

Dossier: Mediterranean Ramifications of the Ukraine War

Turkey's Geopolitical Role. Between National Ambitions, Western Anchors and Russian Sway

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Against the background of a tense electoral cycle and the appointment of a new presidential cabinet, Turkey's geopolitical role is now coming under intense scrutiny from its traditional allies and other partners. Strategic autonomy, balanced policy between NATO and Russia and an enhanced role in the country's near abroad are some of the key features of Turkey's foreign policy for the next five years. Western countries, having observed the recent electoral cycle with great attention, are left with a simple situation. Neither the campaign nor the ballot counting unfolded according to Western standards, nationalist narratives were strong on both sides and at times disparaging against allied countries' banks, media and civil society. This cycle is now closed and Western leaders will deal with an unhindered presidential regime, a more conservative and nationalist majority in parliament and a stronger regional power. As work between Turkey and its Western partners is now resuming, this article aims at identifying, from a Western standpoint, some of the key parameters for their future relations.

Four Perceived Priorities

Based on campaign narratives, victory speeches, and statements by new cabinet members, Turkey's priorities can be identified as follows.

Above all else is the concept of "strategic autonomy," which applies to the defence industry, energy supplies and trade flows, and is now the defining element of the country's political posture. Strategic au-

tonomy is a legitimate goal in itself (Robinson, 2023). But, being applied to a country characterized by a limited natural resource endowment and structural balance of payment deficits, it will take time to reach. Remarkable progress has been achieved in the defence industry (drones, ships, missiles, vehicles and tanks). The results and prospects in the field of military drones is particularly impressive and illustrative of Turkey's new international influence, even if in the short term, gaps remain in critical fields such as engines and navigation systems. Similarly, a gas field in the Black Sea will become operational within several months and will constitute another step towards achieving autonomy. The Akkuyu nuclear-powered electricity plant will become operational in several months too, but the chosen "BOO" legal architecture (Russia builds, owns and operates the plant) will nominally improve electricity self-sufficiency, while simultaneously increasing political dependence on Moscow.

Strategic autonomy also requires a dynamic and sustainable economy. This means that strategic autonomy has moved from a campaign theme (Jamal, 2023) to a key foreign policy item, the success of which not only rests on engineering excellence or political leadership, but also on an enabling macro-policy environment.

The current "balanced policy" between NATO and Russia will clearly remain a pillar of Turkey's foreign policy. This concept, legitimate in normal times, existed before Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, but it has now become linked to the outcome of the war.

Turkey has long had important economic exchanges with Russia: tourism to the Mediterranean coast, agricultural trade both ways, construction contracts in Russia and oil and gas imports. But the nature of the relationship changed drastically after the July 2016 coup attempt, when Russia convinced Turkey to buy and take delivery of an S400 missile system, which

de facto excluded the latter from NATO's missile defence architecture and resulted, in December 2020, in its exclusion from the US' F35 stealth fighter programme. This was a major game changer for Turkey's air force and incipient naval aviation, and for its aerospace industry as well. However articulate the Turkish narrative is, the strategic evaluation is fairly simple: Ankara has allowed Moscow to "cleanse" its southern interface with NATO (i.e. the Black Sea) of two of the most advanced Western military systems. Seen retrospectively in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the gain for Moscow is obviously massive (Pierini, 2022). And the gain doesn't stop there.

Among other decisions, Russia has, in the meantime, agreed with Turkey to implement several crucial decisions: build the Akkuyu nuclear power plant (see above), train hundreds of nuclear engineers and pay Turkey substantial advances in dollars; partner with Turkish oil refineries, allowing its crude oil to be exported to Turkey (without sanction) and transformed into Turkish refined products, then re-exported (without sanctions either); delay payments and/or shift them to roubles for gas sold to Turkey; and vastly develop trade flows. The strategic consequences of this new form of dependence are discussed later in this article. Such a "balanced policy" is now immensely more complex (Pierini, 2023) due to the return of a brutal war on European soil and its foreseeable aggravation in the months to come.

One of the wider implications of strategic autonomy is a more Turkey-centric and influential foreign policy. This will predictably translate, in turn, into a deepening relationship with a) the Turkic states in Central Asia; b) its traditional partners, such as Pakistan and Qatar; c) the countries in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the United Arab Emirates as well as countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This ambitious policy started with the Arab Spring in 2011 and has had its twists and turns since. There are still hurdles on this road, but the trends can be described as "normalization where needed" and "intensification everywhere." In addition, Turkey will likely pursue its preferred "two-state solution" on the island of Cyprus, but may opt to pursue the openings of the recent occurrence of "earthquake diplomacy" with Greece.

During the past decade, Turkey's foreign policy has been based on a multi-vector diplomacy: enlarging its embassy network, opening new routes for Turkish Air-

lines, facilitating business deals and arms sales and cooperation in the military, education and social sectors. This policy will become part of a more clearly structured foreign policy architecture and will rest largely on the President's personal role in Turkey's near abroad. Ankara's foreign policy standing remains different from that of other regional powers such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia or South Africa. Indeed, Turkey has a unique feature: it is a member of NATO and the Council of Europe, two institutions where it has willingly undertaken commitments according to the respective charters governing them. As recently noted regarding NATO, Turkey being a member is "making its geopolitical balancing act and quest for autonomy more contested." (Dalay, 2023)

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Relaunching the economy on sound bases is another presidential priority and it has international implications. Early moves, such as the appointment of Mehmet Şimşek (Gavin, 2023) as Treasury and Economy Minister and Hafize Gaye Erkan as Central Bank Governor have been welcomed by international financial circles (Butler & Spicer, 2023). The simultaneous appointment of the outgoing Central Bank Governor, Şahap Kavcıoğlu, as Director of the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency initially conveyed a negative message, but there are several interpretations of these decisions (Soylu, 2023). Clearly, the voices of Turkey's industrialists have weighed on the first two appointments. The appointments have also been interpreted as signalling a revised, yet centrally-managed policy, but not necessarily a comprehensive macro policy yet. But follow-up decisions will ultimately be gauged according to five criteria: a) appointments in the Ministry and Central Bank's respective teams; b) the degree of autonomy the two institutions will enjoy; c) the rationality of the measures they will take (especially on interest rates); d) the durability of their tenure; and e) the compatibility of the expected policy measures with the political needs of the March 2024 municipal elections. Critical decisions were expect-

ed on 22 June in order to pull back the entire economy, especially the banking sector, from the brink: although substantial – 15% instead of 8.5% – the increase of the Central Bank’s “one-week repo rate” fell far short of a market expectation of around 25%. Short of this, the country will have to continue relying on dollar transfers from Russia and Gulf countries, which not only have the nature of “steroids” instead of sound financial flows, but also constitute elements entailing an increased dependence on political factors, i.e. the opposite of a path towards strategic autonomy. Another important factor is that Gulf countries act as orthodox financial operators and seek a return on investment, implying an efficient macro-policy environment.

These are the four perceived priorities of the current five-year presidential term. As any other country, Turkey will have to test its priorities against the geopolitical realities in its environment. These involve the war waged by Russia, the economic anchor with Europe and the opportunities existing for discussing Turkey’s geopolitical priorities with its key partners.

Turkey in the midst of a War Launched by Russia against the West

Since 24 February 2022, war is back in Europe, in effect putting an end to the “enchanted parenthesis” which since 1945 spared the continent from a generalized confrontation. During this 77-year long period, there was indeed major fighting in Budapest, Prague and the former Yugoslavia, while the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain disappeared. But none of these instances brought the spectrum of a Europe-wide war back onto the political stage. Now, things have changed drastically.

What was launched as a “special military operation” by Russia against Ukraine has now been clearly defined as a civilizational battle, as stated in President Vladimir Putin’s speech on 9 May 2023: “Civilization again finds itself at a decisive, critical moment. A real war has again been launched against our motherland.” (The Moscow Times, 2023) The invasion of Ukraine is thus clearly framed in a much wider context, i.e. a battle against NATO, the Euro-

pean Union, the United States and Western civilization as well.

Supporting Ukraine politically and militarily without entering into a direct confrontation with Russia has become the overwhelming priority of EU governments, the United Kingdom, the United States and other allies. While the deep impact of the war on Europe (The Economist, 2023) is a major concern for Western European leaders, Turkey’s political narrative has been dominated by the goal of becoming an autonomous middle power and the ambition of being a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. The lack of high-level political consultations between Turkey and several key Western countries may also have played a role in delaying the emergence of a common assessment of the situation.

The other side of the picture is critically important, if not predominant: how is Russia using Turkey in the context of its invasion of Ukraine?

Russia’s use of Turkey as a wedge to drive into NATO is not a novel policy. It actually started on 8 August 2016, immediately after the 15 July coup attempt, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Vladimir Putin in St Petersburg and the latter voiced strong support for the former (The Guardian, 2016). Days before this crucial meeting, I wrote, as a hypothesis, “that Russia may go for a long-term game-changing move and lure Turkey away from the West as part of a broader geopolitical reconfiguration.” (Pierini, 2016). This hypothesis has largely materialized during the past seven years: what was sometimes called a “marriage of convenience” has morphed into a complex alliance, mixing mutual convenience with diverging objectives (Glinsky, 2023). It has been analysed a number of times, including recently (Cagaptay, 2023). Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Turkey has implemented a dual-track policy. On several instances, it voted along with its Western allies in the UN General Assembly and adopted the conclusions of NATO’s defence and foreign affairs ministerial meetings. In keeping with its role under the Montreux Convention and its traditional policy¹ in this respect, it also closed the Turkish Straits (Ozberk, 2023) after the beginning of the war, thus preventing a second Russian flotilla from regrouping with the Black Sea Fleet based in

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, Implementation of the Montreux Convention, www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-the-montreux-convention.en.mfa.

Sevastopol and with the reinforcements sent in early February from the Baltic and Northern Fleets (Coleman, 2022). It has also supported the United Nations in implementing a temporary and renewable deal for the export of grains from Ukraine via the Black Sea, and negotiated exchanges of war prisoners between Russia and Ukraine. Turkey has also reportedly provided Ukraine with military drones, ammunition and armoured personnel carriers. Similarly, Turkey has committed troops as part of NATO's deterrence and defence posture² on its Eastern front, which "at any given time, [they] may be deployed to the battlegroups or stationed in their home countries with the ability to deploy rapidly, if needed."

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However, Turkey has so far refrained from joining the Western sanctions against Russia. This has made possible the continuation of air traffic between Russia and the rest of the world via Turkey, exports of Russian crude oil outside the sanctions schemes and financial transfers or investments from Russian oligarchs to Turkey. This policy has brought substantial economic benefits for Turkey.

The war unfolding in Ukraine is deeply entrenched and has recently worsened with the blowing up of the Kakhovka dam (BBC, 2023), with mounting evidence that it was a Russian initiative (Melkozerova, 2023). Given its nature and the balance of forces on the ground, the Russian war on Ukraine will last. It could be the subject of massive complications, as evidenced by a number of Russian attacks from cruise missiles, suicide drones or long-range artillery, often deep inside Ukrainian territory.

In a number of worst-case scenarios, Russia could resort to limited hybrid attacks on Western Europe, for example on critical underwater energy or communication infrastructure, or through the hacking of

computer systems, as recently seen in France.³ Moscow has also hinted at the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons on the war theatre, launched from either Russia or Belarus, where a first batch of nuclear warheads has recently been delivered (Osborn, 2023). A reasonable hypothesis is that an escalation involving nuclear weapons would not be tolerated by NATO powers and that their response would be commensurate, although not using nuclear weapons. Such massive developments would complicate Turkey's proclaimed balanced policy. Depending on the exact nature of the escalation, Turkey could, in principle, stick to the logic of the North Atlantic Treaty's Article 5 as long as a Russian attack could not be characterized as directly aimed at a NATO member. In such a case, Turkey would therefore not have to intervene to defend other NATO member countries and maintain a balanced posture.

However, a substantial escalation, even if it was of a somewhat deniable hybrid nature, will inevitably result in an emergency NATO meeting where Turkey, probably along with Hungary, would be confronted with intense political pressure to side more openly with the Alliance. Despite the sophistication of the "balanced policy" narrative, the discussion would quickly take a "whose-side-are-you-on?" connotation.

In a more distant future, a possible scenario is that negotiations would be launched to end the war on Ukraine and to agree on a new security architecture for the European continent. It is predictable that, in such a scenario, Russia would be inclined to put on the table two ingredients: a) a possible elimination or limitation of its nuclear weapons deployment in Belarus, versus b) the future of US nuclear warheads pre-positioned at the Turkish-US Incirlik air base, near Adana. If this happened, things would get even more complicated for Turkey. The country would find itself, once again, in the uncomfortable position of being used by Russia as a wedge against NATO. This would be fully within the logic of Moscow's above-mentioned actions with the S400 missiles delivery and the ensuing cancellation by the US of Turkey's order of F35 stealth fighters. Ultimately, however, it is worth remembering why Turkey's membership of NATO has a fundamental mean-

² NATO, NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm?

³ The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *Statement by Ms Catherine Colonna – Foreign digital interference – France's detection of an information manipulation campaign (13 June 2023)* www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/2023/article/statement-by-ms-catherine-colonna-foreign-digital-interference-france-s.

ing: Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is a genuine guarantee for its security, as well as a key element of evaluation by international financial and business circles. This means that Ankara is compelled to carefully evaluate the pros and cons of its balanced policy between NATO and Russia.

Europe as Turkey's Resilient Economic Anchor

In Turkey's real environment, the economic relationship with Europe remains important and will continue to play a major part in shaping the country's geopolitical role, despite political narratives sometimes pointing in a different direction.

Turkey's manufacturing sector is fully integrated in the European Union's industrial sphere through the 1995 EU-Turkey Customs Union. Despite a number of shortcomings, the agreement has allowed the country's manufacturing industry to align rapidly with EU standards and to attract a large number of Foreign Direct Investment and sub-contracting arrangements from leading European names such as Airbus, Bosch, Fiat, Ford, MAN, Mercedes, Renault, Siemens, or Valeo, to name just a few.

The customs union, together with European direct investment, brings about a complete integration of Turkey's industrial sector into the complex mesh of production facilities of high-technology automotive and aerospace manufacturers (the leading examples). It also aligns the country's manufacturing sector with European standards, bearing in mind that, worldwide, the EU is the leading setter of such standards. Be it on standards, on innovation, on technology or on market size, the EU remains an unrivalled anchor for Turkey's modern economy and participates in generating sound economic growth.

By contrast, economic decisions involving handouts to specific sub-groups of the population, priority given to the construction and public works sector or unorthodox public tenders, as politically convenient as they may be, produce low quality growth and dent the trust of Western partners.

Similarly, a substantial reorientation of trade and financial patterns based on the non-issuance of sanctions against Russia may sound beneficial, but it is opportunistic in nature and not necessarily durable. An excessive reliance of hard-currency transfers from

Russia or Gulf countries may also prove to be trumping sound macro-policy reforms, although it may be politically convenient in the run-up to the March 2024 municipal elections.

In order to boost the confidence of its European and American business, industrial and financial partners, Turkey will need to restore a level playing field and economic policy predictability. This involves providing investors and financial partners with the assurance of independent and transparent decisions in judicial litigations and tendering processes.

This is not, as some Turkish analysts may think, only an issue of "European values" or the emblematic cases raised by the European Court of Human Rights (to which Turkey is a party) (DW,2022). Rule of law is a more systemic, more fundamental issue: it is simply the basis on which Western economic operators make their decisions. The Volkswagen Group's decision to cancel a giant €1.3 billion investment in Manisa in 2020 is still present in the collective memory of European operators (TRT, 2020).

More generally, it is important to remember that Western operators, whether economic or political, consider Turkey's rule-of-law architecture as a fundamental ingredient of the country's international relations, not just a feature of its domestic political scene.

In addition, this is a time when the reorganization of supply chains and the reduction of the current excessive dependence on China or India for critical supplies such as IT components or basic materials for the pharmaceutical industry are high on Europe's agenda. In this respect, Turkey is well placed to create new links with European industrial counterparts. This, again, assumes that trust will be restored with European economic partners.

The reset of Turkey's economy obviously rests first and foremost on a number of critical macro-policy decisions, because strategic autonomy needs a sound and solid growth foundation. At an operational level, a dialogue on EU and European investment in Turkey and sectoral cooperation should be on the EU's priority list.

Opportunities to Discuss Turkey's Geopolitical Priorities

Given its geographical location and growing economic weight and military power, Turkey has expanded its geopolitical ambitions, especially in its near abroad.

Recent history has seen a number of hurdles. Cyprus, Greece, Libya, South Caucasus, Syria, gas exploration rights in the eastern Mediterranean and maritime boundaries have all been chokepoints at one stage or another (ICC, 2023). Other factors such as hostile narratives, hubris or domestic political goals have hampered real dialogue on Turkey's geopolitical goals. The recurrent use of conspiracy theories has also complicated matters, e.g. when the development of military cooperation between Greece on the one hand and France and the US on the other was oddly depicted as directed against Turkey, amounting to a complete misreading of geopolitical realities. More generally, the entire Greek-Turkish relationship has a long and well-documented history of mutual accusations (ICC, 2021). This was the history of the past few years (or decades in some cases), but it may now be worth leaving aside domestic politics and conspiracy theories, and looking at the justifications for a reset.

The security fundamentals of the European continent are undergoing a momentous upheaval resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its potential military consequences and its ideological context. This situation is unprecedented and warrants a reset, i.e. the resumption of a frank and open dialogue between Turkey and its European and American allies.

In this respect, recent appointments in Turkey's presidential cabinet may offer an opening, because personalities do indeed matter. The new pair handling Turkey's foreign policy and external intelligence, Hakan Fidan (Ataman, 2023) and Ibrahim Kalin, respectively, (Daily Sabah, 2023) have extensive experience and, more importantly, both have long served as aides to President Erdoğan on the foreign policy stage. According to multiple media reports, they have been involved in critical international discussions in recent months and have been in regular contact with their US counterparts. The same applies to personalities in the British, French and German external relations apparatus, with which both Turkish actors have been in regular contact. Such a dialogue should start at professional level, not necessarily with photo-opportunity summitry (except the already scheduled NATO Summit in Vilnius), despite the current taste for top-level bilateral meetings (which only result in third countries playing the differences between EU leaders to their advantage). It is well understood that Turkey remains governed by an ultra-presidential regime and that a resumption of dialogue between some Western countries and

Turkey will only happen if and when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sees a value in it. And if it does happen, efforts will be made to separate rule-of-law issues from international dealings, as was already the case in 2018, in particular with France and Germany. Predictably, dialogue will not be easy.

Yet, Turkey and the West are faced with three realities: a) the major geopolitical and military changes on the continent; b) Turkey's anchor to European and Western business and financial entities; and c) the undoubtable recognition of Turkey's increasing political, military and economic relevance.

The issue is whether the current security and economic landscape on the European continent and in Turkey's near abroad warrants confronting the country's geopolitical ambitions and priorities with the foreseeable economic, military and strategic evolutions.

The summer of 2023 presents a unique opportunity in this respect.

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