



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu arrives for a two-day NATO foreign ministers meeting in Berlin, Germany May 14, 2022. (Afl/REUTERS/Michele Tantussi (Germany))

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[Research Reports] The Ukraine crisis and its impact on Turkey and the Middle East

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The Ukraine crisis has had an impact on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as on the other parts of the world. The impact has been significant as Russia had become one of the most active extra-regional powers in the MENA region in the last decade. Thus, in order to understand how regional countries have responded to the Ukraine crisis, one needs to focus first on the evolution of Russia-MENA relations over the past ten or so years. This paper will then discuss specifically how the regional states have responded to, and been impacted by, the crisis, with a particular emphasis on Turkey, which is in a unique position vis-à-vis the war.

Russia and the MENA region

Since the 2010s Russia has developed closer political, economic and strategic ties with several countries in the region. It has also become involved in several key regional conflicts, first and foremost in Syria but also in Libya, and

in the Iranian nuclear issue. In general, the MENA countries have welcomed an expanding Russian role because of their perception of two systemic shifts. First, the regional countries perceive a global power shift and a transition from a unipolar world to an increasingly multipolar one. Second, and more significantly, they perceive a parallel regional systemic shift, namely the US retrenchment from the region since the Obama administration. This perception of a double transition has led the regional countries to engage in a hedging strategy, with the aim of increasing their room for maneuver and even more so their strategic autonomy. Thus, even the closest US allies in the region began to diversify their relations with global powers, mainly China and Russia. Whereas China was primarily seen as an economic actor, Russia's involvement was also seen as strategic.

Another characteristic of Russia's Middle East policy was its pragmatic balancing among key regional players. The post-Arab Uprisings order in the Middle East had been up until very recently characterized by fragmentation and rivalry among three blocs, led by Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. Russia was successful in maintaining close relations with all of them. Thus, with Iran, Russia cooperated in Syria in terms of supporting the Bashar regime. Moscow has also been part of the Iranian nuclear negotiations and situated itself as a friend of Iran. Syria constituted the main element of Russia-Turkey relations, especially since Russian direct military intervention in 2015. Russia's relations with Israel had also become even closer after the Arab Uprisings as Russia's presence in Syria was seen by Israel as a way to prevent Iranian domination in Syria. Overall, Moscow's relations with the Arab world were quite excellent. Its cooperation with Saudi Arabia within the OPEC+ scheme had been positive for both sides in terms of keeping oil prices high. Economic and military ties between Russia and the GCC countries and Egypt flourished, and Moscow presented itself as a mediator in several regional rivalries.¹ Most significantly, Russia had become an important part of the GCC-centered Middle East order that became increasingly apparent from 2016 as the main Gulf players sought greater strategic autonomy.

Because of Russia's significant role in the Middle East order, most of the regional countries initially gave an ambiguous response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In fact, due to their hedging strategy and beneficial ties with Russia they had a difficulty in picking sides. The Arab League adopted a resolution in February 2022 calling for a diplomatic solution to the crisis without condemning or even mentioning Russia.² This position continued in the UN General Assembly votes where several Arab states and Iran either abstained or voted with Russia. Only recently, with the increasing isolation of Russia globally, have the MENA countries begun to shift their positions in the UN.³

The possible impact of the crisis on the MENA region

The region has been already affected by the Ukraine crisis on multiple fronts. First and foremost, the crisis has exposed the region's food dependency on Russia and Ukraine.⁴ The food crisis has contributed to the already high post-pandemic inflation rates. Considering the role played in the Arab Spring by another food crisis in the first decade of the 2000s, the current food crisis characterized by a scarcity of food supplies and soaring food prices may also have political implications for the MENA countries.

While the region overall has been badly affected by the food crisis, the oil and natural gas producers in the region have been enjoying high prices. In that sense the crisis has consolidated the GCC-centered regional order and increased hopes in crisis-stricken Egypt about increasing LNG exports. Iran, too, has benefited from increasing energy prices, which may ease sanction-related pressures on the country.

Iran may also benefit from Russia's decreasing engagement in Syria. As Russia inevitably reduces its military presence in Syria, Iran seems to be filling the void. This development, however, may escalate tensions between Iran and other regional powers. Turkey itself seems to be using the geopolitical opportunity to achieve its aim of creating a buffer zone in northern Syria that aims both to prevent the emergence of a contiguous Kurdish zone controlled by the PYD/YPG and to support the settlement of some Syrian refugees in Turkey. The AKP government seems to be counting on these two moves to increase its public support, which seems to be lagging recently, before the upcoming elections in 2023. Finally, the Ukraine war may impact the situation in Syria as far as relations between Russia and the US are concerned. Before the Ukraine crisis there were US-Russian negotiations over Syria.⁵ Now, however, the Ukraine war and the deterioration of US-Russian relations may also further contribute to instability in Syria.

Turkey's unique position

Turkey's position vis-à-vis the crisis is unique for many reasons. Unlike the rest of the MENA countries, Turkey is a Black Sea power and thus a maritime neighbor to both Russia and Ukraine. Consequently, the Ukraine crisis has a direct bearing on Turkey as a war between two Black Sea countries. A related aspect is the Turkish Straits, the only waterway that connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Turkey's sovereignty over the Straits is recognized by

the 1936 Montreux Convention which regulates maritime traffic in the Straits. This Convention gives Turkey certain rights during times of war. Soon after the Russian military intervention in Ukraine the Turkish Foreign Ministry deemed the Russian intervention to constitute a war despite Russian claims that it was just a special military operation. Once the situation was defined as a war, Turkey invoked the relevant provisions of the Montreux Convention governing a war between Black Sea powers. Accordingly, only Russian ships from Black Sea naval bases were allowed to return to their bases, and then the Straits were closed to all military vessels.⁶

Turkey also has a unique position as it has developed close relations with both warring parties over the years. After hitting bottom with the downing of a Russian jet flying over Syria that allegedly crossed into Turkish airspace, Turkey's relations with Russia improved considerably after the coup attempt in Turkey on 15 July 2016. Russia has become crucial for Turkey's Syria policy. Through different agreements and understandings this relationship allowed Turkey to militarily intervene in northern Syria and maintain the status quo in Idlib to prevent another wave of refugees into Turkey. In addition, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has become a significant economic partner in trade and investment, as well as Turkey's number-one source of natural gas, although Turkey has managed to progressively decrease its dependence from more than 50 per cent in 2017 to around 30 per cent in recent years.⁷ In addition, Russia won the tender to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant. Despite all the pressures and sanctions from the US, Turkey also bought S-400 missile defense systems from Russia. However, the two countries have had a "complicated relationship", as a recent International Crisis Group podcast called it, and alongside their cooperation they have engaged in "fierce competition in Libya, Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh".⁸ Furthermore, Turkey has never accepted Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In fact, Ankara has developed quite close relations with Ukraine as well, much to Moscow's dislike. The two countries called their relationship a "strategic partnership" with the establishment of a High-Level Strategic Council in 2011. Economic relations as well as tourism have flourished, and a passport-free regime was put into force in June 2017.⁹ During President Erdoğan's visit to Kyiv just before the war, the signing of a free trade agreement and an agreement to jointly produce Turkey's armed drones in Ukraine had brought bilateral relations to a new level. In addition, Ukraine's acquisition of Bayraktar TB2 combat drones was considered a game changer by Ukraine in its war with Russia.

Another aspect of Turkey's unique position vis-à-vis the Ukraine war is Turkey's NATO membership. The war once again increased Turkey's strategic importance for NATO and thus provided an opportunity to repair its strained relations with some members of NATO, first and foremost with the United States. At the same time Turkey aims to use the crisis to advance its own interests in the context of NATO's decision-making to expand by admitting Finland and Sweden. President Erdoğan criticizes these countries and, by implication some other alliance members, as insensitive to Turkey's security concerns.¹⁰ Beyond that, NATO's intended enlargement has created an opportunity for the AKP government to negotiate with NATO and the candidate countries for concessions on several issues. Although not necessarily outside of NATO processes, Turkey's policy seems to have created frustration in the face of a rush to admit these two countries that is much more urgent than earlier enlargements. At the time of the writing of this piece, the negotiations are continuing at different levels.

Since the deterioration of relations between Russia and Ukraine, Turkey has tried to play the role of a facilitator due to its special position with respect to the conflict. Before the breakout of the war Turkey offered its good offices for negotiations between the two countries in order to prevent an escalation. All these efforts failed. When the war started, Turkey announced that it clearly considered Russian military intervention illegitimate and a violation of the international rules on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Still, Turkey persisted in its efforts to end the crisis through diplomatic means and offered to mediate between the two sides. As a result, on 10 March 2022, the foreign ministers of both countries came to the Antalya Diplomacy Forum for indirect talks. Again, on 29 March 2022, delegations from the two countries met in Istanbul. In the meantime, Turkey continued to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine.¹¹

A very significant consequence of the Ukraine war for Turkey has been related to Syria. On 10 May 2022, Turkey announced that it had closed its airspace to Russian civilian and military planes carrying troops to Syria.¹² On the other hand, President Erdoğan has recently announced the start of another military intervention in Syria to continue with his plan of creating a 30km-deep buffer zone across the border. It is within this context that Erdoğan had a telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on 30 May 2022.¹³ Turkey clearly wants to use the geopolitical context that has emerged in Syria since the start of the Ukraine war to achieve its strategic objectives in that country.

Thus, Turkey has so far implemented a strategy of "balanced activism." This balancing strategy has allowed Turkey to maintain relations with both sides and engage in efforts to mediate. It has also meant that Turkey has so far not joined the sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and the EU. This policy of balancing has heretofore been beneficial for Turkey and allowed it to play the role of a facilitator, for instance, in prisoner exchanges between Russia and the US.¹⁴

However, there may be difficulties in sustaining this strategy, especially as the conflict drags on.

On the one hand, there may be tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies. The US has clearly been using the Ukraine war as an opportunity to tighten up NATO's ranks in the midst of global power shifts. On the other hand, maintaining close relations with Russia may prove challenging, particularly in the face of Turkey's support for Ukraine, its involvement in Syria and its developing strategic relations with Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, it may eventually prove difficult for Turkey to carry on with its balancing policy. The real bottom line of Turkey's policy will become clear in the future and will depend largely on whether policymakers are able to read the global and regional context and adjust their policies in an appropriate and timely fashion.

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