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Turkey's Place and Role in the Russia-Ukraine War

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In recent decades, Ankara has maintained a kind of balance in foreign policy and this approach naturally applied to Russia and Ukraine as well.

NATO member Turkey sought to develop lucrative military-political and trade-economic relations with both Russia and Ukraine. However, after the Kremlin's war with Ukraine, Ankara clearly saw the facing imminent Russian threat, precipitating the change in its position (supply additional weaponry to Ukraine, close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, etc.).

At the same time, the longer the Russia-Ukraine war lasts, the more drastic consequences it will have for Turkey. Consequently, Ankara will have to take even more decisive retaliatory steps.

Why Did Turkey's Posture Change?

Turkey has never faced an existential threat since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ankara condemned the annexation of Crimea in 2014 along with the rest of the world but at the same time, did not join Western sanctions and tried to pursue the so-called "pragmatic" policy towards Moscow. During this period, Ankara often had to confront the West as well.

Many things have changed since the recognition of the so-called "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" and the start of the Russia-Ukraine war.

First of all, Turkey's perception of the threats posed to it has changed. It became clear to Ankara that should Putin win the war with Ukraine, he would also reach other former Soviet states and create a new variation of the Soviet Union, putting Turkey against the same existential threat as before.

How the Annexation of Crimea Changed Russia's Exclusive Offshore Economic Zones

Law of the Sea (1982)



How the Balance of Power in the Black Sea Changed after Russia Annexed Crimea in 2014

This switch in Turkey's views has not gone unnoticed in the West where the importance of Turkey's role and geopolitical location for the entire region is well understood.

Thanks to this moment, Turkey also broke out from a kind of diplomatic isolation: during the last month, Biden-Erdogan had a telephone conversation,¹ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg,² German Chancellor Olaf Scholz³ and Israeli President Isaac Herzog⁴ visited Turkey; the Foreign Minister of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu, visited Moscow and Kyiv on a peacekeeping mission⁵, etc. Naturally, the main issue of all these negotiations was the Russian-Ukrainian war and the possible role of Turkey.

What Has Turkey Changed Since the Start of the War?

Along with the change in perception of threats, Turkey's actions have also altered naturally.

In addition to the fact that Turkey has immediately condemned the Kremlin's decision to recognize the so-called independence of the "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic" and reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty,⁶ it also took concrete military-political steps. In particular:

- 1) Ankara used the word "war" already on February 27 after which it closed the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits in accordance with Article XIX of the 1936 Montreux Convention.⁷ Consequently, it did not allow a group of Russian warships to cross the Mediterranean and enter into the Black Sea⁸ and intensify Russian naval attacks towards Odessa.

¹ Readout of President Biden's Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/10/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkey/>

² Secretary General in Turkey: NATO Stands with Ukraine, Rejects Spheres of Influence, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_193091.htm

³ Zeynep Bilginsoy and Frank Jordans, Leaders of Germany, Turkey Press for Cease-fire in Ukraine, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/germanys-scholz-meet-turkeys-erdogan-ankara-83430993>

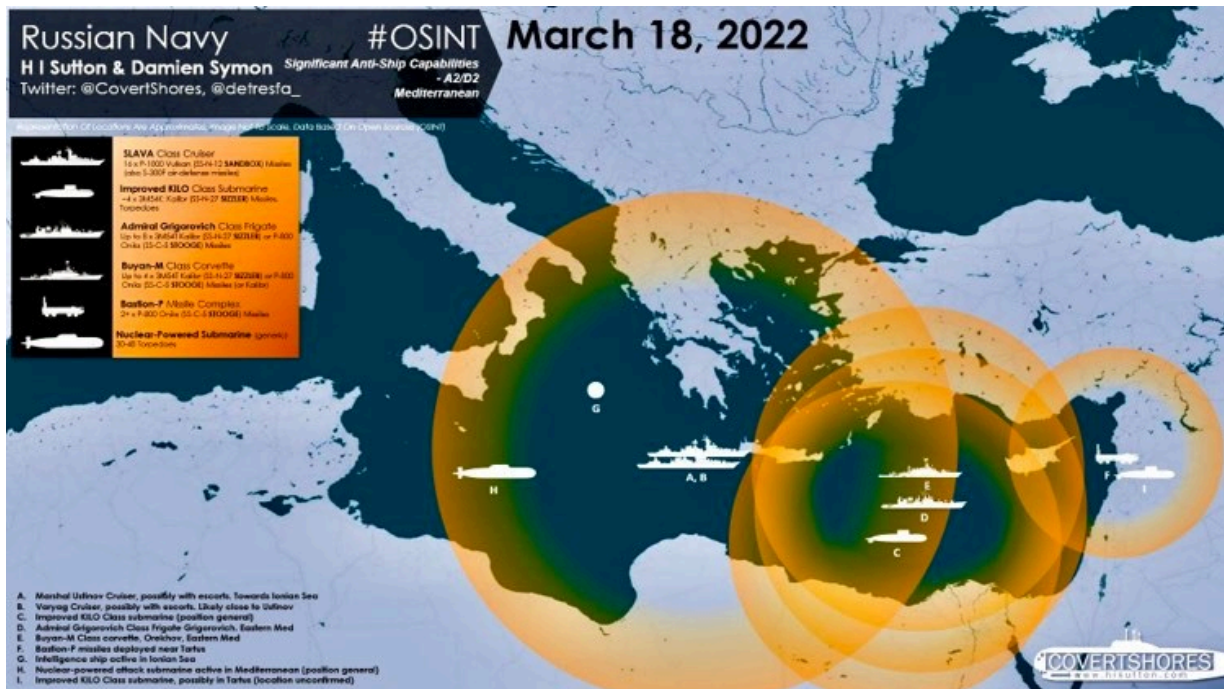
⁴ "Israel and Turkey Hail New Era in Relations, but Divisions Remain," <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/israel-turkey-relations-herzog-visit-erdogan>

⁵ Dorian Jones, "Turkey's Ukraine Stance Boosts Hopes for a Reset With the West," <https://www.voanews.com/a/6488071.html>

⁶ Zurab Batiashvili, "Positions and Actions of Turkey in the Russo-Ukrainian War," <https://gfsis.org/ge/ge/blog/view/1392>

⁷ Kenan Behzat Sharpe, "Turkey's Ukraine Policy: Playing All Sides," <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Turkey/Turkey-s-Ukraine-policy-playing-all-sides-216873>

⁸ Galip Dalay, "Ukraine's Wider Impact on Turkey's International Future," <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/ukraines-wider-impact-turkeys-international-future>



Russian Vessels (including warships and submarines) Stranded in the Mediterranean after Turkey Closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits

In addition, the United States brought the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier to the Dardanelles Strait (Mediterranean side) for two specific purposes: a) if necessary to start air patrols over the Black Sea with military aircraft stationed on board of the aircraft carrier and b) assist Turkey in closing the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits in case Russia tries to use force to get through.⁹

- 2) Supplied Kyiv with even more "Bayraktar" and other weaponry. It is obvious to everyone how important the Turkish-made "Bayraktars" are in the destruction of Russian military convoys¹⁰ and how these drones have changed the nature and course of the Russian-Ukrainian war in general.¹¹

⁹ "US Aircraft Carrier is in Northern Aegean Sea to Ensure Flight Operations if Tensions Escalate in Region," https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-05-22/h_67e9fdb1edd5d75feb219bbb38059c75

¹⁰ "How a Turkish Drone Became the Star of the Ukrainian Defense | Actionable Intelligence," <https://www.defensenews.com/video/2022/03/21/how-a-turkish-drone-became-the-star-of-the-ukrainian-defense-actionable-intelligence/>

¹¹ Gabriel Gavin, "Turkish Drones are Transforming the War in Ukraine," <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/turkish-drones-are-transforming-the-war-in-ukraine>



Turkish-made "Bayraktar" Delivered to Ukraine

- 3) On March 10, a trilateral meeting was held in Antalya with the participation of the Foreign Ministers of Turkey, Ukraine and Russia.¹² The parties failed to reach an agreement; however, no prior expectation of tangible progress in the negotiations was anticipated. However, at the meeting it became apparent that Ukraine considers Turkey as one of the guarantors of the possible agreement with Russia¹³ which is an important factor for Turkey.

At the same time, an opinion was raised in Washington on the possible transfer of S-400s - the Russian-produced air defense system - to Ukraine.¹⁴ In return, the United States may lift sanctions on Turkey, allowing Ankara to renew its fleet of offensive warplanes.¹⁵

¹² "Turkey Says Lavrov-Kuleba Meeting was Civil Despite all Difficulties," <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-says-lavrov-kuleba-meeting-was-civil-despite-all-difficulties-2022-03-10/>

¹³ Kenan Behzat Sharpe, "Turkey's Ukraine Policy: Playing All Sides," <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Turkey/Turkey-s-Ukraine-policy-playing-all-sides-216873>

¹⁴ Humeyra Pamuk, "U.S. Suggested Turkey Transfer Russian-made Missile System to Ukraine," <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-suggested-turkey-transfer-russian-made-missile-system-ukraine-sources-2022-03-19/>

¹⁵ Paul Iddon, "Two Birds One Stone: Will Turkey Supply Ukraine S-400s and Get Back In U.S. Good Graces?," <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/03/20/two-birds-one-stone-will-turkey-supply-ukraine-s-400s-and-get-back-in-us-good-graces/?sh=4b873085dd9a>

However, this issue is quite sensitive for Turkey and at this stage the chances and form of implementation of this idea are quite opaque.¹⁶

Impact of the War on the Turkish Economy

Although Turkey did not join the economic sanctions against Moscow, the Russia-Ukraine war had a significant negative impact (and will have more so in the future) on the Turkish economy which was already in the difficult situation.

The Turkish lira has depreciated by about 10% in the last month.¹⁷

Ukraine and Russia have banned the export of grain (including wheat). And Turkey receives 80% of the grain precisely from Russia and Ukraine.¹⁸ At the same time, the price of wheat on the world market increased by 31.6% as a result of the war¹⁹ and the price of one ton of edible oil increased from USD 1,400 to USD 2,000.²⁰ All of this, naturally, has a negative impact on a low-income people around the world, including in Turkey.

Traditionally the tourist season in Turkey starts in April and the exchange rate of the lira strengthens due to the inflow of foreign currency. However, this time there is less expectation that Russian and Ukrainian citizens will be able to visit Turkish resorts for leisure. Incidentally, in 2021 the citizens of these two countries accounted for 27.3% of the entire inflow of tourists (19% - Russians and 8.3% - Ukrainians).²¹

It is clear that the war, the economic downturn in Russia and the sanctions will also make it more problematic to maintain bilateral economic ties. In 2021, Turkey's total trade volume with Russia was USD 34.7 billion while with Ukraine it was USD 7.4 billion.²²

¹⁶ Paul Iddon, "Two Birds One Stone: Will Turkey Supply Ukraine S-400s and Get Back In U.S. Good Graces?," <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/03/20/two-birds-one-stone-will-turkey-supply-ukraine-s-400s-and-get-back-in-us-good-graces/?sh=4b873085dd9a>

¹⁷ <https://bigpara.hurriyet.com.tr/doviz/dolar/1ay/>

¹⁸ Galip Dalay, "Ukraine's Wider Impact on Turkey's International Future," <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/ukraines-wider-impact-turkeys-international-future>

¹⁹ <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/wheat>

²⁰ Şebnem Turhan, "How Ukraine Crisis Undermines Turkey's Economic Program," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/how-ukraine-crisis-undermines-ankaras-economic-program>

²¹ Galip Dalay, "Ukraine's Wider Impact on Turkey's International Future," <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/ukraines-wider-impact-turkeys-international-future>

²² <https://bianet.org/english/world/258134-what-does-russia-ukraine-crisis-mean-for-turkey-s-economy#:~:text=What%20about%20their%20trade%20volume,of%20Ukraine%20was%201.3%20percent.>

According to preliminary data, after the start of the war Russian and Ukrainian companies have already canceled most of the orders placed for Turkish industry, the value of which is estimated at billions of dollars.²³

At the same time, the fate of the USD 4.5 billion investment made by 700 Turkish companies in the Ukrainian economy is unclear.²⁴

Conclusions

- As a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Turkey's rapprochement with the West has become noticeable and this is also in our interests;
- The more aggressive and threatening Russia's actions, the more difficult it will be for Turkey to maintain a balanced pre-war approach. As a result, the positions of Turkey and the West will most likely begin to converge (however, this does not mean that all the problems between them will be eliminated quickly);
- Turkey, as well as the whole world, is well aware that the world security architecture will change after the Russia-Ukraine war;
- In this new security architecture, Ankara will obviously try to find its place and role. Ukraine's approaches will also help it in this matter as it seeks Turkey, along with several other powerful countries, to be the guarantor of Ukraine's security;
- In such circumstances, the issue of revising the Montreux Convention (which is a serious impediment to NATO's military presence and that of the West in general in the Black Sea) may arise. Georgia, along with Ukraine, should be one of the main lobbyists for this initiative (particularly now, when the Turkish leadership has already sent relevant signals to the West about this possibility). The main purpose of that should be to improve the security environment of the Black Sea;
- If Russia finds itself in even more difficult military situation in Ukraine, it is possible that Turkey and/or pro-Turkish forces will be enabled to act vis-à-vis pro-Russian forces in Syria and Libya;
- The Russia-Ukraine war will hit hard the economies of all neighboring countries (including Turkey). Particularly affected will be the garment industry, tourism, agriculture and the construction sector which have traditionally played an important role in Turkey's trade and economic ties with Russia and Ukraine and as Turkey is our number one trading partner, these difficulties will have an impact on Georgia as well;

²³ Şebnem Turhan, "How Ukraine Crisis Undermines Turkey's Economic Program," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/how-ukraine-crisis-undermines-ankaras-economic-program>

²⁴ Alexandra de Cramer, "Russia-Ukraine War Fallout Threaten Turkey's Economy," <https://www.theArabweekly.com/russia-ukraine-war-fallouts-threaten-turkeys-economy>

- The economic difficulties are the least desirable scenario for the Turkish government in the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2023. However, everyone realizes that it is impossible to completely mitigate the negative impact caused by the Russia-Ukraine war.