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IF PUTIN STUMBLES, WILL ERDOGAN RECALIBRATE?

RYAN GINGERAS
COMMENTARY

MARCH 2, 2022



Editor's note: Don't miss our [comprehensive guide to Russia's war against Ukraine](#).

As Russia launched its assault on Ukraine, significant voices within Turkey's nationalist and pro-government commentariat seemed to revel in the West's weakness. Many sympathized with Ukraine's plight, but this was outweighed by

their sense of vindication and schadenfreude. The fact that neither the United States nor NATO stood prepared to defend Kyiv was touted as evidence of the West's moral and political weakness. "The question of 'who is wrong,'" one pro-government commentator wrote, "is futile." What mattered most was that those countries who "used Ukraine for a proxy war are busy today moving their embassies while glancing to their rear." For Turkey, the West's unwillingness to confront Moscow validated Ankara's effort at balancing between the United States and Russia. The likelihood of Russian President Vladimir Putin's success, several observers suggested, pointed to a new multipolar world order, one that potentially tilted in Turkey's favor. Putin, as one prominent commentator put it, now commands the initiative: "For this reason, the world is looking at what Putin has done and will do, rather than the U.S. and E.U. leaders."

Statements such as these add weight to Selim Koru's dark prediction:

If President Vladimir Putin wins a major military victory against Ukraine, and is able to weather the economic and diplomatic consequences, it will only accelerate Turkey's move into a post-NATO stance. The failure of NATO to stop Moscow's irredentism will confirm Ankara's beliefs about the waning relevance of the alliance and fuel its hopes for a new era in geopolitics.

But what if Putin does not succeed? With the war in Ukraine now approaching its second week, any potential Russian victory appears increasingly Pyrrhic. Russian territorial gains have proven slow in the face of Kyiv's defiance. Images of the fighting have generated a groundswell of popular indignation in Europe and the United States, leading to bold demonstrations of resolve and unanimity. Against this backdrop, European states have committed themselves to a host of earnest policies aimed at thwarting further Russian aggression. Such steps have gone beyond efforts at bankrupting the Russian economy. It now seems highly likely that the war in Ukraine has girded European commitment to NATO despite the potential risks of escalation and economic hardship.

BECOME A MEMBER

It is too early to say how the war will end. However, it is possible to identify several important factors that will continue to influence Turkey's behavior in the event of Putin's defeat. One clear factor is Turkey's security interests, which likely will compel Ankara to continue to appeal to NATO for support for at least the foreseeable future. On the ideological front, President Recep Erdogan's convictions have proven malleable in the past, but his skepticism of the West is likely to endure. Yet all this may prove secondary to something far more pressing: the political needs of Erdogan himself. With his re-election plans hanging in the balance, it is likely that Turkey's president will choose whatever path he believes can keep him in power.

Jets, Missiles, and Training

Regardless of the outcome in Ukraine, Turkey's armed forces will continue to struggle with severe challenges in the realms of development and maintenance. The air force, for example, contends with a fleet of aging aircraft that is now entering its final years of service. Industry experts speculate that it will be a long while before Ankara succeeds in fielding a series of indigenously produced fighters that can replace them. This means Turkey would have to continue to rely on U.S. and European suppliers to retrofit and maintain its current aircraft. One potential alternative Ankara has entertained is buying Russian-made jets, including the advanced SU-57. Some Turkish security commentators, however, have repeatedly questioned whether the purchase of Russian fighters represented a workable solution. In addition to incurring the ire of Turkey's NATO allies, such an acquisition would have to contend with issues of training, technology transfer, and

integration into the Turkish air force. With Russia on the cusp of becoming an international pariah, the acquisition of any Russian aircraft will get even more complicated.

The plight of Turkey's air force underscores the broader predicament Turkey's military finds itself in. Despite the spectacular growth of its defense industry, Ankara remains dependent upon its traditional partners in Europe and North America to advance the domestic development of its armed forces. This dependency is not limited to the maintenance and modernization of military hardware. Turkey is a consistent participant in NATO exercises and planning. According to one internal poll, Turkish officers voiced overwhelming agreement that the alliance contributed positively to the military's readiness and institutional development. Such sentiments did not forestall Ankara's decision to purchase the S-400 anti-aircraft system from Russia in 2017 — which prompted U.S. and European sanctions on Turkey's defense industry and did much to comprise Ankara's standing among its NATO's allies. Turkish officials, however, have long maintained that Turkish defense cooperation with Russia does not undermine its place in the alliance. More recently, Turkish commentators have suggested that such relations are an asset in light of the current crisis. According to editors at Turkish state television: "Moscow relies on the sincerity of NATO member Turkey, which does not back down on the S-400 issue. Kyiv, on the other hand, appreciates the efforts of Turkey, which supports it on the Crimea issue."

Depending upon the damage Russia incurs as a result of its war in Ukraine, it is possible Ankara may rethink its defense acquisitions from Moscow. What it will not change is the country's defense needs. In the short term, one may not immediately see the emergence of a "post-NATO" Turkey. Superficially at least, Ankara will likely continue to speak of its desire to revitalize its defense ties with Washington and Brussels. Central to such an effort would be the lifting of the arms embargoes that currently hobble the country's defense industry. Whether such overtures will succeed is anyone's guess. Even if Ankara persuaded the United

States and Europe to lift their embargoes, Turkey would continue in its quest to develop a native defense industry that can stand on its own two feet. The restoration of defense ties between Turkey and its NATO allies ultimately may simply slow, rather than blunt, the trajectory of Ankara's "post-NATO" ambitions.

The Question of Ideology

Erdogan's pursuit of a strong domestic defense sector is intimately linked to his broader vision of Turkey's place in the world. Amassing a military that is immune to foreign embargoes is central to his desire to forge a foreign policy at odds with the present global order. As Koru points out, Turkish right-wing politics exercise a great deal of influence over his view of contemporary world affairs. It should be said, however, that Erdogan has tended to be rather promiscuous in drawing upon different strains of Turkish nationalism and conservatism. At various times, and in various settings, he has invoked ideological goals deriving from separate, and to some degree conflicting, right-wing movements. While regularly affirming Turkey's place in NATO, Erdogan's administration has spoken of Turkey as the leader of the Islamic world and the custodian of the old Ottoman order. He regularly denounces the tyranny of Western imperialism, while promoting the emergence of a Eurasian consensus in conjunction with China and Russia. In both word and deed, his views on regional politics often betray signs of irredentism. Erdogan's revisionist tendencies are best exemplified by his support for the creation a large "Blue Homeland" in the eastern Mediterranean. If he was to have his way, Greek sovereignty over its islands and waterways would be all but nullified.

And yet one may also say that Erdogan is no slave to ideology. Throughout his two decades in office, he has demonstrated a fair amount of dexterity when it comes to charting the country's foreign policy. By 2015, he had all but abandoned Turkey's commitment to a "zero problems" approach toward bilateral relations with the country's neighbors. Thereafter, he cultivated a reputation for confrontation and forcefulness in his dealings with Iraq, Cyprus, Syria, Armenia, and the European

Union. More recently, Turkey's relative isolation has compelled Erdogan to reverse himself in the hopes of soothing relations with regional competitors like the United Arab Emirates and Israel. Ankara's dealings with Russia exemplify some of the more extreme shifts in the country's international relations. In the early stages of Syria's civil war, Erdogan and his supporters drew a harsh line against Russia and its support for Bashar al-Assad's murderous regime. Ironically, the shutdown of a Russian jet in November 2015 led to a dramatic entente between the two countries, leading to unprecedented levels of cooperation. Since then, both Ankara and Moscow have found ways to cooperate on matters of mutual interest while compartmentalizing their respective differences. At the moment, the crisis in Ukraine has tested but not broken this pattern of behavior.

If Putin's fortunes fail him, it is difficult to say how Turkey's foreign policy establishment may react. In recent years, Erdogan has enjoyed the support of a broad chorus of right-wing supporters for his policies. Many of these figures have argued that the West's real goal in backing Ukrainian forces is to undermine Turkey by forcing a conflict upon Russia. For Turkey's right wing, what is at stake is not Europe's future but Turkey's sovereignty and destiny as an ascending power. As of yet, Erdogan has offered little indication as to how he sees the country's path forward in light of Russia's difficulties on the battlefield. His silence, in some respects, reflects deeper tensions.

Ukraine and Erdogan's Moment of Reckoning

At the moment hostilities erupted in Ukraine, Erdogan was not to be found in Ankara. As Koru notes, he was instead in West Africa, completing a regional tour meant to highlight Turkish investment on the continent and hint at a future in which Turkey is a global leader. But there is another side to this visit: the presidential elections in 2023. It appears Erdogan will face the fight of his political life. National polling suggests that his Justice and Development Party has lost considerable support over the last year. A number of factors play into the Erdogan's waning fortunes: the country's haphazard response to COVID, charges

of corruption and nepotism, and, above all, a flailing economy. In travelling to Africa, Erdogan also sought to burnish his credentials as a statesman and promote Turkish investment and trade. Given the state of affairs in Ukraine, it is likely that no voter in 2023 will remember this particular excursion when they head to the ballot box.

Handicapping Erdogan's political prospects at home is always a tricky proposition. He has lost parliamentary elections in the recent past. In 2019, he failed to install two handpicked candidates running for mayor in Ankara and Istanbul. The election of 2023 will likely be different. As an event coinciding with the centennial of the founding of the Turkish Republic, both his presidency and his historical legacy are on the line. Should he lose, he faces recrimination and unemployment. His personal wealth, as well as the fortunes of his family and allies, would also be in jeopardy. As a result, the war in Ukraine is now intimately intertwined with what Erdogan may quite literally see as a life-or-death struggle. Even his most vocal supporters are aware that the war, irrespective of how it ends, will likely hurt Turkey's economy. The country relies heavily on Russia for its energy needs and is closely linked in matters of trade and tourism. Russian energy giant Rosatom, for example, is currently putting the finishing touches on the country's premier nuclear powerplant. Should the Russian economy truly collapse, much of Turkey's economy will suffer along with it.

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As a result, any change in Turkish policy will likely reflect the desires of Erdogan himself. Over the course of his two-decade rule, Erdogan has created a highly personalized state in which he, and his individual interests, reign supreme. Institutional forces capable of shaping his behavior — such as the military, the bureaucracy, and civil society — now exercise minimal authority. To guess how

Erdogan, as a man, deals with the repercussions of a defeated Russia is nothing less than a crapshoot. Speculatively, his personal rapport with Putin may be of consequence. In the past, Erdogan's relationship with Russia's president has been described as congenial and close. He is known to stage frequent calls with Putin over matters vital to Turkey's interest. Conversely, U.S. President Joe Biden has seen and spoken little with Erdogan since taking office. It is likely that Erdogan will be closely monitoring the destructive effect U.S. and European sanctions have on the Russian economy. In the past, observers argued that the threat of E.U. sanctions helped deter Turkey from escalating its aggressive behavior toward Greece in the summer of 2020. It is possible that he will see Putin's survival or fall as a harbinger of his own future.

Could other factors shape Turkey's foreign policy in the wake of a Russian defeat? One might be the growing influence of China. Though Ankara's foreign policy establishment has contemplated the development of stronger ties with Beijing, there is little evidence that suggests a more robust Turkish-Chinese relationship looms immediately over the horizon. Should Turkey's ties with Moscow take a turn for the worse, however, this may help push Erdogan and Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi to coordinate more closely. Both Ankara and Beijing are convinced that the West is in a state of terminal decline. Even if Europe and the United States thwart Putin's plans in Ukraine, this belief may endure. If Putin stumbles, Erdogan might simply seek out new partners to help him realize Turkey's "post-NATO" future.

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Nationalism and Ethnic Studies and the British-Kuwait Friendship Society Book Prize. The views expressed here are not those of the Naval Postgraduate School, the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.

Image: Turkish presidency

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