

13/06/2024

## **Turkey's navigation in a multipolar security landscape**

*Sweden joined NATO as its 32nd member in March 2024. Russia's invasion of Ukraine stretches into the third year. The war in Gaza and Iran's attack on Israel highlight the risks of escalation in the Middle East.*

*As a NATO member, how does Turkey navigate these different security challenges? Does the evolving security landscape give Turkey geopolitical leverage and, if yes, how does Ankara use it? Can Turkey serve as a mediator in any of these military conflicts?*

### **Galip Dalay, Chatham House, London**

Russia's war on Ukraine and Israel's on Gaza have undermined Turkey's policies towards its two main neighbourhoods. In the Black Sea, Turkey's idea of regional order through regional ownership has been hollowed out by the invasion. Now, Turkey is engaging in balancing policy between Russia and the West while counterbalancing policy towards Russia through closer relations with other littoral states: Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania and Georgia.

In the Middle East, Turkey adopted a new *modus vivendi* through a regional reset and rapprochement with erstwhile foes and rivals. Before October 7, this included Israel as well. However, the Gaza invasion has upended relations with Israel and underpinned the reset with Arab Gulf states. Corollary to this, Ankara has supported Arab agency on and internationalisation of the subject.

Connecting these two contexts, Turkey is emphasising a regional order that is developed by regional powers rather than being imposed by external powers, thereby rejecting both US-centric and Russia-centric views. For Ankara, the Middle East and the Black Sea serve as a microcosm of a broader restructuring of the global order: a world that is disordered, contested and multipolar; and one in which the ability of regional powers to shape the course of regional affairs has increased. These regional and international systems are no longer as Western-centric as they once were. Turkey sees multipolarity not as a threat, but as an opportunity for a greater regional role and higher international status.

**Salih Bıçakçı, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin**

Turkey finds itself at the heart of several geopolitical fault lines, including the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's attacks on Israel, the ongoing Syrian conflict and instability in Iraq. The fragility of the global order is compelling Ankara to carefully consider its actions in order to maintain a favourable position in international politics.

Russian aggression, in particular, evokes Turkey's historical memory of the Cold War and earlier periods, which is driving its current strategic focus. Turkey is prioritising sustaining regional security and peace, deepening multilevel alliances across various blocs, maintaining economic developments that are closely linked to defence investments and technological dominance, and establishing itself as a prominent, if not pivotal, actor in international politics.

Amid these security challenges, Turkey has leveraged its position to persuade the United States to sell F-16 jets by linking it to Sweden's accession to NATO. However, Ankara perceives that an enhanced NATO presence in the Black Sea could escalate the military crisis related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Turkey's concern stems from the potential for increased tensions and the risk of being drawn into a direct conflict. Consequently, Turkey is blocking non-littoral NATO countries from entering the Black Sea, even for demining missions, as a precautionary measure to maintain regional security.

Ankara feels that the EU and NATO countries view it more as a competitor than a partner, pushing Turkey to take a more balanced stance to defend its interests due to limited trust in the alliances. The escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran's retaliation against Israel further threaten Turkey's economic goals and domestic political stability.

**Sinem Adar, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin**

Stretching from the Black Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean and from continental Europe to the Middle East, Turkey is located at the crossroads of multiple security challenges. Moreover, the country has the second-largest NATO army, which has extensive operational experience and combat skills. Its expanding military capabilities and burgeoning defence industry accentuate its strategic significance.

Yet, the level of trust held by EU member states – including Germany – in Turkey has steadily eroded. Turkey's interests and those of EU member states do not

always overlap. Despite its condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its military support to Kiev, Ankara believes that the West, in particular the United States, is partly to blame for provoking Moscow and violating its security interests. Turkey has no involvement with the EU's sanctions. Notwithstanding its recent moves to align with US secondary sanctions and export controls, Turkey has become Russia's economic corridor to the West.

Differences abound on Israel and Palestine as well. Unlike Turkey's Western allies, Ankara does not consider Hamas to be a terrorist organisation. Already in 2018, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described it as part of the Palestinian resistance defending "the Palestinian homeland against an occupying power".

Given its geographical, strategic and military relevance on the one hand, and divergences in foreign and security policy on the other, Ankara is an important but difficult partner for Berlin.

### **Anouck Côte-Real, Noria Research, Paris**

The rising multipolar security landscape and the proliferation of crises in Europe's vicinity and the Middle East have enhanced Turkey's regional and global influence, but they also threaten its national security. As illustrated by the war in Ukraine, the AKP government has reinforced its leverage with NATO partners, EU member states as well as Russia. Contributing to this leverage are Turkey's strategic location, including its control of a global chokepoint (Turkish straits), the AKP's diversification of alliances and active energy policy – impacting south-east European energy security – as well as Ankara's strong push for its domestic defence industry and power projection.

Meanwhile, Ankara's balancing act has helped it nurture ambitions to become a conflict mediator and advocate for the so-called Global South. Contrary to the Ukraine conflict, Turkey's multi-positioning and mediation efforts in the Gaza conflict are facing domestic criticism – evident in the local election losses of the AKP in 2024 – and highlight Ankara's lack of leverage over the actors involved.

From a French perspective, Turkey cannot be considered as a mediator for Western countries, despite the recent de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Greece. It is more of a strategic competitor than an ally, contesting the stability and interests of the EU and NATO as well as multilateralism and France's international status. Ankara's growing presence in France's perceived traditional sphere of influence in Africa as well as its instrumentalization of colonial memories and political Islam reinforce Paris' distrust of Turkey and their opposite stance on various conflicts (Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At the author's request, the last sentence of this contribution has been linguistically edited.

**Valeria Talbot, Middle East and North Africa Centre at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), Milan**

Over the past decade, Turkey has emerged as a proactive player in several strategic contexts, from North Africa to the Eastern Mediterranean and Caucasus, where Italy has crucial interests. In an era of increasing multipolarity, both at the international and regional levels, the two countries share a common vision on many security-related issues, but they do not always converge on every dossier. As an example, although Rome has praised Ankara's mediation efforts between Kyiv and Moscow, Italy and Turkey are not on the same page concerning the war in Gaza. However, from the Italian perspective, it is in the evolving Mediterranean security landscape that Turkey plays an essential role.

Here, as the management of migration and the security of energy supplies are top priorities on Italy's foreign policy agenda, Turkey is seen as both a gatekeeper in stopping irregular migration flows and a transit corridor for gas from the Caspian basin. Certainly, this makes Ankara a necessary partner for Rome. Nevertheless, in recent years, Turkey's assertive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and its increasing military and economic presence in Libya have also made it a difficult partner, and in some cases a potential competitor, which also raises questions about the balance of the bilateral cooperation.

**Dušan Reljić, European Affairs Advisor, Brussels**

There are two embodiments of Turkey in Brussels: One is the indispensable NATO member; the other is the unwanted candidate for EU membership, with which the "West" is far more at ease than the EU. Turkey's bid for EU membership is stalled. For years, the EU has been saying that "Turkey has been moving away from the Union", particularly in the field of human rights and democracy. Turkey is also at odds with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, with an average alignment rate of 10 per cent.

As for NATO, Turkey will remain an essential pillar on the Alliance's south-eastern flank no matter what it does – bomb the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, pick fights with Israel, threaten Cyprus and Greece, or break ranks with the West on Russia. Despite its presumed loyalty to the Western alliance, Turkey is mostly free in the south and east of the country to pursue whatever Ankara believes is in its national interest. Yet, only if the United States decides to assign Turkey a role in negotiations with Russia over ending the war in Ukraine will Ankara have a say. Turkey going it alone to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow can hardly achieve anything.

**Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Panteion University, Athens**

From the perspective of Athens, there are elements of both continuity and change in Turkish foreign policy. The continuity is determined by geography – Turkey's

perception of a flank state status – and the need to seek relevance and influence by projecting its ability to shape or co-shape the policy responses to the many regional challenges that surround it. The change is defined by an upgrading, however subtle, of its territorial claims vis-à-vis Greece and a growing ideologically motivated foreign policy, and by its efforts to move beyond the regional and onto the global stage.

More specifically, while Athens and Ankara seem committed to pursuing their recent attempt at creating confidence-building mechanisms that are resilient to whatever future crisis, there is a concern in Greece that Turkey's activism – be it its ambivalence regarding the war in Ukraine or its confrontational position regarding the war in Gaza – is a cause for alarm. While the assessment is that Turkey might be seeking greater leverage, it does so in a manner that is confrontational rather than constructive, thereby undermining the international order. This, in turn, is an anathema for a small country like Greece that is simultaneously attempting to meet the challenges of the times, both by focusing on becoming a regional security provider and ensuring that the institutional, legal and normative edifice holding the international order together transitions in an orderly fashion to meet the evolution of the security landscape.

**Alan Makovsky, Center for American Progress (CAP), Washington, D.C.**

Turkey has opted to address the multipolar world with an autonomous foreign policy coupled with NATO security guarantees. It is an achievement for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that all major players seem to accept this, however begrudgingly on the part of most NATO allies. Turkey is the sole NATO member that has not sanctioned Russia.

The evolving security landscape enhances Turkey's regional importance. Alone among NATO partners, Turkey has demonstrated its ability to work with both Ukraine and Russia; if Russia decides it wants peace, it would likely call on Turkey to "mediate" – if for no other reason than to reinforce Ankara's distancing of itself from its allies. Turkey has also strengthened its positions in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Black Sea, as Russia's position atrophies. It is likewise emerging as a significant actor in Africa. The development and marketing of the TB2 drone has boosted its international prestige. By contrast, Turkey is not well-positioned to mediate between Israel and Hamas. It lacks influence with Hamas decision-makers and alienated Israel with its rhetoric and trade embargo.

Notwithstanding past obstructionism in NATO, Turkey is indelibly tied to the West, economically and militarily. Its economic vulnerability and need for Western investment may well limit (though not end) Erdoğan's penchant for testing Western patience and threatening regional stability. Even amidst Turkey's enhanced

regional standing and the West's ongoing dependence on Turkey (refugees, geopolitics), that vulnerability leaves Ankara potentially susceptible to Western pressure.

**Karol Wasilewski, Institute for Turkey Studies, Krakow**

The perspectives of Poland and Turkey on the challenges concerning the international security and future of the world order do not always go in hand. Most importantly, contrary to Turkey, Poland sees the United States as a stabilising force, principally when it comes to the rules-based international order, and Russia definitely as the biggest threat to its security. Despite these differences, though, Poland continues to perceive Turkey as one of the most important – even indispensable – partners in its endeavour to strengthen NATO's eastern flank.

This is why during the last few years Poland has been doing so much to engage Turkey more in areas where the security interests of the two overlap. For instance, it invested in the trilogue (Poland–Romania–Turkey) and decided to buy Turkish drones, hoping that the transaction will not only increase its security, but also introduce some distrust into the relationship between Turkey and Russia. Poland would clearly like to see “the future Turkey” become a country that is tied more closely to the West.

Thus, it should turn its security-oriented approach towards Turkey into a multi-dimensional perspective. The first step to do so could be to enhance bilateral economic relations, making use of Turkey's apparent interest in it. Poland could also think of using the Three Seas Initiative as a vehicle to look for synergies between Turkey and member countries.

**Paul Levin, Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies (SUITS), Stockholm**

The Swedish perspective on the current security landscape is dominated by its recent NATO accession along with the threat from Russia, which means that Swedes perceive the international arena as being very much a bipolar contest between NATO and Russia along with China, Iran and North Korea.

While Swedish policy-makers want to maintain good relations with Turkey – with which Sweden now has a bilateral Security Compact – the Swedish understanding of the world as bipolar differs significantly from the Turkish perception of a multipolar world order that gives middle powers like Turkey greater room to manoeuvre. For Stockholm, everything changed after 24 February 2022, and what is seen as Turkey's balancing act between the NATO Alliance and Russia is hard to understand.

For its part, Turkey has played its hand with varying degrees of success. When it comes to Russia's war against Ukraine, Turkey has been able to position itself as a

mediator in ways it has not been able to do with Israel and Hamas. The at times combative rhetoric of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan about Israel means that Ankara has not been welcomed as a mediator. On the other hand, there is widespread anger across the world concerning Israel's brutal war on Hamas, and Erdoğan can instead position himself as an important voice for the opposition with regard to what many see as Israeli war crimes.

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