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**Research Report**

## Deciphering Turkey's geopolitical balancing and Anti-Westernism in its relations with Russia

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# SWP Comment

NO. 35 MAY 2022

## Deciphering Turkey's Geopolitical Balancing and Anti-Westernism in Its Relations with Russia

*Galip Dalay*

The war in Ukraine is set to increase the pressure on Turkey's balancing policy, shed light on the role of anti-Westernism in Ankara-Moscow relations, and reshape Turkey's relations with Russia and the West. The balancing policy will face a less permissive environment. However, a rupture in Turkey-Russia relations is not to be expected. Given the prohibitive cost of a breakdown, Ankara will strive to maintain functional bilateral relations with Moscow. More broadly, despite the changed context, Turkey will continue to seek autonomy in its foreign and security policy. This quest precedes the balancing policy and was not driven solely by discontent with the West. It was also informed by Turkey's reading of the global order becoming more multipolar and less Western-centric. In spite of similarities in their narratives, the Turkish and Russian anti-Westernisms manifest themselves differently in policy terms. Finally, Russia's geopolitical revisionism is set to drive Turkey and the West relatively closer together in matters geopolitical and strategic, provided that Turkey's current blockage of Sweden and Finland's NATO membership bid is resolved in the not too distant future.

The pace and depth of developments in Turkish-Russian relations since 2016 has been intriguing. Discontent with the West has been a major driver for rapidly improving ties. In fact, one could argue that it was anti-Westernism that created Turkey's geopolitical balancing policy between Russia and the West, coupled with the understanding that a multipolar global order was in the making. The close relationship with Russia has led to further rifts between Turkey and the West. However, despite their

shared discontent with the West, Russian and Turkish anti-Westernism differ in nature, origin and manifestation.

Turkish anti-Westernism tends to be selective and policy-focused, whereas the Russian version is more structural and encompassing. For instance, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke of ending US and western dominance of the international system as the core goal of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Unlike Russia, Turkey also benefits from the Western-centric

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international system it criticises. These differences carry major policy implications. The invasion of Ukraine has also injected a whole set of new dynamics into the Turkey-Russia-West triangle. Ankara's geopolitical balancing policy is now entering difficult terrain, if not becoming unfeasible, as NATO and the West treat Russia explicitly as an enemy. The cost of such a policy is likely to increase. But even if balancing became unfeasible, Ankara would still strive to maintain some form of functioning bilateral relationship with Moscow.

### **Geopolitical Balancing Policy and Functional Bilateral Relations**

The major difference between Turkey's geopolitical balancing policy and its quest to maintain functional bilateral relations with Russia is the scope of cooperation. A functional bilateral relationship meant cultivating economic, energy and political ties, but did not extend into the strategic realms of geopolitical and defence industry cooperation. Geopolitical balancing involves strategic cooperation, military procurement (purchasing the Russian S-400 air defence system), and geopolitical engagement in conflict zones in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. The balancing policy is driven by discontent with the West and rests on a particular reading of global politics, which Ankara sees becoming increasingly multipolar and less Western-centric (if not post-Western). It has also been informed by Ankara's assessment that the West lacks internal cohesion, seeing signs of fragmentation between Europe and the United States (especially during the Trump presidency) and within Europe post-Brexit.

In contrast, even Turkey's most pro-Western leaders, such as Suleyman Demirel and Turgut Ozal, have sought to maintain and improve functional bilateral relations with Russia. Throughout modern Turkey's history, Ankara has on several occasions sought Moscow's assistance in developing its heavy industry, for example in the case of the Iskenderun Iron and Steel Plant.

Functional bilateral relations with Moscow and geopolitical balancing between Russia and the West are not mutually exclusive, but they are certainly distinct. Seeking good bilateral relations puts the current Turkish government in line with much of Turkey's political history; its geopolitical balancing policy is a break with tradition, a rare experiment. The Ottoman and the Russian empires fought thirteen wars, leaving the Ottoman and later Turkish elites highly conscious of Russia's geopolitical ambitions and power projection. As a result, these elites always sought alliances with Western powers to counter Russia.

The era from the Turkish war of independence, roughly 1919, to the mid-1930s is the only other period in which Turkey pursued any comparable geopolitical or strategic balancing between Russia/the Soviet Union and the West. The Bolsheviks provided significant financial assistance during the war of independence and then to the young republic. In 1921 the Soviet Union returned to Turkey three eastern provinces that had come under the control of the Russian Empire in 1878. A friendship and neutrality treaty was signed in 1925, from which the Soviet Union withdrew unilaterally in 1945. Narratives and politics of anti-imperialism formed the overarching framework of the relationship during this period. The young Turkish Republic, as a post-imperial state that had just fought a war of independence against European imperial powers, was sharply aware of the latter's geopolitical ambitions and their propensity to interference in the internal affairs of weaker states. This early balancing policy lasted more or less until the preparations for the Montreux Convention of 1936, which granted Turkey control over the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits.

Otherwise, no previous Turkish government has formed such deep strategic, military and geopolitical relations with Moscow. However, a nuance is needed here. These two periods partly resemble each other in the sense that they contain a high degree of functional bilateral relations as

well as geopolitical balancing policy. However, the two periods (Atatürk/Lenin and Erdoğan/Putin) also differ in important respects. NATO did not exist before the Second World War; Ankara joined the Atlantic Alliance in 1952 which anchored Turkey in the Western security structure. Moreover, putting aside the Soviet Union, no other alternative major centres of power (to the West) existed during the first experience. However, there are now multiple centres of power, the West, Russia and China to name main ones, in the world politics. Additionally, regional powers are increasingly more important.

### **Balancing Policy Untenable, Enmity Unaffordable**

For reasons including sustaining its balancing policy, for the time being, Turkey has been keen to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. However, the conflict is not ready for mediation, as Moscow appears to stick to a military solution. Turkey's mediation efforts also serve its own interests: greater visibility for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and prominence for Turkey on the international stage, both of which play well to the domestic audience. Moreover, these diplomatic initiatives also make Turkey's residual balancing and non-participation in the Western sanctions more acceptable to Western actors. Finally, as the war continues to evolve, Turkey will explore ways to acquire further roles – humanitarian, diplomatic or geopolitical – and make itself relevant to different actors in different ways. One case in point is Ankara's recent facilitation of a prisoner swap between the United States and Russia: The exchange of Russian pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko for U.S. ex-Marine Trevor Reed occurred in Turkey. The deal came about after Erdoğan called Putin, and both Washington and Moscow publicly thanked Ankara for its role. Plus, adopting the image of an actor interested in mediation and diplomacy serves Russian interests as well. By signalling openness to diplomacy, prob-

ably not genuinely, Moscow hopes to drive wedges between different Western actors, prevent further sanctions and non-western countries' aligning themselves with the western position.

However, if the war grinds on, Turkey is likely to find itself in a rather difficult position. Ankara's strategic balancing will become increasingly unfeasible as NATO openly regards Moscow as an enemy and a threat to European security. At the same time, the ongoing invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's geopolitical revisionism in the post-Soviet space heighten Turkey's own threat perceptions and insecurity. In fact, the security challenge that Russia potentially poses to Turkey has become more direct, as the previous buffer provided by Ukraine and Georgia has been eroded by the Georgian war of 2008, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, Ankara cannot afford outright hostility towards Moscow either. No Western countries is as exposed to Russia, both economically and geopolitically, as Turkey is. Obviously, the Baltic states and Poland are vulnerable in military terms, but an attack on any of them would normally trigger a collective NATO response. Moscow can impose military and geopolitical costs on Turkey without triggering a NATO response, because Ankara and Moscow are involved in many conflicts that are not covered by NATO security commitments: Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. For instance, Moscow could drive hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria's Idlib province towards the Turkish border. However, now that it is bogged down in Ukraine, Moscow might have less appetite for an escalation in Idlib or a showdown in north-western Syria.

Economically, Russia is Turkey's most important supplier of energy and grain, and accounted for 19 per cent of tourists visiting Turkey in 2021. Turkey sources almost 80 per cent of its grain from Russia and Ukraine, for its export-oriented food industry as well as domestic consumption. Likewise, Ankara imports more than one-third of its gas needs from Russia. Finally, Turkey

will also try to benefit from the sanctions and Russian isolation, hoping to attract some of the international business fleeing Russia and to fill some of the void in the Russian market created by the departure of Western companies. Others such as India can be expected to do the same.

In line with these goals, Turkey is exploring alternative payment systems in order to maintain and even expand its economic links with Russia. Turkish Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati announced that “Russian tourists will not struggle to make payments in Turkey as the Russian payment system Mir continues to grow in the country. The rate of businesses accepting Mir card was around 15 per cent, and the banks are distributing more right now.” Needless to say, usage of this alternative payment system will not be confined to the tourism industry.

In spite of such factors, the depth, duration and brutality of the Russian invasion and the nature and extent of the Western response will weigh heavily on Turkish policy in the coming period. Additionally, the systemic nature of the Western sanctions is likely to impact Turkish-Russian trade.

### **Anti-Imperialism, Anti-Westernism: Varieties of Discontent with the West**

As a major driver of Turkey’s geopolitical balancing policy, anti-Westernism or discontent with the West has come to mean different things during different times for Turkey. However, nuance is called for: Discontent with the West and anti-Westernism are not necessarily interchangeable. Discontent tends to be issue-based, whereas anti-Westernism describes a more comprehensive political and ideological stance. Yet an accumulation of discontents, as is the case in Turkey, feeds into and sustains the broader anti-Westernism at the elite and societal levels. This can make these two terms indistinguishable at times. Additionally, elites can exploit discontent on individual issues to serve wider anti-Western

political and ideological outlooks. While there are similarities between the Turkish and Russian anti-Western narratives, their policy responses and geopolitical aspirations differ. And that prevents their respective anti-Westernism morphing into a shared vision of and stance on the global order.

There are basically two sides to Turkey’s discontent with the West: political and geopolitical. In the political realm a whole series of political factors have driven wedges between Turkey and the West, and generated mutual discontent, if not animosity: from Europe’s often identity-centric opposition to Turkey’s EU membership to the personalisation of power and the authoritarian turn in Turkish domestic politics; from the West’s tepid response to the attempted coup of 2016 to the evisceration of the rule of law in the post-coup era.

Ankara’s geopolitical discontent with the West has multiple sources. Washington’s support for the PYD-dominated Syrian Kurds and Turkey’s disputes with the EU and European powers over the Eastern Mediterranean conflict are two major issues. The West, for its part, takes issue with Turkey’s military operations in Syria, its drilling activities in disputed waters and its military posturing in the Eastern Mediterranean. Many in the West saw Turkey’s acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence system as a manifestation of a new geopolitical identity premised on balancing, rather than merely a defence purchase. It is noteworthy that Turkey has recently made moves to purchase military equipment from Western sources. Turkey reached out to the US to purchase 40 new F-16 fighter jets and modernisation kits for its existing fleets, and to France and Italy about a potential cooperation on the joint production of Eurosam SAMP/T defence systems. These initiatives are important and can be seen as Ankara’s indirect recognition of the limits of its balancing policy, which included defence industry cooperation with Russia.

Fundamentally, the current anti-Westernism of both Turkey and Russia is primarily US-centric. Both experience status anxiety concerning the US/Western-centric

international order. However, as indicated above, what matters — in terms of the implications of their anti-Westernism on their approaches towards the global order — is the difference in their policy responses and aspirations.

Erdoğan and Putin may employ similar narratives in extolling multipolarity in global politics, critiquing Western hegemony, emphasising the nation state framework and displaying suspicion towards supranational institutions, but that does not mean they share a common vision of the international system or a shared policy course for addressing their discontent with the West. Unlike the anti-imperialism of the past, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, which advanced a more universal language and a potentially shared vision of global order through the various manifestations of third worldism and non-aligned movements, today's anti-Westernism largely represents a more nationalist posture and lacks such a universal vision. In fact, it rejects universalism and globalism, or speaks of alternative universalisms. To frame the discussion at a broader level, the post-colonial states of Africa and Asia, driven by anti-imperialism, convened at Bandung in Indonesia in 1955 to advance an alternative vision for the world order, a vision that had global resonance. Could a Bandung Conference of today's anti-Western actors offer a shared vision of global order? The answer must be no. Despite sharing certain grievances vis-à-vis the West and justified criticisms of the current international system, it is particularism and nationalism, rather than transnational aspiration or global ideas, that shape much of contemporary anti-Westernism. Rather than inheriting the legacy of anti-imperialism, contemporary anti-Westernism employs its symbols and to some extent its language, but in a largely distorted manner.

Moreover, Russia is trying to develop a civilisational and value-driven language to justify its invasion, while civilisational language has been disappearing from Turkish foreign policy. In its place, a more

nationalist and interest-based discourse is gaining currency. Likewise, from Peter the Great to Putin (arguably setting aside the Soviet era) Russia has seen itself as part of the cultural West, and tried to define its place in the world in relation to the West. Turkey, as part of the institutional West, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, has attempted to define its place within the West.

Russia's grievances are more comprehensive and relatively structural in nature, whereas Turkey's are more selective and largely issue-based. Russia has long wanted to negotiate the future of European security with the United States, not with the Europeans, and has sought parity with the United States in international affairs. It opposed NATO expansion from early in the post-Cold War era but was too weak to stop the process. In contrast, Ankara covets an enhanced status in international affairs, seeks parity with major European powers such as France, Germany and Britain, and is critical of certain US/EU policies. But Turkey is also a NATO member. It is both critical to and a beneficiary of the Western-centric international order. In spite of some overlaps in both countries' aspiration such as rejection in the case of Moscow and uneasiness in the case of Ankara towards the US hegemony or primacy in international affairs, both countries' discontent with the West has not amounted to a shared vision of the international order. Opposition to the expansion of NATO and the EU occupy a central position in Russia's approach to the international system. In contrast, Ankara has largely been supportive of both processes. The only exception is Turkey's current approach to the Swedish and Finnish membership application. Ankara ties its approval of their applications to preconditions, principally that both countries should change their alleged lax approach to the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK), refrain from any form of the support for the Syrian Kurdish YPG, and lift the arms embargo they imposed on Turkey following Ankara's 2019 military intervention in Syria. In spite of this, Turkey's attempt to leverage Stockholm and

Helsinki's membership bids to extract some gains does not stem from opposition to the NATO enlargement per se. The two sides will probably find a solution to this impasse in the not too distant future. However, this episode will further decrease the level of trust between Turkey and many NATO members, and deepen the mutual frustration. Additionally, whereas Turkey has repeatedly advocated reform of the United Nations system, most importantly the Security Council, Russia jealously guards it.

### **Russian Revisionism Drives Turkey Closer to the Geopolitical West**

While discontent with the West and anti-Westernism have facilitated cordial and cooperative relations between Moscow and Ankara, Russian geopolitical revisionism has almost invariably pushed Turkey closer to the West. The logic here is straightforward. First, Russian revisionism poses direct security threats to Turkey. Historically, the centre of gravity of Turkish-Russian rivalry has been the Black Sea. From the Turkish perspective, Russia's actions — from the war in Georgia to annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine — all decisively tilt the balance of power in this region in Russia's favour. Although Russia's policy in each of these cases might have specifics and contextual nuances, taken together they point to one unmistakable outcome: Russian revisionism in the post-Soviet space and an aspiration to turn the region into a sphere of domination. This will only aggravate the Turkish threat perception vis-à-vis Moscow.

Second, the post-Soviet space is also Turkey's immediate neighbourhood. If successful, the Russian policy will restrict Ankara's geopolitical room for manoeuvre in this region, and undermine its standing from the Black Sea to the Balkans and the South Caucasus to Central Asia. Additionally, Turkish and Western interests are in broad alignment in these regions, so Moscow's geopolitical revisionism is likely to bring Turkey and the West relatively closer together.

### **Convergence with the West: But with Which West?**

Recent crises are expanding the common ground between Turkey and the West. The question is which West Turkey is converging with. Broadly speaking, one can distinguish four different understandings of the West in Turkey at large and amongst the governing circle in particular.

First we have the idea of the cultural West. This can be seen as a process of societal and political secularisation and modernisation, in their "Western" conceptions. While the secular segment of Turkish society identifies more with this cultural West (and not necessarily with the political West discussed below), the conservative/Islamic segment of society tends to be uneasy with this aspect. Correspondingly, the latter group's anti-Westernism has been very much informed by a culturalist understanding of the West, essentially reflecting an incomplete reconciliation with and at times rejection of "Western" modernity and secularism.

Secondly we have the West as the point of reference for Turkey's domestic transformation. This has historically (in the past two centuries) come to denote the West/Europe serving as the model for Turkey's domestic political transformation, democratisation and economic modernisation. For instance, in the late 1990s and early 2000s Turkey introduced a series of important reform and democratisation packages as part of its drive to harmonise its political, legal and economic system with that of the EU.

Third is the West as geopolitical anchor. This understanding has had great implications for Turkey's foreign and security policy. From this perspective, the West was not merely one centre of power amongst others; it has long been seen as Turkey's indispensable geopolitical anchor. This differs from the understanding of recent years, which increasingly sees the West as one centre of power among several. Setting this aside — be it through different manifestations of the European imperial orders or the NATO membership, becoming part

of the geopolitical/strategic West — has been a consistent aspiration through Turkish history from the late Ottoman period to modern Turkey. The indispensability part, in this view, largely meant that Turkey partially filtering its relations with non-Western major powers through its Western geopolitical identity or NATO geopolitical identity.

In recent years, the West has been perceived to be neither a geopolitical anchor nor indispensable for Turkey. While Turkey avoided engaging with the Soviet defence industry during the Cold War, it purchased the Russian-made S-400 missile system in 2017. However, Russian geopolitical revisionism is pushing Turkey closer to the West. Ankara is now likely to be more mindful of the cost of its strategic and security engagements with Moscow. However, Russia is likely to emerge from the war weakened and highly isolated. In spite of the more direct nature of the Russian threat now, such weakening of Russia might reduce Turkish perception of the immediacy of the same threat. So, for Turkey, as indicated above, Russian threat has become close, increasingly more direct, but probably not immediate yet.

Despite the geopolitical resurgence of the West, Ankara is likely to see a multipolar world serving its interests better and unlikely to give up its quest for autonomy in its foreign policy. In other words, the unfeasibility of geopolitical balancing does not mean that Ankara will give up its quest for strategic autonomy — but the context for the quest has dramatically changed. It was never driven solely by discontent with the West. Turkey pursued this policy even when Turkish-Western relations were more amicable, because the quest rested on a particular reading of the international affairs. Turkey's growing capacity in recent years, particularly in defence industry, also enables it to pursue unilateral actions and policies at relatively less cost. Additionally, for all the geopolitical convergence, sources of discontent remain in Turkish-Western relations. In other words, Russian geopolitical revisionism is set to drive Turkey closer

to the geopolitical West, but it is doubtful that this process will make the geopolitical West as indispensable for Turkey as it was during the Cold War, or function as a geopolitical anchor in the way it did then.

Fourth is the West as a set of institutions (the institutional West). Ankara attaches great importance to its membership of the Western institutions such as NATO, the EU's Customs Union and the Council of Europe (with the European Court of Human Rights). These institutions are geopolitical, economic and normative in nature. In the new period, in line with the third point, we are likely to see more convergence between Turkey and the geopolitical institutional West (but not necessarily its normative counterpart).

## Concluding Remarks

First, Turkey and the West (particularly the US), can take steps to consolidate their geopolitical convergence. It is notable in this respect is that the Biden administration has told Congress that meeting Turkey's request to purchase F-16 jets and modernisation kits would serve US national security interests and NATO's long-term unity in light of the war in Ukraine. However, on the F-16 question, Turkey is facing the opposition of a hostile US Congress. But if the Biden administration uses its political capital and this purchase goes through, it could significantly improve Turkish-US relations and potentially pave the ground for more serious engagement to find a formula to address the S-400 crisis — probably this crisis can not be resolved soon but it can be better managed so that it does not contaminate the overall Turkish — US relations. Another positive development is that the US-Turkey launched a new "Strategic Mechanism" to review bilateral topics to boost ties. But if Turkey's problematisation of the Swedish and Finnish NATO membership bids is not resolved, ideally before the next NATO meeting on 30 June 2022 in Madrid, this can then easily dispel the recent positive atmosphere in Turkey-Western/NATO relations,

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which was largely a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the Turkey-EU level, launching a more structured foreign policy dialogue between Ankara and Brussels, including a potential Turkish role in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), paired with more clarity on the part of the EU on the role of non-EU NATO members, namely Turkey, the UK and the US, in the new European security architecture can further aid and sustain this process of convergence. Indeed, without a presence or contribution of these three actors, no serious European security order can be established, yet their roles remain undefined in the European debate on this prospective order.

Second, given the salience of anti-Westernism and discontent with the West in the triangle of Turkey-Russia-West relations, there is a need to distinguish between anti-Westernism as sentiment, narrative and policy response. Discontent with the West has often led to similar sentiments and narratives in Ankara and Moscow, but not necessarily to similar policy responses. Lumping both countries' discontent together under the same umbrella of anti-Westernism without due attention to differences in their sources and manifestations is unlikely to culminate in better understanding of both countries' approaches to the current international system. Moreover, contemporary anti-Westernism in Turkey is largely anti-American in nature – for instance, an anti-NATO position is a surrogate for anti-US sentiment. But while anti-NATO and anti-US sentiments are prominently heard, polls find support for Turkey's place in NATO, and rising aspirations for EU membership. Therefore, anti-Western sentiments and narratives do not necessarily culminate in anti-Western policy responses. That is more a matter of cost-benefit analysis.

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