

The War in Ukraine and Turkish Security: Basic Factors of Ankara's Strategic Calculation

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Turkish stance towards the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine is based on the national interest that implies avoiding risks and profiting from opportunities created by the conflict. The ultimate aim is to make its own place in the post-war international system more optimal than it was in the pre-war one.

The war between Russia and Ukraine does not present a direct existential threat to Türkiye and thus doesn't require any essential adaptation of its national defense system¹. Unlike Poland and the other parts of NATO's Eastern Flank, who due to their geography, have no choice but to respond to the arisen risks by considerably increasing military expenditure and enlarging their armed forces, Russian advance in Ukraine doesn't change the basic calculation of Turkish national security objectives, which is determined by multiple other factors, coming from regions different than Eastern Europe².

Eastern Europe is not a part of Turkish direct neighborhood, and thus Ankara's security calculation is different than other NATO member-states. Especially those located on the Eastern Flank whose security, in case Ukraine loses the war, will be directly affected by the fact that their strategic depth shrinks by some 1,500 kilometers. That's why it would be unrealistic to expect Ankara to perceive the ongoing conflict in the same way that Ukraine or Eastern Flank states do and to behave like it was located elsewhere than it actually is.

Ukraine is directly attacked and fighting not only for the shape of its territory, demographic composition and economic potential, but the very existence of its statehood and the nationhood. What president Putin presented as a justification of the 'special operation' in his pre-attack speech³, was nothing less than a direct denial of Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign subject of international politics. He described it as an 'artificial' and 'seasonal' state 'invented by

¹ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/impact-war-ukraine-russian-turkish-relations-and-black-sea-security-three-potential>

² <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/deciphering-turkeys-assertive-military-and-defense-strategy-objectives-pillars-and-implications>

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>

Lenin'. In his logics, the territorial shape of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic was designed to serve the tactical – sociotechnical as we would say in the contemporary terms – objectives of the Bolsheviks and did not represent a natural response to the expectations of the Ukrainian nation being an existing social phenomenon and behaving as such.

Russian discourse qualifies Ukrainians as a part of the Russian nation and thus 'organically' destined to join the unique pan-Russian state. Ukrainian statehood is presented as an 'anti-Russian' project artificially designed by the West (quoting Russian officials, it is not easy to omit the obvious logical inconsistency between 'being created by Lenin' and 'being the Western project') to reorganize the post-imperial 'Rimland' in the way to contain the Russian 'Heartland' (to put it in the terms of Mackinder and Spykman)⁴.

None of those arguments is imaginably applicable to Türkiye and thus it is difficult to visualize Moscow formulating to Ankara a demand that would put Turkish territorial or national integrity into question. As a consequence, it is difficult to perceive Russia as a direct threat to Turkish national security. As a result, Ukraine on its part perceives Türkiye (which is not and can't imaginably be an object of Russian neo-imperial drive) as a potential guarantor of its independence – a position, that was more than once expressed by president Zelensky⁵. And this special position, of being geographically close to Russia but at the same time politically immune to its expansionism opens to Ankara new space for increasing its influence in the post-War Ukraine as well as strengthening its position towards both Russia and the West.

What is more, by making a try to annihilate Ukrainian statehood, Russia adopts a strategy that is, in longer perspective, incompatible with proposing Ukraine and other post-soviet states any form of a system of close alliances. Creating this kind of 'alternative NATO' centered on Moscow based on a possible delegation of competences but at the same time respecting each other's right to sovereign state (a 'better' version of what the real NATO proposes) was still an option before the February 2022 aggression.

But the two strategies that Russia tried to realize at the same time (post-imperial Reconquista and creation of a system of partnership based on inter-state cooperation) are strictly alternative and directly incompatible. If Moscow applies the first approach to one of the countries (Ukraine), it automatically moves all of its other post-Soviet neighbors in a terrifying

⁴ <https://mackinderforum.org/heartland-vs-rimland-continental-vs-maritime-power-the-geopolitics-of-the-first-world-war/>

⁵ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/ukraine-wants-countries-including-turkiye-as-security-guarantors/2549218>

impression to possibly be its next object⁶. And this motivates those countries to seek for an alternative (a partner that would provide security and progress without violating sovereignty). And this tendency, seemingly stronger with every next month of this war, due to the geographical factor, opens interesting perspectives to Ankara as a potentially alternative regional leader (at least in the South Caucasus and potentially in Central Asia⁷) ready and apt to guarantee the existing order based on the principle of territorial status quo (internationally recognized borders of the former Soviet republics).

Considered from the point of view of political realism, this situation created by the Kremlin, makes Russia a driver of Turkish interests in the post-Soviet space: the longer and more evident that Russia attacks Ukraine, threatens Kazakhstan and abandons Armenia, the more those countries (as well as all other post-Soviet republics) will address Türkiye to guarantee their sovereignty and thus automatically make Ankara a regional leader. In this circumstances, it would be counterproductive to prevent Moscow from making strategic mistakes that lead to create a post-Russian power vacuum to be filled by the rising mid-powers (Poland in Eastern Europe, Türkiye in South Caucasus and Central Asia).

After fifteen months of this war, it is already evident, that independently of its final territorial result, this conflict will change the geopolitical configuration not only in Eastern Europe – the region where it physically takes place – but in all regions adjacent to Russia including Black Sea, South Caucasus and Central Asia – elements of the system vital to Turkish interests. And already now, it's clear, that the coming change will be profitable for Türkiye, making it – by the force of circumstances – a real regional power.

⁶ <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-post-soviet-sphere-influence-jeopardy>

⁷ <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/turkeys-return-central-asia>