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TURKEY AND RUSSIA: DYNAMICS OF RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS

This research analyzes Turkey's dynamic relations with Russia in context of the war in Ukraine, with a particular emphasis on how Ankara finds a balance between its strategic and economic interests in keeping relations with Moscow and its NATO obligations. It illustrates Turkey's balancing act between Russia and the West by analyzing its involvement in the Black Sea Grain Deal, alongside other key cases such as the procurement of the S-400 missile system, energy diplomacy with Russia, and the supply of drones to Ukraine. Hence, this research revolves around the main question of why Turkey has deviated from other NATO partners in completely isolating and sanctioning Russia following its strategic autonomy approach and regional dynamics. Our main focus is on the period from 2014 to 2025, beginning with Russia's annexation of Crimea up until the full-scale invasion in February 2022, covering key turning points in Turkey-Russia relations, such as the downing of a Russian jet, the procurement of S-400 systems, cooperation in Syria, and Turkey's evolving position in the geopolitics of the region. This broader timeframe allows for a comparative analysis of foreign policy trends across different phases of the crisis. The findings might serve as a platform for future study into Turkey's position in multipolar international relations and crisis diplomacy.

Key words: Turkey; Russia; Ukraine war; geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a critical point in the international security order, shaking the foundations of the post-Cold War balance of power in Europe. The Ukraine conflict has forced many states, particularly those in Eurasia, to reassess their foreign policy and security positions. Turkey is among the countries most directly affected by the war due to its geographical proximity and complex position as a NATO member, with significant economic ties to Russia, and historical and ethnic ties with Ukraine, particularly through the Crimean Tatar community.

As a NATO member since 1952, Turkey is institutionally integrated into the Western security architecture. However, in response to the region's turbulent political dynamics Ankara has in recent years pursued a more independent and assertive foreign policy, often described by many as "strategic ambivalence" or "pragmatic autonomy". Turkey's response to the war in Ukraine has further highlighted this balance between alliances, sovereignty and interests. Its response to the Ukrainian crisis has been both active and ambiguous. On the one hand, Ankara has repeatedly publicly supported Ukraine's territorial integrity, condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea, and provided military assistance to Kiev, including the famous Bayraktar TB2 combat drones. On the other hand, Turkey has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia, has maintained strong economic relations with Moscow and has been trying to position itself as a key mediator between the warring parties. This approach reflects the broader logic of Turkish foreign policy: the pursuit of strategic autonomy through a combination of military power, diplomatic maneuvering and economic pragmatism. Consequently, Turkish foreign policy continues to oscillate between a pro-Western orientation and efforts to preserve regional autonomy and sovereign decision making.

Turkey-Russia relations have a long and complex history, marked by phases of open hostility, Cold War polarity, and post-Cold War pragmatic rapprochement. During the Cold war, the anti-communist stance was a main pillar of Turkey's state-identity and a key reason behind its decision to join NATO. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ideological barrier that had defined Turkey-Russia relations for four decades was removed (Balta 2019). The 1990s marked the beginning of a new era of cooperation between the two countries in the political and economic fields. The partnership was institutionalized by the Treaty of friendship, cooperation, and neighborliness, signed by President Turgut Ozal in March 1991, as well as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Project (BSEC) in 1992 (Huseyin 2023).

In the contemporary context, Russia remains one of Turkey's key energy suppliers, and the two countries also cooperate in the areas of nuclear energy, trade, tourism, and military technology, including Turkey's controversial purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system, which has caused tensions with NATO. However, this partnership remains fragile and conditioned by global developments and regional tensions.

The war in Ukraine has put additional pressure on Ankara's foreign policy calculations. As a state balancing between collective security obligations to NATO and its own economic interests, particularly in the areas of energy and trade, Turkey has found it necessary to adopt an extremely cautious and flexible approach. This balance is reflected both in its regional ambitions in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, but also in its domestic political imperatives, especially in the context of the economic crisis and elections. Its response to the war in Ukraine can therefore be seen as a mirror of its broader foreign policy strategy in the 21st century: an attempt to reconcile Western security commitments with ambitions of regional leadership and global relevance.

While both Turkey and Russia appear in the title of this research paper, the primary focus is placed on Turkey's foreign policy behavior during the Ukraine crisis, beginning with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia is analyzed primarily as a contextual counterpart in this bilateral dynamic, rather than as an independent subject of theoretical or empirical investigation. The central research question of this study is: Why has Turkey diverged from the isolation and sanctions imposed on Russia by other NATO member states? The study focuses on the period from 2014 to 2025, beginning with Russia's annexation of Crimea up until the full-scale invasion in February 2022, covering key turning points in Turkey-Russia relations, such as the downing of a Russian jet, the procurement of S-400 systems, cooperation in Syria, and Turkey's evolving position in the geopolitics of the region. It explores how Turkey's response to the Ukrainian crisis reflects the dynamics of relations with Russia and the West. This analysis is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of neorealism, constructivism and middle power theory, with a particular focus on the concept of 'hedging' as a strategy for survival and preserving influence in a multipolar world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The war in Ukraine has generated a wide range of academic and policy-oriented literature, many of which have examined Turkey's position from different analytical angles. Most of these works agree on one core point: Turkey's response to the war has been unique. It has not followed the pattern set by other NATO members, nor has it aligned itself with Russian narratives (Mongrenier 2022; Mona 2023; Balta 2019). Instead, Ankara has pursued its own path, often described as non-binary, strategic autonomy, or even pragmatic to a fault (Cagaptay 2023; Borshchevskaya 2025). Eissenstat (2022) claims that Turkey's policy today resembles its World War II policy of 'active neutrality in which Ankara made overtures to both the Allies and the Axis, positioning itself to be on the winning side at the end, without too much risking in the process' (Eissenstat 2022).

Furthermore, several of the sources in this research paper focus on this very ambiguity. For example, Borshchevskaya (2025) claims that Turkey did not join Western sanctions on Russia but sold armed drones to Ukraine as part of bilateral cooperation with Ukraine that began in 2019, prior to Russian invasion. Also, Özertem (2022) highlights that Turkey did not follow the decisions of European countries to impose sanctions on Russia, limit financial transactions, close their airspace for Russia airlines, and review energy affairs with Moscow. Others, like Efrat Aviv (2023) in the work 'A Policy of Compartmentalization' highlights how Turkey has managed to separate different layers of its foreign relations, maintaining compartmentalized cooperation with both sides even during a high-intensity conflict. These analyses often emphasize economic realism, such as Turkey's refusal to implement sanctions, its reliance on Russian energy, and the flow of Russian tourists and capital. At the same time, they point to Turkey's diplomatic ambitions, hosting negotiations, facilitating the Black Sea Grain Deal, and positioning itself as an irreplaceable regional actor.

Much of the literature treats Turkey's approach as a tactical reaction to short-term pressures, economic crisis at home, upcoming elections, or Erdoğan's personal calculations (Dalay 2024; Düzgüt et al. 2025; Balta & Bal 2025). This leaves less room for understanding the deeper patterns and ideas behind the behavior. While some scholars explore Turkey's balancing acts in realist terms, and others mention identity-based motivations (Öztürk & Alpan 2025), few works systematically apply a combined theoretical framework to interpret Ankara's actions. There is a limited integration between security-based, identity-driven, and strategic middle-power explanations in the existing literature, which is precisely the gap that this study seeks to

address. It also aligns with the argument by Ziya Öniş & Şuhnaz Yilmaz (2015) which emphasizes that growing economic interdependence between states can persist despite continuous political tensions and geopolitical rivalries. The opposing positions of Turkey and Russia in the context of Ukraine as well as in other international crises are examples of this. A key strategy in this process is the compartmentalization of economic issues and geopolitical rivalries in order to avoid the negative spill-over of certain misunderstandings in the domain of bilateral cooperation (Öniş & Yilmaz 2015). Another important gap is the limited use of theory. Much of the literature mentions that Turkey is “balancing” or being “pragmatic,” but they rarely engage systematically applying theories like neorealism, constructivism, or middle power theory in a structured way.

It is important to note that much of the existing literature on Turkey-Russia relations has focused on the immediate context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. A significant strength of this study lies in its broader temporal and analytical approach to this topic, following Turkey’s behavior since the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and examining political dynamics since then. By integrating theoretical perspectives and connecting various dimensions of Turkish foreign policy, ranging from identity and alliances to economy and strategy, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Turkey’s navigating its role in the current crisis between Russia and Ukraine.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Neorealism and strategic autonomy

Neorealism, one of the dominant theories in the field of international relations, sees the global system as fundamentally anarchic, lacking the central authority to enforce order. In such a world, states are the main actors, and their primary concern is survival. As Kenneth Waltz (1979) argued, the structure of the international system and the distribution of power plays a decisive role in shaping how states behave. States, as rational actors, are constantly trying to protect their own interests and maximize security in an unpredictable and often competitive environment (Mearsheimer 2001). For Turkish decision-makers, the liberal international order and Western hegemony are over, the power of the United States is declining, and these countries are operating in a multipolar and post-Western world order (Chatham House 2025). Therefore, the direction of Turkey’s foreign policy has diversified, with a strong focus on national interest and self-sustainability, due to the new realities in the international order. The

diversification of actions is also visible in Turkey's economic relations, as noted in the Aydın-Düzgit & Zarakol study, which highlights that Turkey's total trade with the European Union increased from \$40.6 billion in 2002 to \$182 billion in 2022. Additionally, over the same period, trade with Asian countries (including China and Russia) increased from \$19 billion to \$220 billion in the same period (Chatham House 2025).

The neorealist perspective is particularly useful when we try to understand how Turkey has responded to the war in Ukraine. From the very beginning of the conflict, Ankara found itself in a difficult position. On the one hand, as a long-time NATO member, Turkey was expected to stand firmly with the West and oppose Russia's aggression. On the other hand, Russia is not merely a neighboring state, but a vital economic partner. Turkey depends heavily on Russian gas, trade, tourism, and even cooperation on major infrastructure projects like the Akkuyu nuclear power plant.

From a neorealist perspective, Turkey's actions seem strategically rational and consistent with the imperatives of national interest. Rather than choosing one side and risking serious consequences, Ankara has opted for a strategy of careful balancing. It has supported Ukraine, both politically and militarily, for example through the sale of Bayraktar TB2 drones but at the same time, it has refused to impose sanctions on Russia. It has kept diplomatic channels open, continued economic cooperation, and positioned itself as a mediator rather than a combatant. As Efrat Aviv (2023) notes, Turkey's approach can be described as a "policy of compartmentalization", a way of separating different areas of its relationship with Russia so that disagreements in one area do not necessarily spill over into others. This kind of strategic flexibility aligns well with the neorealist concept of strategic autonomy: the idea that states seek to maintain independence in their decision-making, even when operating within larger alliances or under pressure from global powers.

Neorealist approach has been visible also in Turkey's handling of maritime access to the Black Sea. In February 2022, Turkey used the Montreux Convention of 1936 to warn all countries against sending warships through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits (Reuters 2022). This stopped Russia from moving naval assets from its Baltic and Northern fleets to the Black Sea, which made it less flexible during the invasion of Ukraine. The closure was important in lowering the chances of military escalation, even if Russian vessels that were already in the Black Sea were not affected. Many people saw Turkey's choice as a cautious diplomatic move that struck a balance between its commitments under international law and its strategic neutrality. Also, by repeatedly highlighting its adherence to the Montreux framework, Ankara kept its legal

legitimacy and showed both NATO partners and Moscow that it was being careful. This was not just about legal obligations, it was about preserving Turkey's influence in its immediate security environment. Neorealism does not depict Turkey as a passive actor or a moral crusader but rather conceptualizes its rational approach, carefully navigating between competing powers, trying to protect its own sovereignty, economy, and regional standing. The war in Ukraine, in this view, is not just a test of alliances but a test of survival and strategy for a country determined to remain relevant and autonomous in a shifting world order.

Constructivism and national identity

While realism focuses on material capabilities and structural constraints, constructivism shifts the focus to ideas, norms, identities, and perceptions as key drivers of state behavior. From a constructivist perspective, states do not merely respond to external pressures based on interest calculations, they act in accordance with how they perceive themselves, how they view others, and how they interpret international events through historically shaped lenses (Wendt 1999). In the case of Turkey, constructivism provides valuable tools to understand dimensions of its foreign policy that cannot be explained solely by material interests or strategic calculations. Turkey's relationship with both Russia and Ukraine is deeply embedded in historical narratives, cultural and identity-based ties that often transcend formal alliances or geopolitical logic.

Turkey has long maintained a symbolic commitment to the Crimean Tatars, a Turkic-Muslim minority that endured repression under Russian and Soviet rule. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Turkish officials have repeatedly voiced support for the rights of Crimean Tatars and their cultural autonomy (Anadolu 2021). While such support may appear marginal from a realist standpoint, constructivists would argue that it reflects a normative dimension of Turkish foreign policy shaped by collective memory and national identity. Constructivism also helps explain Turkey's desire to position itself not only as a strategic actor, but as a moral and civilizational bridge between East and West, North and South. This is evident in Turkey's emphasis on mediation, humanitarian diplomacy, and calls for a "more just" international order, elements that go beyond strategic interest and speak how Turkish leadership envisions its global role (Aras 2009).

Turkey's active involvement in hosting negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 can be partially understood through this lens: as an effort to align its self-image as a responsible and independent actor with real-world diplomacy. This anal-

ysis allows us to explore domestic influences on foreign policy. Turkish political discourse, especially under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has increasingly drawn upon civilizational and neo-Ottomanist narratives, portraying Turkey as the protector of Muslim communities and a regional leader with a unique historical mission (Hazır 2022). This identity construction influences not only how Turkey engages with Ukraine and Russia, but also how it positions itself in relation to NATO and the broader Western alliance. Constructivism adds a rich and necessary layer of analysis. It reminds us that foreign policy is not only about what states want, but about who they think they are and how that identity shapes what they see as possible, acceptable, or necessary in moments of international crisis.

Middle power theory and hedging behavior

Turkey is often characterized as a middle power being neither a global superpower nor a minor state but one with enough regional influence, diplomatic visibility, and military capacity to shape developments in the neighborhood. Middle power theory provides us with a beneficial theoretical framework on how countries like Turkey operate under systemic constraints while still seeking room to maneuver. Rather than relying solely on hard power or forming rigid alliances, middle powers tend to use strategies like mediation, selective alignment, and soft balancing to maintain relevance. Among these strategies hedging is one of the most prominent (Lim 2015). For Turkey, hedging means maintaining ties with both Russia and the West, while avoiding full dependence on either. This approach can be seen in Ankara's refusal to adopt Western sanctions against Russia, its decision to continue energy and trade relations with Moscow, and its parallel support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and military needs.

In Turkey's middle power status, this complex behavior is interpreted not as confusion or inconsistency, but as a form of adaptive diplomacy. Kara (2024) argues that Turkey is an example of a swing state that has adopted strategic hedging to avoid taking sides in the US-Russia rivalry for the sake of increasing strategic options available. Moreover, although Turkey's hedging helped the country elevate its status, receive concessions, and increase strategic autonomy, still hedging has weakened alignment between Turkey and its Western allies (Kara 2024). Nevertheless, such behavior has been shaped by Turkey's unique geopolitical position. Its membership in NATO, proximity to conflict zones, and historical depth in regional affairs push it to pursue a delicate balance between engagement and distance. Hedging, in this sense, is not a passive stance, it is a proactive way of managing uncertainty and maximizing strategic options.

Integrating neorealism, constructivism, and middle power theory is not only theoretical exercise, but a practical and flexible way to analyze Turkey's foreign policy in the context of the Ukraine war. Each theoretical framework contributes a distinct analytical perspective, and together they help make sense of the complexity behind Ankara's actions. These theories work together to provide a well-balanced, broad framework. They allow us to assess Turkey's actions from several perspectives – power, identity, and strategy – all of which are critical for understanding foreign policy in a world that no longer fits easily into basic categories. This combination method provides both depth and flexibility, which is ideal for studying a country that alternates between East and West.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand Turkey's foreign policy behavior during the war in Ukraine, this paper uses a qualitative research approach. The reason for this choice lies in the complexity of the topic, since it is not only about measurable data, but also about understanding relationships, perceptions, decisions and the broader political context. A qualitative method allows us to analyze underlying reasons that shaped Turkey's foreign policy decisions. The focus of this paper is a case study of Turkey, which means that attention is paid to one actor within a specific crisis: the war in Ukraine. Using a theoretical framework that includes neorealism, constructivism and middle power theory, the paper analyzes how Turkey positioned itself in foreign policy terms and why its behavior is different compared to other NATO members.

This research focuses on the analysis of secondary sources like academic articles, policy reports, publications by think tanks, statements by political actors, as well as relevant documents from media and think-tank sources. This type of approach allows for detailed and layered analysis without the need for extensive first-hand data collection. Most of the sources used relate directly to Turkish foreign policy in the context of the war in Ukraine and have been carefully selected to cover different dimensions of the topic, from security and economic aspects, to identity and strategic ones. This research does not use quantitative methods or statistical data processing because the goal is not to prove cause-and-effect relationships through numbers, but rather to analyze the meanings, narratives, and strategies that Turkey uses to preserve its position in a complex international system. This methodological choice is in line with the nature of the topic, which concerns the analysis of already publicly available policies, narratives and relations between states. The analytical focus is not on the

behavior of individuals or on the empirical measurement of attitudes, but on the interpretation and contextualization of existing political and academic content.

Like any research, this one has its limitations. The most significant limitation relates to access to primary sources of information, such as interviews with officials or direct access to internal documents of state institutions. The main support of this paper remains on secondary sources, which are carefully selected and rich enough to enable a serious academic analysis. Another limitation concerns the dynamic nature of the topic. Given that the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, Turkey's positions and policies may change over time. The paper therefore focuses only on information that is publicly available and verifiable up to this point.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS

From imperial rivalry to modern geopolitics

Turkey and Russia have had a complicated relationship for hundreds of years. Their interactions have oscillated for long between confrontation and cooperation. The Ottoman and Russian Empires were fighting over the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea between the 18th and 19th centuries. These wars had a big effect on how the two countries see each other, leaving behind a legacy of strategic caution that still affects both countries' foreign policy. The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the rise of the Soviet Union to power marked a new chapter in the bilateral relations. Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952 aligned it with the West during the Cold War, largely as a response to Soviet geopolitical pressure in the region. This period was characterized by formal polarization between Ankara and Moscow, and for decades, Turkey's main goal was to contain Soviet influence.

The end of the Cold War marked a new phase in Turkish-Russian relations. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, bilateral relations gradually improved with a strong emphasis on economic cooperation and a focus on common strategic interests. The end of the Cold War removed an ideological hurdle for the Turkish side, as anti-communism had defined Turkey's political elites' relations with Russia for almost forty years (Balta 2019). In the early 2000s, Turkey's foreign policy was multidirectional facilitating increased cooperation with Russia in sectors such as trade, tourism, energy, and construction. The Blue Stream and Turk Stream pipelines made the two countries even more dependent on each other. Russia is now Turkey's main source of natural gas. The Turk Stream pipeline, which opened in 2020, carries up to 31.5

billion cubic meters of gas each year to both Turkey and Southeastern Europe (IENE 2020). This makes Ankara an even more important energy corridor. At the same time, Turkey's choice not to join Western sanctions kept it a popular place for Russian visitors. In 2022, more than 5.2 million Russians visited Turkey, even though the conflict was still going on (Abay 2023). Also, Russia continued to be a significant supplier of wheat and other agricultural items, which are important for Turkey's food security and its own export industries. These economic linkages gave Ankara both power and limits in how it responded to the war in Ukraine in terms of foreign policy.

Although bilateral relations have deepened in recent years, political tensions and disagreements on various issues remain. The biggest challenge to good relations between the two countries was the incident of the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 fighter jet by Turkey in 2015, causing a diplomatic crisis. But the fact that things quickly got back to normal afterward showed that both sides were determined to handle disagreements by breaking them up into smaller issues in order to protect their strategic and economic interests (Gafarlı & Rognifard 2023). Since then, relations between Turkey and Russia have followed a framework of strategic competition and pragmatic cooperation. Their relations have not been based on mutual trust and shared values, but on overlapping interests and geopolitical calculations. Both countries consistently apply a policy of selective collaboration, especially in conflict zones such as Syria, the Caucasus, and more recently Ukraine, despite often opposing geopolitical goals. Over time, they have established mechanisms for conflict management, preventing escalation, demonstrating maturity in managing an interest-driven relationship. This stance reflects Turkey's long-standing strategic culture of autonomy and flexibility in its international behavior.

Energy, trade, and military cooperation

Energy relations have always been the basis of Turkish-Russian cooperation, giving both countries a strategic edge even when tensions between them rise. Russia is a key energy supplier for Turkey, providing more than 40% of its natural gas imports, as well as large amounts of oil and coal (OSW 2024). The opening of the Turk Stream pipeline in 2020 made this interdependence stronger by allowing gas to flow directly to Turkey and Southeastern Europe without going through Ukraine. Russia is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant at Akkuyu. The \$20 billion project shows that Ankara wants to have long-term strategic partnerships with Moscow (Coskun 2023). Beyond energy, trade and tourism are vital parts of the relationship between the two countries. In 2022, despite Western sanctions and global isolation, Turkey received

more than 5.2 million Russian tourists, establishing Russia as the primary source of inbound tourism. This figures continued in 2023 making Russians the largest group of tourists to Turkey (Turkish Minute 2023). Despite political disagreements, like the shooting down of a Russian jet in 2015 and different geopolitical interests and calculations in Syria and Libya, trade between the two countries has remained strong. Russia is one of Turkey's most important trading partners, with the trade volume exceeding 65\$ billion in 2022 (AA 2023).

In the past, Turkish companies have participated in major infrastructure projects in Russia reflecting the pragmatism and flexibility in crisis-management capabilities of the two countries. One of the main reasons behind Ankara's decision to refrain from the politics of sanctions lies in its structural vulnerability and weak state of the economy. Hence, Turkey has chosen a strategy that encourages Russian capital to come in through tourism, real estate, and banking, despite its high inflation, a weak currency, and a rising current account deficit. Russia emerged as one of the main sources of tourism revenue having a crucial role in the country's post-pandemic economic recovery (Daniel & Lindenstrauss 2022).

Military relations, though more sensitive, have seen notable developments. Turkey's decision on procurement of the Russian-made S-400 air defense system in 2017 marked a significant shift in its defense policy. It drew strong criticism from NATO allies and resulted with the removal of Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program. Turkey went ahead with the acquisition, showing its willingness to have strategic independence in its defense policy. Turkish officials characterized the procurement as an expression of sovereign decision-making and an effort to achieve strategic autonomy in a changing global context. Turkey and Russia have backed different groups in Syria and Libya, but they have kept up a steady high-level military dialogue, worked together in de-escalation zones, and done joint patrols when necessary (Coskun 2023). Some scholars call this 'strategic compartmentalization', which is the intentional separation of economic and security spheres to avoid a complete breakdown. Asymmetric interdependence, marked by a shared awareness of vulnerabilities while preserving functional connections, has become an important aspect of the relationship.

While Turkish-Russian relations have deepened in the fields of trade, tourism, and energy, their political and military relations are fragile and prone to periodic crises. However, recurring tensions have mostly resulted in pragmatic solutions as opposed to long-term stalemates, reflecting the strategic commitment of both sides. In November 2015, Turkish forces shot down a Russian Su-24 jet near the Syrian border, claim-

ing that it had crossed into Turkish airspace. This incident caused a major diplomatic crisis, forcing Moscow to impose economic sanctions on Turkey and suspend bilateral agreements. In less than a year, Ankara and Moscow's relations returned to normal, showing that both sides wanted to avoid a long fight (Cheterian 2023). In every case, whether it was an aerial confrontation, managing regional conflicts, or buying strategic defense weapons, the crises did not end the relationship between Turkey and Russia. Pragmatic realignments have occurred, motivated by a mutual recognition that maintaining dialogue, despite considerable disagreements, furthers the geopolitical aims of both sides.

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR

Discussion: political positioning and diplomatic messaging

Turkey's approach to the war in Ukraine is a carefully balanced one, reflecting a broader drive for strategic autonomy. While it remains a committed member of NATO and maintains a pro-Western orientation, it has not followed its Western allies' policies toward Russia. This has been evident in its refusal to join the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union and the United States, despite public opposition to and condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This dual-track approach reflects a broader pattern of Turkish foreign policy, namely, an effort to assert itself as a regional leader that can engage with multiple actors simultaneously.

Besides its significant energy and trade connections with Russia, Turkey has nonetheless pursued considerable military and security collaboration with Ukraine, both before and throughout the conflict. The export of Bayraktar TB2 drones stands out as a profoundly symbolic and strategically vital element of this collaboration, emerging as an essential asset for Ukraine's defense during the initial phases of the conflict. Prior to 2022, Turkish defense firms had initiated collaborative production efforts with Ukraine, which encompassed the establishment of a joint venture focused on drone manufacturing and the provision of naval assets, including corvettes and unmanned aerial systems (Coskun 2023).

Turkey's choice to continue its defense collaboration with Ukraine, despite the Russian invasion, underscores a significant element of Ankara's strategic reasoning: preserving its position as a pertinent security player while avoiding direct provocation of Russia. Although this may seem paradoxical, it is consistent with Turkey's overarching strategy of strategic hedging, in which Ankara refrains from total alignment

with any single party and instead endeavors to cultivate a range of partnerships to uphold national autonomy (Shlykov 2023). From a doctrinal standpoint, Turkey's actions may be viewed as both transactional and strategically opportunistic. On one hand, the sales of Turkish UAVs provided both economic advantages and geopolitical leverage. Conversely, this collaboration bolstered Turkey's status as a middle power capable of shaping the results of regional conflicts while maintaining a degree of neutrality towards any particular coalition (Coskun 2023; Yegin 2019).

Also, it is noteworthy that Turkey's military involvement with Ukraine has not escalated to the level of a formal alliance or direct intervention. Turkey has intentionally refrained from actions, such as deploying troops or supplying offensive weaponry, that might provoke a significant reaction from Moscow. This measured yet confident stance demonstrates Ankara's willingness to maintain strategic adaptability while simultaneously enhancing Ukraine's defensive capabilities. Ultimately, Turkey's military relationship with Ukraine fulfills both symbolic and practical roles: it reassures NATO allies of Turkey's dedication to regional security, elevates the global standing of its defense industry, and strengthens its position as a crucial player in Eurasian security dynamics, all while preserving essential communication channels with Moscow.

STRATEGIC BALANCING: TURKEY AS A MEDIATOR

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Turkey has tried to be a unique broker, making itself one of the few countries that talks to both Kyiv and Moscow routinely. Most NATO partners strongly supported Ukraine and put sanctions on Russia. However, Ankara chose a more diplomatic road, preferring to negotiate and engage strategically in the process. The approach was clearly demonstrated in March 2022 when direct peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine were hosted in Istanbul. Although negotiations did not produce a lasting agreement they have clearly shown the distinct role of Turkey as a mediator capable of bringing two warring parties to the table. This mediator position of Turkey was also obvious in the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which made it possible for Ukrainian grain to be exported despite Russian blockades and prevented a world food crisis. Turkey's political work went beyond signing major deals. It also made it possible for high-profile prisoner swaps and kept in touch with both governments on a frequent basis. These actions were part of a larger strategy that is often called 'middle power diplomacy'. Ankara used its location in the world, its membership in NATO, and its links with Moscow to make itself an essential mediator.

In the security domain, Turkey supported Ukraine through symbolic and material contributions, most notably the Bayraktar TB2 drones, which not only served a military purpose but also enhanced Ankara's image as a valuable defense partner. Yet, at the same time, Ankara avoided entering into formal alliances or security commitments with Ukraine, thus preserving maneuvering room and avoiding a complete break with Russia. As noted by Vorotnyuk (2025), this selective engagement demonstrates that Turkey was seen by Ukraine as a 'partner but not an ally', a relationship defined more by shared interests than institutional guarantees.

Economically, Turkey maintained and even expanded its ties with Russia. The decision not to participate in the Western sanctions regime allowed Ankara to continue importing Russian energy, benefit from increased trade, and attract Russian tourists and investment, factors that were critical to economic stability, particularly ahead of the 2023 elections. Rather than treating economic interdependence as a constraint, Turkey used it as strategic leverage, reinforcing its relevance to both sides. This entire foreign policy strategy is best understood through the theoretical lens of hedging. Turkey did not fully align with any one camp, but rather, it made selective, interest-based decisions that allowed it to avoid risks, maintain autonomy, and enhance its regional profile. The concept of compartmentalization, as discussed by Aviv (2022), is also useful in this context: Ankara separated economic, diplomatic, and security tracks in its dealings with Russia, ensuring that tension in one area did not necessarily derail cooperation in another;

At the same time, constructivist insights help explain why Turkey emphasized certain principles, such as the sovereignty of Ukraine and the rights of Crimean Tatars, despite its otherwise cautious policy. These normative elements are closely tied to Turkey's identity as a regional power with historical and cultural ties to the Black Sea region. Meanwhile, neorealist considerations, such as energy dependency, regional instability, and alliance dynamics, explain the constraints that prevented a more assertive or ideologically driven stance. Middle power theory ties all of this together. Turkey's actions throughout the conflict represent the logic of a middle power seeking to remain visible and influential without becoming trapped in major power rivalries. As emphasized by Wodka (2023), this role involves both risk-taking and restraint, projecting power where possible, but also stepping back where necessary. Turkey's strategic balancing during the Ukraine war has not been a sign of confusion or indecisiveness, but rather a deliberate and multidimensional strategy. It has allowed Ankara to protect its interests, remain diplomatically relevant, and position itself as a key player in a deeply divided international landscape. Whether this balancing act

will remain sustainable amid growing pressure from both the West and Russia is uncertain but it clearly reflects a shift toward a more autonomous, assertive, and adaptable Turkish foreign policy.

From the neorealist perspective, Turkey's conduct can be interpreted as a rational response to its structural position within the international system. As a member of NATO, located at the edge of Europe and adjacent to Russia, Turkey operates in a high-risk security environment. The war in Ukraine represents not only a threat to regional stability, but also a direct challenge to Turkey's delicate geopolitical balance. Full alignment with the West could jeopardize its economic ties and provoke retaliation from Moscow, while full alignment with Russia would threaten its standing in NATO. This security dilemma helps explain why Turkey adopted a non-aligned, hedging posture. As Karakasis (2025) points out, Turkey's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia was not an ideological statement, but a calculated move to avoid escalating tensions and preserve economic lifelines. Also, energy dependency is another factor that neorealism helps clarify. Russia supplies a major portion of Turkey's gas imports, and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant project represents a long-term strategic connection. The Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, which is estimated to have cost \$20 billion and was built and paid for by Russia's Rosatom, is a big example of economic cooperation. The project, which is being built in Mersin Province, is estimated to fulfill 10% of Turkey's power needs when finished (World-Energy, 2023). In neorealist terms, this places Turkey in a structurally constrained position, where economic interdependence shapes foreign policy choices. As Waltz (1979) would argue, the structure limits agency, states do not have the luxury of acting purely on principle when survival is in the question.

Neorealism also explains Turkey's caution regarding formal defense commitments to Ukraine. Despite strengthening defense ties, such as drone sales and joint military dialogue, Ankara never entered a binding security alliance with Kyiv. From a neorealist point of view, this is consistent with a self-help logic: Turkey avoids commitments that could lead it in a direct confrontation with Russia, especially when it lacks the systemic power to shape outcomes alone. This theory helps explain the pragmatic and restrained nature of Turkey's foreign policy. Faced with a polarizing conflict, Ankara chose flexibility over ideology, and survival over solidarity.

While neorealism helps us understand Turkey's strategic calculations and systemic constraints, it cannot fully explain Ankara's normative choices, diplomatic tone, or the symbolic dimensions of its actions during the war in Ukraine. This is where constructivism becomes valuable. Constructivist theory argues that state behavior is

shaped not only by material factors like power or geography, but also by ideas, identities, historical narratives, and social norms. From a constructivist point, Turkey's approach to the Ukraine war represents not only pragmatism, but also how the state perceives itself and wishes to be perceived by others. Turkey's self-image as a regional stabilizer, a responsible actor, and a defender of oppressed communities reflects its foreign policy behavior, even when it might not align with hard power interests.

One key example of this is Turkey's consistent support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, especially in relation to Crimea and the Crimean Tatars. Even before the full-scale war began, Ankara had positioned itself as a vocal opponent of Russia's annexation of Crimea, citing both international law and cultural-historical ties. The Crimean Tatars, a Muslim-Turkic minority with strong emotional resonance in Turkish public discourse, are frequently mentioned by Turkish officials, not only as a humanitarian concern but as a way to reinforce Turkey's identity as a protector of Turkic and Islamic communities. This symbolic narrative goes beyond neorealism's material calculations. However, Russia's presence in Crimea poses a greater security dilemma for Turkey due to geographical proximity, a history of conflict, and regional competition. Therefore, this matter can be analytically observed through the prism of both theories, neorealism and constructivism.

Furthermore, constructivism also helps explain Turkey's active mediation efforts. The Istanbul peace talks, the grain export agreement, and the repeated offers to host negotiations were all part of Turkey's broader effort to frame itself as a bridge-builder and regional leader. As Wodka (2023) points out, Ankara uses its diplomatic initiatives not only to manage regional crises, but to project an identity of responsibility and credibility in the eyes of the international community. This is especially important for a state that is neither fully accepted by the West, nor entirely aligned with the East. Language and symbolism play a significant role as well. President Erdoğan and Turkish diplomats have repeatedly used terms like "fairness," "justice," and "balance" when discussing Ukraine and Russia. These terms are not merely rhetorical, they reflect a normative positioning aimed at reinforcing Turkey's independent status and moral authority. As Daniel & Lindenstrauss (2022) note, such discourse is carefully crafted to resonate both domestically and internationally, highlighting Turkey's role as an actor guided by its own principles rather than imposed loyalties.

Middle power theory offers a useful perspective for analyzing Turkey's strategic behavior during the war in Ukraine. Unlike great powers that shape global outcomes or smaller states that simply react, middle powers often operate in complex grey zones using diplomacy, selective engagement, and adaptability to pursue their interests.

Turkey's behavior reflects this logic, especially through its clear pattern of hedging and issue-based foreign policy. Hedging is a central concept within middle power theory, and it captures Turkey's approach more accurately than either "alignment" or "neutrality". Rather than committing fully to one camp, hedging involves maintaining flexibility, minimizing strategic risks, and ensuring access to multiple partners. In Turkey's case, this has meant supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and supplying it with drones, while simultaneously refusing to join sanctions against Russia and preserving bilateral trade. As highlighted by Balta & Bal (2024), middle powers often hedge not out of indecisiveness, but because they operate in volatile environments where over-commitment to any side can be dangerous. Turkey's energy dependency on Russia, for example, makes a hard break economically risky, while its NATO membership and security identity require alignment with Euro-Atlantic norms.

Hedging allows Ankara to navigate this tension without locking itself into binary choices. As noted in the work of Özertem (2023), Turkey's initiatives are shaped not just by its interests, but also by its desire to position itself as a bridge between conflicting actors. By offering neutral ground for talks and playing a stabilizing role in the Black Sea, Ankara enhances its diplomatic profile while avoiding entanglement in direct military action. Rather than trying to control the entire conflict dynamic, Turkey focused on areas where it could act credibly and usefully. This pragmatic, task-oriented diplomacy is typical for middle powers, and it strengthens their reputation as constructive actors even when they lack overwhelming hard power.

One of the more distinctive features of Turkey's approach has been its ability to compartmentalize different aspects of its relationship with Russia and Ukraine. Military support to Ukraine (e.g. Bayraktar drones) has been allowed to coexist with intensified trade with Russia, continued energy imports, and joint infrastructure projects like the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. As discussed in research of Aviv (2022), Turkey has pursued this separation deliberately ensuring that tension in one domain (e.g. security) does not automatically spill over into others (e.g. economics or energy). This policy has enabled Ankara to preserve strategic autonomy while extracting benefits from both sides. Such flexibility is not always sustainable, but it reflects the core survival logic of middle powers: being relevant without being trapped, engaged without being overexposed. In the context of the Ukraine war, this compartmentalized approach has helped Turkey withstand international pressure, maintain internal stability, and preserve its role as a regional actor with agency.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the Turkish response to the war in Ukraine from three different theoretical angles, namely neorealism, constructivism and middle power theory. Each of these perspectives provide more insights on a specific aspects of Turkish foreign policy, but none of them alone explains the whole picture. Only when viewed together do these theories allow us to see the complexity and multidimensional aspect of Turkish behavior in times of crisis. Although many studies analyze Turkey's role and position in the post-2022 period in relation to Russia and Ukraine, the contribution of this research lies in the analysis that integrates the three theories and covers a longer time period from 2014 and the invasion of Crimea to the present. This approach provides a better insight and understanding of the continuity of Turkey's policy based on strategic autonomy and a mediatory position.

Neorealism helps us to understand the external pressures and constraints that Turkey faces. The war in Ukraine has further sharpened global divisions, and Turkey has found itself, as it has many times in its history, between great powers, with the need to balance its own security, economic interest and strategic space for action. From a neorealist perspective, Turkey's refraining to impose sanctions on Russia, its continued trade cooperation and its refusal to make formal military commitments to Ukraine represent a rational and cautious response of a state trying to preserve itself in an unpredictable international environment. Yet this approach is insufficient in explaining why Turkey chose to actively mediate, why it insisted on the language of international law and humanitarian principles, or why it publicly emphasized the importance of respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity.

This is where constructivism comes into play, emphasizing the role of identity, values, and norms in shaping foreign policy. Turkey sees itself not solely as a NATO member or a regional player, but also as a state with a moral and historical obligation especially to peoples like the Crimean Tatars, with whom it shares cultural and religious ties. This dimension of politics cannot be measured through statistics and power, but is clearly visible in rhetoric, symbols, and diplomatic gestures. Middle power theory brings both approaches together and paints a broader picture. It explains how states that are neither small nor large try to remain relevant in a system that often marginalizes them. It is through this perspective that Turkey has shown that its behavior was not the result of indecision, but of deliberate flexibility. Strategies such as hedging, selective engagement, crisis mediation, and tactical balancing between East and West are typical of middle powers seeking to maximize their space for maneuver.

All of this together paints a richer and more complex picture. Turkish foreign policy has been driven by various factors, the struggle for autonomy, simultaneous pressure from within and without, the desire for regional influence, and the need to avoid open conflict with any side. It is this multidimensional approach that supports the main hypothesis of this paper: that Turkey's position towards the war in Ukraine was shaped by an attempt to balance economic and energy dependence on Russia with obligations within NATO, while striving to preserve regional influence and strategic autonomy. However, although Turkey currently benefits from its hedging strategy by maintaining ties with the West and Ukraine on the one hand, and strengthening strategic autonomy through ties with China and Russia on the other, it is difficult to believe in the long-term sustainability of such an approach, especially considering the polarity and tensions between Brussels and Moscow in the context of the Ukrainian war. As a result, strengthening economic ties and eventual political rapprochement with China and Russia could ultimately further threaten Turkey's position in the West.

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TURSKA I RUSIJA: DINAMIKA ODNOSA U KONTEKSTU UKRAJINSKE KRIZE

Sažetak

Ovo istraživanje analizira dinamične odnose Turske s Rusijom u kontekstu rata u Ukrajini, s posebnim naglaskom na to kako Ankara pronalazi ravnotežu između svojih strateških i ekonomskih interesa u održavanju odnosa s Moskvom i svojih obaveza prema NATO savezu. Rad ilustrira balansiranje Turske između Rusije i Zapada analizirajući njeno učešće u Sporazumu o žitaricama u Crnom moru, uz druge ključne procese kao što su nabavka raketnog sistema S-400, energetska diplomatija sa Rusijom i isporuka dronova Ukrajini. Stoga se ovo istraživanje vrti oko glavnog pitanja zašto je Turska odstupila od drugih

NATO saveznika u potpunoj izolaciji i sankcioniranju Rusije slijedeći svoj pristup strateške autonomije i regionalne dinamike. Naš glavni fokus je na periodu od 2014. do 2025. godine, počevši od ruske aneksije Krima pa sve do potpune invazije u februaru 2022. godine, pokrivajući ključne prekretnice u odnosima Turske i Rusije, kao što su obaranje ruskog aviona, nabavka sistema S-400, saradnja u Siriji i rastuća pozicija Turske u geopolitici regije. Ovaj širi vremenski okvir omogućava komparativnu analizu trendova vanjske politike u različitim fazama krize. Nalazi bi mogli poslužiti kao platforma za buduća istraživanja pozicije Turske u multipolarnim međunarodnim odnosima i kriznoj diplomatiji.

Ključne riječi: Turska; Rusija; rat u Ukrajini; geopolitika

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