

Turkish Strategy and Interests: Turkey as a Mediator Between Russia and Ukraine - Aylin Ece Çiçek



On Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky held a press brief in Kyiv, following Erdogan's official visit. During the briefing, Erdogan stated his intentions of taking on the role of a mediator between the two states. Although Erdogan's visit is a clear signal of Turkish support of the Ukrainian cause (mostly issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity), Turkey's interests also do not align with taking on Russia as an adversary. The situation is hardly simple; there are many dynamics at play for Turkey, both economic and security based. These dynamics are likely to affect

Turkey's relative regional power position, as well as its stance in the international arena due to its NATO membership. So, why is Turkey so persistent to soften this complex situation without alienating both sides? Well, the answer is rudimentary- Turkey has interests in both countries which provide a certain gain that is important. Perhaps it is too ambitious to state that Turkey has more to lose than Ukraine, but it is clear that the Turkish side will hardly come out as victors in the event of a full-fledged conflict. Choosing how to align is a complex equation dependent on many factors. With Ukraine, Turkey has a mutually beneficial industrial-defence relationship. In 2019 Turkey sold Bayraktar TB2 drones to Kyiv, and Erdogan has made it clear in 2022 that these defence sector based interactions will continue. The TB2s provide a low cost solution in low intensity conflicts- it can harbour two MAM- L missiles, and is hard to visually locate due to its size. These drones have been quite effective for Ukraine in the past, however, in a full-fledged war, the TB2s would not be of much use as their loads are limited. Of course, there is another alternative to the TB2s- AKINCI, which is more costly, but its capacities significantly higher. It is reported that Ukraine is interested in becoming the first buyer for these drones. This would bring in a lofty sum to Turkey. In the meantime, Turkey is also planning to produce MAM- K missiles, which have a longer range. On the other hand, Ankara has to balance such actions in a manner which will not offend Moscow and jeopardize its economic interests. Turkey is reliant on Russia- gas, imports, and tourism. Simply put, Turkey cannot afford to lose Russia as it is the country's top energy supplier and, due to many domestic reasons, the government is unlikely to risk an energy crisis. In turn, Russia also would not benefit from a cut-off of relations with Turkey- but it is obvious which side would be mostly affected. So, it is also a possibility for both actors to somehow tolerate each other's behaviours they would otherwise find offensive. This is precisely the current situation.

Apart from economic issues, there is another critical factor to be considered within this dynamics. Turkey's NATO membership creates a unique situation that fuels Russia's aggressive stance. In the event of an invasion, Russia will very likely refer to Turkish support to Ukraine as a NATO member to justify its aggressive actions. The Western world would most likely expect Turkey to stand by its NATO allegiance. However, when the recent past is examined, Turkey has always followed the middle road; for example, in 2014 imposed sanctions were not adapted to the dismay of many Western powers. Not crossing Moscow's

tolerance threshold is a key consideration that will shape Turkish foreign policy in the region. Also critically important is the fact that Turkey has vested interests on Russia due to the situation in Syria. There is an expectation that Russia will control the situation to an extent- which benefits the Turkish state because Turkey does not want to receive an influx of refugees and also does not possess enough capabilities to push through the Russian area denial weapons systems (A2AD).

Either way, Turkey has to somehow find a way to make Russia content without pushing its NATO allies. In the event of an escalation, the decision of alignment will not be a simple one. Apart from regional dynamics, Erdogan's push for a peaceful solution is also a way to mend tensions with Washington, as heading a democratic solution to a conflict would show Turkey's devotion to Western values. Either way, whether war is inevitable or not, as the red lines of Moscow become wider President Erdogan needs to conduct supreme diplomacy or there is a very tough decision ahead that will be of high cost regardless of the choice.



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