

Triangulating Russia, Turkey, and the West: Towards a New Regional Order?

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Introduction

Is Ankara pivoting back to the West after the war in Ukraine – or is this a transactional move following President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's election victory in May 2023? Does Turkey need a diplomatic reset to ameliorate its souring relations with the United States? Given the country's institutional ties and shared economic interests with its European neighbours, can Turkey manage its geopolitical differences with the EU? How does Russia perceive Turkey's efforts to mend fences with its Western allies? How are the intricacies of the Russia-West confrontation reflected in the relations between Russia and Turkey? Could Turkey re-balance its triangle relations with the US, the EU and Russia in a post-war environment?

These are some of the questions that have kept Turkey-watchers preoccupied since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Despite abundant geopolitical analyses of Turkey's long-standing balancing act, there is room for discussion to fully understand Turkey's assiduous refrain from taking sides and refusing a quid-pro-quo break with Russia while simultaneously offering support to Ukraine.

Since 2022, Turkey has been less confrontational abroad, preferring to mend fences with countries ranging from the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to Greece and the US. Although there are limits on Turkey's ability to walk back some of its previous positions, Ankara has made it clear that it would be willing to cooperate with the West vis-à-vis Russia where it perceived a direct benefit from doing so and that the ballooning of Russian-Turkish trade in 2023 (approx. 70 billion USD/annum) was strictly business. The breadth and scope of regional conflicts, from Donbas to Nagorno-Karabakh to Idlib, demonstrates why tensions around Turkey make Ankara's relations with Moscow much less bilateral.

Until the invasion of Ukraine, Russo-Turkish relations since the end of the Cold War rested on a delicate equilibrium, wherein geopolitical

disputes had been managed for the sake of economic cooperation and, more recently, for political dividends. While Turkey's attempt to toe a balanced line between Russia and Ukraine can be read in various ways, there can be no doubt that it does not indicate an even closer relationship between Russia and Turkey despite increasing trade. The asymmetrical figures for bilateral trade partly explain why the talk of a full-blown Turkish pivot towards Russia is misguided.

Looking at the long-drawn-out war in Ukraine, however it ends, its repercussions will impact not only littoral but also non-littoral powers invested in the Black Sea regional security. As the custodian of the Straits, Turkey will undoubtedly play a crucial role in regional rebalancing and will no doubt benefit from a weakened Russia in the broader geography.

Exogenous shocks and external factors affect Turkey's relations with Russia. At the same time, the Russian-Turkish relationship also impacts the conditions in neighbouring theatres, including but not limited to Ukraine, Nagorno Karabakh, and the Black Sea in general. The convoluted nature of regional conflicts in the broader Black Sea region has already exhibited signs that Ankara and Moscow find it

challenging to manage their differences. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has especially demonstrated why Turkish-Russian relations should not be analysed in a narrowly defined geopolitical vacuum. While Ankara and Moscow have, in the last 20 years, learned how to compartmentalise their conflicting interests carefully and perpetuate their competitive cooperation (Aydın, forthcoming), the war in Ukraine could change this delicate equilibrium. Though the Turkish government refuses to comply with Western sanctions and loose interpretation of the Montreux Convention to allow Western ships in the Black Sea, Ankara is aware that its strategic imperatives demand further cooperation with the US and the EU.

With hindsight, it is now clear that Turkey has adopted a new diplomatic path in the region, autonomous and away from its Western allies since the mid-2010s. As Ankara's unqualified allegiance to the Transatlantic Alliance has waned, scholars, pundits, and policymakers have become increasingly concerned about its rapprochement with Moscow. On the eve of the global Covid pandemic, when regime similarities between the two states eclipsed other factors driving their relations, and when Ankara agreed to purchase S-400 missiles from Moscow, pessimists found reason to label Turkey's diplomacy as a "pivot to Russia". Others watched with trepidation as tensions between Turkey and its allies intensified. Turkey watchers have generally divided into two camps: those emphasising the menacing implications of a Russian-Turkish alliance and sceptics pushing back against hyperbolic predictions that Turkey was preparing to leave NATO. Recent developments, particularly Russia's brazen attempt to take Kyiv, have undermined expectations of a broader Russian-Turkish partnership.

The peculiar evolution of Russian-Turkish relations since the end of the Cold War, after centuries of hostility and confrontation, has been one of the fascinating aspects of the post-Cold War era. Although much has been written on its ongoing tribulations, there is still ground to make a meaningful contribution to the existing literature.

A Geopolitical Synopsis of the Recent Past*

The central pillar of the Russian-Turkish understanding of the Black Sea has been the common position against the excessive presence of non-littoral naval forces in the region. From Turkey's perspective, the delicate balance that emerged in the region at the end of the Cold War was valuable and needed to be protected. It allowed the two countries to work together on non-political issues within the framework of regional initiatives. Turkey preferred Russia to integrate into multilateral frameworks through institutional arrangements such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization rather than engaging it through bilateral negotiations, where it had an advantage over all coastal states. Further, Turkey wanted to avoid alienating and cornering Russia with the additional presence of extra-regional powers. The means Turkey most often used to ensure this was strict adherence to the 1936 Montreux Convention, even after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 (Aydın, forthcoming). With its restrictions on non-littoral fleets in the Black Sea, the convention has been the cornerstone of the security structure in the region. It stabilised the Black Sea after centuries of international confrontation (Oral 2017; Baldiran, Bayer, Gençer 2022).

Turkey's position in the region sometimes differed from that of its NATO allies (especially the US, Romania, and Bulgaria) and its regional partners (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine). The acrimony between Turkey and its allies/partners in the region became noticeable after the 9/11 attacks, as the US increased its presence in the region and encouraged its regional partners to step up their rhetoric against the "Turkish-Russian Condominium" in the Black Sea. The resulting tension diminished over time, especially after 2007, when the US moved to reduce its presence in the region and announced that it had no intention of challenging the Montreux Convention (Aydın 2011, 526).

** This part of the paper is based on the analyses of two forthcoming papers by Mustafa Aydın; "Turkey's Black Sea Policies (1991-2023) and Changing Regional Security since the Russian Invasion of Ukraine" and "Transformation of Turkish-Russian Relations; Rivalry and Cooperation in Eurasia and the Levant".*

In this environment, when Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, Turkey only diplomatically condemned it as the geopolitical landscape had changed in the previous decade, and its rivalry with Russia was coming to an end. While there was no strong, coordinated response from the West either, Turkey's diverging interests in the Caucasus (and, to a lesser extent, in the Black Sea) softened its response to the Russian advance. Likewise, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Turkey's reaction was once again restrained. While it did not recognise the Russian annexation, Turkey chose occasions to voice its objections to the annexation in line with the ups and downs of Turkish-Russian relations. For example, Turkey strongly condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine during the period of strained relations following the downing of a Russian fighter jet for violating Turkish airspace, while at other times, it expressed its displeasure in more diplomatic terms (Rüma and Çelikpala 2019).

Recognising the geopolitical changes since 9/11 and assessing the Russian position on NATO's expansion to its borders, Turkey has taken a middle position between its allies and its regional partner. Moreover, as Turkey's EU membership process and relations with the US increasingly became problematic, Turkey and Russia formed an 'axis of the excluded' (Hill and Taşpınar 2006; Balta, Filis, Aydın 2021). Since the annexation of Crimea, however, Russia has moved to excessively militarise the region and substantially enhance the capabilities of its Black Sea Fleet (BSF). Within a few years, it became the most significant naval power in the Black Sea, replacing Turkey (Çelikpala and Erşen 2018). In addition to controlling several exclusion zones (AD/A2) around the Black Sea and the Caucasus, Russia built a naval base in Syria and established a permanent maritime presence in the Mediterranean. The fact that Russian forces in Syria were logistically supported by the BSF, which was harboured in annexed Crimea until Turkey closed the Straits in February 2022, attests to the complicated relations between the two countries.

The strategic impact of Turkey's effective encirclement by Russia from the Caucasus to the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant was significant and led to a recalibration of its stance (Cheterian, 2023). While Russia became a revisionist power in the Black Sea from August 2008 on, Turkey had yet to develop an

appropriate response to the changing geopolitical equation in the region by 2022 when the former invaded Ukraine. While an imperfect and, at times, an uneasy balance had emerged in the Caucasus after August 2008, the new lines drawn by Crimea in 2014 required a reassessment of Turkey's position at a time when its focus shifted to the Levant, where the Russian presence created opportunities for further cooperation and new challenges for Turkish security and political positioning.

The outbreak of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in September 2020 and the roles played by Russia and Turkey brought the question of an increased Russian presence in Turkey's neighbourhood back to the table. The fact that the war ended with a Russian-brokered ceasefire and Russian peacekeepers returned to Azerbaijan 30 years after their withdrawal increased the urgency of reassessing the Russian position in the region. Nevertheless, Turkey seemed satisfied with the role it obtained after the ceasefire: a political comeback to the Caucasus, a military presence in Azerbaijan, and heightened expectations regarding the possible creation of a land corridor to Azerbaijan that would ensure its connection to Central Asia (Neset et al. 2023). Although it has so far avoided challenging Russia's hegemonic position in the Caucasus, Turkey's unique relations with Azerbaijan, reflected in the 15 June 2021 Shusha Declaration (Resmi Gazete 2022), and its restored military presence in the region after more than a century, put it in a position to take a stronger stance when Russia withdraws its peacekeeping forces from the region.

The War in Ukraine and the Limits of Russian-Turkish Convergence

While the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War ended with a restored balance between Russia and Turkey and the exclusion of the Western actors from the Caucasus (Neset et al. 2023), the invasion of Ukraine and especially the continuation of the war after two years necessitated Turkey to reassess its position. Although earlier expectations that Russian aggression in the region might force Turkey to

rethink its policy and bring it speedily closer to the West (Economist 2022) were not realised, Turkey found itself in double jeopardy between Russia and Ukraine and between Russia and the West. Although criticized by its Allies, Turkey's policy of supporting Ukraine with weapons systems and condemning Russia while not participating in Western sanctions allowed it to be a potential mediator between the warring parties and increase its standing (Bechev 2024).

Turkey's first reaction in the face of aggression was to resort to its age-old instrument -the Montreux Convention- to prevent the war expanding and danger the security in the Black Sea. Demonstrating its strict adherence to the Convention, Turkey declared on 27 February, the third day of the conflict, ahead of other countries, that the developments amounted to a 'war', justifying the closure of the Straits to warships of the warring parties by Article 19 of the Convention (Malsin 2023). Also, signalling its primary concern was regional security, Turkey called on other states to refrain from sending warships to the Black Sea.

More surprisingly, after the implementation of Article 19, Turkey asked Russia not to recall the ships of its BSF that remained outside the Black Sea, although it had the right to do so under the Montreux Convention (Delanoë 2024: 7). It is estimated that the number of Russian ships that belong to the BSF but are not in the Black Sea is between 20 and 30 (Güvenç, 2023). Although Turkey has not activated Article 21 of the Convention, which allows it to prevent the passage of all warships through the Straits by declaring that 'Turkey is under the threat of war,' its position has been made clear to all interested countries and Turkey has not yet allowed them to challenge its position.

In contrast to the immediate closure of the Straits, Turkey has so far refrained from analysing the broader global implications of the war and its significance for the future of the Turkish-Russian balance in the region. Instead, it prefers to capitalise on increased trade with Russia, on the heightened profile as a producer of successful UAVs, and its role as a broker of the 'grain deal.' However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the continuation of the war and Russia's inability to subdue Ukraine are impacting Turkey's assessment of Russia's value to its regional policy and the broader Turkish

'strategic autonomy' in recent years. Although it is too early to have a full-fledged impact analysis of the war in Ukraine on Turkey's wider foreign policy stance, it has already reached out to its allies/partners with strained relations - in most cases accelerated after February 2022 - and is on the path to normalising relations with them (Altunışık 2021; Kardeş 2022).

In this context, Turkey has endorsed all resolutions adopted by NATO since the invasion, particularly the 2022 Strategic Concept, which declares that 'the Russian Federation poses the most significant and immediate threat to the security of the Allies' (NATO 2022). Although the ratifications of Finland's and especially Sweden's accession to NATO were delayed, this was more for national and intra-Alliance reasons than to please Russia (Fraser 2023). In addition, Turkey took command of the maritime component of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in June 2022 and its Rapid Deployable Corps in December 2022, positioning itself to defend NATO territory when the only conceivable threat was perceived from Russia.

Furthermore, the Turkish Navy conducts a 24/7 maritime reconnaissance in the Black Sea to provide NATO with 67 per cent of the maritime picture of the region it receives. It has been sharing this information with Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea (Yinanç 2023). Turkish fighter jets are also deployed to Romania as part of NATO's Enhanced Air Policing Mission to protect NATO's airspace from possible Russian incursions (NATO 2023). Finally, at Turkey's initiative, an agreement was signed with Romania and Bulgaria on 11 January 2024 to establish the Mine Countermeasures Naval Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea), to which other NATO countries can also participate (Euronews 2024).

Likewise, Turkey remained steadfast in its decision to keep the Straits closed, even though this has become increasingly detrimental to Russia as the war progressed due to the attrition of its naval forces in the Black Sea (Güvenç and Aydın 2023). This became particularly important after the flagship of the Russian BSF, the missile cruiser Moskva, was sunk by Ukrainian forces on 14 April 2022 (Dilanian, Kube, Lee 2022), followed by damage to up to 80 ships of all types since then (Frias 2024), further weakening Russian naval power

in the region (Delanoë, 2024). As Turkey applies the Montreux Convention with additional restrictions, Russia cannot bring new ships into the region or take the damaged ships out of the Black Sea for repair or rotation.

Turkey also continued to provide Ukraine with military aid. In addition to the contract to build corvettes for the Ukrainian Navy, Turkey supplied various types of UAVs, both with air-to-ground munitions and for reconnaissance, precision-guided missiles, guided multiple rocket launchers, mine-resistant armoured personnel carriers, wheeled armoured vehicles, ground and airborne electronic warfare equipment, various types of personal military equipment and ammunition (Güvenç and Aydın 2023). Finally, even though it officially does not participate in Western sanctions on Russia, there are indications that Turkish companies, under the watchful eye of the Turkish government, almost fully comply with restrictions on not re-exporting US and EU-produced double-use goods to Russia.

These are all signs that Turkey has recognised the geopolitical value of an independent Ukraine in the Black Sea as a counterweight to Russia. The war's end will significantly alter the balance of naval power in the Black Sea and the geopolitical picture in the broader region. Turkey will no doubt have to rebalance its relations with Russia accordingly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Regardless of how the War in Ukraine unfolds, a certain continuity in Russian-Turkish relations is all but guaranteed. Nevertheless, both sides will be forced to confront the costs of previous choices. Restraint should be expected in the following years, but there will be limits on Ankara and Moscow's ability to walk back some of the impediments unleashed by the war in Ukraine. Ultimately, it is unlikely that Ankara would continue to pivot toward Russia whenever disagreements arise with the West. As Turkey depends on exports to the West for the well-being of its battered economy, the threat of economic sanctions will remain a potent weapon.

Turkey will have to manage its conflicting commitments with Russia in Syria and elsewhere, but the economic ties -topped in 2023- will need to be revived. However, if the West expects too much from Turkey, pressure could backfire as the US support for the PYD (Democratic Union Party) in Syria and the continued residence of Fethullah Gülen in the US have fed a virulent anti-Americanism in Turkey that will remain strong (Reynolds 2019). While Turkey might look for a compromise with the Bashar Al-Assad regime, the real progress will be slower.

The late 1990s, when the US facilitated a breakthrough in the EU-Turkey connection (Sayari 2003), offers a roadmap for leaders in Washington and Brussels today. As a recent FPRI Report (Stein and Danforth 2023) has argued, Washington should be cautious and "seek to cooperate with Ankara where it perceives a direct benefit from doing so." More importantly, the US could encourage further European engagement with Turkey if Turkey proceeds with a more benevolent neutrality towards Ukraine. While only a few Turks believe in EU membership in the foreseeable future, both sides must acknowledge this, and a diplomatic reset is necessary. The bottom line is that all parties involved in Turkey-EU relations – political decision-makers in Ankara, Berlin, Brussels, etc.– should be eager to improve bilateral relations if that improvement is not tied to a quid pro quo break with Russia. A revision of the Customs Union Agreement and a more relaxed visa regime for Turkish tourists, scholars, and students would be helpful towards this end.

During the last decades, Turkey has acted as a Western actor while developing autonomous courses of action in the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, considering regional balances. Even if not soon, the search for peace in the broader region needs to continue with the participation of Western actors, though without excluding Russia.

The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept acknowledges that Russia poses a significant and direct threat to the Alliance. Ankara has been actively contributing to implementing deterrence and defence measures at all levels and in all geographies, including the Black Sea. It is the right choice to continue to do so based on its long-term interests.

Ankara has acted in a framework that would provide both bilateral and multilateral support to Ukraine in the ongoing war. Although this approach has occasionally led to criticism from some allies, there is no doubt that this path is realistic. Ankara should be, however, more active in explaining the reasons for its chosen approach and the positive results it delivers to its allies and partners. As a new regional balance emerges, Ankara's Western allies should understand Turkish priorities and interests and support Ankara in creating areas of common interest.

The Black Sea security cannot be linked only to the maritime domain but also requires measures in the air, land, cyber, hybrid, and space dimensions. Cooperation in all domains should be achieved and deepened. At a time when even some NATO members are debating continuing to provide kinetic military capabilities to Ukraine, Ankara should continue to take steps to strengthen Ukraine's defence while encouraging Russia to achieve stable and lasting peace.

Ankara should take necessary measures in solidarity with the Black Sea littoral allies against threats from the region. Turkey's leading role in implementing the "Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group" initiative in a trilateral framework (Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria) is a case in point. It will undoubtedly contribute to Black Sea maritime security and NATO's deterrence in the region. In the future, if necessary, similar cooperation frameworks that do not adversely affect the Montreux regime should be developed in consultation with the Allies.

The Montreux regime is not an obstacle to supporting Ukraine from the air, land, cyberspace, and space. Indeed, allied support to Ukraine in these four operational areas continues uninterrupted. Cooperation with Western actors should be expanded in this framework.

There is also no obstacle for NATO members in the region to strengthen maritime security in the Black Sea among themselves with surface and underwater capabilities and through unmanned aerial and naval vehicles. They must invest in this area, undertake joint initiatives, and develop their capacities. Finding ways to involve Ukraine and Georgia in this process is also essential and a priority.

Russia must also be convinced to return its face towards regional peace and stability, which can only be achieved through cooperation and negotiations rather than conflict and force. It is crucial that Turkish-Russian relations, which have reached the highest level, should be used effectively in this framework.

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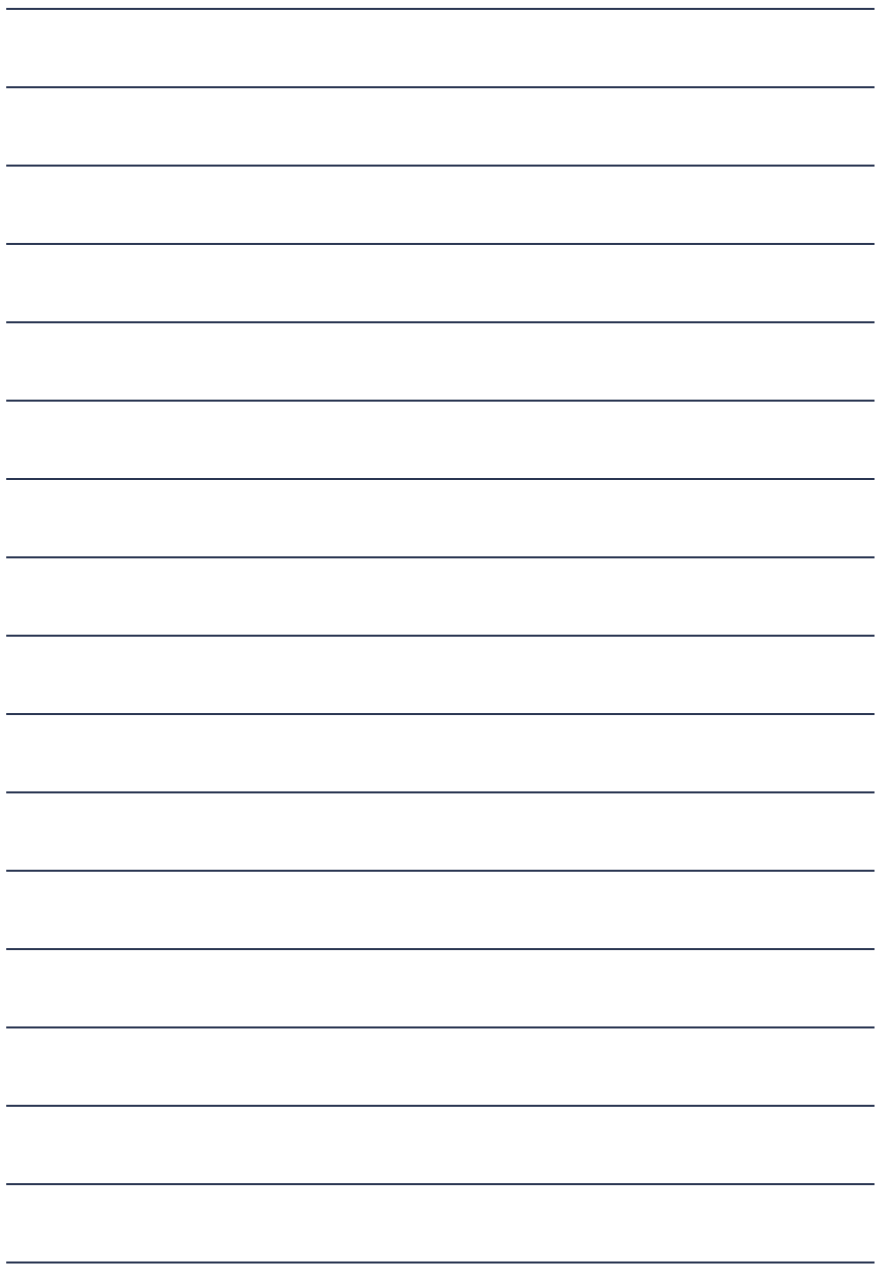
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