

DISCUSSION PAPER

Türkiye's Diplomatic Balancing Act: Mediating the Ukraine-Russia Conflict

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Introduction

The Ukraine-Russia conflict is reshaping global geopolitics, and Türkiye has emerged as a pivotal player, navigating this crisis with a distinctive mix of diplomacy and strategic balancing. This conflict, which challenges established norms, tests the limits of multilateral frameworks and underscores vulnerabilities in global governance, has created both risks and opportunities for regional actors. For Türkiye, these stakes are particularly high. As a NATO member with deep economic ties to Russia and a steadfast commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, Türkiye occupies a unique and indispensable position as a mediator, maintaining robust relationships with both the West and Russia.

Türkiye's actions are guided by strategic imperatives such as preserving regional stability, securing trade routes, and ensuring energy security. These priorities underpin its active mediation efforts in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. With 260 diplomatic and consular missions, Türkiye demonstrates its determination to monitor international developments closely and contribute actively to their resolution. This approach reflects Türkiye's enduring foreign policy principles, rooted in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's vision of "Peace at Home, Peace in the World." Through this lens,

Türkiye positions itself as both a protector of national interests and a proactive advocate for global peace and stability.

This discussion paper examines Türkiye's delicate balancing act, exploring its relations with Ukraine and Russia, its mediation initiatives, and the broader implications of agreements like the Black Sea Grain Initiative. It delves into Türkiye's ties with Ukraine, its complex dynamics with Russia, and key diplomatic engagements, offering a detailed assessment of Türkiye's evolving role in this conflict.

Since 2010, Türkiye has prioritised mediation in its foreign policy, leveraging its active roles in international organisations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). This commitment, combined with its status as a Western ally and NATO member that maintains open channels with Russia, makes Türkiye a distinctive actor in global diplomacy. This dual engagement has enabled it to play a critical role in negotiations and mediation efforts, exemplified by the Black Sea Grain Initiative. By skilfully navigating this diplomatic tightrope, Türkiye contributes to de-escalation while enhancing its credibility as a balanced and reliable force on the global stage.



(Onur Çoban - Anadolu Agency)

Türkiye's Diplomatic Strategy in the Ukraine-Russia Conflict

In international conflict resolution, negotiation is a fundamental and widely utilised peaceful approach (Shaw, 2008, p. 918). Negotiation is a bargaining process between conflicting parties (Zartman, 2007, p. 117), where participants engage in mutual dialogue and diplomatic initiatives to achieve mutually satisfactory solutions (Öğüt, 2017, p. 112). Through this process, parties work toward definitive outcomes by exchanging concessions and reaching compromises on contested issues (Zartman, 2007, p. 117).

Negotiation's significance is underscored by its position as the foundational step in dispute resolution. Whether at the international or domestic level, initiating negotiations is a prerequisite for peaceful conflict resolution, enabling parties to explore additional resolution methods through mutual consultation and dialogue.

In the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, mediation has emerged as a particularly promising resolution mechanism, reflecting its growing global prominence in conflict resolution (Alexander, 2009). Türkiye's mediation initiative in November 2022 represents a pivotal moment in both legal and historical terms. The resolution process is inherently complicated by the conflict's historical complexity, emphasising the necessity for dialogue within the framework of international law.

A distinctive balance has characterised Türkiye's diplomatic approach: maintaining bilateral relations with both parties while advocating for mediation. This strategy demonstrates Türkiye's commitment to international law while transcending global political divisions. Such an approach exemplifies Türkiye's broader diplomatic methodology in navigating and resolving complex international disputes.

The relationship between Türkiye and Ukraine is deeply rooted in history and has evolved into a dynamic and strategic partnership over time. The Consulate General of Ukraine in Istanbul highlights both the historical ties and subsequent strategic collaborations between the two nations. Relations between the Ukrainian and Turkish peoples date back centuries, with the first agreement signed in 1649 between the Ukrainian Cossacks and the Ottoman Empire. This treaty granted Ukrainian ships

freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and passage through the Turkish straits, while Ukrainian merchants were exempt from all customs duties and taxes for 100 years.

In modern history, Türkiye was among the first nations to recognise the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918. The relationship reached a new milestone on January 25, 2011, with the signing of the Joint Declaration establishing the High-Level Strategic Council. This elevated bilateral ties to the level of strategic partnership and laid out mechanisms for their implementation.

Today, Türkiye and Ukraine maintain a dynamic relationship based on mutual trust, good neighbourliness, and strategic partnership, both bilaterally and in multilateral formats. The partnership aims to promote security and stability in the Black Sea region while fostering cooperation in trade, economics, security, defence, education, science, and other areas. For example, Turkish investment in Ukraine exceeds \$3 billion, with approximately 600 Turkish companies actively involved in the country's economy. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkish contractors have undertaken numerous significant projects.

Defence cooperation has been a cornerstone of the Türkiye-Ukraine partnership, exemplified by Türkiye's sale of Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Ukraine. Joint efforts in areas such as unmanned aerial systems and communication equipment have further cemented these ties. Türkiye's unwavering support for Ukraine's territorial integrity—most notably after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014—highlights the strategic alignment between the two nations (Altun, 2023).

Nonetheless, the ongoing conflict has tested these ties. Türkiye has maintained its diplomatic support for Ukraine, as evidenced by its votes alongside Western nations in key United Nations General Assembly resolutions condemning Russian aggression and urging the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory (Gözkaman, 2022). This diplomatic stance underscores Türkiye's alignment with Western powers while reflecting its pragmatic approach to preserving its relationship with Russia.

¹For more, read: <https://istanbul.mfa.gov.ua/tr/partnership/ukrayna-turkiye-siyasi-iliskileri> (Access date 19.11.2024)

²For more on this subject, refer to this booklet: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/turkiye-yuzyili-nda-turk-dis-politikasi-2024-kitapcik.pdf (Access date: 19.11.2024)

Türkiye's Geopolitical Balancing Act

Türkiye's geopolitical position as a NATO member that maintains close ties with Russia is central to its mediatory role in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Its foreign policy often seeks to balance relations between East and West, a delicate equilibrium evident in its actions during the Ukraine war. This approach involves avoiding full alignment with NATO while maintaining robust diplomatic and economic ties with Russia (Gökçelik, 2022).

Economically, Türkiye and Russia share a multi-faceted relationship encompassing trade, energy dependency, tourism, and mutual investments. Despite global and regional tensions, their economic ties grew in 2023, with trade volumes rising due to elevated energy prices and Russia's increasing reliance on the Turkish market amid international sanctions. Around 5 million Russian tourists visited Türkiye in the first nine months of 2023, underscoring the depth of their economic interdependence.

Geopolitically, the Türkiye-Russia relationship is marked by a mix of competition and cooperation. The two countries frequently clash over conflicting interests in regions like Syria and Libya. However, they have maintained constructive dialogue on regional stability and security, including discussions on conflicts in the Caucasus and the broader Middle East.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 notably shaped Türkiye-Russia relations. While Türkiye opposed the annexation, the event paradoxically brought closer the two Black Sea neighbours in certain areas. For instance, following the cancellation of the South Stream project in favour of a new pipeline traversing Türkiye, economic ties—particularly in the energy sector—strengthened (Özel, 2015). By 2022, Türkiye had become Russia's second-largest trading partner, reflecting a calculated and strategic approach to navigating regional dynamics.

This complex dynamic creates a challenging balancing act for Türkiye, especially considering its status as a NATO member and an EU candidate country since 1999. Türkiye's approach to the Russia-Ukraine war has focused on preventing regional conflicts by maintaining stable relations with both sides. An example is Türkiye's adherence to the Montreux Convention, which regulates the passage of naval ships through the Istanbul and Çanakkale Straits. Türkiye closed the straits to warships from countries involved in the conflict, an action appreciated by both its Western allies (BBC, 2022) and Russia (Aydın, 2022). This move underscored Türkiye's critical geopolitical importance to both sides.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has heightened Türkiye's strategic importance in the region, particularly as a crucial player in managing energy routes and supplies. Economically, the war has had significant repercussions for Türkiye, with its extended duration likely to place additional stress on the Turkish economy. This economic fragility has influenced Türkiye's decision to refrain from participating in Western sanctions against Russia, as such measures could adversely affect its national interests.

Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict—initiated by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and escalating into a full-scale war in February 2022—Türkiye has adopted a balanced stance. Instead of aligning with either party, it has maintained an impartial position, avoiding direct involvement in hostilities. From the war's outset, Türkiye's rhetoric and foreign policy choices have demonstrated a commitment to an active yet neutral diplomatic approach, emphasising dialogue and mediation over partisanship (Yumuşak, 2023, p. 178).

In 2022, Türkiye emerged as a key mediator between Russia and Ukraine, garnering both sides' positive responses and indications of willingness. Notably, it facilitated a joint meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers at Dolmabahçe Palace, fostering dialogue more informally and amicably than traditional mediation efforts. Earlier, at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, Türkiye provided a platform for high-level discussions between the two countries' foreign ministers regarding a potential ceasefire. These initiatives highlight Türkiye's role as a communication facilitator, enabling both parties to express their positions and explore avenues for de-escalation (Yumuşak, 2023, p. 183).

Türkiye's Strategic Mediation and Regional Diplomacy

Since the war's inception, Türkiye has consistently upheld its principles. Following a meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ankara reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. By adhering to these principles, Türkiye aims to promote peace through a balanced foreign policy that respects international norms (Baltacı, 2022, p. 521).

On February 23, 2022, President Erdoğan made a direct phone call to Vladimir Putin after the Russian leader signed a controversial decree recognising the purported independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and deployed forces into Donbas under the pretext of maintaining peace. During this call, Erdoğan firmly stated that Türkiye would not accept any actions violating Ukraine's sovereignty and emphasised Ankara's commitment to reducing tensions through diplomacy (Kaddorah, 2022, p. 7).

Türkiye's balanced approach became even more critical during the second year of the Russia-Ukraine conflict as the war's regional and global impacts intensified (Yumuşak, 2023, p. 178). Türkiye's opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 served as a cornerstone of its policy, demonstrating a longstanding commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity. Over the years, Türkiye has provided humanitarian aid, economic assistance, and technical support to Ukraine, further solidifying bilateral defence partnerships focused on reconstruction and strengthening Ukraine's sovereignty.

Uniquely positioned as one of the few nations maintaining direct leadership communication with both warring parties, Türkiye has played a pivotal role in initiating peace talks and promoting renewed diplomatic efforts. Under Erdoğan's leadership and in partnership with the UN, Türkiye achieved notable success with the Black Sea Initiative, which facilitated the transport of 33 million tonnes of grain through the Turkish Straits to global markets in a single year. Following Russia's withdrawal from the agreement on July 18, 2023, Türkiye swiftly launched efforts to revive the deal, engaging with the UN, Russia, and Ukraine. This initiative not only bolstered global food security but also maintained Black Sea stability, curbing the conflict's potential to expand into the region.

Türkiye's strategic mediation efforts have significantly enhanced its regional influence and global standing. The successful grain corridor agreement brought economic and diplomatic benefits to Türkiye, the EU, and Africa, showcasing Ankara's capacity to bridge divides and manage crises. Through its balanced diplomacy, Türkiye sustains robust economic ties with Russia, including significant Russian investments, while strengthening its relationships with the EU and the US. This dual-track strategy has proven highly effective in advancing Türkiye's national interests.

Türkiye's ambitious mediation policy reflects its proactive approach to global diplomacy but is not without challenges. Over the past decade, Türkiye has emerged as a critical player in international affairs, leveraging its position as a bridge between East and West. This strategy has delivered notable successes, such as brokering key agreements and facilitating dialogue in conflict zones. However, the high stakes involved—such as the potential failure to revive the Black Sea Initiative or secure lasting regional stability—highlight the complexity of Türkiye's role.

Striking a balance between maintaining strong ties with Russia while preserving its partnerships with the West adds another layer of difficulty, especially as global tensions rise. Yet, Türkiye's capacity to navigate these challenges could strengthen its status as a resilient and indispensable diplomatic actor. The long-term success of this approach will depend on its ability to consolidate gains and adapt to an evolving geopolitical landscape (Yumuşak, 2023, p. 181).

By navigating these challenges, Türkiye has demonstrated its capacity to mediate in complex conflicts. While the risks are significant, the successes achieved thus far underscore the importance of its role as a mediator, offering a model for balancing national interests with global responsibility.

Challenges of Mediating Between Warring States

Successful mediation between nations at war demands extraordinary diplomatic skill, as mediators must balance neutrality with national interests and complex geopolitical factors. The Russia-Ukraine conflict highlights these challenges through Türkiye's mediation efforts. As Shaw (2008, p. 918) explains, mediation is the most accessible and common peaceful dispute resolution method, helping conflicting parties reach mutually beneficial agreements. Yet the Russia-Ukraine war amplifies mediation's challenges due to intense geopolitical stakes, deep-rooted historical conflicts, and potential regional instability.

Türkiye faces intricate diplomatic challenges as it mediates between Russia and Ukraine, navigating far beyond a simple bilateral dispute. The conflict reflects broader tensions between Russia and Western powers, placing

Türkiye in a strategically sensitive position. Türkiye's November 2022 mediation initiative demonstrates both diplomatic courage and complexity. Historical grievances and polarised international relations require Türkiye to exercise exceptional diplomatic finesse, preserving its mediator credibility while protecting national interests. This balancing act grows more complex as Türkiye strives to avoid showing favouritism, which could damage its diplomatic relationships and destabilise regional dynamics.

Major power conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war make impartial mediation particularly challenging. Türkiye's strategic approach illustrates these complexities as it works to maintain balance while advancing its national interests. While condemning Russia's international law



(Ukrainian Interior Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

violations, Türkiye has strategically chosen not to join Western economic sanctions imposed by the US, UK, Japan, and EU member states (Funakoshi et al., 2022). This decision reflects Türkiye's pragmatic consideration of its Russian economic ties, especially regarding energy dependence. Simultaneously, Türkiye strengthens its Ukrainian partnerships, exemplified by the 2022 Free Trade Agreement signed during heightened tensions (Bozdoğan & Mutlu, 2022). This carefully balanced approach demonstrates Türkiye's diplomatic agility in maintaining credibility as a mediator. Any bias perception could undermine current mediation efforts and Türkiye's future diplomatic influence in the international community.

Another significant challenge in mediating between warring states is the complexity of aligning national interests with regional stability. While Türkiye strongly supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and denounces Russian military actions, it maintains diplomatic ties with Moscow to protect its security interests, economic relationships, and regional influence. Despite condemning Russian aggression, Türkiye's decision to avoid joining Western sanctions against Russia exemplifies the complex trade-offs between economic stability and regional security concerns.

The July 2022 grain shipment crisis demonstrates both Türkiye's diplomatic strengths and challenges. As global food security hung in the balance, Türkiye successfully brought Russia, Ukraine, and the UN to the negotiating table. The resulting agreement, signed in Türkiye, enabled safe grain shipments from Ukrainian ports (Turan, 2022). This diplomatic achievement showcased Türkiye's peace-making abilities while highlighting the delicate balance required to maintain neutrality. Each diplomatic step demanded careful consideration to avoid alienating either party, especially as international tensions escalated.

President Erdoğan's direct engagement with Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy illustrates these diplomatic complexities. While his dialogue with both leaders demonstrates a commitment to peaceful resolution, it also reveals the challenges of managing conflicting expectations. Erdoğan maintains open communication with Putin to preserve vital Russian relations while strongly supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, showcasing Türkiye's carefully calibrated diplomatic approach. This delicate balance helps prevent conflict escalation but exposes Türkiye to criticism from both sides, potentially affecting its mediator effectiveness.

Türkiye's commitment to dialogue, negotiation, and international law faces ongoing challenges. When Zelenskyy announced Türkiye had blocked Russian ships from the Straits, Türkiye clarified its adherence to the Montreux Convention (Erkoyun, 2022). This situation highlights the complexities of managing expectations while following international agreements and maintaining neutrality. The Montreux Convention gives Türkiye authority over naval passage through its straits during conflicts, providing leverage but attracting scrutiny from both Russia and Ukraine, who closely watch for signs of favouritism.

Ultimately, Türkiye's mediation approach, rooted in a pragmatic understanding of international law and diplomacy, illustrates the inherent challenges of mediating between warring states. Balancing national interests with a commitment to regional stability and global peace requires a careful, often precarious, diplomatic strategy. Türkiye's ability to navigate these challenges will be crucial as it continues to play a mediating role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Each diplomatic decision involves weighing the potential gains against the risks of losing credibility or exacerbating tensions, a delicate balance that defines the art of mediation in international conflicts.

The Mediation Process: Successes and Limitations

Türkiye actively mediates the Russia-Ukraine conflict through strategic diplomatic interventions. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan first proposed mediation in November 2021, persistently offering dialogue despite initial resistance from both parties. As Russian troops mobilised near Ukraine's borders in January 2022, Türkiye renewed its peace-building efforts.

On 11-13 March 2022, Türkiye orchestrated a pivotal diplomatic milestone by hosting the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba held their first high-level talks during this event. Although the discussions did not produce an immediate resolution, they demonstrated Türkiye's critical role in facilitating international dialogue. Lavrov emphasised the importance of continued communication, highlighting Türkiye's diplomatic significance (NTV, 2022).

Türkiye further advanced its mediation by hosting another negotiation round on March 29, 2022, at the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul. President Erdoğan emphasised Türkiye's commitment to maintaining an equitable stance that respected both parties' interests. The Russian delegation characterised the talks as constructive, which resulted in a significant decision to reduce military activities around Kyiv and Chernihiv. This outcome underscored Türkiye's effective mediation strategy, with both sides expressing openness to continued negotiations (Çetinkaya et al., 2022).

However, Türkiye's mediation efforts encountered substantial challenges. International scepticism about its impartiality and doubts regarding its capacity to mediate such a complex conflict emerged as significant obstacles. Deep-rooted mistrust between Russia and Ukraine further complicated the negotiations. Russia's longstanding concerns about NATO's eastward expansion, particularly Ukraine's potential membership, added layers of complexity to the diplomatic process. Türkiye consistently navigated these intricate geopolitical tensions, attempting to address demands from both sides (Zevelev, 2000).

Türkiye's mediation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict emerged from a complex web of strategic calculations and diplomatic nuance. The country carefully crafted a diplomatic approach that condemned the war while preserving neutrality, strategically positioning itself

to maximise regional influence. Erdoğan's diplomatic strategy sought to balance relationships with NATO allies and maintain historically significant ties with Russia, embodying what scholars describe as "active neutrality" (Gözkaman, 2022).

President Erdoğan strategically engaged both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy through persistent communication. He consistently advocated for dialogue and negotiation, framing Türkiye's diplomatic efforts within broader foreign policy objectives. By maintaining direct lines of communication with both leaders, Erdoğan underscored Türkiye's commitment to peaceful resolution and de-escalation.

The diplomatic initiatives manifested most prominently in the Antalya and Dolmabahçe meetings, demonstrating Türkiye's proactive mediation capabilities even if these talks did not produce immediate peace. These high-profile talks showcased Türkiye's potential to navigate complex international conflicts, bridging seemingly insurmountable diplomatic barriers.

Internally, Türkiye confronted significant challenges. The country had to carefully navigate domestic and international expectations, balancing its NATO commitments with its strategic interests in the region. This delicate diplomatic dance required nuanced negotiations and a sophisticated understanding of geopolitical dynamics.

Although the ultimate resolution remained elusive, Türkiye's persistent diplomatic efforts highlighted its emerging role as a critical international mediator. By prioritising dialogue over confrontation, the country positioned itself as a potentially pivotal actor in resolving one of the most significant geopolitical conflicts.

The Grain Corridor Agreement: A Success Story

The Russia-Ukraine conflict threatened global food security, creating a critical challenge for international markets. Ukraine, a major grain exporter, struggled to maintain its agricultural exports due to war-induced complications. Mines in the Black Sea and significant agricultural worker migration nearly paralysed grain transportation, triggering widespread concerns among importing and exporting nations.

Türkiye strategically intervened, leveraging its diplomatic expertise to broker the Grain Corridor Agreement. On July 22, 2022, Türkiye, collaborating with the United Nations, negotiated a breakthrough that enabled safe grain exports through a designated Black Sea corridor. The agreement quickly demonstrated its effectiveness, facilitating the transportation of 32 million tons of grain and helping stabilise global food prices (Gözkaman, 2022).

The diplomatic journey leading to this agreement involved intricate negotiations. Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted extensive discussions with both Russia and Ukraine, organising trilateral forums in Antalya and hosting bilateral meetings. These strategic conversations with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Lviv ultimately paved the way for the landmark Istanbul agreement (*Türkiye-Rusya-Ukrayna Üçlü Dışışleri Bakanları Toplantısı, 10 Mart 2022, 2022*).

By successfully mediating this critical humanitarian initiative, Türkiye enhanced its international reputation as a pragmatic peacemaker and influential regional power. The Grain Corridor Agreement exemplified Türkiye's capacity to transform diplomatic challenges into constructive solutions, addressing a pressing global humanitarian concern.



(Islam Yakut - Anadolu Agency)

However, the agreement was fraught with challenges. Despite its initial success, the Grain Corridor Agreement was suspended in July 2023 when Russia withdrew, citing unmet demands concerning the sale of its agricultural products (Kachkachishvili, 2022). The suspension sparked global concerns once again about food security. During this period, Türkiye re-engaged as a mediator. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan played a crucial role in persuading Russian President Vladimir Putin to resume the grain shipments, underlining Türkiye's pivotal role in ensuring the continuity of the agreement. Two weeks after Erdoğan's statements, Türkiye announced extending the agreement for four months. UN Secretary-General António Guterres hailed Türkiye's mediation as a diplomatic success that averted a potential food crisis affecting millions of people (*Antonio Guterres says without Türkiye's commitment, the initiative would never have been born, 2022*).

The Grain Corridor Agreement fructified Türkiye's efforts diplomatically. Türkiye demonstrated a strong commitment to humanitarian values by prioritising the grain requirements of African nations grappling with hunger and malnutrition. This effort significantly bolstered Türkiye's reputation as a global humanitarian actor. Incidentally, this breakthrough was also a relief from an economic standpoint. As one of the world's leading exporters of processed grain products such as pasta, Türkiye depends heavily on raw material imports from

Ukraine and Russia. Thus, the agreement also safeguarded the country's critical food supplies, though this was not the primary motivation.

The right to food is intrinsically linked to the right to health, as inadequate nutrition is a leading cause of severe health issues, particularly among vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant women (Aguirre, 2016, pp. 165-168). The lack of access to basic necessities like food can result in devastating consequences for fundamental human rights. In this context, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's proposal to prioritise African countries suffering from hunger and malnutrition in the grain shipment discussions was particularly noteworthy. The parties' consensus on this matter not only underscored Türkiye's proactive stance on global food security but also its dedication to addressing the urgent needs of the most affected regions (Aguirre, 2016, p. 165).

In conclusion, the Grain Corridor Agreement, facilitated by Türkiye, was a vital development in global diplomacy, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. It underscored the significance of Ukrainian grain exports for global food security, showcased Türkiye's effective mediation and negotiation strategies, and highlighted the challenges in implementing such agreements. Türkiye's role in navigating disputes and ensuring the continuation of the agreement strengthened its image as a regional power committed to peace and stability.

Türkiye's Role in Humanitarian Efforts and Prisoner Exchanges

Türkiye has played a significant role as a mediator in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, leveraging its strategic position to facilitate critical prisoner exchanges and humanitarian efforts. While addressing immediate human needs, these exchanges also hold immense symbolic and geopolitical weight. For Russia, they bolster domestic narratives of resilience against external threats, while for Ukraine, they demonstrate unity and defiance. Such negotiations function as complex diplomatic tools, capable of either creating openings for dialogue or exacerbating existing tensions.

A defining moment in Türkiye's mediation efforts came in September 2022, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan brokered a significant prisoner swap involving nearly 200 detainees. This intricate negotiation required balancing the interests of both Russian President Vladimir Putin and

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. By orchestrating this agreement, Türkiye showcased its ability to act as a peace broker with unique access and influence in a polarised geopolitical landscape.

Türkiye's diplomatic strategy during these negotiations involved engaging multiple stakeholders, including international organisations and nations with conflicting interests. Its ability to prioritise dialogue and humanitarian considerations became evident during a meeting in January 2023, where human rights commissioners Tatyana Moskalkova of Russia and Dmytro Lubinets of Ukraine convened in Ankara to discuss prisoner treatment, wounded personnel, and missing persons. These efforts highlighted Türkiye's role in fostering dialogue even amid profound geopolitical divides.

One of the more nuanced aspects of these exchanges involved commanders from Ukraine's Azov Regiment, who had resisted Russian forces in Mariupol. Temporarily hosting these commanders by the agreement terms demonstrated Türkiye's logistical acumen and diplomatic finesse. By carefully managing post-exchange dynamics, Türkiye maintained strategic leverage, ensuring continued cooperation from both sides.

The successful mediation of these exchanges had multi-faceted diplomatic implications. It bolstered Türkiye's international standing, establishing it as a mediator capable of achieving tangible results. Additionally, by crafting agreements acceptable to both parties, Türkiye strengthened its ties with Russia and Ukraine, positioning itself as a stabilising force in the Black Sea region. This accomplishment aligned with Türkiye's broader geopolitical objectives, including energy security, regional stability, and its role within NATO. Moreover, the negotiations allowed Türkiye to assert strategic autonomy, balancing its Western alliances with a pragmatic approach to relations with Russia.

Despite these successes, Türkiye's role demonstrated a unique ability to balance humanitarian priorities with strategic considerations. Its involvement not only brought tangible benefits but also highlighted its capacity to mediate in highly sensitive situations. While some critics raised questions about motivations and fairness, Türkiye's actions underscored its growing influence as a constructive and stabilising force in the region.

Türkiye's mediation efforts have also extended to humanitarian actions. For instance, on April 3, 2022, at Erdoğan's request, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced the opening of a humanitarian corridor for civilians in Mariupol. Later, the prisoner swap on September 21, 2022, facilitated by Erdoğan's diplomacy (Beyaz, 2022), further underscored Türkiye's role in addressing the human costs of the conflict. Similarly, on July 8, 2023, commanders from the Azov Regiment returned home after being temporarily held in Türkiye,

highlighting the country's commitment to fulfilling its mediation agreements.

These efforts align with international humanitarian law, particularly regarding the right to life during armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions, established after World War II, outline protections for combatants and non-combatants alike, emphasising humane treatment for prisoners of war. Article 12 of the Third Geneva Convention explicitly mandates this treatment, underscoring a universal commitment to human dignity even amid conflict.

The right to life is the cornerstone of human rights, forming the basis for all other rights. Under all circumstances, international law seeks to protect this right by developing comprehensive mechanisms. In the context of war, humanitarian law meticulously governs the conduct of armed conflicts to uphold this principle. The Geneva Conventions, particularly the Third Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War, exemplify this commitment through enforceable standards prioritising human dignity (Sur, 2010, p. 298).

Türkiye's mediation efforts have reinforced these principles by facilitating outcomes consistent with international legal obligations. As Monteiro (2014, p. 456) notes, the essence of the right to life is its universal applicability, allowing individuals to live freely and with dignity. These actions highlight the global community's collective responsibility to preserve human dignity, even in the most challenging circumstances. As Park (2018, p. 108) emphasises, states' obligations to protect life remain non-negotiable, even amid procedural variations within humanitarian law frameworks.

In short, Türkiye's active participation in sensitive negotiations, such as prisoner exchanges, and its humanitarian initiatives, like facilitating civilian evacuations, have underscored its image as a pragmatic mediator. Türkiye has reinforced its position as a key player in conflict resolution and humanitarian diplomacy by skilfully navigating complex regional dynamics and aligning its actions with international interests.

Conclusion

Türkiye's strategic mediation efforts in the Ukraine-Russia conflict have showcased its unique role as a balancing power in global diplomacy. By facilitating critical agreements such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative and prisoner exchanges, Türkiye has not only upheld its commitment to regional stability but also enhanced its reputation as a credible mediator. However, the challenges

of maintaining neutrality, balancing competing interests, and navigating domestic and international pressures remain formidable. As Türkiye continues to navigate this complex diplomatic landscape, its ability to balance national interests with global responsibility will determine its long-term influence and leadership in international conflict resolution.

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