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Turkey's shuttle diplomacy in the Black Sea region

Turkey wants to act as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. That's consistent with the inconsistency of Russian-Turkish relations

The strategic partnership with the US and American sanctions against the Turkish defence industry, Turkey's membership of NATO and its purchase of air defence systems from Russia, cooperation with Moscow in regional forums and standoffs in several frozen and ongoing armed conflicts all over the world – somewhat surprisingly, the Turkish government has managed to combine all these apparently incompatible components in its multi-pronged and consistently pragmatic foreign policy.

Consistent in its inconsistency, Ankara's ambiguous position on many foreign policy issues has significantly enriched not only diplomatic practice but also the language of politics. 'Cooperative conflict', 'agreeing to disagree' and even the difficult to negotiate 'compartmentalisation' (willingness to promote dialogue in certain spheres, while closing its eyes to irreconcilable contradictions in others) – different terms have been used by observers to describe the complex dynamic of Russian-Turkish relations.

However, it seems that this time, the tone Russia has taken in its dialogue with the West and the threat of a direct intervention in Ukraine has left Ankara with little room for geopolitical manoeuvre in the Black Sea region.

Turkey's dependence on Russia

Turkey's attempts to maintain working relations with Russia even in the midst of serious crisis are completely understandable. In addition to their shared aversion to the prospect of NATO strengthening its military capacity close to their borders, Ankara and Moscow are connected through a tangled web of political arrangements in regions where they have overlapping interests. They also have close economic ties and

common energy projects (from the Blue Stream and the TurkStream pipelines pumping Russian gas under the Black Sea to the Akkuyu nuclear power plant currently being constructed by Rosatom on the shores of the Mediterranean).

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Obviously, any deterioration in relations with Moscow would automatically mean the loss of both the Russian market, which is important for Turkish manufacturers, and of the Russian tourists who are such welcome visitors in Turkish resorts. Besides, if necessary, Russia always has the option of 'gas blackmail' (the Russian Federation supplies around 40 per cent of Turkey's domestic gas consumption) or the development of a new humanitarian crisis in Syria, triggering another wave of refugees on the Turkish borders. Against the backdrop of the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the unprecedented devaluation of the national currency over the last year, the weight of such problems risks overwhelming the already weakened Turkish economy.

Lastly, there is Russia's trump card of hybrid diplomacy. The possibility of 'thawing' unresolved conflicts through Russian peacekeeping efforts, the use of the Kurdish factor and the creation of another local hotbed of tension close to the Turkish border could allow Russia to place pressure on uncooperative 'strategic partners' in those cases where the 'partners' strategies' do not coincide. In the majority of regional conflicts – whether Syria and Libya or the occupied territories of the GUAM countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) – Ankara and Moscow have been on opposite sides of the barricades, if not in direct military action, then at the very least at the negotiating table. And this does not exactly make the life of Turkish diplomats any easier.

The Turkish courting of Ukraine

Against the background of Russian-Turkish relations, encumbered by problems of the two countries' complex past and an even more intricate geopolitical present, strategic partnership with Ukraine is an example of a 'natural alliance', based on almost complete convergence of interests with no significant controversies or tensions. Hence, the recent signing of a free trade agreement, among other deals, between the two countries.

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The containment of Russian military presence in the region and ensuring freedom of navigation on the Black Sea, the de-occupation of the Crimea and protecting the rights of Crimean Tartars, increasing bilateral trade and investment are just a few of the two countries' shared priorities. The active development of cooperation in the military-technical sphere and in the defence industry – culminating in plans for the construction of a joint production plant for a new generation of drones – gradually elevated the bilateral relationship from 'economically beneficial' to 'strategically important'.

That said, the economic factor should certainly not be discounted: in 2021, Turkish investment in Ukraine's economy to the tune of USD 4.5bn and USD 7.4bn in bilateral trade saw Turkey become Ukraine's largest foreign investor and one of its top five foreign trade partners. In the event of a full-scale Russian military invasion, however, Ankara would have to forget about these figures, as well as the record two million Ukrainian tourists holidaying in Turkish resorts.

How Turkey is helping itself

Thanks to Turkey's foreign policy pragmatism and skilful balancing, so far it has managed to avoid the pitfalls of Black Sea politics and maintain cordial relations with both partners, who have already been at war with each other for eight years. Nevertheless, the threat of a new Russian incursion in Ukraine may still force Ankara to make an uncomfortable choice.

None of the dilemmas that could arise in the event of further escalation will have a clear solution: whether or not to support the decision regarding sanctions against Moscow, when and how to implement the mechanisms of the Montreux Document, whether to participate in NATO's Allied Maritime Command at sea or to remain a non-participating observer of Russian expansion on the ground. In this case, it would be easier to prevent such issues arising than try to resolve them.

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In this sense, by helping Ukraine prevent Russian escalation, Turkey is also helping itself – avoiding having to face a complex and undesirable choice, where there are no favourable outcomes. Moreover, if mediation

initiatives are successful, through its 'shuttle' diplomacy, Ankara will be able to significantly strengthen its position, not only in the unsettled waters of the Black Sea but on the far shores of the Atlantic.

Dominance over the Black Sea

The constructive position of the Turkish leadership on the Ukrainian issue (refusing to recognise the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, consistently supporting Ukraine's membership of NATO, and now also Erdogan's attempts to act as a mediator between Zelensky and Putin by proposing Istanbul as a potential location for face-to-face meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine) may significantly improve Ankara's image in the eyes of its international partners.

In addition, after the death of Turkish troops as a result of the Russian airstrike in Idlib and the standoff in Nagorno-Karabakh during the second Karabakh war, it seems as though Turkey is no longer under the illusion that Russia has any real intentions of a 'strategic partnership'.

The occupation and subsequent militarisation of Crimea, the increased military presence of Russia in the Middle East, the eastern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus are, for Turkish experts, reminiscent of the centuries of Russian-Ottoman wars, which began with the decline of the Crimean Khanate and resulted in the fall of the entire Ottoman Empire. The de-facto annexation of Belarus and the deployment of CSTO forces in Kazakhstan called Ankara's ambitions for regional leadership in the post-Soviet space into question.

A new incursion in Ukraine would mean a de facto transformation of the Black Sea into a 'Russian lake' with direct access to 'warm seas' – a long-held dream of Moscow's. This is something that Ankara must prevent – even if, to remain credible, the 'shuttle' diplomacy between the shores of the Black Sea needs the support of drones in the skies.



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