

# The Role of Turkey in the Invasion of Ukraine by Russia

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## **Introduction**

With its unique strategic position at the entrance to the Black Sea, its transactional relations with Russia and its interests in Ukraine, Turkey is playing an important, complex diplomatic and military role since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. While Turkey has continued to provide military aid to Ukraine, it has also been laxist towards Russia. The paper will discuss relations between these three countries. Finally the paper will also discuss the role of Turkey as a mediator in the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces.

## **Background related to relations between Turkey and Ukraine**

Over the last ten years, Turkey has significantly strengthened its economic relations with Ukraine. In 2020, this country became the top foreign investor in Ukraine, with a total investment exceeding USD four billion. In total, more than seven hundred Turkish companies operate in Ukraine in a wide range of sectors in which they regularly play an important role (Pehlivan 2021: Turkey is now the largest investor in Ukraine). For instance Turkcell owns Ukraine's third-largest mobile operator, Lifecell, while Onur Group has built the new Kiev-Odessa highway.

Turkey's interests in Ukraine are not only economic, but also strategic, as these growing trade ties come in parallel with military sales. Baykar, a Turkish arms manufacturer, has been supplying Ukraine with Bayraktar TB2 drones since 2019, which have become an iconic symbol of the fight against the Russian invasion. In addition, Ukraine produces jet engines and gas turbines for ships of particular interest to Turkey. Furthermore in June 2021 Turkish Aerospace signed a contract with Motor Sich, a Ukrainian aircraft engine manufacturer, for engines for a next-generation attack helicopter project, and in November 2021 Baykar reached an agreement with Ivchenko-Progress, also an engine manufacturer, for the delivery of engines for the Bayraktar Kizilelma, a combat aircraft.

Given this economic and strategic proximity between the two countries, it is not surprising that, since 2014, Turkey has repeatedly expressed its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, its position since the beginning of the war has been decidedly less unequivocal. The Turkish government has taken a more neutral stance in

the conflict, for example helping to mediate the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022. The UN (United Nations) and Turkey negotiated an agreement to open a safe maritime humanitarian corridor in the Black Sea through the utilization of three Ukrainian ports: Chornomorsk, Odesa, and Pivdennyi. The Initiative is focused on exporting grain, food products and fertilizers from Ukraine. As part of the agreement, a JCC (Joint Coordination Center) has been established in Istanbul, to monitor the implementation of the Initiative. The JCC monitors the movement of commercial vessels and ensures compliance with the procedures developed through the Initiative for shipments to and from Ukrainian ports. The JCC comprises representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Turkey, and the United Nations.

Turkey played a significant role in the now-defunct agreement that guaranteed the security of grain imports from Ukraine over the Black Sea. The agreement, which was mediated by Ankara and the UN in July 2022, came to an end last month when Moscow declined to extend it. The Turkish President Recep Erdogan revealed that Putin would visit Turkey in August during a press conference he had with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy earlier this month. This visit took place in the Russian city of Sochi in early September. The grain initiative will not restart, however the Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that his country would deliver 1 million tons of grain to Turkey "at a preferential price" in the coming weeks. Then, from the local processing plants, it would go to six chosen countries (Putin: Russia to work with Qatar, Turkiye to ship free grain to 6 African countries: 2023).

### **Background related to relations between Russia and Turkey**

Maintaining good relations with Russia is especially important for Turkey for economic and political reasons. First Turkey is dependent on Russia, importing 55% of its gas from Russia (Tastan 2022: 2). Secondly there are more and more Russian tourists going to Turkey as they cannot easily go to other countries. Thirdly, from a geopolitical perspective, Turkey is afraid of the Russian Empire's ambitions. Russia dominates the northern part of the Black Sea (through the Crimea Peninsula) and Syria became a kind of Russian protectorate. The Russian President Vladimir Putin may also decide to stop containing several hundreds of thousands of refugees based in Idlib at the border between Syria and Turkey, letting them leave the country of Bashar al-Assad and destabilizing Turkey. For all these reasons, Turkey is obliged not only to maintain a neutral position in the conflict but for some other reasons to play the role of mediator.

These geopolitical rivalries do not constitute an object of rupture between Ankara and Moscow. This relationship is defined as a kind of pragmatic cooperation. Several elements explain the strength of the ties between the two countries.

First the two countries position themselves as contesting the current international order, both advocating for a truly multipolar world, valuing regional cooperation and rejecting any supposed system of universal values. There is also a certain nostalgia for empire among the leaders of these two countries. Considering themselves as rejected, they seek to promote their vision of international relations, by proposing alternative models. The Astana process – a tripartite meeting between Iran, Russia and Turkey on the Syrian issue – are formats that Ankara and Moscow wish to promote. It is common to hear Turkish President Recep Erdogan recall that "the world is bigger than five" when he wishes to denounce the stranglehold of the UN (Dedeoglu: 2016).

Secondly from a personal approach, we can notice a certain degree of closeness between the Russian president Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdogan. Each of them led officially their respective country since the early 2000s. Both met regularly and had time to get to know each other. Both share a certain vision of political power: a form of authoritarianism resulting in the repression of internal opposition and the promotion of a strong leader. The crackdowns following Turkey's failed 2016 coup brought them closer together, with Putin supporting Erdogan while European countries were unsure how to position themselves (Aktürk 2019: 100).

Thirdly the economic ties between the two countries have been greatly strengthened in recent years. Many sectors are concerned: tourism, real estate and hydrocarbons. This partnership dimension particularly affects strategic areas such as nuclear power. The Russian company Rosatom is currently building a nuclear power plant in southern Turkey. Ankara imports 50% of its natural gas and 60% of its oil from Moscow, even agreeing to pay a part of it in rubles.

Fourthly In a context of war where Russian companies find themselves under a regime of increasingly heavy sanctions, Turkey, which has refused to apply them, is perceived as a haven of peace, in particular by the oligarchs. These Russian rich people massively buy currently real estate in Turkey. (Adar 2022: 1).

Finally we may consider Turkey as a partner for Russia but not as an ally. Historically speaking, the Russian and Ottoman empires have been historic rivals, followed by antagonism between the Soviet Union and Turkey during the Cold War (Baev 2021: 8). Both countries are also not always on the same side, when it comes to the Libyan Civil War or the Nagorno-Karabakh War in Caucasus (Cheterian 2020: 4). The recent history has even been marked by significant moments of tension between the two countries: a Russian fighter was shot down by the Turkish army in 2015. In 2016 the Russian ambassador to Turkey was assassinated.

Turkey also enrolled in NATO<sup>1</sup> in 1952 due to the Soviet threat over the Anatolia Peninsula (Guner 2022: 85).

### **Turkey: a mediator in diplomatic relations**

This position of mediator was already played by Turkish authorities in the past. In the mid-2000 when the Ankara government was not yet authoritarian, it played a mediating position between Israel and the Palestinians (Ayaz 2019: 680). Turkey also played an important role in Syria before the Arab Spring, with whom it was on good terms. Finally, Turkey was also engaged in the conflict between India and Pakistan (Zeeshan 2017).

The person who has the highest interest in this mechanism is the head of state of Turkey Recep Erdogan. The recently reelected president of Turkey seeks not only to defend the interests of his country but also to improve his image on the international scene (Gegelashvili 2022: 1424). He considers that Turkey needs to cooperate with both Ukraine and Russia due to a high economic dependence. At the international level, he wants also to show that Turkey has also an important diplomatic role to play. So far, it's been a success. On July 22, 2022, the UN and Turkey negotiated the previously mentioned Black Sea Grain Initiative.

In the context of negotiations, Turkey is a country that cannot be replaced except maybe by Kazakhstan. This country is close to Ukraine and Russia. Kazakhstan hosted Syrian peace talks between Turkey, Russia and Iran for several years. However this country is not so close to Europe as Turkey.

In this context, the recent reconciliations between Turkey and certain Gulf monarchies and Erdogan's African tours bear witness to strong Turkish activism to diversify its partners and extend its field of influence. Could the Russian weakening benefit Ankara in its historic pre-square, especially in Central Asia? In the name of a historical, linguistic and cultural kinship, Turkey is trying to strengthen its influence, but there will still be a long way to go before it can claim to be on an equal footing with the Russians in the region (Aktürk 2020: 100). Turkey is also a bridge for Central Asian countries, being emerged in Western security alliances like the NATO (Aktürk 2020: 155).

### **Finding and implications**

With the Ukrainian conflict, Ankara confirms its ability to navigate between divergent interests while maintaining relations with as many countries as possible. While several countries have tried to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, in particular the Gulf monarchies and Israel, only Turkey has succeeded in placing itself as an essential interlocutor for the two

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<sup>1</sup> NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

belligerents. Unless there is a sharp escalation, Turkey will likely maintain this position of mediator throughout the conflict. Turkish authorities are trying to pursue a multi-vector policy and be a kind of bridge between the West and Russia.

For many observers, Turkish diplomacy is indicative of the new paradigm of international relations, where alliances will now be more temporary and transactional. This a new era where the "Middle Powers" have positioned themselves, through their activism, as essential partners for the great powers to resolve regional crises on condition that other countries listen to their interests.

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