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Research Report

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Turkey's Stakes in the Russia-NATO Rivalry

The Ukraine Crisis and Beyond

Galip Dalay and Daria Isachenko

The Ukraine crisis poses two particularly uneasy questions for Turkey: How to uphold a power balance in the Black Sea? And how to manage its relations between Russia, Ukraine and the West? So far, Ankara's policy towards Moscow consists of both deterrence and dialogue. In regards deterrence, Turkey is closer to the non-EU members of NATO such as the US and the UK. Meanwhile, Turkey's policy of dialogue is similar to that of EU members, most notably Germany. However, while there is a certain degree of similarity between the stances of Turkey and some Western countries in the current crisis, their convergence of interests has not yet resulted in any meaningful cooperation. In the short term, the parallel track of deterrence and dialogue still gives Turkey some leeway to continue its multi-vector manoeuvring. The Ukrainian imbroglio is, however, a manifestation of a crisis concerning the current European security order, or more precisely the lack thereof, thus making it necessary to define the role of not only Russia but also Turkey in any European design for a new security architecture.

Despite being a NATO member, Ankara represents an ideal partner for Moscow. For instance, Turkey purchased a Russian S-400 missile system and has agreed to build a pipeline bypassing Ukraine to deliver Russian gas to Europe's South and Southeast. Ankara and Moscow have also worked out a delicate modus operandi managing conflicts in the Middle East and the South Caucasus. For example, in Syria, apart from the Astana Process with Iran, they carry out joint military patrols. Meanwhile, in Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey have established a joint centre for monitoring the ceasefire after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war.

On the other hand, despite its close relationship with Russia, Turkey is an exemplary

NATO ally. In fact, Turkey's policy towards the Ukraine crisis is very much in line with the general NATO approach to Russia, namely deterrence and dialogue. In beefing up Ukraine's defence capabilities by providing Kyiv with military items, Turkey pursues a policy of deterrence towards Russia. Rhetorically, however, Ankara favours diplomacy over escalation. Turkey, thus, appears eager to refrain from joining any attempt that seeks to slap Russia with heavy punitive sanctions or militarily confronting it. Indeed, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has a number of times expressed his readiness to mediate between Russia and Ukraine.

The stakes are high for Turkey in the current crisis. It involves the security of its

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northern neighbour, Ukraine, the balance of power in the Black Sea region, its complex relations with Russia, as well as the future of the European security order.

Ukraine and the Power Balance in the Black Sea

Turkey and Ukraine are, in the words of the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, “truly friends in need” wherein their mutual interest has proven to be most pressing in military-technical cooperation. The acquisition of the S-400, military operations in Syria, and direct military support of Azerbaijan during the latest Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have left Ankara with sanctions from its Western allies. As a result, Turkey had to face severe gaps in military procurement and production. Most acute is the lack of engines for Turkey’s drones and fighter jets that Ankara counts on solving, *inter alia*, with the help of Ukrainian manufacturers. Azerbaijan’s military victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the fall of 2020 boosted Ukraine’s interest in Turkish drones. Furthermore, to increase its naval capacity, Ukraine ordered two Turkish Ada-class corvettes. Regarding Ukraine’s long-standing ambitions, in the joint declaration of April 2021 of the High-Level Strategic Council of Ukraine and Turkey, both underlined their “support to Ukraine’s NATO membership perspective in particular, in its intentions to be granted Membership Action Plan in the near future and aim to contribute to the interoperability of Ukraine’s Armed Forces with Allies”.

Ukraine is also an indispensable partner for Turkey in the Black Sea. More specifically, according to one Turkish official, “Ukraine is like a dam that stops further Russian influence and pressure in the region”. Among all shared neighbourhoods, the Black Sea has been the most sensitive area in the history of Turkey-Russia relations. The Crimea Peninsula was a cornerstone of the Ottoman-Russian struggle for dominance in the region with Ottomans losing it to the Russian Empire in 1774. Later, the Soviets never felt at ease with Ankara’s control of the

Turkish straits that connect the Black Sea with the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. However, in the post-Cold War period, despite past grievances, Turkey and Russia have found a way to cooperate in the Black Sea with Ankara trying to keep a delicate balance between Russia and its NATO allies. Should hostilities prevail over dialogue in the current confrontational negotiations between Russia and the West, Turkey will find itself in a rather difficult position and its NATO identity will be under pressure.

Back in 2014, Turkey declared Russia’s seizure of Crimea as an illegal annexation, yet did not side with its Western partners in the sanctions regime against Moscow. Turkey’s economic dependency on Russia in such areas as energy, tourism, and trade played a significant role in this decision. Since then, the Turkey-Russia relationship has grown to become more interdependent to cover regional conflict management, nuclear technology and sophisticated weapon systems. If the balance in one area is disturbed, it may well spill over into other areas, including regional conflicts, especially in the Middle East and the South Caucasus. In the event of a Russian-Turkish confrontation, Syria is likely to be the most obvious arena for Moscow’s retaliation, as it remains to be Ankara’s Achilles’ heel in its relations with Moscow. In contrast, the post-Soviet space represents Russia’s sphere of relative vulnerability in its ties with Ankara.

While striving to deepen military-technical cooperation with Ukraine on the one hand and to limit its geopolitical exposure towards Russia in the Black Sea on the other, Turkey’s attempt to mediate between Russia and Ukraine is, however, unlikely to bear fruit. Istanbul has already been considered as a possible alternative to Minsk for meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine that includes representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). However, the chance of Ukrainian and Russian presidents meeting in Turkey, as envisaged by Ankara, has little prospect for now, since Russia’s overall agenda in this crisis concerns not only Ukraine *per se*.

Rather, Moscow's key worry is about how the West designs the European security architecture, namely against and in confrontation to Russia. By implication, Moscow is primarily concerned by the presence of NATO military infrastructure in Eastern Europe and a potential military confrontation over Crimea — both of which trump any alarm it may harbour over Turkish drones.

European Security and the International Order in Transition

On 18 November 2021, Russia's President Vladimir Putin stated in the expanded meeting of Russia's Foreign Ministry Board, "our recent warnings have had a certain effect: tensions have arisen ... It is important for them to remain in this state for as long as possible," urging Russia's Foreign Ministry "to push for serious long-term guarantees that ensure Russia's security". Putin's demands on security guarantees include preventing NATO's expansion eastward, ending military cooperation with post-Soviet states, withdrawing nuclear weapons from Europe as well as the absence of any strike systems that could potentially threaten Russia.

In brief, what Moscow wants is to change the current European security architecture. But why now? From the Russian perspective, two decisions made in Washington last year have been significant. First is the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021. And second is the announcement of the trilateral security deal between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) in September 2021. Importantly, both — NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and AUKUS — have been interpreted in Ankara in a similar way, namely as signalling the lack of unity in the West as well as Washington's overall shift in geo-strategic priorities. More importantly for Ankara, Greece and France's defence pact, which was signed in the fall of 2021 and driven by an anti-Turkey disposition, illustrates the new parallel security partnerships emerging within Western security architecture. Such frag-

mentation, especially within NATO, would further motivate Turkey to pursue bilateral security arrangements, whenever necessary.

However, Ankara seems to share the West's vision of how to uphold the post-Cold War European security order, even though it is anxious about the ongoing debate on a new European security design, as Turkey's role therein is still unclear. So far, in the current Ukraine crisis, Turkey and other NATO members appear to be on the same page in opposing Russian revisionism. Ankara is aware of the fact that the cost of maintaining the post-Cold War geopolitical status quo is growing increasingly. However, the cost of geopolitical revisionism appears to be incomparably higher. Therefore, for Ankara, maintaining the status quo is not a matter of preference, but rather it is one of choosing the lesser evil.

The main problem, however, is that there is a lack of consensus within NATO on how to approach this conflict, which provides individual countries, including Turkey, with greater room for manoeuvre. On the one hand, non-EU members of NATO, namely the US, the UK and Turkey have adopted a much more active foreign policy towards Ukraine, particularly when it comes to providing Kyiv with military equipment, more specifically armed drones in the case of Ankara. On the other hand, Turkey's stance is close to EU members of NATO such as Germany that put more emphasis on dialogue rather than complete deterrence. So, in terms of Russia, Turkey is actually decoupling itself from the US and the UK, as it does not want to risk crossing Russia's red lines. Having said that, however, if Russia continues with its current escalation strategy, there is likely to be more convergence between the Western actors' positions in opposing it and arguably less appetite to engage in a grand bargain with Moscow over the future of the European security order.

Despite Turkey's support for Ukraine and its shared interests with European partners, namely, not to antagonize Russia completely, Ankara has been conspicuously absent in both Western consultations over the Ukraine crisis as well as in the general debate on

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European security. For example, a video conference held by US President Joe Biden on Russia and Ukraine on 24 January 2022 included only “European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, President Emmanuel Macron of France, Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany, Prime Minister Mario Draghi of Italy, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, President Andrzej Duda of Poland, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom”.

Outlook

If the Ukraine crisis continues in its current form, meaning that it does not result in an open conflict, then Turkey can benefit from it, by showcasing and selling further defence items to Ukraine and forging even closer relations with it, improving its relations with the West, and partially balancing its geopolitical vulnerability with regard to Russia in a tit-for-tat fashion. Indeed, Turkey's track record in recent years illustrates that through gaining a foothold in different conflict zones, it has acquired levers of influence vis-à-vis different actors. This logic appears in play in the Ukraine crisis.

That said, the challenge for Ankara is how to strike the right balance between deterrence and dialogue in its partnership with Moscow has increased tremendously. Thus far, both sides have illustrated a sufficient level of strategic flexibility and patience in preventing a rupture in their relations. Ankara has pursued a geopolitical balancing act through its role in certain conflict zones such as Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. But for Moscow there is a significant difference between crises in the Middle East and Africa and those in its immediate neighbourhood. Moscow looks at the former through the lenses of geopolitical power, influence and status projection. However, with regard to those in the post-Soviet space Moscow sees them in terms of national security. This distinction defines

Moscow's level of flexibility towards Turkey's moves. Ukraine is a crisis of first degree importance for Russia, as well as for Europe's security. For instance, if the Ukraine crisis gets out of hand, then the strategic flexibility that has thus far sustained Turkish-Russian relations might reach its limits. Turkey might then have to make choices that it has thus far strived to avoid.

Regarding Turkish – Western relations, the current set of crises in Turkey's surrounding regions creates more ground between Ankara and Washington, but also with European partners. This is the case in Ukraine, in Afghanistan and with regard to the Bosnian-Serb leader Milorad Dodik's separatist agenda, which may prove to be highly explosive for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The potential for cooperation between Turkey and the West in these areas is yet to be fully explored. Nevertheless, Turkey's traditional policy of balancing Russia through its NATO geopolitical identity might become more accentuated going forward.

So, what does the Ukrainian crisis mean for Turkey in a changing European security order? During the Clinton, Bush and Obama years (until 2014), Russian-Western relations were largely discussed within the so-called framework of détente. As for Ankara, in the late 1990s and during the first decade of the 2000s, Turkish-European relations revolved around Turkey's EU accession framework. In spite of their own specific dynamics and particularities, both frameworks are no longer in place. Russian-Western relations have long entered a post-détente phase and Turkish-European relations are now in a post-accession era. However, current debates about the future of European security have not gotten to grips with this reality completely. Unless these overall changes are taken into account, even if the Ukrainian crisis is brought under control temporarily, the question over Russia's as well as Turkey's place in the reconfiguration of European security will come to haunt the Western defence establishments through other crises.

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