

Unpacking Türkiye-Russia dynamics in the Ukraine war and post-war situation in the South Caucasus

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In recent years, Türkiye's relations with Russia have not been free from turbulence, but Ankara and Moscow have been able to maintain the relationship based on strategic calculations. The main aim of this article is to analyse how Türkiye's transactional relationship with Russia has functioned in the context of the recent conflicts in their neighbourhood: the war in Ukraine and the post-war security architecture in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. This article argues that Russia's war in Ukraine creates not only risks for Türkiye, but also a wide range of opportunities to boost its economy and regional posture. In particular, Moscow's weakening military power gives Türkiye a chance to enhance its role in the post-war security architecture in the South Caucasus region.

Key words: Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Karabakh region,



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Introduction

Since Russia's war in Ukraine broke out on 24 February 2022, Türkiye has taken the side of neither protagonist and has mostly juggled relations with Moscow and Kyiv. Türkiye's policy towards the war in Ukraine has been focused on maximizing the benefits and mitigating the risks for its security and economy, which has been struggling recently. Ankara is engaged in the Russia–Ukraine conflict on multiple levels and strives to leverage its geopolitical position in the proximity of the theatre of war and at the crossroads of important energy and food export corridors. The latter has been particularly important as the war in Ukraine has caused major food and energy supply disruptions and cut-offs. As a result, Türkiye has been able to support Kyiv politically and militarily without severing ties with Russia and, unlike many Western countries, manages

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to continue energy cooperation with Moscow. Thanks to that, Türkiye can position itself as a strategic go-between in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which has prompted Ankara to undertake diplomatic efforts to end the war and mitigate the large-scale food crisis that could have been a side effect of the conflict.

The Ukraine war and Türkiye's relations with Russia have also had an important impact on the post-war situation in Karabakh region. Since the end of the Second Karabakh War (2020), Türkiye and Russia have become pillars of the security architecture in the South Caucasus; the region has become another geopolitical space involved in their transactional relationship, which is a mix of cooperation and competition based on pragmatic calculations. The military campaign in Ukraine, which did not go as planned, shifted Russia's attention away from the South Caucasus and exposed the country's various military weaknesses. Because Russia is a security guarantor of the Trilateral Statement of 10 November 2020, the resulting security vacuum might be filled by Türkiye, which will be further boosted by planned connectivity projects with Azerbaijan.

Diplomatic efforts

Türkiye is still able to successfully maintain an uneasy balance between Kyiv and Moscow, even though that initially seemed unsustainable in a mid-term perspective. In February, Türkiye strongly condemned

Russia's recognition of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk separatist regions¹ and subsequent military attack on Ukraine.² Ankara has also striven to simultaneously support Ukraine and not alienate Moscow, in an effort to position Türkiye as a mediator.

Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was one of the few world leaders to visit Ukraine just before the war broke out on 24 February 2022. Erdoğan came to Kyiv to sign a long-awaited free trade agreement between Ukraine and Türkiye, which had been negotiated for 12 years, and to conclude an important drone-manufacturing partnership, but these were not the only reasons. At that time, tensions between Russia and Ukraine were running high and observers were expecting that war could start at any time. Türkiye's President offered to organize a trilateral meeting with Russian and Ukrainian representatives under Türkiye's auspices to end the crisis. Türkiye's offer was not accepted then but, since the start of the conflict, Ankara has been able to bring the warring sides to the negotiating table on several occasions.³

Türkiye did not join Western sanctions against Russia but, a few days after the war broke out, Ankara closed the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits to Russian ships following a request from Kyiv. Even though, at first, Türkiye was reluctant to do this,⁴ ultimately, it exercised its right to limit the passage of warships through these Turkish straits, as mandated by the Montreux Convention of 1936. Additionally, in late April, Ankara closed Turkish airspace to Russian military and civilian planes flying to Syria for three months. This was the first time it had done so since 2015, when Russia intervened in Syria

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1 Reuters.com, *Erdogan tells Putin Turkey does not recognise steps against Ukraine's territorial integrity*, February 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-cannot-abandon-ties-with-russia-or-ukraine-media-2022-02-23/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

2 DailySabah.com, *Turkey to continue support Ukraine's territorial integrity, unity*, February 24, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-to-continue-support-ukraines-territorial-integrity-unity> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

3 Konarzewska, N., "Turkey, Ukraine and Russia: The Illusion of Neutrality," *The Turkey Analyst*, March 4, 2022, available at: <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/681-turkey-ukraine-and-russia-the-illusion-of-neutrality.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

4 Reuters.com, *Turkey hasn't decided to close straits to Russian ships -Turkish official*, February 26, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-hasnt-decided-close-straits-russian-ships-turkish-official-2022-02-26/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

in support of President Bashar Assad.⁵ This surprising policy shift was likely motivated by a desire to show solidarity with Türkiye's NATO allies in their efforts to deter Russia.

Ankara's position towards Russia is more assertive than many experts initially thought, but that does not mean that the authorities in Türkiye want to completely burn their bridges with Moscow. Türkiye's Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, criticized the 'hawkish' approach to sanctioning Russia displayed by some NATO members. Instead, he proposed a step-by-step approach which envisages that sanctions would be gradually lifted in parallel to the withdrawal of the Russian army from Ukraine.⁶

Initially, Türkiye's mediation efforts were not welcomed by Russia and were disregarded by the West but, eventually, Ankara persuaded officials of the warring countries to meet in Türkiye for peace talks.

As a result of this policy, Türkiye, unlike many other NATO countries, has not severed either political or economic ties with Moscow. This is despite criticism and pressure from Ankara's Western allies, which think that Türkiye, a NATO member, should fully align its Russia policy with those of its Western partners. Nevertheless, Türkiye's politicians still maintain a dialogue with Moscow, and Türkiye's and Russia's presidents have met on several occasions since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. However, this did not stop Türkiye's president appealing publicly to Russia to end the war in Ukraine 'by diplomatic channels' at the 2022 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit, which took place on 15–16 September in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where Russia's President Vladimir Putin was also present.⁷

Türkiye's economic relations with Russia have been growing recently, despite Western sanctions and the economic turbulence caused by the war in Ukraine.⁸ For example, Türkiye's imports from and exports to

5 Voanews.com, *Turkey Closes Airspace to Russian Planes Flying to Syria*, April 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-closes-airspace-to-russian-planes-flying-to-syria-/6542319.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

6 Gostev, A. and Liklikadze, K., "Analysis: Erdogan Hoping Russian Invasion Of Ukraine Can Bolster Turkish Regional Power", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 30, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-erdogan-russia-regional-power/31828327.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

7 Euronews.com, *Turkey and India call on Putin to end war in Ukraine*, September 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/17/turkey-and-india-call-on-putin-to-end-war-in-ukraine> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

8 Kubilay, M.M., "The Ukraine war has upended Turkey's plans to stabilize the economy", *MEI@75*, March 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/ukraine-war-has-upended-turkeys-plans-stabilize-economy> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

Russia surged to \$4.4 billion and \$730 million respectively in July 2022. This is nearly twice as much as in July 2021, when Türkiye's imports and exports were \$2.5 billion and \$417.3 million and dollars. At some point this year, Russia even surpassed China as the main source of imported goods for Türkiye.⁹

The presidents of Türkiye and Russia recently stated that they want to upgrade bilateral economic relations, particularly in the fields of trade, energy, transport, agriculture, construction, and tourism.¹⁰ Ankara sees bolstering economic cooperation with Russia as beneficial because it might prop up Türkiye's struggling economy, which has been recently affected by skyrocketing inflation, a weak national currency (the lira), and a slowdown in GDP growth.¹¹ Increased imports of Russian hydrocarbons will not only ensure Türkiye's energy safety in the current time of a sharp energy crisis in Europe, but Ankara might also resell gas at a profit to European countries struggling with energy shortages. Experts claims that Moscow, which has been at economic war with the West since the February aggression in Ukraine, is using Türkiye to circumvent Western sanctions and, most likely, Russia's current plans of expanding economic ties are intended to further facilitate that. Moscow has already been 'reimporting' some sanctioned goods from the European market via Türkiye, and many Russian companies are seeking to re-enter the European market through Türkiye.¹²

As a result of such a balanced approach, Türkiye was able to bring Russian and Ukrainian representatives to the negotiating table. Initially, Türkiye's mediation efforts were not welcomed by Russia and were disregarded by the West but, eventually, Ankara persuaded officials of the warring countries to meet in Türkiye for peace talks. On 9 March, in the resort city of Antalya, Türkiye's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu

9 Moens, B., Aarup, S.A. and Tamma P., "Erdoğan walks a fine line as the Ukraine war's double agent", *Politico*, August 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-fine-line-ukraine-russia-war/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

10 DailySabah.com, *Turkey, Russia agree to boost economic, energy cooperation*, August 5, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-russia-agree-to-boost-economic-energy-cooperation> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

11 Zgheib, N., "Turkey to see muted economic growth in 2022", *European Bank of Reconstruction and Development*, May 10, 2022, available at: <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/turkey-to-see-muted-economic-growth-in-2022.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

12 Özdemir, S., "Turkey and Russia: A partnership essential to both", *Deutsche Welle*, August 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-and-russia-a-partnership-essential-to-both/a-62790489> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

hosted a meeting between Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba. Bringing the warring sides together for the first time since Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February was a success in itself, but the meeting did not bring any visible progress towards peace.¹³ Subsequent peace talks, which were held in Istanbul in late March, were ultimately more productive, probably because the Ukrainian level of resistance and endurance had surprised Russia, which had to scale down its military objectives and walk back from plans to capture Kyiv and topple President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government.¹⁴ But even though Kyiv and Moscow were able to agree on some issues, such as Ukraine's neutral status, the talks were stalled after Ukrainians revealed mass killings of civilians in the territories liberated from the Russian army.¹⁵

Türkiye, alongside the United Nations and Ukraine, was a signatory to the Initiative on Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs From Ukrainian Ports ('Grain Agreement') that was concluded on 22 July 2022 and unblocked Ukraine's three Black Sea ports for grain exports. The Russian representative, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, separately signed similar agreement with Türkiye and the UN.¹⁶ The deal was brokered by Türkiye and the UN, and was a substantial achievement in itself because it was the first time that the warring sides had arrived at any agreement, despite the fact that it was initialled separately, at Kyiv's request.¹⁷ The major aim of the deal was to create safe passage for cargo ships in the Black Sea, which both sides of the deal "committed not to attack", thereby unlocking exports of grain and sunflower oil

13 The Kyiv Independent, "Kuleba-Lavrov meeting ends with no result", March 10, 2022, available at: <https://kyivindependent.com/national/kuleba-lavrov-meeting-ends-with-no-result> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

14 Atlantic Council in Turkey, *Experts react: After Russia-Ukraine talks in Istanbul, is an end to war imminent?*, April 1, 2022, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/experts-react-after-russia-ukraine-talks-in-istanbul-is-an-end-to-war-imminent/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

15 Ali, T., "Russia-Ukraine peace talks: Bucha atrocities have stalled negotiations to end war, Turkey says", *INews*, available at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/russia-ukraine-peace-talks-bucha-atrocities-negotiations-end-war-turkey-1561384> (Accessed: September 21, 2022)

16 Kabanenko, I., "Export of Ukrainian Grain Through Seaports: Opportunities and Risks," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 27, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/export-of-ukrainian-grain-through-seaports-opportunities-and-risks/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

17 Euronews.com, *Ukraine and Russia sign vital grain export deal in Istanbul*, July 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/07/21/ukraine-russia-to-sign-turkey-brokered-grain-export-agreement-on-friday> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

from Ukraine, as well as goods from Russia, which would receive an exemption from Western sanctions and be shipped to world markets.¹⁸ Previously, safe passage through the Black Sea was impossible due to the war in Ukraine, which severely affected shipments of Ukrainian agricultural products. As a result, grain prices soared, which created huge problems, including shortages of certain products and even fear of famine in poorer countries. So far, the Grain Agreement has brought very good results: since July, Ukraine has been able to export around 8 million tons of agricultural products to Asia, Africa, Middle East and European Union.¹⁹ Russia is dissatisfied with the ‘Grain Agreement’ and wanted to withdraw from it in October 2022. However, Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was able to convince Moscow to return to the deal, which highlights Türkiye’s current role as a strategic bridge between Russia and the West.²⁰

Türkiye also acted as an intermediary in the biggest exchange of prisoners of war between Russia and Ukraine to date. Ankara, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia, brokered an agreement as a result of which, on 21 September, Moscow released 215 Ukrainian POWs including Mariupol’s Azovstal plant defenders and 10 foreign nationals who were held captive in Russia. Under the agreement, five leaders of the Azov Regiment, who were swapped in September, will remain in Türkiye until the war ends. They were exchanged for Viktor Medvedchuk, the Ukrainian pro-Russian oligarch and politician who is said to be “Putin’s ally”, and 55 Russian soldiers.²¹ Both Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Andriy Yermak, Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, highlighted the leading role of Türkiye’s president in this successful prisoner swap.²²

18 Ibid.

19 Kabanenko I., “The Ukraine Grain Agreement After Three Months: Moscow’s Blackmail, Boa Constrictor Tactics and Russian Gas”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ukraine-grain-agreement-after-three-months-moscows-blackmail-boa-constrictor-tactics-and-russian-gas/> (Accessed: November 18, 2022)

20 Prokopenko, A., “Russia’s Return to Grain Deal Is a Sign of Turkey’s Growing Influence”, *Carnegie Politika*, November 8, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88349> (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

21 Dw.com, “Ukraine: Azovstal commanders among 215 soldiers released in prisoner exchange with Russia”, September 21, 2022, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-azovstal-commanders-among-215-soldiers-released-in-prisoner-exchange-with-russia/a-63198602> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

22 Ibid.; Romanenko V., “Recently liberated leaders of Azov Regiment will remain in Turkey until war’s end”, *Ukrainska Pravda*, September 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/09/22/7368578/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

Arms supplies

The defence cooperation between Türkiye and Ukraine was burgeoning even before the current war with Russia started. They had been cooperating mainly in area of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) since Ukraine acquired Bayraktar TB2 drones in 2018 and established a joint venture with Bayraktar manufacturer Baykar Makina for the joint development of UAVs, guided munitions and aerospace engines. Türkiye has also been interested in transferring Ukraine’s know-how, especially engine technology, to Türkiye’s military equipment producers and defence projects.²³

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Türkiye’s arms sales to Ukraine increased significantly in the first quarter of 2022. According to the Exporters’ Assembly of Türkiye, arms exports reached \$59.8 million in the first three months of this year, which is an impressive rise considering that they totalled \$1.9 million in the same period last year.²⁴

More importantly, Türkiye eagerly supplied weapons to Ukraine just before the war when many countries rejected Kyiv’s desperate pleas for military equipment. Türkiye’s authorities did not reveal which weapons were sold to Ukraine, but defence analysts agree that Kyiv acquired a new batch of Bayraktar TB2 drones, guided munitions and possibly communications and targeting systems.²⁵ Also, in August 2022, Türkiye’s Ministry of Defence delivered 50 used Kirpi vehicles, which are ambush- and mine-protected, and plans new deliveries in the future.²⁶

Nevertheless, Ankara publicly distanced itself from drone sales to Ukraine, insisting that the Bayraktar-TB2 UAVs were purchased by Kyiv under an agreement with their producer, Turkish private company Baykar Makina, rather than the government of Türkiye. This behaviour

23 Konarzewska, N., “Defying Russia: Turkey Boosts Ties with Poland and Ukraine”, *The Turkish Analyst*, August 2016, 2021, available at: <http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/671-defying-russia-turkey-boosts-ties-with-poland-and-ukraine.html> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

24 Osterlund, P.B., “Amid war fears, Ukraine stocked up on Turkish defence equipment”, *Aljazeera*, April 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/12/amid-war-fears-ukraine-stocked-up-on-turkish-defence-equipment> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

25 Ibid.

26 Bekdil, B.E., “Turkey sends 50 mine-resistant vehicles to Ukraine, with more expected”, *Defense News*, August 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2022/08/22/turkey-sends-50-mine-resistant-vehicles-to-ukraine-with-more-expected/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

reflects the fact that Türkiye, which faces several vulnerabilities with regard to Moscow, does not want to anger Russia and is striving to maintain its special position as a mediator rather than an overt ally of Ukraine, especially as Russia has already been angered by the proliferation of Turkish drones close to its borders. Bayraktar TB2 UAVs were already successfully proven against Soviet/Russian-made weaponry in conflicts in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and North Africa, and have proved to be an asset for the Ukrainian army. In the current conflict with Russia, Bayraktar TB2 armed drones proved to be particularly successful against Russian surface-to-air missile systems.²⁷ This is because Russian air defence systems are not technically capable of intercepting drones produced in Türkiye. It is also debatable whether Russian electronic warfare systems, such as Krasukha-4, are able to counter these drones.²⁸ Analysts confirm that the Bayraktar TB2 can indeed be credited with destroying high quantities of Soviet- and Russian-made military hardware during previous conflicts in Syria, Libya, the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, and now in Ukraine. This has included T-72 tanks; multiple launch rocket systems: BM-27 ‘Uragan’, BM-30s ‘Smerch’, and BM 21-s ‘Grad’; and a number of surface-to-air missile systems such as different types of ‘Buk’, ‘Osa’, ‘Strela’, and ‘Pantsir’, among others.²⁹

Defence cooperation between Türkiye and Ukraine is continuing despite Russia’s protests. Baykar Makina decided to donate several Bayraktar TB2 UAVs for free to the Ukrainian army after people in Lithuania,³⁰

27 Kasapoglu, C., “A Dangerous Drone for All Seasons: Assessing the Ukrainian Military’s Use of the Bayraktar TB-2”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 16, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/a-dangerous-drone-for-all-seasons-assessing-the-ukrainian-militarys-use-of-the-bayraktar-tb-2/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

28 Axe, D., “Ukraine Reportedly Has 20 TB-2 Drones. They Might Not Matter In A Wider War With Russia”, *Forbes*, February 8, 2022, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/02/08/ukraines-got-20-tb-2-drones-it-might-not-matter-in-a-wider-war-with-russia/?sh=26e75482353f>, (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

29 Mitzer, S., Kemal, D. and Janovsky, J., “Defending Ukraine – Listing Russian Military Equipment Destroyed By Bayraktar TB2s”, *Oryx*, February 27, 2022, available at: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/defending-ukraine-listing-russian-army.html> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

30 Sytas, A., “Turkey’s Baykar donates drone for Ukraine after Lithuanian crowdfunder”, *Reuters*, June 2, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkeys-baykar-donates-drone-ukraine-after-lithuanian-crowdfunder-2022-06-02/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

The Second Karabakh War (2020) between Azerbaijan and Armenia clearly showed that Türkiye and Russia were the only external actors that could influence the outcome and shape the post-war order in the South Caucasus region.

Poland,³¹ and Ukraine³² raised millions of dollars to procure these drones; the money collected will instead be spent on humanitarian causes in Ukraine. Apart from that, despite the war, Baykar Makina still intends to pursue plans to build a drone production plant in Ukraine where its flagship product, the Bayraktar TB2 drone, will be produced. This will happen on the basis of an agreement that was signed between Türkiye and Ukraine during Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Kyiv on 3 February 2022. The deal foresees starting joint production of Bayraktar TB2 drones, which will be set up in a location in Ukraine alongside a training centre for pilots.³³ Russia reacted to this news very harshly: the Russian President's Press Secretary, Dmitry Peskov, publicly threatened that Russia might destroy any drone production plant set up by a Turkish defence company in Ukraine.³⁴

Türkiye's role in the post-Second Karabakh war order in the South Caucasus

The Second Karabakh War (2020) between Azerbaijan and Armenia clearly showed that Türkiye and Russia were the only external actors that could influence the outcome and shape the post-war order in the South Caucasus region. The war happened mainly because the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group – co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States – could not, for decades, work out any tangible resolution to the conflict. As a result, the South Caucasus became another region, alongside Libya

31 Anews.com, "Baykar donates TB2 drones to Ukraine after Polish funding campaign", July 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.anews.com.tr/gallery/economy/baykar-donates-tb2-drones-to-ukraine-after-polish-funding-campaign>, (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

32 Jankowicz, M., "A Ukrainian TV host crowdfunded \$20 million to buy Bayraktar drones. The company making them refused the money and said it'd donate the aircraft instead", *Business Insider*, June 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/bayraktar-firm-refuses-20m-says-will-donate-drones-to-ukraine-2022-6?IR=T> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

33 Bekdil, B.E., "Turkey and Ukraine to coproduce TB2 drones", *Defense News*, February 4, 2022, available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/02/04/turkey-and-ukraine-to-coproduce-tb2-drones/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

34 The New Arab, *Putin aide says Moscow will destroy 'Turkish drone factory in Ukraine'*, August 10, 2022, available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/ukraine-russia-threatens-destroy-turkish-drone-factory> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

and Syria, where Russia and Türkiye share influence in a complicated system of cooperation and competition. Türkiye's stronger engagement with the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict coincided with its more robust regional policy and attempts to boost its influence across the Black Sea region and Central Asia, which has been reinforced by Ankara's growing technical and military capabilities.³⁵

Türkiye and Azerbaijan had a strong partnership before the war based on cultural and ethnic kinship, and robust political, economic, and social ties, which have been upgraded because of the unprecedented level of assistance that Türkiye gave to Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War. Among other support, according to Turkish military analysts, Türkiye transferred to Baku its domestically produced military equipment, including technically advanced UAVs and a complete warfare doctrine that was previously tested in Syria.³⁶ Experts agree that it was, specifically, the drones used by Azerbaijan's army, which proliferated across the battlefield and destroyed large quantities of Armenian military hardware, that largely contributed to Azerbaijan's military superiority in this war.³⁷

Russia did not get militarily involved in Second Karabakh War. Moscow rejected Armenia's appeals to send soldiers or equipment to Armenian forces in the Karabakh region on the grounds of the collective security rule of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and said that collective security guarantees encompass only Armenia's internationally-recognized territory.³⁸ This was because Russia preferred to play the role of mediator in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and shape the post-war reality in the region because that would give it leverage on both Yerevan and Baku, and would preserve Moscow's influence and interests in the South Caucasus. As a result,

35 Konarzewska, N., "Turkey, Russia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict", *New Eastern Europe*, No.1-2 (2021), January-March 2021, p. 84.

36 Kasapoglu, C., "Turkey Transfers Drone Warfare Capacity to Its Ally Azerbaijan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 15, 2020, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-transfers-drone-warfare-capacity-to-its-ally-azerbaijan/> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

37 Shaikh, S. and Rumbaugh, W., "The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, December 8, 2022, available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

38 Aliyev, N., "War in Nagorno-Karabakh Requires a Russian Balancing Act", *CACI Analyst*, November 10, 2020, available at: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13646-war-in-nagorno-karabakh-requires-a-russian-balancing-act.html>, (Accessed on September 24, 2022)

Moscow negotiated the 10 November 2020 trilateral statement and deployed 1,960 peacekeepers to what is now the Karabakh economic region of Azerbaijan to oversee its implementation.³⁹

Türkiye also took part in the peacekeeping process, but to a lesser degree. On 11 November 2020, Russia and Türkiye signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a Joint Russian–Turkish Centre for monitoring the ceasefire in Azerbaijan. The centre was opened in February 2021 in Qiyameddinli village of Azerbaijan’s Agdam District, and up to 60 troops from the Russian Federation and Türkiye, equipped with drones, were deployed to oversee the ceasefire. The centre was established in Qiyameddinli, a settlement that was rewon by Azerbaijan in the 2020 war, after months of negotiations. Moscow was against letting Turkish soldiers into the Karabakh region and proposed setting the centre up in the city of Ganja or the Barda district of Azerbaijan, which have better-developed infrastructure. In contrast, Azerbaijan and Türkiye

Russia has been visibly reluctant to let Türkiye into its perceived sphere of influence in the South Caucasus, but the current war in Ukraine has shifted its attention away from the region.

deemed it necessary for the centre to be located near the Karabakh region where Russian peacekeepers are deployed so that the centre would be able to fulfil its duties better.⁴⁰

Russia has been visibly reluctant to let Türkiye into its perceived sphere of influence in the South Caucasus, but the current war in Ukraine has shifted its attention away from the region. Owing to the severe manpower shortages that the Russian military has been experiencing in the war with Ukraine, Moscow pulled hundreds of experienced peacekeepers out of the Karabakh region to be sent to the Ukrainian front.⁴¹ It is clear that the war against Ukraine did not go as Moscow planned: first, the Russian army had to retreat from the Kyiv area and, in September, it suffered heavy losses in Kharkiv province. At the time of writing, in November 2022, the Russian army had suffered another serious setback, as it had retreated from the part of Ukraine’s

39 Bbc.com, “Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia sign Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal”, November 10, 2022, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54882564>, (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

40 Goble, P., “Joint Russian-Turkish Karabakh Monitoring Center Opens Amidst Fresh Controversy”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 4, 2021, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/joint-russian-turkish-karabakh-monitoring-center-opens-amidst-fresh-controversy/> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

41 Cafiero, G., “Russia’s Challenges in the South Caucasus Amid the War in Ukraine”, *American Security Project*, September 8, 2022, available at: <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russias-challenges-in-the-south-caucasus-amid-the-war-in-ukraine/> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

Kherson province and the city of Kherson itself. This was the only regional capital that Russia had captured since its 24 February invasion of Ukraine; the province was annexed by Moscow in September 2022.⁴²

Russia's problems in Ukraine have created a vacuum in the South Caucasus, which presents an opportunity for Türkiye to increase its influence. Türkiye has already strengthened its relations with Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea Basin as a successful mediator, as it is located close to the war theatre and has proved to be indispensable to both Kyiv and Moscow in some areas. This gives Türkiye a fair chance to negotiate a larger role for itself in the South Caucasus's security architecture, given that Russia is currently struggling to preserve its role as security guarantor in the Karabakh region.

Türkiye's posture in the region will be further enhanced when the transport corridor between the main territory of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenia's southern Syunik Province is finally reinstated. This will give Türkiye a direct land connection with its strategic ally, Azerbaijan, and will facilitate contacts and ties with Turkic peoples inhabiting Central Asia. The link in question was specifically mentioned in the 10 November 2020 trilateral statement, which obliged Armenia to guarantee unimpeded overland traffic through it, which will be monitored by Russian border guards. The armistice also stipulated that transport infrastructure will be set up to ensure the functioning of the route.⁴³ Unfortunately, the transport channel between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan AR still has not been reinstated despite Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's efforts. This is because Baku and Yerevan have differing visions of how the transport link should function, therefore reopening this very important route remains in limbo.⁴⁴

Türkiye's posture in the region will be further enhanced when the transport corridor between the main territory of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenia's southern Syunik Province is finally reinstated.

42 Euractiv.com, *Ukrainian troops reclaim dozens of towns from Russian control, close in on Kherson*, November 11, 2022, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/ukrainian-troops-reclaim-dozens-of-towns-from-russian-control-close-in-on-kherson/> (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

43 Socor, V., "Karabakh Armistice: Azerbaijani National Triumph, Russian Geopolitical Victory (Part One)", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 12, 2020, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/karabakh-armistice-azerbaijani-national-triumph-russian-geopolitical-victory-part-one/> (Accessed: September 25, 2022)

44 Silk Road Briefing, *Azerbaijan Talks Up Zangazur Corridor Amongst Armenian Concerns As Transit Trade Grows*, July 18, 2022, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/07/18/azerbaijan-talks-up-zangazur-corridor-amongst-armenian-concerns-as-transit-trade-grows/> (Accessed: September 25, 2022)

Conflict between Russia and the West in the energy sphere, caused by the war in Ukraine, also opens new possibilities for Türkiye to leverage its strategic geopolitical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and its growing ties with Azerbaijan and Central Asia's Turkic nations. Now, as EU member states seek to wean themselves off Russian hydrocarbons, Türkiye is poised to enhance its role as an energy transit state as an alternative to Russia. Türkiye will transit more Azerbaijani gas to Europe in line with the 18 July 2022 "Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy" with the European Commission, which commits Azerbaijan to increasing its natural gas flow to Europe to at least 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027.⁴⁵ Kazakhstan also plans to expand its oil exports via the trans-Caspian route through the South Caucasus and Türkiye to Europe. Astana wants to export 1.5 million tons of its crude oil through the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline in 2023 and increase the volume up to as much as 6 to 6.5 million tons annually.⁴⁶ Most Kazakh oil is transported to Europe via Russia but, since Moscow has been ramping up pressure on Astana in connection with the war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has decided to develop alternative transport routes bypassing Russia.

Conclusions

Türkiye continues its balancing act with Russia and Ukraine, despite the fact that it is defying the bipolar paradigm that has been reinforced in international relations since 24 February and has caused an international backlash. This is because Ankara tries to approach the conflict in Ukraine not only as a threat to Türkiye's own security interests, but as an opportunity to stabilise its geopolitical neighbourhood and increase its diplomatic weight as a successful mediator. This strategy has, so far, yielded some positive results, as Türkiye has been able to preserve relations with both Kyiv and Moscow, as well as to mitigate particular risks caused by the war in Ukraine.

Many recent events highlight the fact that Türkiye's successful balancing act has positioned the country as a strategic bridge between

45 O'Byrne, D., "Azerbaijan and EU agree to strategic energy partnership", *Eurasianet*, July 18, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-eu-agree-to-strategic-energy-partnership>. (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

46 Kumenov, A., "Kazakhstan starts exporting oil through Middle Corridor from New Year", *Eurasianet*, November 11, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-starts-exporting-oil-through-middle-corridor-from-new-year> (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

Russia, on one side, and Ukraine and the West, on the other. What is more, Türkiye has become indispensable for Moscow as it is the only remaining link to Europe for Russian companies and individuals, as well as for Russian natural gas after the Nord Stream gas pipelines were damaged in September 2022. Simultaneously, the expansion of energy transit routes bypassing Russia also enhances Türkiye's posturing *vis-à-vis* Moscow. Clearly, Türkiye–Russia dynamics are shifting in Ankara's favour, and Russia now has to compromise many of its interests in bilateral relations.

The above discussion points to the fact that Türkiye can now also enhance its posture in the Black Sea region and South Caucasus *vis-à-vis* Russia. Russia's reputation for military power has suffered a serious blow in Ukraine, and the war is consuming more and more resources, which casts doubt on whether Moscow is still capable of stabilising the situation in the Karabakh region. Türkiye could use this opportunity and its strategic partnership with Baku in the military sphere to expand its military foothold in the South Caucasus. Having said that, regional destabilization due to Russia's weakening posture is not in Ankara's interest; a shift in the regional balance in Türkiye's favour would be more advantageous.