuters* 20 March 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-ukraine-idUSKBN0MG0VZ20150320>; "President Erdoğan: 'Turkey sees Ukraine as a key country for ensuring stability, security, peace and prosperity in our region,'" Communications Department of Turkish Republic, 16 October 2020, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-turkiye-ukraynaya-bolgemizde-istikrar-guvenlik-baris-ve-re-fahin-temini-icin-kilit-bir-ulke-olarak-goruyor>; "Ukraine and Turkey have signed a Free Trade Agreement," *Ukraine Government Portal* 3 February 2022, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-j-turechchina-uklali-ugodu-pro-vilnu-torgivlyu>

⁴ "General Assembly resolution demands end to Russian offensive in Ukraine," *United Nations* 2 March 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>.

⁵ "No plans to impose sanctions against Russia: Spokesperson," *Hürriyet Daily News* 2 March 2022, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/no-plans-to-impose-sanctions-against-russia-spokesperson-171932>.

⁶ Hakan Yavuz (2020), *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ For another interesting take on the matter see, Pinar Tank, "Turkey's Difficult Balancing Act in the Ukraine Crisis," *PRIO Blogs* 3 March 2022, <https://blogs.prio.org/2022/03/turkeys-difficult-balancing-act-in-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

⁸ This Brief is based on earlier research from the author. See, Zenonas Tziarras, "Η Τουρκία ως «τρίτος πόλος» στην Μέση Ανατολή" [Turkey as a 'third pole' in the Middle East], *Foreign Affairs Hellenic Edition*, 20 July 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.gr/articles/70893/zinonas-tziarras/i-toyrkia-os-%C2%ABtritos-polos%C2%BB-stin-mesi-anatoli?page=show>.

⁹ "No plans to impose sanctions against Russia: Spokesperson," *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Mete Hatay and Zenonas Tziarras eds (2019), *Kinship and Diasporas in Turkish Foreign Policy: Examples from Europe, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean*, PRIO Cyprus Centre Report 10. Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre.

¹¹ Zenonas Tziarras (2022), *Turkish Foreign Policy: The Lausanne Syndrome in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, Cham: Springer.

¹² Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2021), *A Fairer World is Possible*, İstanbul: Turkuvaz Kitap.

¹³ For a discussion on the contemporary challenges to the liberal international order see, G. John Ikenberry (2018), "The end of liberal international order?," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, Issue 1, pp. 7-23.

¹⁴ It should be noted that Russia was expelled from the G8 in 2014 due to its annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, resulting in a the G7 group. See: Elena Teslova, "Russia suggests Turkey be part of G7," *Anadolu Agency* 5 September 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/russia-suggests-turkey-be-part-of-g7/1573890>.

¹⁵ "Readout of President Biden's Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey," *The White House* 10 March 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/10/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkey/>.

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THE PROJECT

This project aims to explore the Eastern Mediterranean as a distinct geopolitical space in the context of global and regional transitions. It conceptualizes the Eastern Mediterranean's new geopolitical identity both historically and theoretically and looks at its security and politico-economic prospects. At the same time, it tracks the main challenges that regional states face, and attempts to re-imagine the patterns of conflict and cooperation by examining the potential of regionalism and inter-state cooperation in various sectors. Moreover, the project keeps monitoring conflict and peace-building dynamics (e.g. in Syria and Libya) as well as region-building/regionalism processes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the role of state and non-state actors.

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