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How will Russia's invasion of Ukraine impact Turkey's foreign policy?

24 February 2022 will be remembered as a watershed moment for Europe. As a candidate country for EU accession, despite the stalled negotiations, and as a long-standing member of NATO with increasing dependency on Russia over the years, Turkey will certainly not be immune to the changes that this crisis will trigger with respect to its foreign policy and, perhaps, domestic politics. In its response, Ankara has so far focused on balancing the benefits and costs. Turkey sells drones to Ukraine – so it claims to be providing active support, while staying away from aligning itself with the EU's sanctions regime. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has publicly stated the goal of not abandoning either Russia or Ukraine after Turkey signalled to shut down the Bosphorus for warships, a move that will primarily affect Russia. What are the possible implications of the war and severe tension between Russia and the West on Turkish foreign policy? Can Turkey's balancing act continue for long in the post-24 February world or can Turkey afford to pursue a policy of active neutrality in the conflict?

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Besides its implications for the newly-emerging international order, the Russian invasion of Ukraine also challenges the geopolitical calculations of countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Turkish government is one of the few in the region to have condemned the assault. However, while Ankara explicitly supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and independence, at the same time it balances its interests and tries not to alienate Moscow. So far, Turkey has attempted to act as a mediator in the conflict, as it will likely have serious economic, security, and energy consequences, especially for its relations with Russia, all coinciding with a serious economic downturn already well underway in the country.

But as international pressure against Russia continues to mount, Turkey will need to depart from its strategy of balancing Russia with the West, and take a clear position. Since the end of 2020, the balancing act, diplomatic efforts, and improving relations with neighbors have become the modus operandi of Turkish foreign policy, after years of confrontational foreign policy in the MENA region. The war in Ukraine will certainly accelerate the realignment and rapprochement attempts of Turkey in the region. While leveraging its geostrategic value and seeking a greater role for itself in the international order, Ankara's approach in the MENA region will primarily focus on three elements: preserving diversified alliances with the likes of the Gulf

states, Israel and Iran; deepening economic ties; and strengthening national and regional security.

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Within NATO, Turkey has long been playing a special role through its relations with Ukraine and Russia. Linked to Ukraine in various ways, the successful use of Turkish Bayraktar drones against the Russian invasion has become the most visible sign of a strategic cooperation. Ankara has always been clear in its condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, it has not joined the Western sanctions against the Kremlin. Pertinently, the country is highly dependent on Moscow for its natural gas supplies, its construction and tourism sectors, and agricultural trade. In addition, Turkey is militarily opposing Russia already in several other regional conflicts. Both a further weakening of the crisis-ridden Turkish economy and a potential new influx of refugees triggered by the Russian invasion might pose a vital threat to the Turkish government. Turkey's active mediation efforts between Ukraine and Russia are therefore a clear attempt to prevent a situation where it would have to take sides. As long as Russia remains a significant regional player, Turkey will likely continue its balancing act. At the same time, the country must find its place in the changing European security architecture. If this opens the door not only to improving Turkey's relations with NATO partners but also to engaging the country in rules-based cooperation beyond NATO, then this is a chance not to be missed.

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Turkey has long pursued a balancing act between Russia and the West. It cooperates with Russia when it sees fit but also remains committed to NATO. Deepening ties with Western-leaning countries in the post-Soviet space – Georgia, Moldova, but first and foremost Ukraine – is part and parcel of Turkey's agenda. Moreover, engaging with Kyiv has delivered benefits: being a counterweight to Russia, establishing trade and investment links, and, lately, boosting prospects of expanding cooperation at defence industry level.

The war highlights Turkey's dependence on NATO as its ultimate insurance policy vis-à-vis Russian expansionism. However, Ankara also feels a sense of vulnerability, be it because of the potential economic fallout from a confrontation with the Kremlin or Russia's ability to spur another wave of refugees from across the Turkish border with Syria. As was the case during the 2008 Georgia war and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Turkish President Erdoğan's tone is conciliatory. Turkey is not joining the Western-led sanctions against Russia. What is more, Erdoğan as well as Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu are trying to mediate between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

In the longer term, the war is bringing Turkey closer to the West. Turkey's de-democratization, however, limits the convergence with both the US and the EU.

NATO might be as relevant as ever to Turkey but re-joining "the strategic West" is not easily convertible to a fundamental reorientation in Turkey's foreign policy, which would imply a value shift too.

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Turkey has been actively pursuing a diplomatic solution since the war broke out. Ankara's initial reaction to Russia's attack on Ukraine was that Moscow's decision and stance were unacceptable and it conveyed a message of support to Kyiv. Later, it decided to close the Turkish Straits to both littorals and offered to mediate between Russia and Ukraine.

Turkey has centuries-old experience in confronting and cooperating with Russia while it currently enjoys exclusive economic, political relations as well cooperation on military technology with Kyiv. Ankara has been an outspoken supporter of Ukraine's territorial integrity and a critic of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Meanwhile, it has developed an effective program of cooperation with Kyiv on military technology while retaining effective relations with Russia on energy, agricultural trade, tourism, and some key defence technologies.

Considering Ankara's security concerns, its Western identity as a NATO member and Russia's aggressive policies Turkey's general approach to Russia can be expected to shift toward a more confrontational path than a cooperative one in the coming days. Considering the nuclear aspect of the situation and the heavy Western sanctions imposed on Moscow, it would not be wrong to say that a long and challenging process awaits Ankara. Amidst this situation, Turkey must carefully monitor the changes in its Western allies' and Russia's Turkey perceptions. In so doing, Ankara may have to take decisions against Russia outside of its will, and, rather, follow its allies' decisions and expectations.

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The Russia-Ukraine war may urge Turkey and China to cooperate in two potential areas. First, the Western sanctions against Moscow have partially isolated Russia from the global economic and political system. These sanctions have already indirectly affected China and Turkey as big economic partners of Russia, even though Beijing and Ankara have not participated in the sanctions so far. As such, Beijing and Ankara may prioritize their own connectivity projects in Eurasia under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Turkey's Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI). Developing alternative overland logistic corridors to Europe will likely become more important for China after Russia's isolation from the EU's economic zone. Beijing will likely consider more projects related to transportation infrastructure in Turkey as well as in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Second, Russia's exclusion from the Western SWIFT system has concerned both Beijing and Ankara. China and Turkey, which have long been discussing a payment system for bilateral trade in their local currencies,

are now likely to accelerate their currency cooperation efforts further. As the Chinese yuan is stronger and more stable than the Turkish lira, doing bilateral trade in the Chinese currency may be an option for payments between China and Turkey.

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The fate of Turkey's foreign policy will be determined both by its own efforts and by the outcome of great power competition, which puts Ankara in the crossfire. So far, Ankara has pursued a successful policy of active neutrality. As per Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, Turkey notified Russia and Ukraine that it had closed the Turkish Straits to their warships and later brought the belligerent parties together in Antalya. However, Turkey is likely to follow a more active form of diplomacy to convince both parties to agree to a ceasefire. The reasons for this are two-fold.

The first is Ankara's asymmetrical dependence on Russia that developed after the abortive coup on 15 July 2016. Additionally, there is the fear of Russian retaliation in various regional theatres such as the Black Sea, the Caucasus, Syria, and the eastern Mediterranean. The second is Turkey's flourishing strategic partnership with Ukraine to which Ankara has recently turned for its defence industry needs due to the various kinds of formal and informal arms embargoes issued by several Western countries. As the financial war against Russia prolongs, Ankara may have to take some decisions against its will and expectations. In this context, Turkey's return to the republican foreign policy principle of "peace at home, peace in the world" may help it to pursue a successful foreign policy at a time of power transition during which geopolitical fault lines are filled with serious risks rooted in misjudgment of relative power.

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The outbreak of war in Ukraine has so far highlighted two recurrent themes in Ankara's foreign policy. First is the centrality of Turkey's geostrategic location that underpins its relationship with the West. Ankara's non-involvement in the high-level transatlantic consultations that preceded the war stands in stark contrast with the current intensive degree of diplomatic activity in and around Turkey. Second, and relatedly, is Turkey's policy of balancing or, to put it more precisely, the self-assessment of costs and benefits concerning largely whether its priorities converge or not with the West's agenda. One of the reasons for the divergence of interests between Turkey and the West as well as between Turkey and Russia is the diversity of Ankara's threat perceptions in its immediate surrounding neighbourhood: the Black Sea, the Middle East, and the eastern Mediterranean. It is still unclear how Russia's war in Ukraine will influence the dynamics in these regions. However, as

long as there is no direct military conflict between Russia and NATO, Turkey is still able to stick to the course of active neutrality. After all, the level of Turkey's structural exposure to Russia in the economic sphere is not comparable to other European countries.

Andrey Kortunov, Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow

The ongoing military conflict in Ukraine might produce at least two new opportunities for Turkey's foreign policy. First, it is likely to distract Russia's attention from other regional crises where Moscow and Ankara have diverging interests such as in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus. The change in Russia's priorities opens ways for strengthening Turkey's positions in these crises and for changing the local balances of power. Second, in the context of a sharp confrontation between Russia and the West, the latter needs Turkey on its side more than even before. Therefore, the Ukraine conflict strengthens Turkey's bargaining positions in dealing with the US, with NATO, and arguably even with the EU. At the same time, it is unlikely that President Erdoğan can play the role of an efficient mediator between Russia and Ukraine. He is not in a position to claim that he is equidistant from Moscow and Kyiv; of note, since 2014, Erdoğan has consistently taken a strong pro-Ukrainian position on all disputes between Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, it is unlikely that President Putin would seriously consider Erdoğan as an honest broker in this conflict.

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Up to this point, there is little sign that the war is affecting Turkey's basic foreign policy, particularly its "balancing" approach toward NATO and Russia. As was the case with past Russian regional incursions, Ankara embraces the NATO position rhetorically while rejecting sanctions on Russia, although with some additional wrinkles this time, such as armed drone sales to Ukraine and the closing of the Turkish Straits.

Russia, the US, and NATO seem to be acquiescing to this balancing act so far – in part, because Turkey is the conflict's leading potential mediator – although the US will be watching closely to make sure Ankara does not assist Russia in major sanctions circumvention. Turkey would desperately like its mediation to be successful, enhancing its international prestige and, more importantly, seemingly justifying its policy of balancing between Russia and NATO allies and thereby possibly winning more acceptance from the latter.

The basic structure of, and tensions in, the US-Turkish-Russian triangle have not changed. President Erdoğan shows no sign of giving up the S-400s, which remain of critical concern to Washington, especially the US Congress; Turkey still fears the prospect of Russia – or Syria, with Russia's blessing – driving millions of Syrians from Idlib into Turkey, and the US seems unlikely to cut ties with the Kurdish YPG militia.

Karol Wasilewski, Neoświat, Warsaw

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced Turkey to reconsider its relationship with Russia and the West. Indeed, Putin's revisionism has already endangered Turkey's interests in Ukraine. Turkish decisionmakers also seem well aware that Russia's military success will be even more problematic as it will strengthen Russia's grip of the Black Sea, constituting a clear threat to Turkish security. This, in turn, will amount to a paradigm shift in the way Turkish politicians have been seeing Russia since the end of the Cold War – namely, as a competitor or rival, but definitely not as a threat. Moreover, due to the potentially devastating Western sanctions, Russia will very soon lose its economic clout. All in all, the cost of having a good relationship with Moscow may quickly outweigh the benefits of keeping it close.

At the same time, NATO's strong reaction towards Russia's aggression proved that the alliance can still be a viable pillar of Turkey's security. And since it is already clear that there is little chance of getting back to "business as usual" with Russia, the EU's future restructuring, especially in the energy and economic sector, may be a way to refresh Turkey's stalled relationship with Western allies. Furthermore, the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) may be seen as an instrument to enhance synergies between Turkey and its Western allies, providing that the TSI members agree to opening the initiative to some form of cooperation with non-EU states.

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