



# Turkey's Diplomatic Performance and Tendency in the Context of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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**Abstract.** After Erdoğan came to power, Turkey's foreign policy has been presented with a more active and independent character with its balancing strategy well applied, all of which is reflected in its diplomatic performance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. By analyzing Turkey's diplomatic performance during the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine crisis until March 2023, this article finds that although Turkey's attitude towards Russia and Ukraine has been wavering and ambiguous for a year, Turkey has shown a tendency to side with its NATO allies in supporting Ukraine in its foreign policy; at the same time, Turkey has won the praise of the international community for facilitating negotiations and its efforts to resolve the food and humanitarian problems. The Russia-Ukraine crisis has forced NATO and EU countries to pay more attention to the country's geopolitical role amid their long-standing marginalization and distrust of Turkey. Turkey may take this opportunity to achieve improved relations with the West. The crisis has also provided Turkey with the opportunity to improve its diplomatic standing regionally and internationally. However, as a middle power, Turkey must first address its domestic political and economic problems to achieve its diplomatic ambitions.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Diplomatic Policy, Russia-Ukraine conflict, EU, NATO.

## 1 Introduction

After Erdoğan came to power, Turkey has shown greater diplomatic ambitions, seeking to increase its influence among Turkic-speaking countries and in the Balkans from a geopolitical perspective through an aggressive regional diplomacy and power balancing strategy; it has changed its tactics of leaning on the West, and even openly expressed its opposition, and adopted a more independent and autonomous stance in order to play a more critical role on the international stage. Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Turkey has been active and has made a series of diplomatic initiatives. This paper will analyze Turkey's diplomatic practice and its characteristics after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict; the views of European and the US on Turkey, which is located at the NATO borderline with significant civilizational differences with the West; the relations between Turkey and the West after the Russia-Ukraine conflict; and the direction of Turkey's diplomatic strategy in the future.

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## 2 Turkey's Diplomatic Performance in the Face of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict - An Analysis of Representative Diplomatic Actions

Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022, Turkey's reactions in the diplomatic field have been very active. Unlike the firm stance attitude of NATO countries such as the United States and France, Turkey's strategy and mentality have apparently been more wavering, with some of its policies presented as contradictory; at the same time, Turkey has always been trying to facilitate negotiations between the two sides and played the role of a mediator.

After the outbreak of the war, Turkey, at the request of Ukraine, closed the Straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles to warships in accordance with the Montreux Convention, which also played a role in slowing down the Russian offensive and preventing further escalation of the situation at the Black Sea area. Turkey had already sent military equipment and supplies, such as combat and reconnaissance drones, to Ukraine by the end of 2022, according to a report by Oryx <sup>[1]</sup>, an open-source intelligence research organization.

While other countries are still on the sidelines, Turkey has already been decisively providing critical assistance to Ukraine because of its status as a NATO member and its security considerations. Turkey and Ukraine have common interests in geostrategic security, and Turkey needs to resort to Ukraine's strength to deal with Russia's military deployment in the Black Sea region. Ukraine's defeat in the war and expanding Russia's military scope will potentially affect regional security and stability and even directly threaten Turkey's national security. At the same time, the Russian presence in Syria can also potentially create problems for Turkey by destabilizing the border areas and causing new refugee flows from Syria <sup>[2]</sup>. While the Russian military focuses on the battlefield in Ukraine, it will unavoidably loosen its attention to Syria to a certain extent, which will help Turkey to relieve the pressure and create opportunities for it to deal with the refugee problem.

In contrast to the sharp attitude of its NATO allies, such as France, Turkey has maintained close contact with the Russian side while providing military supplies and political support to Ukraine. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has met with Russian President Vladimir Putin several times to promote peace talks between the two sides of the war while expressing his desire to maintain economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. Russia is an important economic partner of Turkey, with more than \$30 billion in imports to Turkey in December 2021, making it Turkey's largest import partner <sup>[3]</sup>. With high domestic inflation, Turkey needs to rely on imports to ease market pressure. For this reason, Turkey has not made a big deal of its aid operations to Ukraine, choosing instead to do so in relative secrecy, for which it has also been blamed by the Ukrainian public and some NATO allies <sup>[2]</sup>.

Beyond its wavering balancing policy, Turkey also seeks to increase its regional influence and play a more significant role in regional affairs. Turkey has made significant efforts to facilitate negotiations between the two countries. On March 28, 2022, Russian and Ukrainian delegations held their fifth negotiation round in Istanbul, Turkey. On

March 10, 2022, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba held trilateral talks on the sidelines of a diplomatic forum in Antalya, Turkey, which was the first ministerial-level meeting between Ukraine and Russia since the conflict erupted on February 24. In addition, Turkey has played an active role in humanitarian diplomacy and the food crisis. In July 2022, the UN, Russia, Ukraine, and Turkey signed an agreement on Black Sea food shipments. Within the three months since the agreement was signed, a total of 7.7 million tons of food was delivered by 345 ships from Ukrainian ports <sup>[4]</sup>. In September 2022, Turkey facilitated the exchange of more than 200 prisoners of war between Russia and Ukraine in Turkey, with Turkey guaranteeing their lives until the end of the war. In January 2023, Turkey facilitated the exchange of more than 40 prisoners of war between the two countries. These actions and their results have gained universal recognition in the international community and have played a positive role in enhancing Turkey's influence regionally and globally.

One year after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Turkey has shown a noticeable tendency in its diplomatic actions to favor Ukraine since 2023. On February 19, 2023, Blinken visited Turkey for the first time in his two years as US Secretary of State. During the visit, Blinken stated that the continuation of an active bilateral diplomatic process between Turkey and the United States would depend in large part on Turkey's willingness to recognize Russia as the main security threat of the moment and to tighten exports of products that could be used by Russia in its military industry. In response, Turkey publicly confirmed its intention to cooperate this way <sup>[5]</sup>. In a statement on March 16, the Turkish Foreign Ministry expressed its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, reaffirming its non-recognition of Russia's long-standing policy toward the Crimean peninsula, and called the act a violation of international law, revisiting the topic of the Crimea region after many years, revealing Turkey's intention to make its position clear.

On March 17, Erdoğan announced that the Turkish Grand National Assembly would start the voting process on Finland's NATO membership and said that Turkey is not hostile to NATO's eastern expansion and opposes Sweden's membership because the PKK issue has touched Turkey's bottom line <sup>[6]</sup>. Will such a tendency of Turkey swing as before, or does it mean that Turkey has finally decided to side with Ukraine like other Western countries? The more likely case is that Turkey has decided to align its position with Ukraine and the West this time.

There are multiple considerations behind such a decision: First, there are domestic needs: the devastating earthquake in February 2023 has exacerbated inflationary pressures in Turkey, and the post-disaster reconstruction process requires a lot of material and financial assistance, which the EU and the US are most capable and likely to provide. As a new round of elections is approaching, it is crucial for Erdoğan and the AKP to stabilize the domestic economy, ease inflationary pressures, and do a good job in post-disaster reconstruction to stabilize people's living standards in order to gain an advantage in the new round of elections. The NATO summit and the US Secretary of State's visit provide an opportunity to repair Turkey's relations with the West, and Turkey will not easily let go of this opportunity.

### 3 Turkey as a Marginalized NATO Member

Turkey's mediation behavior in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been criticized by NATO allies because mediation presupposes that the dispute between the two sides revolves around a disputed territory or a historically unresolved issue. At the same time, they believe that Russia's unilateral invasion caused the war between Russia and Ukraine, and therefore negotiations should be abandoned. Russia should be made to withdraw its troops through sanctions and military means <sup>[7]</sup>. NATO countries have been inclined to see Turkey as a less trustworthy ally, and some scholars even believe that Turkey does not play the role of an ally for NATO but even poses a threat to NATO's unity.

Turkey is a significant power that should be addressed in terms of geographic location and armament size. The reason why Western countries feel distrustful of Turkey is that, in addition to Turkey's increasingly independent and distant diplomatic positioning from the West in recent years, is that the Europeans have held a long-standing perception of Turkey as the "other". This perception becomes even more evident in the EU's attitude toward Turkey.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Turkey began its historical process of approaching Western society as early as the Ottoman Empire. After World War II, Turkey's integration into the West accelerated, especially with the outbreak of the Cold War, which provided an opportunity for Turkey to return to Europe and make its accession to the European Union an essential goal of its foreign and security policy. Turkey joined the Council of Europe, NATO, OECD, CSCE, and other political, military, economic, and security organizations, establishing its security and political status in Europe to a certain extent. On December 16, 2004, the EU announced its agreement to start accession negotiations with Turkey.

However, Turkey's journey to the West has been full of twists and turns. In the past 20 years, Turkey has been negotiating its accession to the EU with many twists and turns. The EU has been making new demands on Turkey, and Turkey's suspicion of the EU has been rising. Unlike NATO, the EU is a political and economic organization, and Turkey is much less important to Europe in the political and economic sphere than in the military sphere.

Another critical factor that separates Turkey from the West is religious and cultural differences. According to Yan Tianqin, Christian superiority and rejection of the Islamic world have been part of European civilization's interaction with Islamic civilization since the Crusades. The distortion and misrepresentation of Islam in European Orientalist work contributed to the formation of "Islamophobia" in Europe. "Turkophobia" is an extension of "Islamophobia". The European representation of Islam and Turkish Muslim orientalism has profoundly influenced the way Europeans currently view Turkey, and the image of Turks as the "other" has been deeply embedded in the "European consciousness" <sup>[8]</sup>.

At the same time, criticism of the lack of democracy in Turkish domestic politics is also one of the reasons for the long-standing disconnect between Europe's image of Turkey and its frequent military coups and the authoritarian tendencies of its leaders, which Europe considers to be far from Western democracy. Such a perception gap has

caused Europe to limit its cooperation with Turkey to strategic considerations rather than truly accepting it as a member of the alliance.

#### **4 Turkey's Relations with the West after the Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the EU and NATO countries started to attach more importance to Turkey, either actively or by force. Turkey's active diplomatic practice has demonstrated its essential role, and the course of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to increased attention to Turkey in regional security. In addition, there are disagreements between NATO and EU members over Russia and Ukraine. The concept of "allies" and "partners" has been weakened considerably compared to the initial establishment of NATO, and the different interests of member states have gradually emerged. In such a situation, Turkey's geopolitical significance to NATO has increased.

The relationship between France and Turkey is a clear example. After Erdoğan came to power, Turkey's relations with France began to show tensions, exacerbated by the 2020 incident in the Mediterranean and, more recently, by issues related to France's attitude toward Muslims. After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, closer military and diplomatic cooperation as NATO allies presented an opportunity to turn the relationship around. The March 2022 NATO summit allowed the two countries to dialogue, with French defense officials visiting Turkey to discuss ways to advance defense relations and French and Turkish warships conducting a joint exercise in the eastern Mediterranean. In March, Macron announced that France, Greece, and Turkey would implement a joint plan to provide humanitarian support to the Ukrainian city of Mariupol. While the operation ultimately failed to materialize due to Russia, it symbolizes a turning-back trend in French-Turkish relations after years of tension.

The EU's warming attitude toward Turkey offers new options for Turkish diplomacy. However, it remains to be seen whether Turkey will cooperate more closely with European countries in the future or even join the EU and present a more Westernized identity in its diplomacy. On the one hand, Turkey's relations with its neighbor Greece are still very tense, and on the other hand, Turkey still has many disputes with the EU and NATO countries regarding the PKK and the problems in Syria and Libya.

#### **5 Perspectives on the Future Development of Turkish Diplomacy**

After Erdoğan came to power, Turkey's foreign policy has always revealed a strong dose of realism and pragmatism. After the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Turkey has been putting more emphasis on its diplomatic relations with Europe and the Balkans. On March 18, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry in Cairo, the first time in more than a decade that Turkey sent a ministerial official to Egypt, marking further warming of relations between the two countries.

Constructivist authors, in connection to the Copenhagen School's Regional Security

Complex Theory (RSCT), explained how identity and self-perceptions shaped Turkey's foreign policy shifts over the last fifteen years and how this influenced its patterns of cooperation and conflict with its neighbors <sup>[9]</sup>. According to the RSCT, Turkey sits at the intersection of multiple security complexes, very different from each other, without genuinely being part of any of them, which makes it act as an 'insulator state' <sup>[10]</sup>.

In contrast, in recent years, some scholars have argued that Turkey's initial role as an "insulator" between different regions within the regional security cooperation framework has changed. Over the years, Turkey's role has shifted from being an "insulator" to a "conductor", sending different signals between different regional security cooperation and playing a more active regional role <sup>[11]</sup>. H.T. Oğuzlu argues that the most appropriate position for Turkey in the current international situation is that of a "constrained middle power" <sup>[12]</sup>.

Although the Russia-Ukraine conflict has provided an opportunity for Turkey to play a more significant role in international affairs, there are still many domestic issues that need to be addressed, such as the recent earthquake, the upcoming elections, high inflation, and the resulting decline in the standard of living of the population, and how to manage relations with neighboring countries such as Greece and Syria. Only by resolving these issues first and placing Turkey's economy and regional security in a more stable environment will it be possible to guarantee its performance in the international arena and allow Turkey to make bolder moves in diplomacy.

## 6 Conclusions

Since Erdoğan came to power, Turkey's diplomacy has been characterized by a more ambitious and independent approach, relying on a balancing strategy and aggressive or even radical regional diplomacy to build its international image, a tendency evidenced by its performance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. After the outbreak of the crisis, Turkey maintained close economic and political ties with Russia while providing military assistance to Ukraine. Such wavering and even contradictory attitudes and policies continued until March 2023, when Turkey's diplomatic attitude toward Russia and Ukraine developed a more pronounced tendency to side with its NATO ally and support the Ukrainian side. In addition to its stance on Russia and Ukraine, Turkey has actively played the role of mediator and promoted humanitarian diplomacy. It has won international praise for facilitating negotiations and trilateral talks between Russia and Ukraine, opening the Black Sea food corridor to secure food shipments, facilitating prisoner-of-war exchanges, and resettling prisoners of war in its own country.

Turkey's diplomatic performance in the year following the Russia-Ukraine crisis has drawn criticism from NATO allies. However, the source of NATO and EU countries' distrust of Turkey is not only due to its more ambiguous and uncertain attitude compared to NATO allies such as France but also due to a long-standing European cultural and religious perception of Turkey as the "other" and accusations of a lack of democracy in domestic politics.

Turkey will likely seize this opportunity to repair and improve its relations with the West to create a better external environment for its domestic political and economic

stability. Although many practical issues remain to be resolved, relations between the two sides are turning around for the better.

Turkey's foreign policy has always revealed a strong dose of realism and pragmatism. After the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Turkey shifted its diplomatic perspective more toward Europe and the Balkans. The Russia-Ukraine conflict allows Turkey to play a more significant role in international affairs. However, to play a more significant role in regional and international affairs, Turkey must first solve its internal problems, including post-earthquake reconstruction, easing inflation, and a stable transition to general elections.

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