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Explaining Turkish foreign policy moves in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine

Even though Turkey abstained from vetoing Sweden and Finland's NATO accession at the NATO Summit in Madrid, the initial optimism about Turkey's convergence towards the West pronounced after the Russian invasion of Ukraine has withered away. Beyond his bargaining with Sweden and Finland, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan caused an international stir by threatening Greece's sovereignty and announcing plans for a new incursion into Syria. Together, these moves have prompted the resurfacing of questions about Turkey's underlying foreign policy orientation. Are Turkey's recent moves part of a long-term strategy and do they signal a return to a confrontational foreign policy toward the West reminiscent of 2020? And, ultimately, what is Turkey's end-goal?

Hüseyin Bağcı, Foreign Policy Institute, Ankara

Turkey's move to delay Finnish and Swedish applications for NATO membership was not designed to obstruct the grand strategic decision of NATO enlargement in response to Russian aggression towards Ukraine, but rather to address security issues at the bilateral level. Turkey's legitimate security interests in northern Syria and northern Iraq do not converge with the Finnish and Swedish approaches to the PKK and the PYD. Internal factors such as mass-migration bound with economic difficulties and the fight against the PKK continuing with great success so far also fuel the Turkish government's assertiveness. The Astana process remains intact, and Turkey is a guarantor of Syria's territorial integrity, along with Russia and Iran.

Turkey is not expected to follow a confrontational policy like in 2020 because its national interest is now to have one foot in NATO and the other in the Middle East. The West is also now likely to treat Turkey as a "special regional player" partly because of Russia's war against Ukraine and also the recent "U-turn" in Turkey's relations with Gulf countries, Israel, and Egypt, converging towards Western preferences. With enhanced geopolitical value for the West, Turkey will likely be the most "reliable" NATO member when it comes to possible negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.

Ronald Meinardus, ELIAMEP, Athens

The war in Ukraine has led to a strategic upgrading of Turkey, opening up new opportunities for Erdoğan to promote the country as a leading regional power. Once again, Turkey's geographical position is its key strategic asset. In the run-up to the NATO summit in Madrid, the Scandinavian membership issue was about containing the Kurdish PKK, at least on the surface. However, upon closer inspection, we could

see how President Erdoğan “instrumentalized” his veto power to force the U.S. president to agree to selling upgraded F-16 fighter jets to Turkey.

On top of that, Ankara's policy toward Greece is volatile and, once again, confrontational. A partner just a few weeks ago, Erdoğan has now declared the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis a non-person after he apparently broke his word when he warned Washington against US arms deals with Ankara. However, the Greek-Turkish conflict is about more than personal vanity: Ankara is pursuing a long-term strategy in the Aegean, waiting for opportune conditions to put into action the grand scheme of a "blue homeland." The public questioning of Greek sovereignty over the East Aegean islands in the context of the militarization issue has created a new dimension in an old conflict. Internationally, Ankara is isolated on this issue. For this reason, Erdoğan avoided “internationalizing” the matter at the Madrid summit. Domestically, however, Erdoğan's tough talk is popular. For the beleaguered president who is struggling for his political survival, this is of primary importance.

Tuba Eldem, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

The Russian invasion of Ukraine revealing geopolitical fault lines in an era of shifting power has led to a widespread view in Ankara that Turkey now occupies a key position in shaping the emerging multipolar world order in which the role of regional powers will be paramount. As a long-standing supporter of NATO's open-door policy, Turkey's initial opposition to Finland and Sweden's NATO membership bids was, thus, not an outright rejection of NATO's historic enlargement, but a reflection of a sense of over-confidence and a means of demanding that its national security concerns and defense industry needs be equally taken into consideration by its Western allies, especially the U.S. Ankara maintains the opinion that NATO has to change its disposition that its problems are Turkey's problems, but that Turkey's problems are not NATO's. This also relates to Ankara's open declaration of a new cross-border operation in northern Syria. The announcement of plans to resettle one million Syrian refugees into a safe zone in northern Syria after a possible incursion was also driven by domestic political calculations, and a desire to capitalize on growing domestic anti-refugee sentiment and thus to bolster support ahead of the critical 2023 election. Turkey's assertive foreign policy discourse is expected to continue as it helps the incumbents to trigger a rally effect within its own electorate.

Toni Alaranta, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been interpreted by the Erdoğan government as having been provoked by NATO. The view that Turkey undertook a reset with the West in 2021 is unfounded. The attempt at a so-called reset was designed to lure the Biden administration into a similar sort of bargaining that Erdoğan enjoyed with Trump. As this proved unachievable, Turkey abandoned making more cooperative

statements, and the emphasis was put on attempting to normalize relations with Middle Eastern states.

Turkey's attempt at strategic autonomy and cutting its dependency on the West requires different poles such as Russia and China that it can use as balancing powers. Turkey sees little value in a new phase of NATO enlargement and wants concessions from the West. The PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG, the fighting corps of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces created to fight the Islamic State, is the most crucial issue of deep concern for Turkey.

After Turkey lifted its vetoing of Finnish and Swedish applications at the NATO Summit in Madrid, it now attempts to use the memorandum of understanding signed in Madrid to yield more concessions in terms of extraditions and PKK-related activity in Sweden and Finland. Turkey's bargaining continues, although President Biden's attempts to have the U.S. sell F-16s and possible other new openings may counter Erdoğan's stubbornness with the Nordic NATO aspirants.

Paul Levin, Stockholm University Institute of Turkish Studies, Stockholm

When trying to understand foreign policy under the AKP, it is useful to consider both broadly perceived Turkish national interests and the personal interests and worldview of the current leadership.

First, some Turkish complaints, like the maritime delimitation conflict with Greece and Western support for the YPG in Syria, arguably transcend party lines. Here, Turkey's interests simply do not align with those of many of its allies, and we should expect almost any Turkish government to maintain a similar position.

Second, however, Turkish foreign policymaking has become de-institutionalized and is increasingly up to one man (albeit often under pressure from various factions with differing degrees of influence). Currently, the president is concerned about his political survival. Elections are coming up in 2023 and his polling numbers are low. The economy is nosediving and resentment against Syrian refugees continues to simmer. Hence, the conditions remain ripe for a "wag the dog" style fight with Sweden and Finland, for example, which still need the Turkish parliament to ratify their NATO accession. This even if such a fight comes with major reputational costs for Turkey.

Finally, spats like these keep appearing because there is an underlying "push factor" driving Turkey and its Western allies apart. According to the AKP leadership, Turkey's natural home is no longer necessarily the Euro-Atlantic community of secular democratic nations.

Lars Haugom, Centre for Intelligence Studies, Norwegian School of Intelligence, Oslo

Ankara is taking advantage of its position in NATO and the relative weakening of Russia to pursue central foreign and security policy goals. Any Turkish government would probably have raised the issue of external support for Kurdish militant organizations in connection with Swedish and Finnish applications for NATO membership. However, Ankara's approach to this issue exemplifies the assertive and transactional foreign policy strategy we have seen under Erdoğan, in which confrontation and reconciliation are used interchangeably. Relations with the West may now have entered a new period of confrontation but, in my opinion, there is no real change in Turkey's strategy. I doubt that the Turkish government has any specific end-goal in its latest moves, except extracting concessions on foreign policy issues, such as getting NATO to focus more on Turkish security challenges, curbing external support for Kurdish militant organizations, and easing the export of military hardware and technology to Turkey.

President Erdoğan's rhetoric and maximalist demands, and the simultaneous playing-up of disputes with NATO and Greece, and on Syria, also point to the domestic dimension of this recent foreign policy endeavor. With a deepening economic crisis, weakening electoral support and an upcoming general election at home, Erdoğan may be well served by a crisis that puts Turkey in the international limelight and boosts his own image as a strong national leader.

Lisel Hintz, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, Washington

Any optimism about Turkey's foreign policy convergence with the U.S. following Russia's invasion of Ukraine was misplaced. From US support of the YPG and the refusal to extradite the accused coup mastermind Fethullah Gülen – both of which increased the domestic political value of anti-Americanism –, to Turkey's energy and security cooperation with Russia, no real rapprochement with the U.S. appears in sight. Rather, Erdoğan's overtures to the U.S. are mainly aimed at ameliorating the security and defense complications created by its purchase of Russian S-400s. Relatedly, his ire at the Greek prime minister, following what some saw as an encouraging meeting between the two in March, flared up after the latter urged the U.S. not to sell F-16s to Turkey.

Turkey's NATO objections stem in part from its attempts to use its current leverage to gain concessions, including on F-16s and arms embargoes, in part from Erdoğan and his nationalist partners' genuine (if not well-founded) beliefs that Kurdish organizations with support in Sweden and Finland pose existential threats to Turkey, and in part from widespread Turkish resentment toward the West for not taking such concerns seriously. The pressure now put on NATO actors to use language recognizing these concerns can also work to legitimate and amplify Erdoğan's narrative that paints Kurds as threats, potentially easing future incursions

into Syria while driving a wedge between domestic opposition actors. Ultimately, at the heart of all these moves are Erdoğan's regime security concerns.

İlhan Uzel, Professor of International Relations, Ankara

Erdoğan is at his weakest point since his party came to power 20 years ago. He is losing ground in domestic politics, the economy is in free fall, Turkey has been isolated regionally and faces an unfriendly US administration and a hostile Congress, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has complicated the president's already problematic ties with Putin.

Although the Erdoğan government has taken a more conciliatory position towards the West, he has come to realize that his bowing to Western pressure does not yield benefits regarding the removal of sanctions, the Halkbank case in the U.S., or even receiving an official invitation to the White House.

Under these unfavorable conditions and with his first attempt at applying transactionalism from a weak position, Erdoğan was using his last remaining bargaining chips: a veto power which he was publicly using against the proposed accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, and Turkey's military prowess that he could employ in the Aegean and in northern Syria. With these moves, Erdoğan wants to show the West that he still has the power to be a gamechanger. On the domestic front, he wishes to consolidate his alliance with the nationalist segments of the political scene and reach out to an electorate that is becoming increasingly disgruntled under ailing economic conditions. However, his move to block Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO failed, and thus exposed his weakness.

Karol Wasilewski, Analytical Agency NEOŚwiat (NEOWorld), Warsaw

Turkey's stance towards Russia's aggression and, consequently, Turkish decisionmakers' approach towards their Western allies have evolved due to two factors: Russia's hitherto military struggles in Ukraine and the initial widespread overestimation of Russia's power. Yet, the behavior of Western countries has also been important: : emerging differences between them on how to approach Russia and Vladimir Putin's future, which pointed to cracks in the West's strategy, and their praise of Turkey's stance, expressed despite that Turkey distanced itself from sanctions on Russia.

Overall, these developments showed Turkey that it had space to pursue a balancing act with a pro-Russian flavor – contrary to its initial stance, which was more pro-Ukrainian. Yet, praise from Western countries also had another effect. For Turkish decisionmakers, this served as confirmation of their deeply-rooted belief that Turkey, due to its geographical location, is a country with exceptional potential, and that it can therefore use the war in Ukraine to pursue its interests in a maximalist way without facing serious consequences. While the NATO allies will be afraid of

Turkey's potential turn toward Russia, at the same time Russia will fear Turkey's provision of more support for the Alliance and Ukraine. Thus, I think Turkey will continue to push hard in pursuit of its national interests whenever it feels it can do so without incurring significant consequences, only to withdraw when met with pushback from its NATO allies.

Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, European Neighbourhood Council, Brussels

Ankara's end-goals are largely dictated by three factors. Firstly, revisionism and Ankara's historical sense of loss plays an important role. A mixture between electoral narratives added to state-level opportunism and sentiments of historical belonging motivates Turkish revisionism today.

Secondly, Turkey is a geographical bridge-builder. This is relevant at a time when the world moves out of a state of unipolarity and into a messy patchwork of alliances. In this respect, Turkey is currently playing its best hand, namely its favorable geographical position. This helps Ankara to promote connectivity in trade, security and energy, which is crucial for staying neutral, since having to take sides would mean diminishing its Eurasian bridging capacity between China, Russia and Western allies. Turkey is likely to continue its strategy of "perpetual hedging" for as long as an environment exists in which there is instability and where alliances are being remolded. The danger of this strategy is that hedging may land Ankara in trouble with its neighbors, while the risk of making a mistake increases. To encourage Turkey to stop hedging, it should be given a substantial offer that institutionally cements it within an alliance (e.g. EU defense and NATO).

Thirdly, President Erdoğan's personal mistrust of the U.S. significantly influences Ankara's relationships with Washington and NATO. It is also likely to create an incentive against domestic political transition, unless Erdoğan is given additional guarantees.

Ejaz Haider, Journalist, Lahore

The tripartite memorandum signed by Turkey, Sweden and Finland, addressing Turkey's concerns and subsequent decision to lift the veto on Sweden and Finland's NATO membership bids shows that President Erdoğan's preconditions for the vote was a calculated move. Their membership application gave President Erdoğan the perfect handle to extract concessions from the Alliance on Turkey's concerns. This also ties in with Turkey's plan to target Kurdish forces in Manbij and Tal Rifaat, a continuation of its longstanding policy. Turkey does not differentiate between the SDF, the YPG, and the PKK, and believes that the SDF is a PKK front. It already has differences with Washington, which supports the YPG. The Kurdish question has long steered and soured Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU. However, Ankara

needs to go beyond the military-centric approach to tackle it successfully. Doing so is important both for a political resolution and improving relations with NATO/EU states.

Erdoğan's decision to break off high-level talks with Greece came after Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis urged the US Congress not to approve F-16 sales to Ankara. Turkey's reaction has also been driven by its traditional rivalry with Greece. However, breaking off talks could create another friction point for Turkey with NATO and the EU. Therefore, Ankara needs to ensure it does not overplay its hand.

Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, Thomas More Institute, Paris

The refocusing of Turkey's diplomacy could be explained by the recent change in the balance of power in the region and a worrying internal context. For Erdoğan, Russia's war against Ukraine is a window of opportunity. In order to preserve the future as Turkey's president, he maintains some sort of balance between NATO allies and the Russian aggressor. The need for Ankara's agreement to approve NATO applications made by Finland and Sweden opened up possibilities to obtain concessions in return.

Is this pure opportunism? No. Let us take into account Turkish psychological substrata and geopolitical representations: much of the people are resentful of the West. Moreover, the AKP no longer wants to be an honorary member of the Western club and sees itself as a beacon state in a greater Middle East spanning from North Africa to Turkestan and South East Asia.

Can we talk of a grand strategy? Yes. However, from a Western perspective, there is room for manoeuvre and it is still possible to find common ground. Take the NATO summit in Madrid, for example. In the long run, all possibilities, including losing Turkey as an ally, should be considered and anticipated by the West.

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