

# TURKEY'S RESPONSE TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE IN THE CONTEXT OF SYSTEMIC CHANGES AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

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## Abstract

As it is one of the few NATO members that refused to sever cooperation with Russia in 2022, Turkey's response to the war in Ukraine can be seen as a critical case study in the dynamics of contemporary geopolitics. This article examines Turkey's strategic positioning and policy responses regarding the conflict, with the aim of understanding the logic behind Ankara's decision to present itself as a mediator, instead of aligning itself with the mostly united policy of the West. Embracing the theoretical framework of neorealism, the article first examines the correlation between systemic changes and Turkish foreign policy, as the author considers that the emergence of a "post-hegemonic world order" profoundly affects Ankara's opportunities in the international environment. Employing the analytical approach of geopolitics, the second section of the study delves into Turkey's security concerns and economic interests in the Black Sea region and examines the evolution of Ankara's geostrategy towards the region since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Building upon the context outlined by the first two sections, the third part of the study analyses Ankara's foreign policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, focusing primarily on the period from February to December 2022.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, war, foreign policy

## Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the 21st century has been characterized by quickly evolving power dynamics and the emergence of new challenges that transcend traditional boundaries. Against this backdrop, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has become a focal point, with the potential to reshape the contours of the international system. This study examines Turkey's response to the war within the broader context of the changing world order, shedding light on Ankara's strategic considerations, diplomatic maneuvers, and the implications of its stance on regional and global dynamics. The analytical focus placed on Turkey is justified by the fact that Turkey is

one of the few NATO members that refused to sever cooperation with Russia in 2022. In addition, Ankara's ability to control the straits linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean enables it to influence the course of the conflict. Consequently, an examination of the Turkish strategic perspective on the war in Ukraine brings us closer to a comprehensive understanding of the conflict. This explains the relatively high number of studies (Isachenko, 2023; Isachenko & Swistek, 2023; Bechev, 2023; Dalay, 2022; Adar, 2022; Tziarras, 2022; Yang, 2023) addressing Turkey's role in the war. Building upon the findings presented in these articles, this paper aims to contribute to the academic discourse on the subject by interpreting Turkey's response to the war in relation to systemic changes and regional dynamics.

The study employs the theoretical framework of neorealism, which claims that the international system is structured by the logic of anarchy, and the distribution of power on the systemic level profoundly affects the options and possibilities of individual states seeking to maintain their existing positions or increase their power (Waltz, 1979). On this theoretical basis, the author assumes that the emergence of a "post-hegemonic world order" strongly influences Ankara's abilities and opportunities in the international arena. To verify this hypothesis, the second section of the study examines the impact of post-Cold War systemic changes on the evolution of Turkish foreign policy. The neorealist theoretical approach is complemented by a geopolitical perspective in the third section, which provides a brief overview of the evolution of Turkey's geostrategy in the Black Sea region from 1991 to 2021. This requires clarifying the meaning of geopolitics and geostrategy, as these are related yet distinct notions (Kacziba, 2023, p. 37). According to Saul Bernard Cohen (2015), geopolitics should be defined as "the analysis of the interaction between, on the one hand, geographical settings and perspectives and, on the other, political processes. The settings are composed of geographical features and patterns and the multi-layered regions that they form. The political processes include forces that operate at the international level and those on the domestic scene that influence international behavior" (p. 16). In Grygiel's (2006) understanding, geostrategy examines "where a state concentrates its efforts by projecting military power and directing diplomatic activity. The underlying assumption is that states have limited resources [therefore] they must focus politically and militarily on specific areas of the world. Geostrategy describes this foreign-policy thrust of a state" (p. 22). Finally, the fourth part of the study sets the analysis of Turkey's response to the war in Ukraine into the context outlined by the previous two sections, focusing primarily on the period from February to December 2022. Accordingly, in addition to examining Ankara's concrete foreign policy reactions in the light of regional dynamics, the section also discusses the potential effects of the war on Turkey's geopolitical position in the changing global order, with a special focus on Ankara's relations with NATO, the EU, and China.

## Turkish foreign policy in a post-hegemonic world order

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union radically transformed the geopolitical environment of the Turkish Republic at the beginning of the 1990s. Some political analysts at the time concluded that the disappearance of the Soviet threat would inevitably diminish Turkey's strategic weight in the eyes of its NATO partners (Gaffney, 1998, p. 1). Others emphasized new opportunities and argued that the power vacuum created by the collapse of the socialist bloc in the regions surrounding Asia Minor has significantly widened Ankara's strategic latitude, thereby allowing Turkey to become a regional power capable of influencing global affairs (Davutoğlu, 2016, p. 82). Developments during the 1990s confirmed neither interpretation. On one hand, Washington's interest in preserving the geopolitical pluralism of Eurasia, and Ankara's ambition to exploit its own supposed strategic depth in the Caucasus and Central Asia aligned, giving Turkey the opportunity to demonstrate its strategic weight vis-à-vis the United States and NATO after the disappearance of the Cold War rival. The American perception of Turkey's continuous strategic significance was articulated for instance by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his influential book, *The Grand Chessboard* (1997): "Turkey stabilizes the Black Sea region, controls access from it to the Mediterranean Sea, balances Russia in the Caucasus, still offers an antidote to Muslim fundamentalism, and serves as the southern anchor for NATO" (p. 47).

On the other hand, despite Turgut Özal's efforts in the early 1990s to transform the country into a political and economic powerhouse in its own neighborhood (Haugom, 2019, p. 209), Turkish foreign policy has achieved only limited successes and remained essentially Western-oriented in the course of the decade. This was partially a consequence of domestic challenges – political instability, economic crisis, and the recurrence of Turkey's conflict with the PKK –, but also reflected the impact of the post-Cold War transition to an America-centric global order. In the words of Erşen and Köstem (2019), "Ankara's commitment to transatlantic security and economic institutions in the 1990s was consistent with the unipolar structure of the international system, in which the U.S. enjoyed an unrivalled status" (p. 2). Since then, however, the international system has been going through a dramatic change. Usually described either as the crisis of the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2018) or a transition from unipolarity to multipolarity (Acharya, 2017), this change is rooted in a gradual shift in the center of economic gravity from the rich trans-Atlantic democracies to emerging economies outside of the Western world (Peters, 2023, p. 1653).

According to Ikenberry (2018), the liberal international order can be defined as a "multifaceted and sprawling international order, organized around economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity", defended and held together by the hegemonic power of the United States (p. 7).

After functioning for several decades as a subsystem within the bipolar structure of the Cold War, it was extended and globalized, as the demise of the soviet empire paved the way for the “unipolar moment”. This, Ikenberry argues, is the development that eventually led to the crisis of the liberal order. With the integration of China, India, Russia, Brazil, and others, the distribution of power and wealth in the system started to change. Benefiting from the opportunities offered by globalization, these non-Western powers have achieved impressive economic progress, and aspired to renegotiate their position in the hierarchy, thereby making multilateral decision-making more complicated (Ikenberry, 2015, pp. 408-409).

For some years, these developments were unfolding within the international liberal order. In the last fifteen years, however, the order itself has been increasingly challenged, mainly because of three interrelated tendencies. The first is the United States’ gradual disengagement from multilateralism, which became especially visible during the presidency of Donald Trump, who initiated the US withdrawal from the Paris Accord; the Trans-Pacific Partnership; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; the United Nations Human Rights Council; and the Iran Nuclear Deal. For some scholars, these developments indicate, that the United States is stepping back from its role as a world leader (Huang, 2020). Although it continues to be the most dominant actor in international affairs, the United States’ influence and freedom of action as a global hegemon is gradually diminishing. As it is no longer able to operate the existing liberal order according to its preferences, it may become disinterested in maintaining it (Tálas, 2021, pp. 847-850).

The second tendency is the growing willingness of emerging powers to directly challenge the US-led order. In this regard, Russia and China deserve special attention. Russia signified its determination to use military force to pursue its geopolitical interests by waging war against Georgia in 2008, annexing Crimea in 2014, conducting a military intervention in Syria in 2015, and invading Ukraine in 2022. In parallel, Moscow aimed to institutionalize its sphere of influence through the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, an ambitious project for economic integration in the post-Soviet region (Svarin, 2016, p. 137). While Russian revisionism is mainly confined to the area designated by Moscow as “Russia’s near abroad”, China poses a systemic challenge to the United States. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, and the foundation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2016 among other projects indicate, that in the period following the 2008 global financial crisis, China has gradually transformed from a reformist of the liberal international order into a revisionist power that seeks to establish alternative mechanisms of global governance and international cooperation (Huang, 2020, pp. 5-6). Beijing’s vision focuses on connectivity and reflects global needs such as the lack of infrastructure and capital shortages (Vörös, 2022, pp. 16-17). It aims to create the world’s largest economic corridor linking East Asia and Western Europe through the resource-rich regions of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. In

addition to conquering new markets, enhancing its own energy security and meeting the investment and infrastructure requirements of partner countries, China's economic expansion is also weakening US positions in Eurasia, thereby accelerating the global power shift (Maçães, 2018, p. 68).

The third tendency is the entrenchment of authoritarianism, which is gradually eroding the popularity of liberal ideology and altering the regime landscape worldwide (Huang, 2020, p. 3). Krastev and Holmes (2019) refer to the post-1989 period as the Age of Imitation, in which the hegemony of liberalism was rendered unchallengeable by a unipolar world order dominated by the West. This ideological supremacy endowed Western institutional forms with such normative legitimacy that their imitation seemed obligatory (p. 11). The impacts of the 2008 economic crisis, the 2015 European refugee crisis, and the spectacular rise of China, however, have brought this period to an end. The liberal model of governance and economic management has been increasingly challenged by a rising number of illiberal and populist regimes, claiming to defend national unity against the homogenizing forces of globalization (Huang, 2020, p. 7).

The result of these tendencies is the emergence of a post-hegemonic order, a multiplex world that is not defined by the hegemony of any single nation or idea. As the United States no longer has a monopoly over making the rules and dominating the institutions of global governance, the surviving elements of the old liberal order must coexist with actors and approaches that do not bend to America's commands and preferences (Acharya, 2017, p. 277). Besides the fierce geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalry between the United States and China, another aspect of the post-hegemonic era that receives growing scholarly attention is the increasingly influential role of middle powers. In the absence of a superpower capable (or willing) to play the role of the "world's policeman", and with the emergence of alternative centers of power, their geopolitical space expands and their opportunities for economic diversification increase, enabling them to reduce their dependence on Western financial and political systems more effectively (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021, p. 1088). The strengthened position of middle powers can also be regarded as an important difference between today's world and the Cold War era. During the latter, a genuinely independent foreign policy for middle powers was nearly non-existent, as the bipolar structure of the time compelled most of them to align with one of the two superpowers (Mammadov, 2024). Today's competing superpowers, on the other hand, do not possess the level of dominance that the United States and the Soviet Union achieved at the dawn of the Cold War. In multiple strategically important regions, neither the United States nor China can assert unequivocal hegemony. This allows middle powers to play a more decisive role in regional affairs, thereby shaping a world that is increasingly fragmented and transactional (Aydıntaşbaş et. al., 2023, pp. 2-3).

In this regard, the evolution of Turkish foreign policy is a case in point. Turkey's political leadership perceives the growing economic weight of Asia and the

intercontinental integration promoted by China as a historic opportunity for the country to reassess its geopolitical position and to move from the eastern periphery of the West to the center of the emerging Eurasian “supercontinent”. By utilizing its geographical location, Turkey embraces connectivity and aims to become an inescapable hub of supply chains between Europe and Asia. Consequently, its self-perception is not only a “bridge” that connects continents and civilizations, but a central power that plays an active role in Eurasian affairs. One of the key theoretical creators of this strategic perspective is the Former Turkish Foreign Minister (2009-2014) and Prime Minister (2014-2016) Ahmet Davutoğlu. In his influential 2001 book, *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu advocates the abandonment of a passive and unilaterally Western-oriented mentality and the adoption of a new strategic attitude that is in line with the Ottoman historical heritage. In his view, the Turkish state can succeed in the dynamically changing geopolitical environment of the 21st century if it uses soft power tools – flexible diplomacy, cultural influence, international trade, and capital investment – to increase its political, economic, and cultural influence in the surrounding regions (Davutoğlu, 2016, pp. 116-118). Following his appointment as Foreign Minister, Davutoğlu attempted to put his ideas into practice. By the mid-2010s, however, the destabilization of Turkey’s neighborhood and Ankara’s deepening involvement in the Syrian conflict questioned the viability of his vision. In parallel, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s efforts to expand his executive power led to Davutoğlu’s resignation in the spring of 2016.

Since the failed coup attempt of July 2016<sup>1</sup>, Davutoğlu’s “Neo-Ottomanism” has been superseded by President Erdoğan’s new strategic vision, in which Turkey’s self-perception as a central power is wedded to an anti-Western discourse that emphasizes threats to national security and independence (Haugom, 2019, p. 210). In this framework, achieving strategic autonomy has become an absolute priority. To decrease its strategic and economic dependence on the Western world, Ankara has significantly intensified its cooperation with Russia and China. Building upon the theory of Steven R. David (1991), which explains the correlation between regime security and alignment decisions, we can assume that Ankara’s turn towards Moscow and Beijing is – at least partially – motivated by domestic concerns: the shifting balance of economic power in the world enables the increasingly authoritarian Erdoğan-regime to consolidate its domestic position by attracting foreign capital and investment into the country without the requirement to meet Western expectations for the rule of law.

Besides the quest for greater strategic autonomy, another aspect of Erdoğan’s foreign policy is increased assertiveness in public diplomacy. The Turkish president

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<sup>1</sup> On the night of July 15, 2016, a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to seize control of key government institutions, including the presidential palace and the parliament, to overthrow the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.



tends to use a sharp tone in disputes with Western countries (Haugom, 2019, p. 210), and stresses the need to reform the institutional mechanism of the United Nations Security Council, which, he argues, is unfair towards the developing countries of the “Global South” and provides a license to members of the P-5 to abuse their privileges (Aral, 2019, p. 85). Meanwhile, the pursuit of geopolitical and security interests through projecting military force beyond Turkey’s borders has also become an increasingly prominent element of Turkish foreign policy. In the period between 2016 and 2022, Ankara occupied stretches of territory in Northern Syria; intervened in the Libyan civil war; took a confrontational stance in the Eastern Mediterranean; and provided extensive military support for Azerbaijan in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

In many cases, the Turkish government has clearly and demonstratively put the pursuit of national interests ahead of meeting Western demands. Examples include Ankara’s decisions to buy the S-400 air defense missile system from Russia, to confront US-backed Kurdish militias in Northern Syria, and to obstruct Sweden’s accession to NATO. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that Ankara aims to break its institutionalized ties with the West. In addition to its strong economic links with the European Union, Turkey considers NATO membership too important to give it up in the name of Eurasian orientation. While maintaining a transactional collaboration with the West, however, the Erdoğan administration continues to actively seek to strengthen its strategic autonomy through assertive foreign policy and economic cooperation with alternative centers of power.

## **A brief overview of the evolution of Turkey’s geostrategy in the Black Sea region from 1991 to 2021**

In addition to producing a shift on the systemic level, the disintegration of the Soviet sphere of influence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to a geopolitical transformation in the Black Sea region. During the decades of the Cold War, the regional order was characterized by Russian-Soviet dominance over the entire stretch of the area along the Black Sea, except for the southern shores, controlled by Turkey, the sole representative of NATO in the region (Sezer, 1996, p. 80). Accordingly, Ankara’s strategic value was mainly determined by the role it played as the Eastern outpost of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance – a barrier to Soviet expansionist ambitions towards the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean basin (Aydın, 2009, p. 278). The collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991 dramatically changed this configuration, as the number of littoral states increased from four to six, and the regional balance of power shifted in Turkey’s favor. The most consequential event resulting from the decline of Moscow’s territorial control was the emergence of independent Ukraine on the northern shore of the Black Sea. While Russia reacted to the loss of territory with frustration, Ankara embraced the new regional order,

finding an important partner in Kyiv. As pointed out by Sezer (1996), the unfolding cooperation between the two countries reflected their shared desire to preserve the post-Soviet status quo in the Black Sea region in the face of potential Russian revisionism. Following this logic, Turkey from the outset supported Kyiv's quest for achieving complete independence from Moscow in general and gaining full sovereignty over Crimea in particular (pp. 86-88).

Another element of Turkey's foreign policy towards the Black Sea region in the post-Cold War era was promoting economic cooperation among littoral states. Turkish President Turgut Özal envisioned at the beginning of the 1990s a regional cooperation zone, that would facilitate commercial relations between littoral states and secure a leadership role for Turkey in the wider region. His diplomatic initiative led to the signature of the Bosphorus Declaration, which established the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), an international regional organization involving the six littoral states (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine) and five non-littoral ones (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece, and Moldova) (Aydin, 2014, p. 385). Because of the lack of a united political perspective, and the emergence of geopolitical conflicts within and between member states, BSEC failed to evolve into a successful project of regional institutionalization. Despite its shortcomings on a regional level, the organization has nevertheless been effective in the sense, that it provided a platform, on which Turkey and Russia could gradually strengthen their economic cooperation, especially in the fields of energy, tourism, and trade (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018, p. 74).

Following the turn of the millennium, Ankara has taken multiple steps to extend regional cooperation to the security sector, by launching multilateral cooperation schemes<sup>2</sup> designed to strengthen regional stability and security. As described by Çelikpala and Erşen (2018), the rationale behind these Turkish efforts was not only to highlight Turkey's geopolitical role but to limit the presence of outside actors in the Black Sea, thereby protecting the region from great power rivalry (p. 75). Especially after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Ankara embraced the discourse of regional ownership concerning the Black Sea region, a concept identifying the rise of exclusive regional integrations as an alternative to a unipolar world order supervised by a "global hegemon". In the words of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the idea of regional ownership refers to the aspiration to "find regional solutions to regional problems, rather than waiting for other actors from outside the region to impose their own solutions" (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012). Following this logic, Turkey's Black Sea geostrategy aimed at enhancing collaboration among littoral states, preserving regional stability, limiting the involvement of the

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<sup>2</sup> Two notable examples are the *Black Sea Naval Force* and the *Black Sea Harmony*. Both cooperation programs were established on the initiative of Turkey at the beginning of the 2000s, and both were joined by the other littoral states.



United States and other outside actors in regional affairs, and maintaining a balanced relationship with Russia.

A crucial element of this strategy is Ankara's determination to implement the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, an international agreement that has been defining the legal status of the Turkish Straits since 1936. The treaty recognizes Turkish sovereignty over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, allows for the free passage of commercial ships, and restricts the entry and length of stay in the Black Sea of military ships from non-littoral states (Aydin, 2009, p. 280). From a Turkish perspective, the Montreux Convention represents an important instrument that helps to preserve stability and order in the region. On the other hand, Ankara's adherence to the legal regime benefits Moscow by enabling it to secure regional maritime dominance over NATO (Isachenko, 2023, p. 20). The Turkish intention to shield the region from great power competition became evident in August 2008, after the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian war, when Turkey invoked the Montreux Convention to prevent two American ships from entering the Black Sea (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, p. 5). Davutoğlu, who was at the time chief foreign policy advisor of Prime Minister Erdoğan, justified the decision by emphasizing Turkey's energy dependence on Russia: "Turkey is almost 75-80 percent dependent on Russia for energy. We don't want to see a Russian-American or Russian-NATO confrontation. ... We don't want to pay the bill of strategic mistakes or miscalculation by Russia, or by Georgia" (Bruno, 2008). The Russo-Georgian conflict indeed demonstrated the increasing tension between alternative great power strategies in the region (Aydin, 2014, p. 393), as Russia's determination to reestablish control over the post-Soviet periphery clashed with the US agenda of extending NATO's presence in the Black Sea region (Sakwa, 2014, p. 83). Instead of siding with its NATO-ally, Turkey proposed the establishment of the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, a regional project which attempted to facilitate communication and confidence building between Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia (Babacan, 2008).

After 2008, Turkey continued to pursue a Black Sea policy based on the doctrine of regional ownership, its strategic approach, however, was severely tested by the events of 2014 and 2015. The Russian annexation and the subsequent militarization of Crimea, complemented by the rapid modernization of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, greatly strengthened Russia's ability to project power inside and beyond the Black Sea basin. With its enhanced military capabilities, Russia once again signaled its claim to regional hegemony, thereby exerting increasing pressure on the other riparian states (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, p. 2). This has caused a dramatic change in the region's security situation, which directly contradicted Turkey's efforts to sustain the post-Cold War regional status quo (Gaber, 2020, p. 49). Accordingly, the Turkish government proclaimed the referendum in Crimea on 16 March illegal and made clear its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity (Republic of Türkiye,

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). In addition, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called the discriminatory political practices of the Russian authorities against Crimean Tatars unacceptable (Daily Sabah, 2015). On the other hand, despite the critical tone of its public diplomatic communication regarding the annexation of the peninsula, Ankara has cautiously avoided any concrete countermeasures, that could have disrupted the generally positive dynamics in its dialogue with Russia (Gaber, 2020, p. 47). Most importantly, Turkey refused to join Western sanctions against Russia, and continued its economic collaboration with Moscow. The latter was evident for instance in the announcement of the Turkish Stream natural gas project during President Putin's visit to Turkey at the end of 2014 (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018, p. 76).

In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, Ankara thus maintained its ability to compartmentalize geopolitical disagreements and economic collaboration in its relationship with Moscow. In contrast, Russia's direct military intervention in Syria in September 2015 led to a seven-month-long breakdown of their relations, after the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian warplane that had violated Turkish airspace (Çelikpala, 2019, p. 19). The "jet incident" was quickly followed by Moscow's decision to initiate economic sanctions against Turkey, and to deploy S-400 anti-aircraft missiles to Syria. Through the deployment of the highly effective missile system, Russia has closed off Syrian airspace to the Turkish Air Force, preventing Ankara from shaping the course of the conflict to its own interests (Erşen, 2017, p. 92).

An indirect consequence of the "jet crisis" was the dramatic, albeit temporary modification of Ankara's Black Sea policy, which was displayed in a speech that Erdoğan delivered at a defense conference of Balkan nations in May 2016. In a sharp break with Turkey's traditional Black Sea discourse, the president argued that NATO must respond to Russian revisionism by extending its military presence in the region: "[NATO's] invisibility in the Black Sea turns it into a Russian lake, so to speak. (...) As NATO members, we should take all required steps in all spheres, including the sea, air and ground. Otherwise, the history shall not forgive us" (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2016). In line with the President's reasoning, when NATO members decided at the 2016 Warsaw Summit to launch the Tailored Forward Presence for the Black Sea region, Ankara agreed to participate in Romania's multinational brigade under a NATO flag, aimed at responding to Russia's assertive posture in the region (Gaber, 2020, p. 46). These developments suggested Turkey's intention to return to the foreign policy approach of the early Cold War-period when Ankara was making efforts to join the Euro-Atlantic Alliance to counter the Soviet Union's overwhelming regional dominance.

The rapid normalization of Turkish-Russian relations, which was accelerated by the failed coup attempt of July 2016, however, led to a repositioning of Ankara's Black Sea strategy. In the period following the coup attempt, relations between

Ankara and Moscow were marked by military coordination in Syria, a Turkish decision to buy Russian S-400 missile systems, and the signing of a bilateral agreement on the construction of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline. Consequently, Turkey's Black Sea policy became largely defined by the aspiration to resume full-speed cooperation with Russia (Gaber, 2019, p. 47). Accordingly, Turkey expressed concerns regarding NATO's decision to extend its military presence in the region in February 2017, and held a joint naval exercise with Russia two months later (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018, p. 84). This implies, that following the reconciliation with Moscow, Ankara has returned to the policy that is based on the assumption, that regional stability can be maintained through the appeasement of Russia and the exclusion of outside actors.

At the same time, however, developments in Turkish-Ukrainian relations indicate, that despite the spectacular improvement of Turkish-Russian relations, Ankara remained concerned over Russia's increasingly overwhelming military superiority in the Black Sea. After the annexation of Crimea and the Russian intervention in Syria, Turkey and Ukraine have elevated their partnership to a strategic level. In 2015 Turkey delivered its first shipment of ammunition to Ukraine (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, p. 5), which was followed in February 2016 by an agreement to extend their cooperation to designing and manufacturing aircraft engines, radar units, military communication and navigation systems (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 16). Ankara and Kyiv continued their strategic cooperation despite the Turkish-Russian rapprochement. Most crucially, the two sides agreed in 2019 on the delivery of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 combat drones to Ukraine, which were reportedly used in the Donbas by Ukrainian forces in October 2021 (Isachenko, 2023, p. 22). In addition, the two countries signed a military agreement during President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Turkey in October 2020, further deepening their defence cooperation in the Black Sea region (Daily Sabah, 2021). The intensification of Turkish-Ukrainian military collaboration did not escape the attention of the Russian leadership, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov openly warned Turkey not to feed militarist sentiments in Ukraine (Reuters, 2021). Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, on the other hand, praised Turkish efforts to ensure security and stability in the Black Sea region and argued that "Ukraine and Turkey are natural regional partners in the security sphere" (Kuleba, 2021). However, Kuleba implicitly pointed to the difference in the Turkish and Ukrainian strategic perspectives too, as he made a clear case for strengthening NATO's presence in the Black Sea (*ibid.*).

All this leads to the conclusion, that after normalizing its relations with Moscow in 2016, Ankara embraced a modified version of the regional ownership doctrine, that aims to protect the status quo in the Black Sea through the combination of three policies: maintaining a privileged partnership with Russia; stalling

Western efforts to enhance NATO's military presence in the region; and developing intense strategic cooperation with Ukraine to counterbalance Russia.

## Turkey and the war in Ukraine

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military offensive against Ukraine. Consequently, the war in the eastern half of the country since 2014, limited in its geographical scope and intensity, has been replaced by an invasion covering almost the entire territory of the country, limited in intensity at most in that no weapons of mass destruction have been used up to the time of this writing. Most Western commentators agree, that in addition to causing terrible destruction of human life and property in Ukraine, the invasion represents a direct assault on the rules-based international order, as it undermines the foundational principle of that order - the idea, that that international boundaries may not be changed with force alone (Brunk & Hakimi, 2022, p. 688). Hence, the war in Ukraine is widely interpreted in the West as a turning point in history, which will impose a new polarization in international relations (Coles et. al., 2023). In the words of Francis Fukuyama (2022), Putin's war "marks the end of the post-cold war era, a rollback of the "Europe whole and free" that we thought emerged after 1991, or indeed, the end of The End of History".

While in 2014 the Western response to the annexation of Crimea was rather muted, in 2022 the West reacted immediately and decisively against Russia, imposing a series of costly sanctions on the aggressor, and providing substantial military assistance to Ukraine (Tziarras, 2022). Consequently, trans-Atlantic ties have been boosted and the idea of a unitary West has been strengthened, while Russia has proved unable to achieve a quick victory on the battlefield and become more dependent economically on China (Lo, 2023, p. 7). The intensified polarization in the aftermath of the invasion placed considerable pressure on countries that maintained close economic and diplomatic ties with Moscow as members of the Western politico-military alliance system (Cheterian, 2023, p. 1282). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that in the spring of 2022, several analysts (Kirişci, 2022; Mankoff, 2022) believed that the effects of the war could encourage Turkey to turn more decisively toward the West. In the two years since then, however, Ankara has defied initial expectations and maintained a policy of balancing between the West and Russia.

Turkey reacted to the invasion with several pro-Ukrainian steps. On March 2 in the UN General Assembly, it was one of the 141 countries voting in favor of a resolution, that reaffirmed commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders; condemned the Russian aggression; and called for an immediate withdrawal of Russian military forces from Ukraine's territory (United Nations Digital Library, 2022). More importantly, following the start of

the invasion, Turkish military exports to Ukraine dramatically increased. Within four months, Ankara supplied 50 additional combat drones to Kyiv, which greatly contributed to the effectiveness of Ukrainian resistance during the initial phase of the war, when Western aid was limited to short-range anti-tank and anti-air missiles (Cheterian, 2023, p. 1283). In addition, Turkey sold 50 armored vehicles and dozens of laser-guided missiles to Ukraine in the summer of 2022 (Soylu, 2022). On 1 March, at the request of the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Turkish authorities invoked the Montreux Convention and closed the Turkish Straits, thereby preventing Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea fleet<sup>3</sup>, whose flagship, the Moskva, was sunk by Ukrainian forces on 14 April (Bechev, 2023, p. 4). Turkey's strong support for Ukraine can be understood from a geostrategic perspective. As Dimitar Bechev (2023) put it, the scenario, in which Ukraine is transformed into a landlocked country and Russia gains direct control over the entirety of the Black Sea's northern shores would disadvantage Turkey greatly, as it would further upset the balance of power in the region (p. 3).

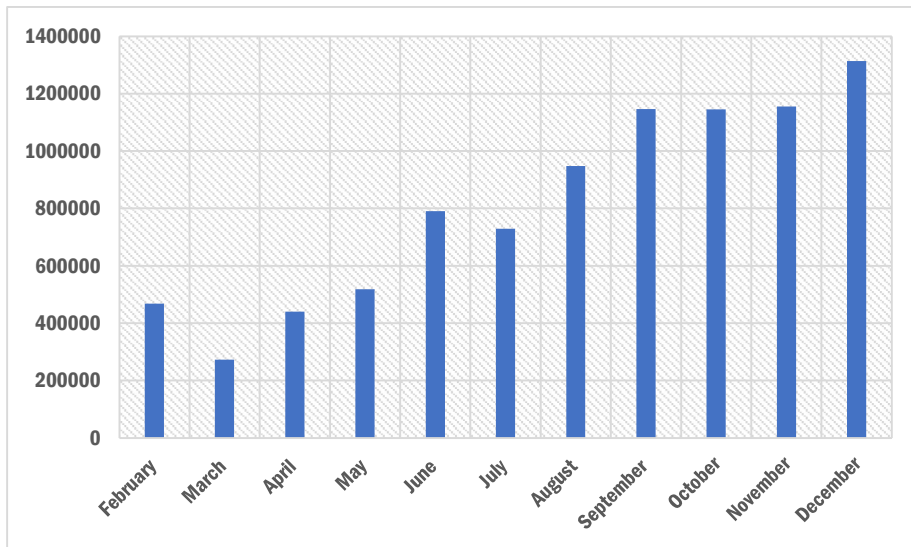
On the other hand, Turkey hasn't joined Western sanctions and continued its economic partnership with Russia, which implies, that Ankara aims to support Kyiv without turning openly against Moscow (Dalay, 2022). Major bilateral projects, such as the Rosatom contract to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant or the gas-supply arrangements with Gazprom have continued to proceed unhindered, while three million Russian tourists visited Turkey during the summer of 2022 (Bechev, 2023, p. 4). In addition, Turkish authorities have permitted sanctioned Russian oligarchs to secure their assets by moving them to Turkey (Faiola, 2022). The evolution of Turkish-Russian trade relations is perhaps the most tangible evidence that Turkey has not only maintained its economic cooperation with Russia but has also taken advantage of the business opportunities created by Western sanctions. Official trade figures published by the Turkish Statistical Institute (2024) clearly show that Turkey has significantly increased its exports to Russia following the start of the invasion (see Figures 1 & 2). In addition to selling its own goods in the Russian market, Turkey also acts as an intermediary in ensuring that key military technologies reach Russia. According to a report by Zayakin and Lee (2024), since German, Japanese, and Swiss machine tools manufacturers all left Russia following the start of the invasion, mostly Taiwanese products are satisfying the requirements of the Russian military-industrial complex. Between March and September 2023, Russia imported at least 193 Taiwanese-made machining centres, of which nearly 40% have been transshipped through Turkey.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be mentioned that the significance of the Turkish decision to close the Straits was somewhat diminished by the fact, that Russia's Black Sea Fleet had already been reinforced shortly before the start of the invasion.

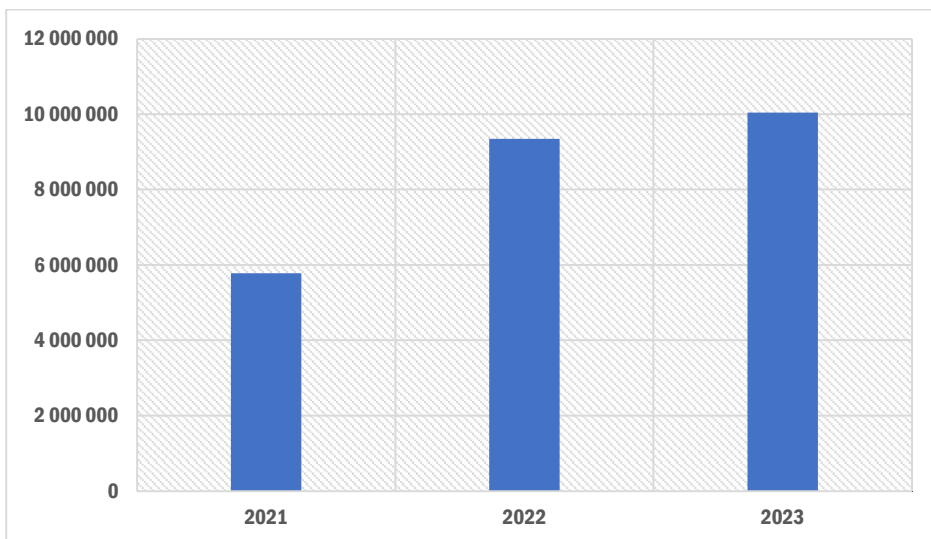


**Figure 1: Monthly value of Turkish exports to Russia from February to December 2022 (thousand US\$)**



Source: Own editing based on the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (2024).

**Figure 2: Annual value of Turkish exports to Russia from 2021 to 2023 (thousand US\$)**



Source: Own editing based on the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (2024).

Under these circumstances, concerns have been raised about Turkey providing a “backdoor” for Russia to bypass Western sanctions (Bechev, 2023, p. 4). In September 2023, the US Treasury Department went so far as to impose sanctions on



Turkish companies and a businessman accused of helping Russia to circumvent US sanctions (Ozkan, 2023). By refusing to join Western sanctions, Turkey has reinforced its self-perception of being an autonomous central power that acts not according to Western expectations but in its own national interests. In this regard, Ankara's decision to invoke the Montreux Convention should not be interpreted simply as a pro-Ukrainian step. Besides preventing Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea Fleet, the closure of the Straits also serves Ankara's traditional goal of minimizing the potential of escalation by limiting the access of Western powers to the Black Sea (Isanchenko, 2023, p. 19). Consequently, since the implementation of Ankara's decision in March 2022, there are no longer any NATO naval forces in the Black Sea apart from Bulgarian, Romanian, and Turkish units (Isachenko & Swistek, 2023, p. 4), which is contrary to Ukraine's interests.

Despite the country's NATO-membership, the efforts of Turkish diplomats successfully established Turkey's image as a credible mediator between Russia and Ukraine. The Turkish diplomatic standpoint regarding the conflict was summarized by then Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on March 1 2022: "When there is a war, we don't have to take sides. On the contrary, we are the country that can establish a dialogue on both sides in order to end the war" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2022). On March 10, the Antalya Diplomacy Forum provided the opportunity for Sergey Lavrov and Dmytro Kuleba to meet for the first time since the war started. Although the two foreign ministers' discussion on the possibility of temporary ceasefire agreements failed to produce a breakthrough, the fact that they were willing to conduct negotiations with Turkish mediation represented a diplomatic achievement for Ankara (Tziarras, 2022). At the end of March, a new round of talks organized in Istanbul produced the most tangible result to date, a draft treaty identifying Ukraine's neutral status as a key condition of peace. The adoption of the draft was, however, thwarted by the collapse of the peace process in early April, when evidence of Russian war crimes was discovered in Bucha and other Ukrainian towns (Skidelsky, 2024). Another interpretation highlights the responsibility of then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who during his visit to Kyiv on 9 April, allegedly promised Zelenskyy further military support, if Ukraine resumed the fight against Russia (Isanchenko, 2023, p. 25). The latter explanation seemed to be confirmed by Çavuşoğlu, as he claimed after the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting on 4-5 April, that some NATO members "want the war to continue [because] they want Russia to become weaker" (Daily Sabah, 2022). His remark conveyed the message, that while Turkey is trying to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict, the West aims to use Ukraine for geopolitical purposes.

The most significant result of Turkey's diplomatic mediation efforts was the Black Sea Grain Initiative, an international agreement between Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and the UN, which established a "grain corridor" by ensuring that Ukrainian grain could leave the ports of Chornomorsk, Odesa, and Pivdennyi through the

Bosporus (Wintour, 2023). Under the terms of the two parallel documents signed in the Dolmabahçe Palace of Istanbul on 22 July 2022, officials from Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, and the UN were to inspect ships crossing the Bosporus towards Odesa to verify they were not carrying any weapons, while warring parties committed themselves not to attack commercial ships in the Black Sea (Bechev, 2023, p. 5). By helping to broker the deal, Turkey has not only guaranteed its own food security, but has also established its image as a country acting in the interests of the “Global South”, given that the disruption of Ukrainian grain exports has had the greatest impact on those developing countries in Africa and Asia, whose stability and security are heavily dependent on external food supplies. Hardly any of these countries have embraced the Western narrative claiming that the preservation of the rules-based international order requires the defeat of Russia on the battlefield. Their priority instead is to see an early end to the conflict, regardless of who wins (Lo, 2023, p. 9), which is a position that is completely in line with Ankara’s mediation efforts. According to a report published by the United Nations in April 2022, the effects of the Ukraine crisis on global food security have the potential to push up to 1.7 billion people into poverty, destitution and hunger, as Russian and Ukrainian grain is an essential food source for some of the poorest and most vulnerable people on Earth (United Nations, 2022). This confirms the significance of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which up to July 2023, when Russia unilaterally withdrew from the deal, enabled the exports of almost 33 million tons of grain and other foodstuffs, 57% of which reached developing countries (Council of the European Union, 2024).

In addition to enabling it to exploit its diplomatic potential, the war in Ukraine also provided Turkey with an opportunity to use its central geographical location to enhance its role in the Eurasian network of economic relations. From a geoeconomic point of view, one of the most important consequences of the war is that it highlights the constraints of those connectivity projects which move across territories directly affected by the crisis, thereby shifting attention to alternatives. Traffic along the Northern Corridor, which links the Far East and Europe via Russia and Belarus, is estimated to have fallen by 40% in the seven months following the start of the invasion (Eldem, 2022, p. 1). Consequently, the Middle Corridor, which connects China and Turkey through Central Asia and the Caucasus, has gained new popularity despite long-standing logistical problems associated with it (Sharma & Bhatt, 2023, p. 24). This provided Turkey opportunities to further deepen its economic ties with the other countries along the route. Ankara’s commitment to do so is evident, for instance, in the August 2022 meeting of Turkish, Azeri and Uzbek foreign, economy and transportation ministers, where the decision was made to develop coordination and cooperation among the three Turkic-speaking countries, especially on issues related to the Middle Corridor (Eldem, 2022, p. 4). Despite the intensification of Chinese-Russian collaboration, Beijing also displays growing interest in Eurasian routes that reach Europe while bypassing Russia, which might open new

doors for Turkish-Chinese economic cooperation (Çolakoğlu, 2023). This was showcased at the 3<sup>rd</sup> China-Türkiye Communication Forum in September 2022, where speakers on both sides argued that the two countries should work together more closely to enhance coordination between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor (China Today, 2022).

Meanwhile, the European Union, which seeks to eliminate its energy dependence on Russia, is showing growing interest in the Southern Gas Corridor, a supply route linking Caspian gas deposits with Europe via Turkey (Eldem, 2022, p. 1). This was made clear by the European Commission's July 2022 agreement with Azerbaijan, which set a target for the EU to double its imports of Azeri gas by 2027 (Reuters, 2022). Although Turkey has no significant domestic energy resources, because of its geographical location, it can greatly contribute as a transit country to Europe's energy security. In this regard, it is worth underlining that the war in Ukraine has strongly influenced Ankara's energy policy calculations. The intensification of Turkish-Russian energy ties indicates that Turkey aims to take advantage of Russia's loss of European markets as a result of Western sanctions. At the same time, however, Turkey is also interested in exploiting the EU's diversification efforts to strengthen its position in the network of Eurasian energy flows (Kardaş, 2023, p. 17). Consequently, the EU's effort to disconnect from Russian gas and Turkey's ambition to become an energy hub can be partially aligned, which creates an opportunity for pragmatic cooperation between the two sides, despite the persistent tension that has characterized their relations since Erdoğan consolidated power following the July 2016 coup attempt.

## Conclusions

Based on the contextualized analysis of Turkey's response to the war in Ukraine, the following four concluding remarks can be made.

In 2022, the West's united and decisive action against Russia suggested a revival of the US-led global order. Developments since then, however, present a different picture. In the words of leading American analyst Hal Brands (2024), "Western sanctions no longer look like wonder weapons", as Russia's economy resumed growing in 2023 after its trade had been rerouted to Asia. The failure of the West to bring the Russian economy to its knees seems to confirm that we are already living in a post-hegemonic world order, in which the United States is unable to impose its will on the international community. The first conclusion of the study is that Turkey's foreign policy behavior in this regard is a case in point. In parallel with the West's attempt to isolate Russia, Turkey has intensified its commercial relations with the latter. By doing so, Ankara has not only weakened the effectiveness of Western sanctions but also helped Moscow to mitigate its increased economic dependence on China.

According to the second conclusion, Ankara's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been so far consistent with Turkey's traditional post-Cold War geostrategy in the region. As the possibility of Russia gaining direct control over the entirety of the Black Sea's northern shores is clearly at odds with Turkish geopolitical preferences, Ankara has significantly intensified its military cooperation with Kyiv. Therefore, from a Turkish strategic perspective, supporting Ukraine is a means of counterbalancing Russian expansionism. At the same time, Ankara continues to share the understanding, that the preservation of the post-Cold War regional order requires the exclusion of the United States and other outside actors from the Black Sea. Turkey enforces this objective through strict adherence to the clauses of the Montreux Convention, thereby limiting the military presence of NATO in the region. Socor (2018) rightfully calls this policy a "reality-denying position", as Ankara aims to uphold a status quo that no longer exists since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The study's third conclusion is that although the 2022 invasion represents a clear challenge to Turkey's regional interests, Ankara does not view Russia as an existential threat. This is an important difference compared to the early period of the Cold War when the perceived threat that the Soviet Union posed to its territorial integrity drove Turkey into the Western Block. In contrast, Turkey's current leadership believes it can afford to defy Western expectations by cooperating with Moscow. It is indeed undeniable, that in the framework of the post-hegemonic world order, Turkey and Russia have been able to forge a functioning partnership despite their geopolitical disagreements. Their clash in 2015-2016 should remind us, however, that under certain circumstances, geopolitical tension can quickly escalate into a crisis. The sudden breakdown of Turkish-Russian relations over Syria resulted in a temporary modification of Ankara's foreign policy towards the Black Sea, which indicates, that the two regions are linked in the Turkish strategic mindset. Consequently, as long as Northern Syria's geopolitical status remains unresolved<sup>4</sup>, the Syrian conflict can influence Turkish foreign policy calculations concerning the Black Sea region.

Finally, we can conclude that the war in Ukraine has created opportunities for Turkey to justify its claim of being a central power. On the one hand, Turkish diplomats mediated between Moscow and Kyiv on multiple occasions. The most important result of Turkish diplomatic efforts was the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which significantly mitigated the negative impact of the conflict on global food security. As the disruption of Ukrainian grain supplies has affected developing countries the most, Turkey's active involvement in the negotiation process has improved the country's image in the "Global South". On the other hand, the war has increased the importance of supply lines linking Asia and Europe through Turkey. The renewed

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<sup>4</sup> On Turkish-Russian disagreements over Northern Syria, see Lechner, 2021.

popularity of the Middle Corridor as an alternative to the Northern Corridor provides Ankara with an opportunity to enhance its commercial relations with China and the Central Asian republics. At the same time, the European Union's commitment to reduce its energy dependence on Russia through partner diversification serves Turkey's goal of becoming an energy hub.

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