



Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: The Effect of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Turkey's position in a “post-Western world” is widely debated as Asia emerges as the world's new demographic and economic focal point.
- Turkey's drive for strategic autonomy is crucial to all considerations of Eurasianism as a result of the rise of emerging powers worldwide and the transition to a multipolar international system.
- The emergence of a revisionist Russia, threatening to destroy the global order in place since the end of the Cold War, sent out a powerful warning to its neighbors, including Turkey.
- Russian-Turkish relations have not been shaped by shared identity, interest and threat perceptions; instead, they have remained largely instrumental and driven by necessity.
- The Turkish government cannot afford consistency in its discourse on Turkey as the “protector of the oppressed” when it comes to defending Uyghur rights against the Chinese regime.
- Ukraine and the West's response to Russian aggression refuted Turkish Eurasianist claims that Ukraine was “helpless” and that the West had entered a “serious and irreversible decline”.

Introduction

Turkey's position in a "post-Western world" is widely debated as Asia emerges as the world's new demographic and economic focal point.

Turkey's pivot to Eurasia has emerged as one of the most controversial questions in current Turkish policy debates. Turkey's position in a "post-Western world" is widely debated as Asia emerges as the world's new demographic and economic focal point. Turkey's disillusionment with its EU accession process, the rise of anti-Western sentiment, and its desire to play an independent role led it to reevaluate its relations with Russia and join an "axis of the excluded." The shift in global production patterns coupled with domestic political struggles have challenged Turkey's two-century-long strategy of seeking cultural, economic and political integration with the West, which started with Sultan Selim III, continued with the *Tanzimat*, and culminated with Atatürk. This change is reflected in the popularity of anti-Western thinkers like Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and the increased influence of "Eurasianist" political visions that view Turkey's future, not in the West, as an integral part of international organizations such as NATO and the European Union, but in strategic partnerships with Asian powers, predominantly Russia and China. The failed coup of 15 July 2016 played a critical role, reinforcing the Turkish government's suspicions regarding the intentions of the United States and consolidating a trust deficit in Turkey's relations with key Western actors. Turkey's drive for strategic autonomy is crucial to all considerations of Eurasianism as a result of the rise of emerging powers worldwide and the transition to a multipolar international system.

On the other hand, Turkey's economic and political links with the West remain too strong to be ignored, and the risks associated with an abrupt shift remain high. This indicates that the rise of Turkish Eurasianism is conjectural not structural: it is not based on a categorical opposition to the West but on a desire to prioritize Turkey's strategic and regional autonomy. Turkish national interest, in other words, would no more be indexed to Western or US interests but be defined autonomously instead. Such a development could eventually beg the question of whether Turkey's NATO membership is any longer meaningful. Despite the prominence of vocal, inherently anti-Western actors, the Western and Eurasian orientations of Turkish foreign policy have, to date, been less identity-oriented and more instrumental. To better understand them, one has to look into the ebbs and flows of Turkey's security concerns and increasingly at developments on the domestic front, in particular the Kurdish question. The rising perception of the United States as an ally of the Kurds has facilitated the rise of anti-Americanism and Eurasianism.

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The Invasion of Ukraine and Russian-Turkish Relations

Turkey's pivot to Eurasia received renewed attention following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The war in Ukraine became a "geopolitical wake-up call" which forced Western actors to abandon benign interpretations of the international environment and confront essential strategic questions they had shelved for many years, particularly regarding Russian revisionism since the 2014 occupation of Crimea. The war has introduced a new reality to the international order that nobody has the luxury of escaping. The emergence of a revisionist Russia, threatening to destroy the global order in place since the end of the Cold War, sent out a powerful warning to its neighbors, including Turkey. The pan-European wave of solidarity with Ukraine has shown that these tragic events have had a catalytic effect, facilitating long-looming political decisions on developing European security and defense policy, and demonstrating that the West and the European Union are not helpless in the face of Russian aggression.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine resuscitated NATO as an international organization that is critical for global security. It spotlighted once again the significance of Turkey's membership in

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NATO and other Western organizations and the risks linked to Turkey potentially breaking off its relations with them; NATO has become more valuable for Turkey and vice versa. Turkey has attempted to navigate the conflict by “sitting on the fence.” On the one hand, it has refused to join in the Western sanctions against Russia, maintaining a communication channel through which it has attempted to improve its diplomatic status as a mediator. On the other, it has condemned Russia's aggression and continues to supply Ukraine with weapons, including its *Bayraktar TB-2* drones. Turkey does not want to put all its eggs in one basket.

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Nevertheless, Turkey's relations with Russia cannot be compared with its relations with the West, and certainly cannot serve as a substitute for them. Turkey's relationship with Russia remains non-institutionalized and heavily dependent on the personal rapport between the Russian and Turkish leaders. Russian-Turkish relations have not been shaped by shared identity, interest and threat perceptions; instead, they have remained largely instrumental and driven by necessity. This has contributed to the emergence of paradoxical situations in conflict zones including Libya and Syria, where Russia and Turkey supported opposite camps but still maintained a channel of communication. As “frenemies,” “cooperative rivals”, or “adversarial collaborators,” Russia and Turkey have maintained a problematic but necessary relationship that, even at its best moments, has lacked a problem-solving capacity. On the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine could serve as justification for a turn towards hard power in Turkish foreign policy. If Russian aggression against Ukraine delivers tangible gains to Russia, this could encourage Turkey's propensity to project hard power in its own foreign policy and employ coercive tools on the various fronts on which Turkish foreign policy has been deployed. Turkey will have to seek ways to live with a new Russia and escape a likely dependency underwritten by US sanctions against Turkey following its decision to acquire the Russian S-400 missile system. Given the asymmetric nature of their relationship, a revisionist, rogue and decaying Russia could pose new challenges for Turkey's foreign policy on a number of important fronts, ranging from energy to the media: Turkey meets about 45 percent of its natural gas needs through Russian imports, while Russia is building, and will manage, Turkey's first nuclear power plant at Akkuyu. Through *Sputnik Türkiye*, Russia also maintains a notable presence and considerable influence in the Turkish public sphere, for which Turkey has no counterweight in Russia. Excessive dependence on Russia limits Turkey's space to maneuver vis-a-vis the West, as the S-400 case has aptly manifested. Russian perspectives on the relationship have always been more cautious and balanced, and there has never been talk of an alliance or strategic partnership.

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China, India and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Turkey's Asian reorientation is likely to generate new opportunities and challenges over and beyond Russia. Thus, China's positioning in the new international order will significantly influence the dynamics of Turkey's Eurasian ambitions. Indeed, China's final position on the Ukraine war will likely affect Turkey and bring the two countries closer together on the basis of strategic reasoning rather than a shared identity narrative. Despite the plight of China's Uyghur minority and its symbolic value for Turkish nationalism due to its Sunni and Turkic identity, the Turkish government cannot afford consistency in its discourse on Turkey as the “protector of the oppressed” when it comes to defending Uyghur rights against the Chinese regime. In addition, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has often been seen as an alternative or substitute for the European Union. In times of crisis for EU-Turkey relations, President Erdogan has referred to the SCO as Turkey's exit option if EU-Turkey relations reach a deadlock. The war in Ukraine has shed light on the SCO's potential relevance to Turkey's strategic planning.

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Despite its use as a conjectural instrument that serves Turkey's needs, the SCO has proven not to be a power multiplier for Russia and to be irrelevant to the Ukraine war. Turkey's recent attempt to institutionalize its partnership with post-Soviet Turkic republics outside the SCO umbrella has provided additional arguments about the SCO's limited value. For its part, India, unlike China, presents little potential as a partner for Turkey; indeed, Turkey's close ties with Pakistan and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan have placed severe limitations on closer relations with India, let alone the development of a strategic partnership.

Domestic Implications-Conclusion

The rise of Eurasianism allowed for the mainstreaming of radical nationalist, expansionist views and improved the government coalition's approval ratings with nationalist secularist voters.

Eurasianism grew more popular in Turkish public opinion following the failed coup of 15 July 2016 and the concomitant realignment of Turkey's political scene. The *de facto* alliance of Doğu Perinçek's Motherland Party (*Vatan Partisi*) and the *Aydınlık* newspaper group with the government coalition and their disproportionate presence in pro-government media is linked with the rise of support for Eurasianist views and the official adoption of the expansionist "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine. Eurasianists were brought in to replace Gülenists in the Turkish bureaucracy and provided valuable symbolic resources. This allowed for the mainstreaming of radical nationalist, expansionist views and improved the government coalition's approval ratings with nationalist secularist voters. It also allowed for the endorsement of democratic backsliding and a decline in the rule of law in the name of "defending state interests." Although they pay lip service to democracy, Turkish Eurasianists have displayed obvious authoritarian inclinations. Their discourse prioritizes the state over human rights and the rule of law while maintaining a monopoly on the definition of national interest. Eurasianism received a short-term boost after Russia invaded Ukraine, but its long-term appeal will be indexed to the progress of the war and the fortunes of the two sides.

Ukraine and the West's response to Russian aggression refuted Turkish Eurasianist claims that Ukraine was "helpless" and that the West had entered a "serious and irreversible decline". Since the onset of the Ukraine invasion, Russia has emerged as a radically different, "new" revisionist actor in the international system. This understanding could highlight the risks inherent for Turkey in pivoting towards Eurasia, as well as providing a window of opportunity to repair its relations with the West.

Suggested Readings:

Şaban Kardaş, "The War in Ukraine and Turkey's Cautious Counter-Balancing Against Russia," On Turkey (Ankara: The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS), 03/03/2022, 9 Pages (full text available [here](#))

Suat Kınıklıoğlu, "Eurasianism in Turkey," SWP Research Paper 07/2022 (Berlin: SWP/CATS), 22/03/2022, 29 Pages (full text available [here](#))

Habibe Özdal, "Turkey–Russia Relations: Complex Cooperation" in Andrew Futter (ed.), Threats to Euro-Atlantic Security: Views from the Younger Generation Leaders Network (Cham: Springer: 2019), pp. 99–114 (full text available [here](#))