

Strategic ambiguity: Turkey, Russia and the war in Ukraine

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Abstract

As a NATO member, Turkey is formally an adversary of Russia. Moreover, Turkey's interests in the Middle East and the southern Caucasus frequently conflict with Russia's. Yet Turkey has forged a productive working relationship with Russia over the years of Erdogan's rule, with ties between the two ranging across defence, foreign policy and energy. In particular Turkey has finessed its reaction to the war in Ukraine: it has opposed Russia's invasion at the United Nations, provided lethal aid to Ukraine and limited Russian naval access to the Black Sea; at the same time Turkey has refused to implement Western sanctions, continued to buy Russian gas, and allowed Russian tourism and trade to continue. Neither Russia nor the West can force Turkey to become more accommodating to their interests: Turkey's key geostrategic location means it effectively has both sides over a barrel.

Keywords: Erdogan, Putin, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine

Introduction

This paper seeks to demonstrate how President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has used strategic ambiguity in balancing Turkey's relations with Russia and the West over his 20 years in power. In particular, the paper focuses on Erdogan's use of this methodology in relation to Russia's war in Ukraine. This analysis is set in the context of his management of Turkey's broader external relations in terms of his idiosyncratic approach to government – which might be defined as ambition tempered by realistic appreciation of Turkey's capabilities in its geostrategic environment. The paper will demonstrate how Erdogan's foreign policy has developed gradually – with him learning, and gradually gaining confidence, through trial and error. While not eschewing specialist foreign policy advisers, he has abandoned them when their advice has not been to his liking: his decisions have invariably reflected his own instincts, prejudices and personality. As such his style has been an exemplar of “Role Theory”, with Turkey's role in its region and in relation to Russia and the West best understood from the perspective of Erdogan himself as the decision-maker.¹ Reinforcing this perspective, the paper will show how Erdogan's international counterparts see their ties with Turkey determined in strong measure by their personal relationships with him.

¹ A useful overview of Role Theory in international relations is set out in Breuning, Marijke (14 March 2019), Role Theory in Politics and International Relations, in *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioural Political Science* <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb>. Breuning traces the theory's development by K. J. Holsti (1970) through to more recent theorists, with their consistent idea that theoretical models of international relations must simultaneously take into account the state's material capabilities and the perceptions of decision makers, who bring their own biases and ideas/ideals to the task of shaping foreign policy.

Dominant personality

Erdogan has been a major player in Turkish politics for nearly 30 years and has ruled the country for more than 20. A large man, six feet tall and strongly built, he was a semi-professional football player in his youth. He seems to dominate whatever space he is in; he is clearly used to leading and having his way. He crashes through barriers that might sideline less determined politicians. After serving as mayor of Turkey's largest city, Istanbul, for nearly five years from 1994, a military-backed court dismissed him, jailed him for 10 months and banned him from holding political office because of his strongly Islamic views. These personal convictions clashed with the state's secular ethos, a legacy of Kemal Ataturk, who founded the republic in the aftermath of the First World War. Turkey's military saw itself as the guardian of this legacy, and in the second half of the 20th century regularly intervened in the political process when it judged this national ethos under threat.

While out of office Erdogan amalgamated several political parties to form the socially-conservative Justice and Development (AK) party. He led AK to a landslide victory in the 2002 national elections but did not become prime minister until the following year after the new government arranged for his ban to be lifted. He served as prime minister until 2014 when he assumed the presidency, at that time a non-executive office. However, he continued to dominate Turkish policy-making, and then oversaw major constitutional changes in 2017 that abolished the role of prime minister and instituted an executive presidency – to which he was elected the following year.

Having been re-elected to a further five-year term as president in May this year, he is set to dominate Turkish foreign and domestic policy till at least 2028 and possibly years beyond. Even if he had lost the election, his stamp on foreign policy would likely have been maintained. Indications before the election were that the multi-party opposition planned to maintain Turkish foreign policy largely as it had developed under Erdogan, though with a more pro-Western bent.²

Erdogan and Putin: healthy egos and mutual understandings

In order to assess the outlook for Turkey-Russia relations in the short to medium term it is important to examine areas where their interests align and at times conflict: in particular, their respective approaches to the Middle East and the southern Caucasus, as well as towards the West broadly and the US in particular.

As a long-standing member of NATO, Turkey is formally an adversary of Russia. Yet Erdogan and Russian President Putin have a productive working relationship, with bilateral ties ranging across defence, foreign policy and energy. Having been in power for almost the same period of time, they have met frequently and know each other well. It would be surprising if such lengthy periods of continuous rule of major states did not boost already healthy egos to stratospheric levels. Certainly, both Erdogan and Putin indicate absolute confidence in their decision-making. There is no record of either repeating Louis XIV's "*L'état – c'est moi*", but it's not difficult to imagine them

² See for example The Economist (27 April 2023), A post-election Turkey would only partly change its foreign policy: on Russia, Syria and the Kurds, the country's interests would remain much the same <https://economist.com>. See also Middle East Eye (24 April 2023), Turkey elections: what is the opposition's Russia policy?: Turkish opposition sources tell Middle East Eye that a Kilicdaroglu government would not break its relations with Moscow and would maintain the balanced attitude in Ukraine <https://www.middleeasteye.net>

thinking it. In conformity with Role Theory, Erdogan's strongly personal approach to government is central to the analysis below.

Turkey's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been mixed. Erdogan has refused to join Western sanctions against Russia but at the same time has provided military assistance to Ukraine. He has been a difficult and occasionally unpredictable partner for both Russia and the West, with his decisions regularly frustrating both. Turkey's strategic geopolitical location at the crossroads of Eurasia means that Russia and the West have little choice but work with or around Turkey's interests.

Roller coaster ride

Two quotations nearly 20 years apart exemplify how Turkish foreign policy has become more assertive under Erdogan's leadership:

"Turkey will strive for peace and durable stability in the region alongside the US, her strategic partner and ally for more than half a century."

"We do not need to ask permission (on national security issues) from anyone, and we will not be held accountable to anyone."

Erdogan was the speaker on both occasions: the first in 2003 was in a conciliatory op ed in the US media after he had refused permission for the US to use its military base in Incirlik, in southern Turkey, as a platform for the invasion of Iraq.³

Erdogan delivered the second in November 2022, when warning of a new Turkish incursion into northern Syria to push back Kurdish militants from the border region.⁴ But Erdogan's comment could have been applied equally to Turkish policy in relation to fellow NATO member Greece, which he made a veiled threat to attack over their maritime boundary dispute in December 2022 (though in his mercurial fashion he has since reached out to Athens, assisting Greek firefighting efforts over the 2023 summer).⁵ Similarly he has dismissed US concerns over Turkey's 2017 purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system.⁶

The two statements encapsulate the roller coaster ride Turkey's foreign policy has taken under Erdogan. A Turkish observer of Erdogan's style has noted that his ideology "shifts every few years, and he appears to make up his road map as he goes along".⁷ But Erdogan's outlook has also been affected by regional and wider geopolitical developments over which he has had little control, and domestic setbacks that he has occasionally struggled to manage or has patently mismanaged. Examples include Turkey's current rampant inflation (just under 50% in July but over 80% a year ago⁸), the result of his overriding his economic advisers to keep interest rates artificially low

³ The Economist (16 January 2023), Turkey has a newly confrontational foreign policy: the country has turned into an awkward ally for the West (<https://www.economist.com>)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Politico Europe (11 December 2022), Erdogan warns Greece that Turkish missiles can reach Athens (<https://www.politico.eu>); Politico Europe (13 July 2023), Greece and Turkey seek fresh start to bilateral relations (<https://www.politico.eu>)

⁶ Al Jazeera (17 June 2021), Erdogan says he told Biden Turkey to keep stance on S-400s

⁷ Genc, Kaya (2019), Erdogan's Way: The Rise and Rule of Turkey's Islamist Shapeshifter, *Foreign Affairs*, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, September-October 2019

⁸ Turkey inflation rate: <https://www.tradingeconomics.com>

in the run-up to the May election; and the major earthquake in southern Turkey in February this year, which revealed shoddy building practices allowed by his administration.

Given those uncertainties, it's hard to believe Erdogan in 2003 had a clear plan of where he wanted Turkey's place in the world to be by 2023, a key year as it's the centenary of Atatürk's foundation of the modern Turkish republic. (On the other hand, it can reasonably be argued that Putin in the early 2000s had a pretty good idea of where he wanted to take Russia over the ensuing 20 years.) That said, it's possible to trace the development of Erdogan's external relations over this period, as well as the forces that have shaped his approach and will continue to affect Turkish foreign policy.

Regional ties: from idealism to pragmatism

Erdogan's first big idea in foreign policy after becoming prime minister was "zero problems with neighbours", which he developed in conjunction with former academic, foreign minister and later Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. The term had an ivory tower resonance. It was vague but seemed to mean non-interference in neighbouring states' domestic affairs and, beyond that, cosying up to their leaders regardless of their politics or human rights record. That approach was possible only as long as the regional status-quo held – a hopelessly unrealistic pre-condition in the *realpolitik* turbulence of the Middle East.

Before the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011, Erdogan befriended Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, even inviting Assad and his wife to a Turkish holiday resort in 2008.⁹ Erdogan ambitiously – and perhaps naively – negotiated between Syria and Israel, with Assad reported as saying that Israel had offered to withdraw from Golan (occupied by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war) in return for a peace treaty.¹⁰

The Palestinian militant group Hamas's rockets into Israel in 2009 and Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza put an end to these negotiations. Erdogan was furious with Israel – because of his sympathy for Hamas's Islamism but also because, as he saw it, Israel had had no hesitation in trashing his diplomatic efforts. Israel's interception of a Turkish protest vessel attempting to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza in 2010, which led to nine demonstrators being killed, put the Turkish-Israeli relationship into a slough of despond through most of the 2010s.¹¹

The upheavals of the Arab Spring from 2010 put paid to any lingering thoughts Erdogan might have had of "zero problems". The Syrian civil war, pitting Assad against a range of mostly Islamist rebels, led to Turkey's estrangement from Syria. Erdogan became a vociferous member of the international "Assad must go" chorus and provided assistance to parts of the opposition – putting him at odds with Russia, which intervened militarily in the conflict in 2015 to support Assad. Erdogan also sought to quash Kurdish elements in northern Syria whom he suspected of attempting to take advantage of Assad's preoccupation with the war to launch attacks against Turkey.

⁹ Reuters (6 August 2008), Syria's Assad meets Erdogan for peace talks

¹⁰ See for example: Syrian News Agency report quoted in ABC (US) News (21 July 2008), Israel willing to return Golan Heights to Syria? (<https://www.abcnews.go.com>)

¹¹ The Guardian (31 May 2010), Israeli attack on Gaza flotilla sparks international outrage

When long-time Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak fell in 2011, Erdogan welcomed the election of a Muslim Brotherhood government under Mohamed Morsi. But after then-army leader Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi deposed Morsi and took over the presidency in 2013, relations with Egypt were tense for a decade. Ties with major Arab states were further strained when Turkey sided with Qatar in the latter's dispute with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt from 2017 to 2021.

Turkey intervened in the Libyan civil war in late 2019 on the side of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord against the rebel movement in Benghazi led by Khalifa Haftar – again putting Erdogan at odds with Russia, which with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed Haftar. Turkey's primary motivation in becoming involved seems to have been to obtain formal Libyan support for Turkish claims to maritime resources in the eastern Mediterranean.¹²

Erdogan then turned much of that around in 2022, improving ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and even meeting with Sisi in the margins of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022. Relations with Syria thawed, with the Turkish and Syrian defence ministers meeting in December 2022 and April 2023 – significantly in Moscow, hosted by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu. Erdogan's motivation in a partial, if not yet full, reconciliation with Assad seems to be to find a formula for returning to Syria refugees who fled to Turkey during the civil war and whose continued presence Turks resent.

In similar vein Erdogan has normalised diplomatic relations with Israel – though that happened in August 2022 under the relatively moderate Bennett-Lapid government (which included an Arab party). The relationship is coming under strain with the considerably more right-wing (and overtly anti-Palestinian) administration Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu put together after the elections in November 2022. Though Netanyahu and Erdogan have agreed to “work together to create a new era in relations”, Turkey condemned Israeli Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's visit in January to the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem, Islam's third holiest site.¹³ Erdogan has also criticised Israeli settler attacks this year on Palestinians in the West Bank, which are condoned by the new Israeli government.¹⁴ Despite these provocations Erdogan has held back from downgrading ties.¹⁵

The *volte-face* in his regional approach seems motivated by pure pragmatism. He had gained little by his hostility towards the major Arab states and Israel, and better ties with them could help improve the Turkish economy through improved trade and investment. He wants Israel as an ally in his maritime claims in the eastern Mediterranean. And better ties with Israel could help ease through Congress the sale of F-16 aircraft that the Biden administration has promised after Erdogan dropped his bar on Sweden joining NATO at the Vilnius NATO summit in July this year.

Moulding domestic factors to suit foreign policy

Part of Erdogan's genius is that he has remained aware that foreign policy has to work in tandem with domestic imperatives. Internal Turkish migration from rural to areas

¹² France 24 (21 December 2019), Why does Turkey seek a greater role in war-torn Libya?

¹³ Reuters (4 January 2023), Turkey condemns “provocative act” by Israel's Ben-Gvir

¹⁴ Al Jazeera (26 July 2023), Erdogan-Abbas meet: Turkey concerned over Israel settler attacks

¹⁵ The Jerusalem Post (18 June 2023), Advancing Israel-Turkey relations, new regional cooperation

to large cities, as well as the fact that the country's population is the youngest in Europe,¹⁶ has increased secularism in Turkish society. Erdogan has sought to counter this trend through vigorous backing of Islamic institutions and causes, which has kept his support in the conservative countryside at a high level – a trend evident in the May election, with Erdogan sweeping the Turkish interior, while support for the opposition was higher in coastal cities and Ankara.¹⁷ Moreover, he has managed to compensate for the decline in religiosity in major cities by promoting Turkish nationalism, which he has used to augment his electoral appeal.

Though Erdogan has an irascible personality and seems often to make decisions on a whim or in reactive mode, he has been remarkably adept at moulding domestic opinion to his way of thinking. In relation to foreign policy he has been able to portray international opposition to him as a hostile foreign elite that Turkish people must struggle against.¹⁸ Increased nationalism means Turkey is growing less Western in its orientation. Pew Research Center global surveys have consistently shown that more than 70% of Turks have a negative view of the US, with only around 20% having a positive view.¹⁹ As well, a German Marshall Fund survey of 2022 showed the proportion of Turks believing Turkey should act alone on international issues had risen to 24.6% compared with 15.9% the year before.²⁰ (Compare this with almost 90% support for ANZUS among Australians, according to the 2022 Lowy Survey of Australian foreign policy attitudes.²¹) According to the German survey, the proportion favouring cooperation with EU countries was larger – at 33.1% – though this had fallen from 37% the previous year. But Russia has not been a beneficiary of this trend. The proportions favouring cooperation with China, Russia and the US were low and broadly static at 6.5%, 5.6% and 4.7% respectively.²²

The other major domestic factor affecting Erdogan has been the attempted coup in July 2016 by military officers loyal to Fethullah Gulen, a former Erdogan ally now vehemently opposed to him and living in the US. Turkey has demanded Gulen's extradition to face charges of terrorism, but the US has refused, claiming Turkey has provided insufficient evidence to justify the move – much to Erdogan's anger. The brief uprising seems to have made Erdogan more wary of domestic opposition to him and more hostile towards Washington.²³ Significantly, he visited Moscow within a month of putting down the Gulenist uprising.²⁴

Erdogan has been even more determined to control the domestic political and economic environment since the attempted coup. The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2022 global democracy index ranks Turkey at 103 (of 167), describing it as a "hybrid"

¹⁶ Turkish Statistical Institute, quoted in Hurriyet News (15 May 2020), Turkey's youth population declined but still youngest country in Europe (<https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com>). Youth aged between 15 and 24 make up 15.6% of Turkey's 82 million people, though that proportion is declining as the birth rate slows (it is now 1.9 per woman).

¹⁷ Al Jazeera (29 May 2023), Turkey election run-off results 2023 by the numbers (Turkey presidential election run-off results map)

¹⁸ European Center for Populism Studies (10 May 2023), AKP's populist framing of Erdogan as the tough, macho, militaristic saviour of "the people" against the Western imperialists

¹⁹ Pew Research Center (7 January 2020), US image generally favorable around the world, but mixed in some countries, Global Attitudes Project (<https://www.pewresearch.org>)

²⁰ GMF (2022), Turkish Perceptions Survey (<https://www.gmfus.org>)

²¹ <https://www.poll.lowyinstitute.org>

²² GMF, op cit

²³ France 24 (24 August 2016), US seeks to placate Erdogan on extraditing cleric accused in coup

²⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (8 August 2016), Erdogan goes to Russia: Turkish leader seeks to mend fences with Kremlin

regime (defined as having elections that have substantial irregularities that often prevent them being both free and fair).²⁵ Elections in Turkey have been described as a football match with the government having 11 players and the opposition 8, with the referee generally siding with the larger team.²⁶ That obviously makes it hard for Erdogan's opponents to win against him, as demonstrated by the May election, which he won despite the dire state of the Turkish economy – though he was forced into a second round run-off. (Since the election he has appointed a competent Central Bank governor and has allowed her to start raising interest rates in an effort to get inflation under control.²⁷)

Russia-Turkey: neighbours and frenemies

As noted above, Erdogan's erratic dealings with Turkey's neighbours have inevitably drawn interest and concern from Russia, which under Putin has focused closely on the Middle East and the southern Caucasus.

To a large extent, that is part of a long historical trend. From the early period of the Ottoman empire to its collapse after the First World War, Turkey has had to deal with Russia as a neighbour – often a competitive one – particularly as Russia's empire expanded southward into the Caucasus and Black Sea region. Relations were characterised by distrust on both sides and regular conflict in the Balkans, Caucasus and northern Black Sea region, including being on opposing sides during the First World War. Their wars even entered into European consciousness in the 18th century with German writer Rudolf Erich Raspe's account of the fantastical adventures of Baron Munchausen, loosely based on a real German nobleman who fought for the Russian empire against the Ottomans. The two empires cooperated rarely, but when they did, it was against a common enemy – such as the French under Napoleon.

With the advent of communism in Russia and republican nationalism under Ataturk in Turkey, the two were largely focused internally between the wars and signed treaties to secure their common borders. Turkey was neutral through most of the Second World War, so Russia was free to focus on its struggle with Germany. In the war's aftermath their relations resumed their adversarial nature as Turkey turned ^{towards} the West, mainly for financial assistance, and became a member of NATO in 1952. Fearing a communist "domino" effect in the greater Middle East, the US encouraged Turkey, the UK, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran to form the Baghdad Pact (later the Central Treaty Organisation – CENTO) in 1955 with the specific aim of countering the spread of Soviet influence in the Middle East.²⁸

CENTO gradually lost relevance with changes in the Middle East and a shift of US interest to South East Asia in the 1960s, though it was not formally dissolved until 1979. In that time the Soviet Union reached out to Turkey, taking advantage of Turkish-US frictions over Cyprus: by the end of the 1960s Turkey was the largest recipient of

²⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2022 (<https://eiu.com>)

²⁶ The Economist (21 January 2023), Turkey is still just a democracy, but it is not certain to remain that way (<http://www.economist.com>)

²⁷ CNBC news agency (9 June 2023), Turkey's Erdogan appoints a former Goldman executive as its new central bank chief

²⁸ A detailed account of this development is in Laqueur, Walter (1972), *The Struggle for the Middle East*, London, Penguin

Soviet assistance in the developing world.²⁹ Alternations between military and civilian rule in Turkey caused waxing and waning in Ankara-Moscow ties up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the subsequent decade Turkey sought to project influence into the newly independent Turkic-speaking central Asian states, injecting further competition into the relationship with Moscow.

Relations became closer in the first decade of Putin's and Erdogan's rule, the fact that both were authoritarian seeming to contribute to their mutual understanding.³⁰ However, Russian-Turkish ties fluctuated significantly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring from 2010. Turkey was unhappy with Putin's support for the Assad regime because Erdogan had staked much on bringing the regime down. Relations between Turkey and Russia appeared headed for a serious crisis in November 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft that it claimed had strayed into Turkish airspace. But following a brief period of frostiness, Erdogan uncharacteristically apologised, enabling normal ties to resume. As noted above, Turkish-Russia relations were boosted further following the 2016 Gulenist coup attempt.

The Turkey-Russia relationship clearly has strong underpinnings. It has survived not only the attack on the Russian aircraft but the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Ankara in 2016 during a period of Turkish popular disquiet over Russian bombing of Aleppo. In early 2020 an airstrike, apparently Russian, in Idlib, Syria's north-west province adjoining Turkey, killed 34 Turkish soldiers. Turkey struck back – but only against Syrian forces and never blamed Russia.

Relations between Moscow and Ankara have been strongly influenced by vicissitudes in Turkish-American ties. Obama and Erdogan did not get on because of what Erdogan saw as Obama's carping on human rights. Donald Trump, who did not share his predecessor's humanitarian concerns, was initially an improvement from Erdogan's perspective. But US-Turkish relations continued to be marred by Washington's refusal to accede to Ankara's demands for Gulen's extradition, as well as by Trump's periodic insensitivities towards Erdogan. Trump's peremptory and undiplomatic letter to Erdogan in October 2019, in which he told Erdogan "don't be a fool" concerning a Turkish military incursion into the Kurdish enclave of northern Syria, unsurprisingly infuriated Erdogan.³¹ Thereafter, the Turkish leader made clear that he preferred to work through Putin in order to reach understandings with the Syrian regime on Turkey's Kurdish problem.

US-Turkey relations have remained cool but correct under President Biden – not least because Biden has used the word "genocide" in relation to Turkey's forced removal of Armenians in 1915, a term Turkey utterly rejects.³² The Biden administration's approach seems to be: hold back from Erdogan unless a crisis is emerging – when you engage with him, you end up with drama. Erdogan visited former US President Trump in Washington, but Biden is yet to host him (though there is media speculation at time of writing that an invitation will be forthcoming following Turkey's lifting of its bar on Sweden joining NATO³³). Erdogan was not asked to the "Summit for Democracy" in

²⁹ Hamilton, Robert and Mikulska, Anna (April 2021), Russian-Turkish relations and their implications for the West, *Foreign Policy Research Institute / Black Sea Initiative* (<https://www.fpri.org/2021/04>)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ BBC News (17 October 2019), Turkey's Erdogan "threw Trump's letter in bin"

³² NBCNews (24 April 2021), Biden calls mass killing of Armenians a genocide

³³ The Economist (9 August 2023), President Erdogan wants to make nice with the West, on his terms

Washington in March 2023, and it's reasonable to assume that Biden would not have been unhappy if Erdogan had lost this year's election.³⁴

One of the consequences of the coolness between the US and Turkey is the ambiguous position in which it puts Turkey within NATO. Erdogan's deal with Russia to buy the S-400 missile system led the US to exclude Turkey from the F-35 fighter program, which is on order to most NATO countries. As noted above, Biden has offered an improved version of the F-16 fighter as a substitute, though this is still to be approved by the US Congress.

Such tactical successes would please Putin, but with Russia now estranged from the West and the military campaign in Ukraine in serious difficulty, he needs to manage relations with Erdogan with utmost care. The two states' bilateral ties are underpinned by the TurkStream I and II natural gas pipelines, which cross the Black Sea and have the capacity to supply 31.5 billion cubic metres of natural gas a year, half of it to Turkey, the other half for the Balkans and Central Europe. Turkey is already buying Russian gas through the pipeline. But the Dutch-based operator of the offshore portion of the pipeline has had its export licence withdrawn by the Netherlands government amid sanctions on Russia from the European Union, which obviously puts the wider project in doubt.³⁵

Russia also needs to keep Turkey onside in relation to Syria. As noted above, all three have important interests in the remaining rebel enclave in Idlib. Turkey does not want Assad's forces to invade the enclave, as that would lead to a further flow of refugees into Turkey. So far Russian influence has held Assad back. In conjunction with Erdogan's new outreach to Assad, Turkey will be looking to more Russian influence to persuade Syria to take back refugees from the civil war. Unconfirmed reports indicate Turkey may already have started that process unilaterally despite its ratification of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention prohibiting *refoulement*.³⁶

Russia's war in Ukraine: whose side is Erdogan really on?

Turkey's mixed response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine should be seen in the context of these historical and more recent bilateral developments. As well as refusing to join Western sanctions against Russia, Turkey continues to buy Russian gas, and encourages Russian tourists to visit Turkey (and oligarchs to berth their yachts there). Erdogan also allowed Turkish banks to facilitate Russian bank payments after the start of the war, enabling them to circumvent Western sanctions on Russia – though he had to put a stop to that in September 2022 when the US threatened secondary sanctions on Turkey.³⁷ On a visit to Belgrade in September 2022 Erdogan accused Western nations of provoking Russia into the invasion, saying Ankara's policy toward the war was “balanced”, compared with the West's.³⁸

³⁴ New York Times (13 May 2023), An Erdogan loss would stir relief in the West and anxiety in Moscow

³⁵ Reuters (30 September 2022), TurkStream gas pipeline says Netherlands withdraws licence to continue gas exports (<https://www.reuters.com/middle-east>)

³⁶ New York Times (12 July 2023), Scapegoated by everyone, wanted by no one; The Guardian (27 June 2023), “We fear leaving the house”: Lebanon and Turkey step up deportations of Syrian refugees

³⁷ Reuters (29 September 2022), Turkey's state banks suspend use of Russian Mir payment system

³⁸ Al Jazeera (7 September 2022), “Provocations”: Erdogan decries Western policy towards Russia (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news>)

At the same time Turkey has assisted Ukraine militarily by providing its highly effective Bayraktar drones to Kyiv³⁹ and, more controversially, is reported to have supplied cluster munitions⁴⁰ (prohibited under the international Convention on Cluster Munitions, to which Turkey is not a party). Turkey has denied providing the cluster munitions, though Washington (also not a party to the Convention) has confirmed that the United States has done so. Turkey voted in favour of two anti-Russian UN General Assembly resolutions: ES-11/1 (calling on Russia to withdraw troops from Ukraine) and ES-11/4 (declaring illegal the Russian referendum on annexation of four eastern provinces – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia). The Turkish Foreign Ministry described Russia’s move to annex the provinces as a “grave violation of the established principles of international law”.⁴¹ Turkey has also used the Montreux Convention governing naval passage through the Bosphorus to prevent Russia sending to the Black Sea warships that are not home-ported there. To Moscow’s irritation, in July Turkey reneged on an apparent promise Erdogan had made to Putin not to repatriate five Ukrainian commanders captured by Russia and transferred to Turkey as part of a prisoner swap.

Nevertheless, this dual approach to the Ukraine conflict has enabled Turkey to have more success than other states in mediation between Ukraine and Russia. In mid-2022 Turkey facilitated a deal for Ukrainian grain to be exported via the Black Sea despite the Russian naval blockade of Ukraine. Russia refused to renew the deal in July this year: whether Erdogan might persuade Putin think again on the arrangement remained to be seen at time of writing. Regardless of the outcome of the grain issue, Turkey and possibly China are the only states external to the conflict in a position to undertake the larger mediation task to end the war when Russia and Ukraine are willing to negotiate. That said, the well-connected Director-General of Moscow-based think tank the Russian International Affairs Council, Andrey Kortunov, has assessed it unlikely that Putin would seriously consider Erdogan an honest broker in the conflict, given the assistance Turkey has provided Ukraine.⁴² That may be so, but is yet to be tested.

Turkey’s refusal to sanction Russia boosts bilateral trade – and angers the West

Turkey’s refusal to implement economic sanctions on Russia has boosted their bilateral trade. The balance is very much in Moscow’s favour – unsurprisingly, given Turkey’s energy dependence on Russia – with Turkish imports from Russia totalling \$58.85 billion in calendar 2022 (mainly gas, oil and coal), twice as much as in 2021. That made Russia Turkey’s top import partner with a 16.1% share of Turkey’s imports that year – ahead of China (11.3%) and Germany (6.6%).⁴³ Turkey even pays for some of this Russian energy in roubles – which several Western states have refused to do – thus helping to stabilise the Russian currency.⁴⁴ Turkey’s exports to Russia are growing as

³⁹ Reuters (31 May 2022), Exclusive: After Ukraine, ‘whole world’ is a customer for Turkish drone, maker says

⁴⁰ Foreign Policy (10 January 2023), Turkey is sending Cold War-era cluster bombs to Ukraine

⁴¹ Reuters (1 October 2022), Turkey rejects Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territory (<https://www.reuters.com/middle-east>)

⁴² Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) Network Perspectives (31 March 2022), How will Russia’s invasion of Ukraine impact Turkey’s foreign policy? (<https://www.cats-network.eu/publication/russias-invasion-of-ukraine>)

⁴³ <https://trendeconomy.com>

⁴⁴ Reuters (8 November 2022), Turkey starts paying for some Russian gas in roubles

well. The export figure for calendar 2022 was \$9.34 billion, making Russia Turkey's eighth largest export partner that year, compared with \$5.7 billion in 2021.⁴⁵

This spectacular growth has given rise to suspicions that Turkey is helping Russian companies and individuals circumvent Western sanctions. Possibly, but Turkish authorities vehemently deny that Turkey exports or facilitates trade of sanctioned goods to Russia or items that could assist Russia's war in Ukraine.⁴⁶ However, it seems undeniable that Turkish companies have stepped in to take the place of Western companies that have withdrawn from Russia – which provides Russian businesses and consumers shut out of Western markets with access to Western goods while creating new opportunities for Turkish business.⁴⁷

The US and its European partners argue that Turkey is helping Russia evade sanctions. The US has warned that companies and individuals trading with sanctioned Russian entities may face secondary sanctions. Turkey counters that joining Western sanctions against Russia would hurt the Turkish economy. It refuses to do so unless sanctions are authorised by the United Nations – which won't happen, given Russia's veto in the UN Security Council. Russia obviously has strong interest in Turkey maintaining its opposition to Western pressure to modify its stance.

Looming problems

Despite these mutual benefits the Turkish-Russian relationship is likely to undergo stresses in coming months and years. Russia's hostility towards the West, and NATO in particular, is likely to become more difficult for Erdogan to finesse, especially as the war in Ukraine is prolonged and NATO provides Ukraine with increasingly sophisticated weapons.

Russia's and Turkey's overlapping concerns in Syria could become more complex, particularly if Erdogan orders new military action against Kurdish militants in northern Syria without Assad's agreement. Russia, already preoccupied with Ukraine, would have to mediate between Turkey and Syria, which would protest against the violation of its sovereignty.

Russia and Turkey are on opposite sides in Libya, where conflict may erupt again. Similarly in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute Russia backs Armenia and Turkey supports Azerbaijan. Putin would be disappointed by Erdogan's post-election outreach to the West, which included calling at the Vilnius NATO summit for Ukraine to be allowed to join the alliance.⁴⁸ Putin can't do much about these developments, but presumably can take comfort in Erdogan's track record in his ties with Russia and the West, which has been anything but consistent.

⁴⁵ <https://trendeconomy.com>

⁴⁶ The Turkey Analyst (26 June 2023), Turkey will not give up on its lucrative trade with Russia (<https://www.turkeyanalyst.org>)

⁴⁷ Steven A. Cook (18 January 2023), What everyone gets wrong about Turkey: Turkey isn't East or West – it's Turkey, Foreign Policy

⁴⁸ Al Jazeera (8 July 2023), Ukraine 'deserves' NATO membership, Turkey's Erdogan says

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis demonstrates how Erdogan has successfully developed strategic ambiguity as a foreign policy methodology. That methodology gives both Russia and the West strong reasons to court him.

The Turkey-Russia relationship advantages both sides and is likely to endure. As demonstrated above, Turkey under Erdogan has gained much from the link to Putin. Putin in turn would have been pleased with Erdogan's re-election, not least because a government formed by Turkey's opposition parties would have been more consistently pro-Western than Erdogan.⁴⁹

Erdogan's unpredictability makes Turkey a potentially divisive force within NATO. Though Erdogan has made nice with the US and Europe since his re-election, Turkish policies have increasingly been diverging from those of the West over the period he has been in office. In 2008 Turkey aligned itself with 88% of the EU's foreign policy decisions and declarations; by 2016 that percentage had fallen to 44%; in 2022 it was only 8%.⁵⁰ Negotiations for the admission of Turkey to the EU, begun in 2005, seem moribund. Erdogan called at the Vilnius summit for the stalled talks to be revived, but he appears to accept for now that resolution of the issue in Turkey's favour is probably decades away. But the Europeans need to keep the negotiations alive (if barely) in order to maintain a 2016 deal whereby the EU pays Turkey to keep Syrian refugees on the Turkish side of the Aegean Sea.

Transactional though Turkish-Western relations might be, both sides clearly benefit: full Turkish divergence from the EU is unlikely. Though currently distorted by Western sanctions resulting from the Ukraine war, Turkey's business and trade links with Russia have historically paled in comparison with those with Europe. Around 40% of Turkey's exports have traditionally gone to the EU, while imports from EU states usually represent around a third of Turkish imports⁵¹. Europe and the US account for 84% of foreign investment into Turkey.⁵² And despite the S-400 issue, the US remains Turkey's biggest supplier of weapons. Turkey is a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), but even if it becomes a full member, the SCO is a poor alternative to Turkey's Western ties. The Cyprus issue appears unresolvable but is a long way down on Europeans' concerns.

Erdogan clearly sees himself as at the height of his powers. He exudes confidence. In a television interview he described his dominance of Turkish politics in stages. His time as mayor of Istanbul was his "apprenticeship", his time as reformist prime minister was his "journeymanship", and his years as president have been his "mastership".⁵³ Though Erdogan would doubtless be unconscious of "Role Theory" as described in the introduction to this paper, he very much personifies it.

Though 69, Erdogan is apparently in good health: a digestive problem he suffered during the election campaign does not appear to be serious. So Russia and the West

⁴⁹ France 24 (25 April 2023), How the West, Russia see Turkey's presidential election (<http://www.france24.com>)

⁵⁰ The Economist (16 January 2023), Turkey has a newly confrontational foreign policy (<http://economist.com>)

⁵¹ European Policy Department for External Relations (July 2021), The EU-Turkey Customs Union and trade relations: what options for the future? (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu>)

⁵² CIP Turkey News (3 March 2022), FDI levels in Turkey hit five-year high as investors seek geopolitically secure assets (<https://www.imidaily.com>)

⁵³ Genc (2019), op cit

will be obliged to deal with Turkey with kid gloves for the next five years and possibly beyond. The West has to live with Turkey because there is no provision in the NATO treaty for expelling a member. Turkey would have to discontinue membership of its own volition, which Erdogan shows no sign of doing: the prospect of him leaving NATO in a pique over the behaviour of a fellow member is something Putin can only dream of.

Russia equally has no choice but to deal carefully with Erdogan. Turkey's control of entry to the Black Sea means Russia has a strategic interest in keeping Erdogan onside. That would remain the case even if Putin were to leave office and regardless of the outcome of the Ukraine war. When Putin withdrew from the Turkey-mediated Ukrainian grain agreement noted above, some had speculated that Erdogan might defy Russia by having Turkish warships escort ships transporting Ukrainian grain. That idea was quickly quashed by Ukraine's ambassador to Ankara, who said Turkey would never go into an open military confrontation with Russia.⁵⁴

An Erdogan adviser, Ibrahim Kalin, in a 2018 interview⁵⁵ described Turkey under Erdogan as conducting a "360 degree" foreign policy: "We don't want to favour any particular issue or actor or region or country over others." He added, "Turkey's position in the Western alliance as a NATO member does not prevent it from opening up to other strategic regions in the world." That approach has served Turkey well over the past 20 years, and there are at present no signs of a change in that position.

Phrasing that more bluntly, Erdogan has Russia - and the West – over a barrel.

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⁵⁴ Politico (11 July 2023), The Black Sea grain deal is all but dead. What next?

⁵⁵ Anadolu Agency (5 May 2018), Turkey sees foreign policy from 360 degree angle (www.aa.com.tr)

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