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Split Three Ways on Ukraine: Turkey in a Changing Regional Order

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With its low-level involvement in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ankara repeated its customary formula of refraining from disrupting relations with Moscow, but also sought to maximise the benefits from its position, in order to recover its declining power. Yet this is not a voluntary strategy, so much as an effort by Turkey to make the best of a bad hand. The crisis between Russia and the West affects Turkey's security concerns, economic interests and wider domestic and foreign policy ambitions. Although non-involvement has so far carried few direct costs, Turkey needs to leverage its low-profile position, not least to ensure NATO solidarity, and indeed might soften its position in internal NATO debates. And yet this might in turn create a new conflict of interests: Turkey needs to maintain its soft power capacities, not least in order to hook into the EU, while the EU needs to deepen Turkey's integration in order to develop a cohesive answer to the new circumstances.

There were many reasons to expect Turkey to play a substantial role in the unfolding of the crisis in Ukraine. The security threats posed to Turkey, its historical ties with the peninsula and its kinship with the Tatar community, its earlier prominent reaction to the developments in Syria and Egypt, and the country's ambition to become a regional leader are just a few.

But Ankara has not emerged as an important player in this crisis. This is because Turkey is currently being pulled in three directions on the global stage. As an emerging power, it is still relatively weak and prefers to humour its Eurasian partner, Russia. As a NATO member, it is reliant on the U.S. and NATO for its hard security. Finally, as an EU candidate country, it is, for now, still reliant on the EU for its soft power.

The Muted Response of an Emerging Power

The traditionally low profile of Turkey's Black Sea policy, its deep economic and energy ties to Russia, and a more general tendency towards international restraint, have dissuaded Ankara from taking a strong stance against Moscow. Based on its previous experience of the Georgian War, Ankara has also been put off by the disunity in the EU's response to Russia. Moreover, it has limited capacity to influence the situation: although Ankara has a strategic partnership with Kyiv under the Ukraine–Turkey High-Level Strategic Council, as well as with Russia, Turkey has limited political and diplomatic capacity to impact the outcome of the Ukrainian–Russian crisis.

Admittedly, NATO member Turkey was one of the first to recognise the new government in Kyiv, and on several occasions Turkish leaders affirmed their commitment to Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity. And yet, Ankara has primarily focused on "peace diplomacy," limiting its involvement to decisions that would be taken within an international framework, such as the UN or the Council of Europe, and

notably avoiding following the U.S. and EU's lead when it comes to sanctions. Ankara thus refrained from disrupting its relations with Moscow after Russia's annexation of Crimea, with Turkey's political elites reluctant to permit "any external power" (i.e., the U.S. or the EU) to damage the country's relations with Russia. It seems that some in Ankara are banking on a repeat of the post-Orange Revolution scenario, whereby the upheavals fizzle out and Kyiv returns to Moscow's political sphere of influence. Moreover, the Turkish public already feels the country has been drawn into an ill-advised intervention in Syria, which absorbs most of the country's capacities. Events in Ukraine have also been interpreted as a power struggle between Russia and the West, of which they do not feel part, since it has been shunned by EU Member States.

On the other hand, Turkey is itself reliant on NATO's territorial defence guarantees, and sees that it is in its interests to strengthen solidarity with the alliance's eastern members. As a traditional contributor to NATO missions, it has already provided support to NATO AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) reconnaissance flights over Poland and Romania via air-to-air refuelling aircraft. Moreover, it allowed on 5 March 2014 informal talks between the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the European Union's Political and Security Committee (PSC) on Crimea despite its non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus.

Although Ankara has painted Russia's actions as a worrying precedent in the region, it is the question of Crimean Tatars that has spurred it into (restrained) action. In particular, relations with Crimean Tatars have caused Turkish officials to articulate concern about their security to their Russian counterpart. And yet, despite the size of the Tatar diaspora in Turkey and its strong ties with the government, let alone demands from Ahiska Turks (a minority living in eastern Ukraine) for protection, the influence of the Tatar community on Turkey's position should not be overestimated. Indeed, any moves to improve the security of these communities are made through discussions with Moscow or commercial attempts at support, through, for example, private companies investing in the region and launching direct flights to Crimea.

Thus, instead of direct involvement, Turkey has tried to maximise the benefits from its low profile and non-engagement in Ukraine. Turkey's energy minister Taner Yildiz stated that Ankara would negotiate cheaper gas with Russia and further develop their energy partnership, and the two countries aim to increase bilateral trade volume up to $100 billion. Moreover, and rather surprisingly for a country which ranks as fourth largest donor of international assistance in the world, he also stated that Turkey would give no financial aid to Ukraine. (It is worth noting that Turkey has also benefited from Russian capital being moved from the U.S. and the EU.) Meanwhile, the government in Ankara has used the Ukrainian crisis to bolster its own domestic standing: They warn of "Ukrainisation" as a phenomenon that may also befall Turkey: They thus allude to the idea that Turkish demonstrations pose a potential threat to national security.

Turkey as NATO Ally: The Need to Boost Its Hard Power

Turkey's foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has twice argued that Turkey is the only country neighbouring Ukraine, Russia and the Crimea. The fact that the statement is not wholly accurate (given that Romania and Bulgaria are both in the same neighbourhood) highlights Turkey's security sensitivities as well as its rising sense of isolation. As the scope for building confidence and stability measures shrinks, Russia's military unpredictability grows, and geopolitical balances in the Turkish Straits tip, Turkey grasps that it must guarantee the NATO solidarity on which it relies, and boost its domestic defence sector. Turkey is a NATO member on the front line of the conflict, holding key access points for the U.S. and NATO to the Black Sea and a crucial transit point for Russia, and it already faces considerable challenges in its south.

The threat from Russia is clear. After Russia's seizure of Crimea, the Duma terminated a number of legal agreements between Russia and Ukraine, including the Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet, which regulated the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. As a result, Moscow has the opportunity to expand its Black Sea Fleet and to project its power over its greater Black Sea region. Russia's seizure of the geo-strategically important Crimean peninsula has therefore further tipped the balance of power between Turkey and Russia. Moreover, Russia's violation of international law and the possibility of further regional instability as a result of the "referendum" in Crimea increase the instability in Turkey's own neighbourhood. This will require Turkey to further embrace NATO as an important pillar of its security structure.

The dilemmas attached to this front line status have frequently threatened to come to a head. The Montreux Convention gives Turkey sovereignty over the Turkish Straits, and abiding by it is important for the security of Istanbul and the Turkish straits. However, the convention sets clear peacetime conditions, requiring Ankara to limit the volume, tonnage and length of stay of all vessels belonging to non-Black Sea powers, including the U.S. and the other NATO allies. Since NATO and Turkey are not party to the conflict in Ukraine, the peacetime rule still holds. Ankara thus finds itself in an increasingly uncomfortable position, legally obliged to abide by the convention and to limit U.S. and NATO naval access to the Black Sea, even as its need for their security umbrella grows. Turkey experienced a similar dilemma during the Georgian war, when its compliance with the convention disappointed Washington and EU capitals, and it has come close to playing the role of swing state in the alliance's credibility and effectiveness. In turn, Turkey needs to boost its own military capabilities in response to the problem of the balance of power in the region. Besides maintaining its capabilities in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas, Turkey is now facing calls to strengthen its littoral warfare structure in the Black Sea. The Turkish navy has already been boosted by modernisation projects such as the MILGEM national ship project covering eight corvettes (Ada class) and four frigates (TF-100 class), the development of a multi-mission phased array naval radar, important for maritime surveillance and expected to be delivered between 2014–2018, and the acquisition in 2010 of a landing platform dock vessel (LPD) with the capacity to deploy a battalion-sized overseas force, eight utility helicopters, three unmanned aerial vehicles, 13 tanks and 81 armoured vehicles.

Tellingly, however, the MİLGEM programme was delayed in September 2013 after the completion of the first two corvettes, when the government cancelled its agreement with the contractor (the Koç Group had provided refuge to demonstrators during the Gezi Park protests in summer 2013). Besides, the oscillations in its foreign policy and of its potential defence industry partnerships (for example, attempts to build a long-range air and missile defence system in partnership with a U.S. sanctioned Chinese firm) have the risk degrading future partnerships from which Turkey's domestic defence industry might benefit. It was also argued that the detention and jailing of high-profile Turkish army officers on charges of plotting a coup within the Operation Sledgehammer and Ergenekon cases affected the Turkish army. Additionally, the recent weakening of the bureaucratic tradition, and current political polarisations, are complicating the effectiveness of coordination between institutions, and recent leaks of a top-level meeting on Syria have damaged the public trust in Turkey's political and security institutions.

Turkey as EU Candidate: Declining Soft Power

The need to show commitment to NATO and readiness to take sides creates a further dilemma for Ankara. Non-involvement has long been the mainstay of Turkey's security policy, and the country has often kept a low profile in tensions involving the West. It was neutral during the Second World War and, even in the Cold War, abided by the Montreux Convention. In recent years, Turkey has responded to security challenges in its immediate neighbourhood while taking care not to deepen the divisions with its neighbours. It maintained a low profile during the Georgian war, and refused American troops permission to cross its territory during the Iraq war. Although Russia and Turkey have been in opposing camps on several issues, not least the Syrian war, they have pursued a policy of "agreeing to disagree."

Benefiting from the consequences of a multi-polar order, Turkey exploited its "strategic depth" by capitalising on historical, religious and language ties to diversify its trade relations, and sought to develop its soft power capacity. However, once it saw its EU accession bid replaced by a strategic partnership, Turkey's foreign policy became more ambitious and independent, with the aim of bolstering its capacity to "act alone," and this detached Turkey from EU's foreign policy ambitions. The non-involvement policy that was initially based on security concerns has also become an increasingly comfortable position for Ankara. During this period, Turkey has deepened its partnership with Russia,[1] and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has twice mentioned his desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Eurasian political, economic and military organisation, and for a re-orientation that would resonate with sections of the Turkish public. Predictably, perhaps, Turkey's ruling elites painted NATO membership as a "burden" to Turkey's national ambitions. As regards the EU, siding with EU allies who voiced hostility to Turkey's European ambitions has also become unpopular.

[1] Russia is Turkey's second largest trade partner after the EU, and Turkish contractors are active in Russia. Moreover, Turkey imports 58% of its gas and 11% of its oil from Russia, and a Russian company is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant.

These attempts to find a new, more self-confident and more intrusive basis for Turkish soft power have run into trouble. Not only did the "zero problems" policy result in the "precious loneliness" doctrine once the Arab uprisings exposed the policy's contradictions, but growing security challenges such as the Syrian civil war obliged Turkey to turn back to the United States, lower its foreign policy profile, and postpone its ambitions to become a regional leader. Ankara had to acknowledge NATO as a pillar of its security as it twice evoked Article 4 for consultation among NATO members (after the downing of an unarmed Turkish F-4 reconnaissance jet, and after a mortar was fired at Turkey from Syria) in 2012.

So far, however, Turkey's return to the U.S. and to the transatlantic alliance has not meant a return to the EU. Although Ukraine's Europeanisation would benefit Turkey, it is greeted with ambivalence so long as Turkey's own accession prospects are unclear. Indeed, Turkey has contributed to the prosperity of its shared neighbourhood with the EU, within a bilateral framework, and provides a potentially important alternative to Russian influence with its economic and trade partnerships, as well as the visa-free regime enjoyed by the citizens of the entire region. Turkey's trade volume with Ukraine has reached $6.7 billion, and Ukraine's biggest trade surplus is to Turkey. Turkish investments in Ukraine have surpassed $2 billion. Moreover, the two capitals are preparing to sign a free trade agreement despite Ukraine's market monopolies.

And yet the EU has failed to engage Turkey properly in Ukraine. With its accession bid blocked, Turkey would be reluctant to be associated with the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) due to past grievances: the parallel "Union for the Mediterranean" was conceived by Paris as an alternative to EU membership. This failure of imagination by the EU is made all the more disappointing the recent shift of thinking in Turkey. Once based on security concerns, non-alliance with the EU's foreign policy has than become an increasingly comforting position for the Turkish decision-makers. Its muted response to the Georgian war allowed Ankara to deepen its strategic ties with Moscow, which in turn benefitted their economic, trade and energy relations. Currently, Turkish leaders seek to use their low involvement in the Ukrainian crisis to recover their declining economic and diplomatic power. Moreover, despite Russia's natural gas sanctions on Ukraine would, for instance, affect 25% of Turkey's gas imports, and Turkey is relying on the EU to pay Ukraine's debts in order to secure its own gas imports. Moreover, the decline of Turkey's democratic standards has in turn deprived the EU of potential Turkish assets, diminishing the union as a pole of attraction.

On the other hand, Turkey's preference for low-involvement in the crisis has already had setbacks. EU capitals with a strong interest in the EaP region have seen Turkey as an important ally, and were supportive of Turkey's EU prospects. However, the Ukrainian crisis has magnified the divergences in their geographic priorities. In addition to the disappointment by the lack of symbolic solidarity that Turkey could have provided for EU actions, it also cast doubt over Turkey's often claimed "multi-regional" location. The limits of Ankara's regional power are also questioned, due to its limited capacity to influence the developments in Ukraine, or the religious and kinship argument regarding, for example, Gagauz Turks, who appear rather to be under Russian influence. As such, not only are the geopolitical balances changing to Turkey's disadvantage, but Ankara is also sending little in the way of positive messages to EU capitals, and in turn its relevance as an EU candidate has diminished. If Ankara is to gain stronger support for its EU bid, it will need to reaffirm its willingness to act with the EU, and will thus also need to manage its absence in Eastern Europe.

Conclusions: Resolving Turkey's "Trilemma"

The crisis poses difficulties for Ankara's delicate diplomacy, which aims to balance security needs, economic and energy interests, and longer-term ambitions of an autonomous foreign policy. While its low-profile response would be challenged in the event of an increase in tensions, Turkey would see a crucial interest in enhancing the credibility of territorial defence guarantees offered by the alliance, and Ankara could opt to leverage its position by differentiating its stance in internal NATO debates.

The general reluctance to countenance Turkish EU accession has spurred Ankara to develop its own global vision, and to begin judging the EU in terms only of its utility for the country's wider ambitions. For public opinion, which does not distinguish between NATO and the EU, being denied their EU bid, and obstacles to visa-free travel, have undermined the perception of Turkey as part of the West in global geopolitics. Although Turkey has recalibrated its foreign policy in recent years, the obstacles to EU–Turkey relations

have encouraged decision-makers in Ankara to compensate for their weakening international position (due to weaker economy, a democracy deficit, and foreign policy failure) by diverging their stance. And yet this also shows that EU–Turkey relations could be the key to overcoming Turkey's "trilemma," and give the EU a strategic advantage in dealing with regional challenges if it can address Turkey's vulnerabilities.

Turkey faces considerable barriers to trade, services and investments in the EU, and aligning itself with EU foreign policy, even if symbolically, is challenging for non-EU member Turkey. The EU may be Turkey's biggest export market, but it covers only 41% of its exports, which in turn increase Turkey's tendencies to diversify its relations. Furthering economic and commercial integration can in turn give new impetus to Turkey–EU relations, and therefore, the EU–Turkey Customs Unions should be updated in line with the recent World Bank report.[2]

As the Southern Gas Corridor will play a greater role in reducing the EU's energy dependence on Russia, Turkey's strategic position as a gas transit state is expected to gain further importance. While Turkey is making efforts to diversify its supply sources by, for example, building pipelines to transfer gas from northern Iraq, constructing an LNG terminal or becoming a gas hub; the EU should consider building additional pipelines to the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP), and not abandoning the Nabucco-West project. Reducing Turkey's vulnerability to geopolitical tensions is one of the emerging areas of cooperation for bolstering the alliance, and building reverse flow mechanisms between the EU and Turkey would be helpful in decreasing its vulnerability.

However, any joint initiative that lacks reaffirmation of Turkey's EU accession prospects will fall short of expectations. EU–Turkey foreign policy coordination cannot take place without the accession process. While the climate in the EU is not favourable towards Turkey's accession, the new European Commission should consider reforming EU enlargement policy, in order to bring more transparency to the evaluation process and prevent the "blame-games" used by Turkish politicians towards the EU, and also to de-politicise the process on the EU side. At the same time, Member States should be more vocal on the credibility of Turkey's accession, which would help cement transatlantic cohesion.

With their more accommodating policy on Turkey's EU bid, their immediate proximity to the Eastern Neighbourhood, and their energy needs, the EU's Central European Member States, including Poland, can use the Visegrad framework both for strengthening EU–Turkey relations and for channelling Turkey's assets to the region. Turkey is an important contributor to the prosperity of Eastern Europe, and, through its economic ties and people-to-people contacts, already provides an alternative to Russian influence in the region. The Visegrad Group should develop initiatives to strengthen V4–Turkey relations within the EU Framework, and, at the same time, develop regional mechanisms that will allow Turkey's economic and civil society assets to be channelled to the region. Mechanisms that would increase bilateral contacts between Turks and their neighbours would both support regional transition and increase Turkish civil society's interest in the common neighbourhood.

[2] *World Bank Group Report: EU–Turkey Customs Union Boosts Trade, but Needs Strengthening*, 8 April 2014, www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/turkey/tr-eu-customs-union-eng.pdf.