

Turkish Foreign Policy and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: A Strategic Opportunity to Distance from Russia?*

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Abstract

Turkey has been seeking strategic autonomy for the past decade for various reasons. One viewpoint links this to the shift in global politics from unipolarity to multipolarity. Another argument connects this assertive shift to domestic issues and Erdogan's personal choice. This argument suggests that authoritarian states facing domestic problems often resort to military aggression to create a "rally around the flag" effect. Turkey's foreign policy shift from the Western alliance has also had conjectural dynamics, and many of them can be attributed to the conflict in Syria. The Syrian civil war had significant security, cultural, and economic consequences for Turkey, including the refugee flow and the emergence of a Kurdish entity controlled by PYD, which Turkey views as a Syrian branch of PKK. The United States' passivity in Syria against the Assad regime, its collaboration with PYD, and the Russian military's involvement in Syria contributed to Turkey's concerns about the Western alliance's dependability. To prevent the expansion of PYD, Turkey approached Russia and conducted several military operations with Russian consent. However, the price of this rapprochement with Russia has become high, including the purchase of the S-400 missile system and Turkey's exposure to military humiliation in the Idlib region by Russia. Northern Syria, particularly Idlib, has become a retaliation territory for Russians over Turkey for their competing policies in other regions. This weakness in Syria has created an asymmetrical relationship between the two states in favour of Russia. However, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this asymmetrical relationship has changed, and Turkey has the upper hand with its hedging policies after the war. This conjecture offers an opportunity for Turkey to realign with its NATO member states by solving the S-400 problem and maintaining transactional relations with Russia.

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OUTLINE

I. INTRODUCTION

II. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OR COMPLIANCE WITH RUSSIA?

III. RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE AND TURKEY'S HEDGING

IV. THE PENDULUM SWINGS IN TURKEY'S DIRECTION: AN
OPPORTUNITY FOR TURKEY TO REVERSE COURSE

V. CONCLUSION

I. INTRODUCTION

Turkey has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 1952 and has been an active participant in the alliance's various missions and operations. In recent years, Turkey's relations with its NATO allies, particularly the U.S. and some European powers have been strained due to the developments in global world politics, the outcome of the Arab spring in the Middle East, especially in Syria, and domestic issues at home.

Turkey's previous foreign policy known as 'logic of interdependence' shifted from a moderately western oriented track to an assertive quest for 'strategic autonomy', accompanied by military interventionism and coercive diplomacy.¹ The attempts to clarify the reasons for the assertive foreign policy of Turkey have two main arguments. One opinion explains this trend with the changes in the global power politics and the regional dynamics in the Middle East and East Mediterranean. The other view generally ties this shift to President Erdoğan's seek for international power to boost its domestic support at home and to prevent his falling due to the deteriorating economic conditions and social and political polarization.²

In recent years, one of Erdogan's most spectacular characteristics has been his short-termism.³ 'However, the short-term benefits of "independent action" may lead to foreign policy initiatives detrimental to the country's long-term national interests.' In the Turkish case, an ambitious foreign policy strategy brought populist dividends but it led to isolation and new forms of dependence *visa vi* Russia.⁴

This study examines Turkey's shift away from the Western alliance and its rapprochement with Russia and it focuses on Turkish foreign policy behaviour in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The main thesis of this paper is that the War in Ukraine presents an opportunity for Turkey to break away from Russian influence and realign itself towards the Western alliance. The argument of the paper suggests that Turkey initially had to approach Russia to defend its security objectives due to Russia's involvement in Syria. However, over time, the relationship between Turkey and Russia has become asymmetrical, with Russia gaining the upper hand. With the difficulties that Russia has been facing militarily, economically, and politically due to the War in Ukraine and Turkey's hedging policies, the

¹ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence?', *International Affairs* 97: 4, (2021) p.1085.

² Mustafa Kutlay & Ziya Öniş Understanding oscillations in Turkish foreign policy: pathways to unusual middle power activism, *Third World Quarterly*, 42:12, (2021) p.3053.

³ Strategic Comments, 'Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy', IISS, 26:6, iv-vi, (30 Sep 2020).

⁴ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order', p. 1091

asymmetrical relationship between the two countries has been reversed, and Russia has lost its flexibility against Turkey in their competing regions, particularly in Syria. This Russian sensitivity allows Turkey to shift back to its original NATO path without fear of retaliation from Russia while maintaining its transactional relations with Russia.

The following section discusses how Turkey joined the Russian orbit while it was decoupling from the West and seeking strategic autonomy. The third section explains Turkey's hedging policy as a foreign policy tool and its influence on the asymmetry of Turkish-Russian relations due to the Russian War in Ukraine. In the fourth section, I argue that the weakness of the Russian military and political influence, along with Turkey's hedging, presents an opportunity for Turkey to leave the Russian sphere of influence and realign itself with its NATO alliance while maintaining transactional relations with Russia.

II. STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OR COMPLIANCE WITH RUSSIA?

Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party's (AKP) foreign policy is generally divided into three periods since it came to power in 2002. The first period is associated with the first term of AKP's rule in which it allied with liberals and some leftists and pursued a constructive foreign policy with 'zero problems with neighbours' motto. The second period merged with then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's 'strategic depth' policies which aims to establish a cultural and economic hegemony in the Middle East, Caucasus and the Balkans. It tried to deploy Turkey's soft power in the near abroad, showed the Turkish system as a model for the Middle East and North Africa, and create a regional free-trade zone.⁵ It preferred to use Sunni Islam as the most efficient tool of foreign policy and supported Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region. The third period of foreign policy developed aggressive, and interventionist moves together with a populist and autocratic domestic discourse at home after the failed coup attempt in July 2016.⁶

Strategic autonomy entered Turkish foreign policy during this late term of the AKP government. The new multipolar order, increasing uncertainties in the international system and weakening of multilateral institutions are generally referred to as the causes of Turkey's choice for a more autonomous role in regional and international politics. Autonomy 'implies overcoming the condition of dependency' in a hierarchical order.⁷

⁵ Strategic Comments, 'Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy'

⁶ Mehmet Arısan, 'Populism, victimhood and Turkish foreign policy under AKP rule', *Turkish Studies*, 23:5, (2022), pp. 694-695.

⁷ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order', p. 1089.

In the international power hierarchy, Turkey has been categorized among the middle powers. A ‘middle power’ nation category is generally used for the countries which are not powerful enough to be regarded as ‘great’ powers but still have a substantial impact and strategic importance. They typically have a considerable amount of weight with their economic, geographic, demographic, or military dimensions. A current trend among the middle powers is an increasing desire for more control to influence the global order. Turkey, as a middle power, has been attempting to position itself between the USA and Europe on the one side, and their main competitors Russia and China on the other with its growing military engagements abroad.⁸

However, strategic autonomy does not automatically require decoupling from a Great Power because of extreme costs; it may be a policy inclination aimed at drawing domestic support through the implementation of more cautious policies.⁹ According to Muhittin Ataman, Turkey’s search for greater autonomy in its region could be tied to the changes in the global power, the weakening of the American leadership and the more assertive and competitive foreign policies of other global powers such as Russia and China.¹⁰

Oğuzlu states that Turkey’s recent international orientation does not fit traditional middle power classification and categorizes Turkey as an ‘over-ambitious middle power’. He argues that Turkey’s over-ambitious middle power strategy has failed in producing the expected outcomes due to the lack of material power capacity.¹¹ Kutlay and Öniş describe Turkey’s activities as an ‘unusual middle power activism’ and lay out the pathways leading to this assertive foreign policy behaviour.¹² They argue that the Turkish version of strategic autonomy also includes a ‘domestic legitimating discourse’ maintaining a transition to authoritarianism. Pursuing an assertive autonomy-based foreign policy has contributed to President Erdoğan’s popularity, resulting in an increase in public approval of his new presidential regime. It is also used as a fruitful instrument to distract attention from political and economic governance crises. They emphasize that Erdoğan’s increasing autocracy at home, with the deterioration of free media, government institutions, and check-and-balance

⁸ Tim Sweijjs and Michael J. Mazarr, ‘Mind The Middle Powers’, *War on the Rocks*, (April 4, 2023).

⁹ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, ‘Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order’, p. 1089.

¹⁰ Muhittin Ataman, ‘Editor’s notes’, *Insight Turkey* 21: 4, (2019), pp. 4–5.

¹¹ H. Tarık Oğuzlu, ‘Turkey as a restrained middle power’, *Turkish Studies*, (2023).

¹² Mustafa Kutlay & Ziya Öniş, ‘Understanding oscillations in Turkish foreign policy: Pathways to unusual middle power activism’, *Third World Quarterly*, 42:12, (2021), p.3052.

mechanisms opens space for foreign policy adventurism. The critics of the government's foreign policy moves are easily labelled as not 'domestic and national'.¹³

Unfortunately, this request or search for strategic autonomy has created another dependency on Russia in the context of Syria. Turkey has been harmed because of what has been happening in Syria. Having a 911-kilometer border with Syria and following an open-door policy for Syrian refugees, Turkey has felt most of the pain from the Syrian crisis. In the pre-ISIS period in Syria, when the situation was noticeably less risky, Turkey did not prefer an intervention and missed many opportunities even for a limited ground invasion in Syria to create a buffer zone for its own sake.¹⁴ There was reluctance from the Turkish military leadership to conduct any military campaign in Syria and then Erdoğan has not yet achieved full control of the military.

Turkey miscalculated the domestic conditions in Syria and international dynamics. It focused on the fall of the Assad regime by arming the moderate opposition groups, together with the United States. However, the rise of ISIS caused the U.S. to change course in its Syrian policy. Obama administration did not act against the Syrian regime despite its red lines crossed with the use of chemical weapons by Assad. The U.S. concentrated its efforts on defeating ISIS rather than toppling Assad.¹⁵ Turkey's no-fly zone request over Syria to create safe zones for the incoming refugees was not answered by the U.S. and NATO allies.

In 2015, Russia's decision to participate in the Syrian war changed Turkey's position. With Russian and Iranian support, the Syrian regime got rid of having been collapsed. NATO was not interested in to involve, and Turkey realized that Alliance had little to offer in response to a changed strategic posture in the Middle East.¹⁶ In addition to that, to defeat ISIS on the ground in Syria, the Americans start to work with the Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG) — the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an affiliate of PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which is an internationally recognized terrorist organization and Turkey has been fighting for over forty years.

The U.S.'s collaboration with PYD was an alarm for the Turkish political and military elite. Moreover, the U.S.'s silence during the July 2016 failed coup attempt and its protection

¹³ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order', p. 1099.

¹⁴ Grimaldi, S.G., and S. Koru, 'Is the Islamic State Trying to Draw Turkey into Syria?' *War on the Rocks*, (May 13, 2016).

¹⁵ H. Tark Oğuzlu, 'Turkey as a restrained middle power', *Turkish Studies*, (2023).

¹⁶ Strategic Comments, 'Turkey and NATO, IISS, 25:9, (2019).

of the leader of the Gülen movement which was believed behind the coup attempt contributed to Turkey's distancing itself from the U.S.

To prevent PYD enlargement in the Turkish-Syrian border area, Turkey conducted three cross-border operations with Russia's consent.¹⁷ During Turkey's first operation, Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIS, in order to be allowed to use Syrian air space, Turkey persuaded local rebel groups to withdraw from Aleppo. The price of the Russian consent for Turkey's second military operation, Operation Olive Branch, which aimed at PYD-held territory Afrin, was Turkey's decision to buy the Russian S-400 air defense system.

Turkey has also deployed soldiers to the Syrian governorate of Idlib and established twelve military observation posts between October 2017 and May 2018 to prevent Syrian Assad forces from attacking the largest rebel-held enclave in Syria with an estimated 2.5 to 3.3 million population and triggering another massive influx of refugees to Turkey.¹⁸

During a continuing attack on Idlib, Russian and Syrian jets hit a Turkish convoy and an observation post, which according to official figures killed 33 soldiers and wounded more than 30 on February 27, 2020.¹⁹ From a broader outlook, the Russian attack on Turkish soldiers in Idlib was interpreted as a message to the Turkish government not to force over against Russian interests in other regions (e.g Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Crimea) and to remind their vulnerability in Idlib.²⁰

By controlling the tension button in Idlib, Russia showed that it has an advantage in creating a new refugee flow to Turkey to destabilize both Turkey and Europe whenever it wants and it would never be shy to hit the Turkish bases in Syria.²¹ A ceasefire held the situation, but it was regarded as a fragile agreement and expected to break up soon.²² Therefore the critical condition in Idlib has become the Achilles' heel of Turkey and contributed to the asymmetrical power of Russia.

Russia has been the absolute beneficiary of Turkish Syrian policies. First, the Syrian regime established authority in Aleppo and other de-confliction zones inside the country after

¹⁷ Francesco Siccardi, 'How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy', *Carnegie Europe Working Paper*, (September 2021), p.5.

¹⁸ Seçkin Köstem, 'Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria: geopolitical alignment with limits', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, (2020), p.10.

¹⁹ Middle East Eye, '33 Turkish Soldiers killed in Idlib', (February 28, 2020).

²⁰ Seçkin Köstem, 'Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria', p. 12.

²¹ It was silently understood that the S-400 missile system, bought from Russia with a cost of 2,5 billion dollars, was useless in deterring Russia.

²² Galip Dalay, 'How long will the Turkish-Russian deal on Idlib last?', *Al Jazeera*, (March 16, 2020). Charles Lister, 'The puzzling outcome of the Moscow Summit', *Middle East Eye*, (March 16, 2020).

the withdrawal of Turkish-backed rebel groups due to Turkish consent. Second, Turkey has accepted guardianship over Idlib and started to convince (to some extent) jihadist groups not to pose a threat to the Assad regime and Russian bases in Syria. Third, Russia expanded its sphere of influence to the east of the Euphrates by setting up bases in several towns controlled by PYD when Turkey forced the Americans to withdraw from this region and conducted Operation Peace Spring. Fourth, by selling the S-400 air defence system, Russia not only received \$ 2.5 billion in cash but also prevented Turkey's buying of F-35 fighter jets and caused it to face US sanctions on weapon sales. Fifth, Russia achieved to harm NATO's southern flank and NATO's solidarity by distancing Turkey from the Western alliance, exploiting its sensitivity in Syria.²³

III. RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE AND TURKEY'S HEDGING

The War in Ukraine has profoundly transformed the global balance of power within the international system.²⁴ It has generated a powerful motive for Western cohesion. However, the global South or the non-Western world has embraced a relatively passive stance towards the Russian invasion.²⁵ For example in Africa, the war seemed mostly like a European war, and approached mostly with the idea of 'new neutralism'.²⁶

Öniş argues that the passivist attitude of the 'Rest' towards the entire tragedy of the War in Ukraine is a paradox from the perspective of rule-based international order. He brings four arguments to explain the 'Rest's' behaviour. His first argument states that the Rest seems to have considered 'the War as a European War rather than their own war, in the same way perhaps that the Europeans did not consider the Syrian Civil War as their own war.' Ukrainians fit their perception of European identity may be because of their closer white-Christian identity. The second argument is the growing anti-Western sentiments in much of the world due to the outcome of the unsuccessful military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The third argument is the declining democracy in much of the Rest. Many countries of the global South developed different tones of illiberalism and authoritarianism which may explain their neutral position.

²³ Özpek, B. B., 'How Russia exploited nationalism in Turkey to expand its influence in Syria', *Middle East Policy*, (2021).

²⁴ Andrew Corbet, 'Lies, Damn Lies, Disinformation and Deterrence, Russia-Ukrainian War', in: *War in Ukraine: One Year On*, ed. Zeno Leoni, Maeve Ryan and Gesine Weber, Centre for Grand Strategy (February 2023).

²⁵ Ziya Öniş, 'The West Versus the Rest: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Crisis of the "Post-Western" Order', *Transatlantic Policy*, (March 1, 2023).

²⁶ Folahanmi Aina, 'To be "Putinised" or "Westernised"? Africa's Strategic Choices and Relevance in the Russia-Ukrainian War', in: *War in Ukraine: One Year On*, ed. Zeno Leoni, Maeve Ryan and Gesine Weber, Centre for Grand Strategy, (February 2023).

The fourth argument is based on the strong economic benefits of the war. Non-Western countries behave pragmatically and try to produce economic benefits due to the Russian trade and investment shifts after the execution of the Western sanctions.²⁷

From a general perspective, Turkey's attitude towards the War in Ukraine was parallel with the Rest and the arguments above might be valid for Turkey as well. Just before the Russian move, a Turkish policy analyst argued that 'Ankara has ample incentives to "fence-sit" in the near term' in the case of a large-scale Russian invasion.²⁸ As predicted, in this geopolitical jam and uncertainty, Turkey has started to carefully balance both sides. We can refer to the 'hedging' to fit the Turkish policy into an international relation context because supporting Ukraine militarily and politically but staying engaged with Russia economically and diplomatically has become an effective hedge strategy for Turkey.²⁹

According to Kuik, the intended purposes for hedging are: 'developing robust relationships with both competing great powers (working toward the best outcomes), cultivating maximum protection to offset multiple risks under uncertainty (preparing for the worst scenarios), and, ultimately, keeping all options open for as long as possible.' In most cases, hedging appears as 'instinctive behaviour' which is not a well-calculated or clearly designed strategy that emerges under high risks and high uncertainty situations.³⁰

While balancing and bandwagoning involve clear-cut choices which require siding with one power over another and putting all policy eggs in the aligned power's basket, hedging refers to a 'middle' position that would not be taking a side or putting one above another.³¹ It is a response to uncertainty and brings flexibility while keeping both options on the table. Hedging is not indecisiveness. Employing 'hedging is not opportunistic, it is pragmatic'. Most of the time great powers disapprove of such behaviour and have frequently expressed disfavour. However, both small and middle powers hedge in varying forms.³²

Today's middle powers prefer not being recruited into a new bipolar stand-off between big powers and show many variants of hedging. Some would like to partner more with the U.S.

²⁷ Ziya Öniş, 'The West Versus the Rest'

²⁸ Aaron Stein, 'Turkey's Careful and Risk Fence-Sitting between Ukraine and Russia', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, (February 8, 2022) www.fpri.org/article/2022/02/turkeys-careful-and-risky-fence-sitting-between-ukraine-and-russia/

²⁹ Rich Outzen, Yevgeniya Gaber and Brenda Shaffer, 'How long can Turkey play both sides in the Ukraine War?' *Atlantic Council*, (August 2022).

³⁰ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective', *China International Strategy Review*, (2021-3), pp. 301-302.

³¹ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective', p.302.

³² Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective', p. 310.

while still employing ‘soft balancing’ when it comes to China and Russia’s block, and some keep formal pacts with the U.S. but chose a different view of crucial rivalries. All these actions, according to Hunter Marston, ‘make hedging not merely a matter of wanting to “balance” or “bandwagon” but instead a comprehensive and essential foreign policy vision.’³³ For example, regarding the tensions in the South China Sea, some allies of the U.S. have hedged as well. South Korea avoided direct participation in the South China Sea disagreements while France, Germany, and the Netherlands issued policy documents unveiling their respective strategies for the Indo-Pacific region. Even for some Southeast Asian nations hedging is a preferable policy between the U.S. and China because they are not sure how and how long will Washington’s determination continue as a ‘resident power’ in Asia.³⁴

Eray Alim examines Turkey’s hedging policies towards Russia in the Black Sea area after the Cold War. He uses ‘secondary state’, ‘local great power’, and ‘external great power’ metaphors to clarify his argument. He claims that a secondary state has to employ hedging to coexist with the local great power in the same region for the foreseeable future because it is mostly more knowledgeable about the regional dynamics and history with the local great power’s sensitivities and red lines than the external great power, therefore secondary state’s hedging serves as a risk minimizing strategy in the long term. In the case of Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea region, on the one hand, Turkey objected NATO’s and especially U.S.’s request to be present in the Black Sea for Russian assertiveness towards Ukraine and Georgia. On the other hand, Turkey supported both countries militarily and lobbied for their NATO membership.³⁵

By looking at hedging practices from Southeast Asia, the literature introduces the notion of mixed signals. ‘Mixed signals enable the secondary state to merge conflicting responses into a coherent strategic approach, so it becomes possible to display willingness to stay on good terms with the local great power while simultaneously expressing opposition to the latter’s hegemonic aspirations.’³⁶

In Turkey’s hedging strategy toward Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, these mixed signals are apparent. When the Russian attack started, President Erdoğan blamed NATO, especially the U.S. for causing such an event. However, Ankara declared its opposition to

³³ Asli Aydintasbas, ‘Turkey Will Not Return to the Western Fold’, *Foreign Affairs*, (May 19, 2021).

³⁴ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, ‘Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective’, pp. 308-309.

³⁵ Eray Alim, ‘Strategic hedging in the Black Sea: The case of Turkey versus Russia’, *Comparative Strategy*, 41:5, (2022), pp. 459-482.

³⁶ Eray Alim, ‘Strategic hedging in the Black Sea’, p. 464.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It approved the UN general assembly resolution condemning the invasion but abstained from voting on Russia's removal from the Council of Europe.³⁷ Turkey also employed Montreux Convention by closing the Straits to Russian, Ukrainian, and other countries' military ships. This move not only limited Russian vessels but also prevented any NATO naval involvement in the Black Sea.³⁸ Turkey also rejected to participate in Western sanctions against Russia while banning its airspace to Russian military flights.³⁹

Turkish-made Bayraktar armed drones helped defeat the initial Russian offense against Kyiv during the first weeks of the war in February-March 2022. These drones also played a role in the April 2022 sinking of the Russian naval vessel Moskva.⁴⁰ During the later phases of the conflict, Turkey continued to help Ukraine avoid defeat by sending drones and other types of military hardware and refrained from open conflict with Russia.⁴¹ This 'pro-Ukrainian but not anti-Russian' policy boosted Ankara's diplomatic importance. Ankara's keeping the channels of communication open with Kyiv and Moscow policy brought the two sides' officials to Antalya for a possible ceasefire agreement. Although this attempt failed, Ankara succeeded the 'grain corridor' deal to allow grain exports from the Black Sea ports which prevented a possible food security crisis for many Middle East and African nations.⁴² This policy was well received globally and boosted Erdogan's popularity both internationally and in the domestic context.

Turkish economy is dependent on Russian gas, tourism and trade. The War created new financial opportunities for the declining economy of Turkey, considering the production capacity and export potential and its closeness to Russia, as well as deep commercial links between the two nations since the end of the Cold War.⁴³ Since Russia could not import from the West, Turkey's exports to Russia increased by 45% in 2022.⁴⁴ Many moneyed Russians and oligarchs have been moving to Turkey and pouring money into the economy.⁴⁵

³⁷ Ziya Öniş, 'The West Versus the Rest: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine'

³⁸ Eray Alim, Strategic hedging in the Black Sea, p. 474

³⁹ Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivilcim, 'Ukraine War Makes Unexpected Winner of Turkey's Erdogan', *Washington Post*, (Feb. 5, 2023).

⁴⁰ Soner Cagaptay, 'Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy, Tuesday, *Hoover Institution*, (March 7, 2023), www.hoover.org/research/unpacking-turkeys-non-binary-ukraine-war-policy?s=08

⁴¹ Rich Outzen, Yevgeniya Gaber and Brenda Shaffer, 'How long can Turkey play both sides in the Ukraine War?'

⁴² Soner Cagaptay, 'Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy'

⁴³ Soner Cagaptay, 'Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy'

⁴⁴ Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivilcim, Ukraine War Makes Unexpected Winner of Turkey's Erdogan, *The Wall Street Journal*, (Feb. 5, 2023).

⁴⁵ Emile Hokayem, 'The Gulf states, Israel and Turkiye: reactions to the war in Ukraine', IISS, (February 21, 2023).

Turkey's immediate consideration with Russia is not only economic but also security. If Russia absorbs Ukraine, this will have serious security consequences for Turkey's and Black Sea security. In fact, Russia has many tools in its toolbox to damage and weaken the security of neighbouring states, especially the sensitive situation in Idlib and northwest Syria in general. For Turkey, 'the potential price to pay from miscalculation is much higher than for any state in Western Europe or the United States.'⁴⁶

IV. THE PENDULUM SWINGS IN TURKEY'S DIRECTION: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR TURKEY TO REVERSE COURSE

It appears that Russia miscalculated the Ukrainian resistance and the degree of Western solidarity exhibited in support of Ukraine. As the War progressed, the weaknesses of Russian hard power have become increasingly apparent. It seems that the war will likely be long with major human and material losses for the Russians. Before the invasion, Russia was deeply integrated into the global economy; now, Russia has become gradually isolated within the international arena, as sanctions started to impose negative impacts and long-term problems are building up.⁴⁷ The costly military consequences of resorting to a full-scale war with Ukraine will also impact Russian deterrence, political and soft power in its neighbouring environment and the entire world which it has been trying to project power for a decade.⁴⁸

After the invasion of Ukraine, capitals in Russia's backyard such as Yerevan, Chişinău, Tbilisi and Astana have started to re-examine Moscow's role as a stable partner and feared seeing the atrocities of Russian aggression. The result of the War in Ukraine 'could lead to a change in the constellation of power across the post-Soviet space... After all, if a state is unable to maintain dominance in its own "backyard" it is implausible that it will be able to exert influence on a global scale.' Some loudly say that 'Russia has lost its soft power. They don't know how to use it anymore with their neighbours. They just use this brutal force... Maybe it's a good chance to build up some sovereignty and decouple partially from'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Rich Outzen, Yevgeniya Gaber and Brenda Shaffer, 'How long can Turkey play both sides in the Ukraine War?'

⁴⁷ Tracey German and Natasha Kuhrt, 'Will Russia's global influence continue to decline?', *King's College*, (February 21, 2023), www.kcl.ac.uk/will-russias-global-influence-continue-to-decline

⁴⁸ Ziya Öniş, 'The West Versus the Rest: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine'

⁴⁹ Andrew Roth, 'Russia has lost its soft power: how war in Ukraine destabilises old Soviet allies', *The Guardian*, (11 Mar 2023). www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/11/russia-has-lost-its-soft-power-how-war-in-ukraine-destabilises-old-soviet-allies.

Turkey-Russia relations in the last decade were referred to as both cooperation and competition. This changing relationship between the two countries is described with different titles ranging from “cooperative competition or competitive cooperation” and “a marriage of convenience” to “adversarial collaboration,” and “fire and ice.”⁵⁰ With the annexation of Crimea and military involvement in Syria, Russia created anti-access/area-denial regions around Turkey. With its maritime base in Tartus and airbase in Khmeimim in Syrian, Russia had become able to deploy permanent forces in the north, northeast (with its military base in Armenia), and south of Turkey for the first time in history.⁵¹ In 2016, Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of Russia, stated that ‘Russia is now capable of easily striking the Bosphorus straits.’⁵² If Russia wins in Ukraine, it could create serious consequences for Turkey’s security and geopolitical posture.

The relationship between Turkey and Russia remains transactional and both countries do not share the same vision for the Black Sea, Caucasus, Middle East and North Africa. Turkish-Russian Relations are not structurally deep and there is no trust between them.⁵³ This was seen with the Russian attack on Turkish soldiers in Idlib in February 2020.

Focusing mostly on preventing the empowerment of the PYD, Turkey collaborated with Russia in Syria to counterweight the U.S.’s support for PYD.⁵⁴ However, after the Turkish operation in northeast Syria, when American soldiers withdrew from some towns, Russian and the Syrian regime forces deployed there to stop Turkish forces. Russia has demonstrated that it can exploit the Kurdish issue.⁵⁵ This was a clear sign that if the U.S. leaves northern Syria, Russian forces will replace and continue to play the role of the U.S. in the support of PYD.

The economic capacity between Russia and Turkey should not be overstated since the West remains a critical component of Turkey’s economy (\$35 billion of trade turnover with Russia opposed to \$178 billion with the European Union).⁵⁶ Turkey is a trading country, and the European market takes the major scale for its export-oriented manufacturing

⁵⁰ Francesco Siccardi, ‘How Syria Changed Turkey’s Foreign Policy’, p.17.

⁵¹ Mustafa Aydın, ‘The Long View on Turkish-Russian Rivalry and Cooperation’, *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, (June 2020).

⁵² Joshua Kucera, ‘Russia Claims "Mastery" Over Turkey in Black Sea,’ <https://eurasianet.org/russia-claims-mastery-over-turkey-black-sea> (September 25, 2016).

⁵³ Jakob Lindgaard and Moritz Pieper, *Turkey’s NATO Future*, Danish Institute for International Studies, (2020), p.24.

⁵⁴ Mustafa Aydın, *The Long View on Turkish-Russian Rivalry and Cooperation*

⁵⁵ Eugene Rumer, ‘Russia in the Middle East’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2019).

⁵⁶ Rich Outzen, Yevgeniya Gaber and Brenda Shaffer, ‘How long can Turkey play both sides in the Ukraine War?’

sector. Germany has regularly been the largest buyer of Turkish exports, with the automotive and textile industries consisting of more than half of Turkish sales.⁵⁷

The asymmetrical relationship between Turkey and Russia was in favour of later before the War in Ukraine. With Russian embarrassment, loss of face and strength, and impacts of the Western sanctions, Russia lost its freedom of action against Turkey in Syria. Turkey now has much more leverage to use against Russia if it chooses to strengthen its muscles in Idlib or in other pockets of northern Syria under Turkish control. Russia is likely to become more dependent on Turkey and refrain from any provocation in previously competed areas, Syria, Libya, or elsewhere if Turkey continues its hedging and giving a lifeline to Russia. With a weakened economy in the face of sanctions, the pendulum swings in Turkey's direction.

The West achieved solidarity towards the Russian aggressiveness. How long can Turkey play both sides would soon be a question of concern for the West. The U.S. has raised its concern about 'parallel exports of microchips and critical chemicals through Turkey to Russia.'⁵⁸ In the long run, continued trade and other relations with Russia might backfire because Turkey's role in helping Russia could allow it to bypass Western sanctions, 'potentially resulting in the West introducing sanctions against Turkey itself.'⁵⁹ The West would like Turkey to make a binary choice regarding the War, but they also understand the sensitivity of Turkey's situation vis-à-vis Russia.

Turkey still needs the regional and global deterrence of the transatlantic alliance. Its security institutions are still deeply aligned with the West's.⁶⁰ The war helped the West to remember Turkey's crucial role on Russia's southern flank. Turkey's geography and control of the Straits serve as a fundamental source of influence in that regard.⁶¹ For NATO, it is better to keep Turkey as a member than a possible opponent.

As Russia's capacities in Syria have diminished, Turkey now could act one step toward Western alliance while continuing its transactional relations with Russia. This first step could be to get rid of S-400s and return to the F-35 program. There is already a discussion in domestic

⁵⁷ Onur İşçi and Samuel J. Hirst, 'Turkey's Elections and Foreign Policy Options', *War on the Rocks*, (May 1, 2023).

⁵⁸ Onur İşçi and Samuel J. Hirst, 'Turkey's Elections and Foreign Policy Options'

⁵⁹ Rich Outzen, Yevgeniya Gaber and Brenda Shaffer, 'How long can Turkey play both sides in the Ukraine War?'

⁶⁰ Evren Balta, Constantinos Filis, and Mustafa Aydın, Russia, Turkey and the EU: An Uneasy Triangle, SWP CATS Network Project, (October 2021).

⁶¹ Eray Alim, 'Strategic hedging in the Black Sea', p. 475

politics about transferring the S-400s to India.⁶² In reverse, Turkey needs alliance commitments to the southern flank. Turkey considers itself as a frontline nation and expects alliance solidarity in its counter-terrorism operations and the several other crises in its vicinity.⁶³ It depends on what the EU and US will offer Turkey for the reverse course. First, the U.S. should deploy Patriot missiles to Turkey and declare a no-fly zone over Idlib to deter a possible Russian retaliation against the Turkish military or local proxies in Syria. An American commitment in Idlib would likely create extensive European support, given the major risk Europe faces from another refugee wave.⁶⁴

The U.S. must also use its influence on PYD-heavy SDF to remove PKK cadres from its structures and encourage them to engage in dialogue with a post-election Turkey.⁶⁵ 'Europe should accept that Turkey is as much an internal Western matter as an external one.'⁶⁶ Turkey believes that the earlier goal of E.U. membership is not realistic, and both sides need to accept this fact.⁶⁷ Instead, Europe should develop a new version of an inclusive partnership with Turkey rather than seeing it as a 'buffer' state.

V. CONCLUSION

Turkey accomplished its main foreign policy goal of preventing the establishment of a Kurdish corridor along its entire Syrian border with Russia's consent. However, this dependency on Russia contributed to the asymmetrical relationship between the two countries. Turkey had to make further concessions to Moscow to sustain a long-term presence in Syria and prevent new refugee waves. This was indicating a highly asymmetric relationship favouring Russia.⁶⁸

The Russian-Turkish relationship seems more like a transactional relationship than a strategic partnership or security bloc apart from economic ties.⁶⁹ In Syria, Turkey and Russia are on opposite sides. They are also on opposite sides in Libya. Russia had the ability to hurt

⁶² Serhat Güvenç, 'Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'nda ilk yılın bilançosu' (The First Year of the Russia-Ukraine War), medyascope.tv, (February 26, 2023).

⁶³ Jakob Lindgaard and Moritz Pieper, *Turkey's NATO Future*, p.19

⁶⁴ Jennifer Cafarella, John Dunford, Michael Land, and Blane Wallace, 'Turkey Commits to Idlib', *Institute for the Study of War*, (March 18, 2020).

⁶⁵ Jakob Lingard and Moritz Pieper, *Turkey's NATO Future*, p.25

⁶⁶ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, 'Hedge Politics: Turkey's Search for Balance in the Middle East', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, (July, 27, 2022).

⁶⁷ Onur İşçi and Samuel J. Hirst, 'Turkey's Elections and Foreign Policy Options'

⁶⁸ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order', p. 1102

⁶⁹ Eugene Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2019), p. 25

Turkey in three or four conflict zones. This capacity and intention were observed in February 2020 attack on Turkish soldiers in Idlib. It is one thing to be non-confrontational, and another to be compliant. Russia used its advantageous situation to force Turkey to play a submissive role. The War in Ukraine changed this power dynamic.

Turkey has managed to achieve by placing itself between NATO, Russia, and Ukraine during the Russian invasion of Ukraine⁷⁰ with its hedging policy. Turkey geopolitically benefited from the War.⁷¹ This policy also closely serves the interests of Erdogan before the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023.⁷²

A weakened Russia helps Turkish benefits. The fact that Russia was able and willing to increase retaliatory policies towards Turkey so quickly, Russia now lost this flexibility. This allows Turkey to distance itself from Russia while maintaining transactional relations. In recent months, Turkey has been seeking rapprochement with regional countries such as Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and even Syria. This pragmatic shift includes also Western countries. Turkey would like to avoid the cost of sanctions implied because of the S-400 deal with Russia.⁷³ Ankara's S-400 purchase had a number of damaging political consequences with its relations with the West and with its aging fighter jets.⁷⁴ The first step towards a Turkey-West realignment could be Turkey's finding a solution to the S-400 problem and joining to F-35 program, regardless of who wins the elections. In reverse, the U.S. and EU should support Turkey in Idlib to deter any possible Russian retaliation.

⁷⁰ Soner Cagaptay, 'Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy'

⁷¹ Emile Hokayem, 'The Gulf states, Israel and Turkiye: reactions to the war in Ukraine'

⁷² Soner Cagaptay, 'Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy'

⁷³ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order', p. 1103

⁷⁴ Jakob Lingard and Moritz Pieper, Turkey's NATO Future, p.25

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