

# A Balancing Act:

## Türkiye and the Russia-Ukraine War

Burak Elmalı



(Arda Küçükkaya - Anadolu Agency)

**This Policy Outlook examines Türkiye's position towards the Russia-Ukraine War in the context of its recent foreign policy initiatives. Türkiye has emphasised the importance of international law and state sovereignty in the Russia-Ukraine War. Moreover, Türkiye has avoided alienating Russia through its non-participation in Western-led sanctions. The Policy Outlook also explores the ongoing debates about the NATO bids of Finland and Sweden to demonstrate how Turkish foreign policy constitutes a balancing act in the recent debates about European security architecture.**

## Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised several questions about the strategic foreign policy choices of the international community vis-à-vis both actors. While the United States, Canada and European nations took a firm stance by imposing heavy economic and political sanctions against Russia, not all countries followed suit, and many developed other strategies that better served their national interests. In any case, the war has provided us with key insights into nations' preferences and their respective foreign policy choices in the international system.

In this context, understanding Türkiye's stance in terms of both its strategic position and the proactive foreign policy it has displayed over the last two decades is of great importance. All the more so in a global order where many variables, such as shifts in the balance of power, the rise of new regional powers and geographical location, are interrelated. Türkiye, a NATO member of seventy years, constitutes a strategic bridge between West and East, requiring sophisticated foreign policy calculations. Türkiye's position vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine War can be seen as a reflection of the dynamics of changes and transformations in its foreign policy. The shift from a non-interference strategy to a proactive one is useful in understanding its ongoing mediation efforts and respective foreign policy moves that best suit its national interests.

This Policy Outlook examines Türkiye's position towards the Russia-Ukraine War in the context of its recent foreign policy initiatives based on mediation and assertiveness. Türkiye has consistently emphasised the importance of international law and state sovereignty in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War. Moreover, Türkiye has avoided alienating Russia through its non-participation in Western-led sanctions. The paper also explores the ongoing debates about the NATO bids of Finland and Sweden to demonstrate how Turkish foreign policy constitutes a delicate balancing act in the recent debates about European security architecture.

## How has Turkish foreign policy responded to the war?

On February 24, 2022, the Turkish Foreign Ministry [issued](#) a press release declaring the Russian military operation against Ukraine as unacceptable. In its statement, Türkiye emphasised that international law and the territorial integrity of Ukraine based on the Minsk Agreement had been violated by Russia. President Erdoğan underscored the unacceptability of the Russian armed attack. However, he added that while Türkiye will keep its commitments as a NATO member, it would not further antagonise Moscow. This message was clear enough to make the international community understand that Türkiye has a unique position in the region. It could not simply alienate itself from Russia or Ukraine. President Erdoğan also [pointed](#) out that both Russia and Ukraine are Türkiye's neighbours in the Black Sea and Türkiye has a strategic partnership with Ukraine in addition to the deep-rooted, multidimensional and close relations.

A few days later, President Erdoğan [declared](#) that Türkiye would use its legitimate authority over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles under the 1936 Montreux Convention. According to [Article 19](#) of the convention, vessels of war belonging to belligerent powers will not pass through the straits. Moscow did not respond negatively to this decision and acted in compliance with Türkiye's legitimate right to close the straits to the warships of Russia and Ukraine.

In the following period, Türkiye led diplomatic talks focused on bringing together officials from both countries. Of particular was the tripartite summit held by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on March 10. It was one of the important points of the summit that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [expressed](#) a positive attitude toward the readiness of Türkiye to become



Russia-Türkiye-Ukraine tripartite Foreign Ministers meeting in Antalya. (Cem Özdel - Anadolu Agency)





Türkiye President Erdoğan delivers remarks at 76th session of UN General Assembly. (Cem Özdel - Anadolu Agency)

a guarantor country in case of peace talks. Moscow also had a positive [attitude](#) regarding Türkiye as a possible guarantor. Yet, both sides added further details that need to be discussed in this issue.

Regarding the humanitarian cost of the war, Türkiye has been assisting the Ukrainian people who need urgent equipment, food, or shelter through the Turkish Red Crescent. In this context, Dr İbrahim Kalın, Foreign Policy Adviser of President Erdoğan, had emphasised the urgency for the evacuation of the civilians in Mariupol and that Türkiye was willing to provide diplomatic and logistical assistance if necessary.

## Mediation and assertiveness: Türkiye's strategic combination

The general remarks above are illustrative in terms of understanding the behavioural patterns of Turkish foreign policy if one puts them into the context of major shifts and transformations that occurred in the last two decades. While an important NATO member, Türkiye does not want to reduce its unique position to an uncompromised dichotomy of being in compliance with Western attitude towards Russia or maintaining close relations with Russia. This new trend in diplomacy can also be seen as another way of pursuing an autonomous and strategic foreign policy approach. In this regard, Turkish foreign policy reflects a particular *modus operandi* which is beyond a clear-cut bipolarity.

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye has acted proactively and prioritised diplomatic negotiations in the context of changes and transformations in Turkish foreign policy. Ankara's vision has a key proposition: "The world is bigger than five" (i.e., the world cannot be at the mercy of five vetoing members of the security council). The underlying message is that the Western-led global security architecture has become inadequate. This approach is not anti-West in its essence but explicitly articulates the inequalities and injustices of the Western-led global order in a broader context.

The world is in a period of transition to a global context, where the West is beginning to share its status as the unique source of power in international power politics with emerging powers. The unipolar moment of the post-Cold War world has definitively shifted towards multipolarity. This is especially true considering the regional and global rise of countries such as China, India, and Russia.

These changes have produced an external impetus for Turkish foreign policy coupled with President Erdoğan's emphasis and actions towards the most pressing international problems, such as civilian casualties, extreme poverty, refugee flows and so on. Therefore, a distinct foreign policy pattern has emerged: While undertaking mediator roles in overcoming regional crises, Ankara has also increased its military presence in various conflict zones. Accordingly, the changing dynamics of Turkish foreign policy can be understood within the context of changes and transformations that have occurred on a global scale.

Developments in Türkiye's two neighbouring countries, Syria and Iraq, made it necessary to proactively shape Turkish foreign policy to proactively protect national interests. The civil war that has been going on for more than ten years in Syria and the authority vacuum arising from the deterioration of Iraq's territorial integrity has strength-

ened Türkiye's resolve to protect its national interests in these regions. At the same time, foreign humanitarian aid made through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has ensured that humanitarian values are also considered. This approach is undertaken despite the realpolitik mindset, which views strategy solely via power and interest maximisation. Some have indicated that such a strategy can be labelled as "[moral realism](#)".

Other interpretations exist, such as the one provided by [Kutlay and Öniş](#) (2021), for whom changing regional and international dynamics in a post-Western world order led Türkiye to choose strategic autonomy reflected in military involvement, mediation, and assertive diplomacy. Therefore, changing conditions in the international system, coupled with Türkiye's new vision, led to a new phase that can be expressed as a strategic combination of mediation and assertiveness.

Professor Şener [Aktürk](#) (2020) views the aim behind the transformation of Türkiye's foreign policy as protecting the status quo in neighbouring countries and ensuring their territorial integrity. This strategy allows Türkiye to be a "third power buttressing the independence and territorial integrity of neighbours that are being partitioned or destroyed in proxy wars between two major rival allies".

Emphasising these underlying considerations when positioning itself between the West and Russia means that Türkiye does not want to be tied to any side unconditionally in terms of discourse and action in its foreign policies regarding the war. Türkiye has abided by the United Nations' principal guidelines by condemning the war and reiterating its call for peace. However, in every official statement, Ankara has reiterated that it would not join the sanctions regime. The main reason for this stance is that it would hinder potential opportunities for dialogue. Adopting a policy of equidistance between both protagonists, Russia and Ukraine, enhances Ankara's chances of succeeding in acting as a mediator. Türkiye is, thus, in harmony with its diplomatic strategy, demonstrating how well mediation is embedded in its foreign policy.

This [strategy](#), in essence, is quite different from a foreign policy strategy of "bandwagoning" in international relations, which expresses that relatively weak states take the side of strong states. Turkish foreign policy chose an independent way of policy and action without necessarily following the same policy patterns of other countries. It should also be noted that for Türkiye NATO membership does not mean unconditional engagement with the West. For decades, Türkiye's geopolitical significance, coupled with the Cold War containment strategy against the Soviet Union, made Türkiye an inseparable part of the Western international order. However, in light of today's international power dynamics, NATO, an effective deterrent in the yesteryear bipolar world, currently has various other roles.

Therefore, it would be erroneous to think of the current international power flux as another Cold War scenario. As the international distribution of power evolves from unipolarity to multipolarity, the world faces many uncertainties that need sophisticated approaches. Moreover, the rise in importance of regional powers, including Türkiye, means more strategic autonomy is in order.

While such a balancing act can be challenging, it holds some important benefits if conducted masterfully. Türkiye's procurement of the Bayraktar TB2 drone to Ukraine and maintaining diplomatic communication with Russia reflects this new approach. It is mainly understood from the diplomatic meetings in Antalya attended by the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine and the various meetings between President Erdogan and Putin that Russia does not equate Türkiye with other NATO countries. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [emphasised](#) the role of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership in shaping bilateral relations positively. As for why Moscow does not equate Türkiye with other NATO members, Peskov talked about the excellent bilateral relations based on mutual interests and added that other NATO countries have strong prejudices under the influence of Washington.

In this context, it can be said that Türkiye, a strong NATO partner, refrains from participating in sanctions with unconditional compliance with Western countries, which makes Türkiye different from the perspective of Russia. The Russian envoy to Ankara, Aleksei Erkhov, [pointed](#) out that Moscow appreciates Türkiye's compliance with the Montreux Treaty regarding the Straits because Türkiye acts in line with its legitimate international rights. At the same time, the appreciation of such mediation efforts by Western countries indicates that the global context in which Türkiye positions itself in foreign policy is quite different from the old power dynamics dominated by an uncompromising East-West divide. In other words, actor behaviours are demonstrative reflections of the power distributions of the global system.

The latest developments, shaped under "fog of war" conditions and reflecting Türkiye's strategic foreign policy choices, continue to be a turning point where the limits of the "[co-opetition](#)" relationship between Türkiye and Russia can be tested.

In the trade asymmetry between the two countries, Türkiye's energy dependency is important in making sense of this complexity. In trade relations, we see that the concept of "complex interdependence", as [defined](#) by Nye and Keohane, has become much more multifaceted today. As a result, countries consider both security factors and the economic relations when making their strategic choices. Given Türkiye's dependence on external energy sources, Russia will continue to be an important source in this respect. Emphasising the importance of economic relations

saves us from the fallacy of seeing Türkiye-Russia relations as an “alliance of the excluded”.<sup>1</sup> Economic interdependence in the global trade system necessitates neighbouring countries to engage in increased economic relations.

Recent developments have stimulated Turkish foreign policy in terms of reiterating its assertive character and being a desirable diplomatic partner. Accepting Türkiye's position without any qualms by both Ukraine and Russia is a positive signal that warrants more Western support for Türkiye's perspective.

## Türkiye as a strong NATO member

Türkiye's balancing act in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War is in no way in contradiction with its NATO membership. Ankara's combination of mediation and assertiveness played a de-escalation role and facilitated diplomatic talks between Russia and Ukraine. The foreign ministers of two countries held diplomatic talks under the leadership of a NATO member country. This action is a clear manifestation of this, especially if one thinks that one of the fighting countries is strongly opposed to NATO expansion. Another important role of Türkiye in the context of war is alleviating the ongoing global food crisis by opening a grain corridor via the Bosphorus.

The recent Nordic bids for NATO membership constitute a demonstrative case for the continuation of Turkish foreign policy along the same patterns. Once Finland and Sweden applied to join NATO, Türkiye outlined its conditions. For Ankara, unless these two countries cut their support (tacit or otherwise) to terrorist organisations, such as the YPG/PKK, Türkiye, a NATO member holding veto power, will not consider these applications positively. President Erdoğan's stance was clear enough to describe the irreconcilability of support for a terrorist organisation and becoming a member of a strong alliance based on collective defence.

Incorporating Finland and Sweden into NATO means that the border between Russia and NATO will double. From a structural-realist perspective, which emphasises the balance of power structure of the international system as the key determinant of state behaviour, this step will further antagonise Russia. Whereas the Nordic countries seek to join the NATO umbrella to thwart any future security threat Russia poses. In response, former Russian President and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev said that if NATO enlarges in the Baltic direction, one cannot talk about a non-nuclear Baltic region.

In this scenario, which is likely to have significant consequences for the balance of power in Europe, Türkiye's attitude will be perceived as a significant factor that will always be considered beforehand in the making of critical foreign policy decisions about Europe. Türkiye, which



*Türkiye's talks with Sweden, Finland on NATO bids begin in Ankara. (Türkiye Presidency - Anadolu Agency)*

<sup>1</sup> Although it was proposed by some commentators, the term “alliance of excluded” is inadequate in my view. It can be examined in the context of a post-Western global order, indicating that the global balance of power is being challenged by emerging powers, such as China, Russia, and so on. Previously, these countries did not have close diplomatic relations with the West. Hence, they were perceived as excluded from the Western liberal order. However, the economic interdependency on a global scale has turned the situation upside down. As the international balance of power shifts toward a multipolar structure in which regional powers have also become influential, dynamics between some countries that are (rightly or wrongly) perceived outside of the West, such as Türkiye and Russia (among other cases) can be better understood via the prism of economic interdependency. For further reading on this general trend, see Stuenkel, O. (2016). *Post-Western world: How emerging powers are remaking global order*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

strategically reflects its national interests in foreign policy moves, this process may lead to “unintended consequences” in terms of creating an outcome that Moscow favours. Moscow would indeed be satisfied with the protraction of Finland and Sweden’s application to join NATO. However, such convergence is unintentional since Ankara’s vetoing Finland’s and Sweden’s application was primarily driven by the support (tacit or otherwise) provided by Helsinki and Stockholm to terrorist groups and the arms embargo against Turkey. However, if Moscow became satisfied with the protraction of the membership bids of Finland and Sweden, this was not a driving consideration for Türkiye’s position. In fact, Türkiye has supported NATO enlargement in the past and continues to do so as long as its national interests are considered in the process.

This particular case demonstrates that Turkish foreign policy is not only mediation-centric but can also include elements of assertiveness when needed. Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu underlined [that](#) Türkiye has consistently supported of NATO’s open-door policy for new members. However, Çavuşoğlu also highlighted Türkiye’s security concerns. While a terrorist presence, propaganda, and fundraising in Finland and Sweden are one factor in the equation, another important factor is the existing arms embargo by Finland and Sweden. It raises another big question: to what extent do allies use embargoes against each other? In other words, how can countries be in the same security alliance and still impose export restrictions on another member’s defence industry? Especially when this member has been in that alliance for many decades and is geopolitically “indispensable”.

Another dimension that is rarely discussed is economic interdependence. Ankara takes seriously economic interdependence, espousing strongly liberal institutionalist ideas. This aspect is not negligible in Ankara’s decision-making. In this approach, theoretically, the more extensive the economic relations developed among the members of an alliance, the more the membership bond will increase. However, this dimension has not always been achieved because no matter how economic exchanges grew between Türkiye and western countries, the arms embargo was always part of the tools used by fellow NATO members to coerce Turkey. Thus, Ankara did not see its efforts for economic interdependence and integration being rewarded. On the contrary, the frequent resort to embargoes by European countries is rarely conducive producing better behaviour nor does it enhance the motivation for collective action. The same liberal institutionalist ideas are behind Ankara’s scepticism towards the sanctions applied by Western countries against Russia. Ankara is dubious about whether the sanctions would have the anticipated effect on Russia’s behaviour vis-à-vis Ukraine.

## What’s next for Turkish foreign policy?

Türkiye’s position vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine War has become an indication of the changes and transformations in foreign policy over the last two decades. The combination of mediation and assertiveness has been reflected in several conflict zones and has served to protect the country’s national interests. This foreign policy approach is likely to continue in the short and medium term as the transformation process from unipolarity to multipolarity will put in motion crises and opportunities.

In terms of geopolitical balancing, turning crises into opportunities and getting the maximum benefit from the opportunities in this process for Türkiye depends on the strategic application of this combination. The Russia-Ukraine War shows that no actor in global power politics can be easily excluded from international economic and political institutions. Even if strategies for this are implemented, calculating the costs that will be incurred in the short and medium-term is an essential issue for those who exclude certain countries from the liberal institutional system characterized by complex interdependency.

In this sense, Türkiye does not aim to show inconsiderate opportunism that leads to an oscillation between Russia and the Western countries. Rather, Ankara aspires to read the current moment of uncertainty properly and implement relevant foreign policies accordingly. The recent Nordic bids for NATO membership and Türkiye’s determined stance in presenting its demands regarding terrorism and arms embargo demonstrate that Türkiye is a regional force to be reckoned with. The combination of mediation and assertiveness has proved to be an effective balancing mechanism that is not in contradiction with Türkiye’s NATO membership.