

The State of Strategic Hedging: Turkey's Foreign Policy and Relations with Russia

Pavel V. Shlykov

Pavel V. Shlykov, PhD in History
Moscow State University, Russia
Institute of Asian and African Studies
Department of Middle Eastern Studies
Associate Professor;
MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia
Research Project "Multifactor Analysis of the 'Turn to the East'"
Non-Resident Scholar

ORCID: 0000-0002-0331-430X
ResearcherID: N-3826-2014
Scopus AuthorID: 57194032891

E-mail: shlykov@iaas.msu.ru
Address: 11 Mokhovaya Str., Moscow 125009, Russia

The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, Project 19-18-00142.

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-3-134-158

Abstract

This article analyzes the multidimensional nature of Turkey's foreign policy and its relations with Russia in the 2010s and the early 2020s through the prism of strategic hedging concept. Previously, many scholars pointed to mostly different elements of balancing in Ankara's foreign policy behavior. However, since the late 2010s, Turkey has systematically positioned itself as a power aspiring for significant strategic autonomy in international affairs, for which reason researchers had to look for new analytical approaches to describe its behavior in the international arena

and relations with its neighbors. The concept of strategic hedging allows analyzing more accurately Turkey's multidirectional foreign policy, which does not correspond with the classical models of behavior typical of middle powers, especially those engaged in military-political alliances with the United States. The article argues that due to a complex of international and domestic reasons Turkey has been trying to combine different types of balancing and, more importantly, hedging. This strategy enables Turkey not only to retain but also to enhance its strategic autonomy in international relations. In this strategy Russia has become an important source of Turkey's strategic autonomy while the crisis in Ukraine, with all its negative impact on Turkey, has opened up new opportunities.

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy, Russian-Turkish relations, strategic hedging, strategic autonomy, balancing, the Ukraine crisis.

Turkey's foreign policy is the product of several interrelated processes at the global, regional, and national levels. It experienced a strong impact of what many scholars called "the end of the liberal world order", that is, the influence of structural political and economic transformations, which became evident in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

The global financial crisis of 2008 questioned the political and economic dominance of the West, causing a large-scale recession there. The rise of right-wing populism in Europe and Donald Trump's advent to power in the U.S. in 2017 transformed the political landscape of the Euro-Atlantic region, which formed Turkey's foreign policy vector throughout the second half of the 20th century. China's rapid economic rise created new economic and strategic realities in the world. The emerging post-liberal world order has brought in a new system of coordinates, with non-Western centers of power becoming more prominent.

The developments at the regional level also affected Turkey. On the one hand, the Eurozone crisis and the political and economic instability in Central and Eastern Europe have devalued Turkey's long-aspired EU membership. On the other hand, Turkey experienced the humanitarian

and political consequences of the Arab Spring. At the same time, the balance of power among non-regional players in the Middle East also started to change. The U.S. focused more on containing China in the Asia-Pacific while the EU carefully distanced itself from the Middle Eastern problems. On the contrary, Russia's regional involvement began to rise, and China became increasingly focused on the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean, implementing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a large-scale infrastructure project initiated in 2013. All these developments have prompted Turkey to seek new mechanisms to ensure and enhance its strategic autonomy in the evolving regional order.

The domestic political dynamics in Turkey also influenced its foreign policy. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two decades in power (first as Prime Minister and then as President) enabled him to obtain an almost unrestricted control over Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. The hot phase of the political crisis in Ukraine came in February 2022 and the overall crisis of the European security architecture opened a window of opportunities for Erdoğan's pragmatic and intuitive policy. Previously, seeking to enhance its strategic autonomy, Turkey could resort only to conventional instruments, such as filling in the regional lacunas after the global powers had retreated, or attaining membership in multilateral institutions with the Western dominance and with such relatively new organizations as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). After February 2022, Turkey's staying away from bandwagoning with the West and Erdoğan's mediation efforts helped enhance the country's influence not only regionally, but also globally.

Many authors pointed to Turkey's balancing between various foreign policy partners (Deringil, 1994; Oktav, 2011; Dursun-Özkanca, 2017; Batalla Adam, 2017; Zankina, 2022). In doing so, Turkey did not take sides and was trying to enhance its strategic opportunities at the expense of various regional asymmetries. However, as this article argues, in the early 2020s, Turkey's foreign policy has entered a qualitatively different stage, combining various elements of balancing and, more important, hedging. This combination not just discursively but *de facto* allowed Turkey to retain and enhance its strategic autonomy in international relations.

To prove this argument, the article starts with an analysis of conceptual explanation of balancing and hedging. It then explains the Turkish understanding of strategic autonomy and examines the role of Russia as one of the important sources of Turkish strategic autonomy. The article ends by outlining the qualitative changes in Turkish foreign policy in 2022-2023.

STRATEGIC HEDGING CONCEPT IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Over the past decade, the concept of strategic hedging has become widely spread in IR research. It helped overcome the reductionism of the neorealist approach, which simplistically explained the small states and middle powers' strategies in terms of either "balancing" or "bandwagoning" with a major power.¹ The concept of hedging has highlighted the specific features of policies of middle powers and small countries, whose international behavior rarely matched the straightforward neorealist dichotomy of balancing-bandwagoning. Indeed, these countries sought more room for maneuver in relations with superpowers and were keen to diversify their foreign policies whenever they had such a chance (Kuik, 2016, pp. 504-505). Strategic hedging rejects the simplistic formula of building relations with global powers in favor of more complex and multidimensional models of interaction with them.

The concept of strategic hedging, however, has its own shortcomings. First, the concept itself is ambiguous. For many, it is primarily the ability to take the middle ground in a turbulent geopolitical environment (Goh, 2005, pp. 2-3). To tackle this problem, Malaysian researcher Cheng-Chwee Kuik proposed a more accurate description of foreign policy hedging, emphasizing a country's effort to compensate for risks through a diverse and multi-vector foreign policy (Kuik, 2008, pp. 162-163). Second, the popularity of this concept has universalized it, turning it into a means to explain everything (Lim and Cooper, 2015, pp. 699-700). As a result, researchers interpreted similar cases of interstate relations differently: for example, some saw

¹ For a detailed overview of scholarly debate and existing literature on the hedging strategies of small and middle powers see the recent book by Paradon Rangsimaporn (2022, pp. 4-26).

Japan's policy towards China as balancing (Lim and Cooper, 2015, pp. 712-715) while others qualified it as hedging (López i Vidal, 2018, pp. 193-211).

Successful implementation of a hedging strategy, as Kuik points out, suggests the ability to combine elements of both acceptance and rejection of a global power at the regional level (Kuik, 2016, p. 503), that is, the ability to build relatively balanced relations that imply neither overt antagonism nor total subordination to the dominant partner. The main interest of hedging states is to prevent an escalation of tensions with a very limited set of levers to exert direct influence on the regional situation. The hedging state has no choice other than to coexist with the neighboring great power and other regional actors, relying on an understanding of regional specifics, historical dynamics, and “red lines” not to be trespassed. It is equally important for the hedging state to engage in its foreign policy strategy other small countries in the region that are also interested in fixing their relations with the global power that governs the regional situation. By combining efforts, they can more effectively counterbalance the “local” great power's influence and to socialize and integrate it in the existing regional order.

In the 2000s and especially in the 2010s, foreign policy hedging gradually became an essential tool in Turkey's policy, including towards Russia, which, despite its relative weakening in the 1990s, still had a major influence in many regions of Ankara's interest. At that time, the main issue for Turkey was to neutralize the consequences of Russia's growing military and political potential in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean and U.S. and some other regional powers' provocative actions. These motives explain Turkey's “special position” on Georgia and Ukraine. Using all available diplomatic resources, Turkey tried to prevent the regional states from taking provocative steps both in the case of Georgia-Abkhazia conflict in the late 2000s and in the case of growing tensions over Ukraine in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Turkey's support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine was not identical to that of the West, which insisted that only Russia was responsible for the growing regional tensions. Even officially, Ankara stressed that some regional players and major powers (the U.S. and the

UK) had also contributed to the conflict's escalation, thus explaining its reluctance to take an anti-Russian stance under external pressure.

The policy of strategic hedging was evident in how Turkey handled the issue of warships' passage through the Black Sea straits, and in references to the provisions of the Montreux Convention. Turkey demonstrated its understanding of Russia's concerns over the U.S. Navy's attempts to enter the Black Sea during the Georgia and Ukraine crises in the 2000s. Turkey displayed similar understanding after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, against the backdrop of the U.S. and the UK's strong wish to send warships to the Black Sea to express their solidarity with Ukraine. In such situations Ankara preferred to distance itself from NATO allies, whose actions had provoked escalation in the region. In general, the limitation of local and external actors' destabilizing behavior has become a key component of Turkey's foreign policy hedging. Control of the Black Sea straits has always served as an extremely important lever of influence in this regard, allowing Ankara to compete in a higher "weight class," constraining and even sometimes restraining stronger partners' actions.

These examples demonstrate Turkey's difference from other small states and middle powers. With its major political and economic potential and the advantage of its geographical location at the junction of several strategically important geopolitical regions (Southern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Caucasus, and the Middle East), Turkey has been able—through a combination of balancing and hedging—to enhance crucially its role in these areas. Turkey's strategic hedging originated from its desire to influence the regional order and asymmetry in geopolitical potentials indirectly, through other regional actors. Another important feature was Turkey's desire to control and limit the involvement of extra-regional powers not interested in maintaining the status quo, which was particularly evident in Turkey's unequivocal stance in defusing regional tensions.

IN SEARCH OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The concept of strategic autonomy appeared in Turkish political lexicon in the late 2010s. As international political uncertainty grew

and interstate institutions weakened, Turkey aspired for a more independent role in regional affairs and world politics (Karar, 2016; T.C. Dışişleri..., 2019). The concept of strategic autonomy used the principles of “negative” and “positive” freedom, that is, freedom from external pressure and the ability to act proceeding from one’s own interests and goals. In the 2010s, the EU and some Asian and Latin American countries introduced this concept into their foreign policy doctrines.

In Turkey, the imperative of strategic autonomy was a logical extension of the debate about the end of the unipolar world. As then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu put it, the short period of unipolar world order was coming to an end, the intensifying struggle over political and economic influence shattered the existing order, and international institutions ceased to function properly. In this situation, Turkey with its geopolitical potential has to generate new ideas, new initiatives and new approaches (T.C. Dışişleri..., 2019). For regional powers, the end of the unipolarity widened the room for foreign policy maneuvering. The emergence of new centers of power reduced dependence on the West and allowed a more sophisticated balancing.

Turkey’s dissatisfaction with the liberal world order was only partly due to Ankara’s desire to secure a stronger bargaining position in the dialogue with the West and in defending its interests. Frustration with the Western allies, especially the U.S., which imposed sanctions against Turkey and threatened to destroy its national economy (2018-2020), was the fundamental underlying reason. Traditional balancing among global players, to which Turkey had resorted in the past, was no longer enough to achieve strategic autonomy.

Ankara’s growing geopolitical ambitions poorly correlated with the country’s real political, economic and military potential (19th place in 2021 in terms of economic development, 17th place in the world in terms of population, 2.5% of GDP spent on defense). However, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan argued that “although Turkey is no military or economic superpower, it has emerged as a global leader by taking part in settling the crises in Iraq, Syria and

elsewhere” (Erdoğan, 2018c). Turkey's self-identification as a global power implied the achievement of strategic autonomy through three imperatives: building a high-tech defense complex by making a significant leap forward in the development of the national military industry, establishing the primacy of Turkey's Islamic identity, and creating flexible alliances with different countries in various fields to achieve specific foreign policy goals.

Erdoğan believed that the achievement of strategic autonomy by proactive foreign policy and enhancing “hard power” instruments (the development of the national military-industrial complex, diversification of military production and expansion of the geography of military-technical cooperation, and finally, the use of the army outside Turkey) were not only justified amid the growing geopolitical risks, but also met the national security goals.

As Erdoğan proudly stressed, during the Justice and Development Party's (known by the Turkish acronym AKP) rule Turkey had managed to reduce the technological dependence of the Turkish military-industrial complex from 70 to 30 percent. The number of Turkish companies working on the government's defense contracts increased to more than 1,500 in 2020 from just fifty in 2000. Turkish arms exports rose to more than \$3 billion from \$248 million over the same period (Erdoğan, 2020). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), since the mid-2010s, Turkey has reduced its arms purchases by nearly 60 percent, with arms shipments from the U.S. dropping by more than 80 percent. As a result, from a country that came third in the list of arms purchases from the U.S., Turkey had moved down to the 21st place on this list by 2022 (Wezeman, et al., 2022). The development of the defense industry naturally encouraged Turkey to project its military capabilities beyond its national borders. The opening of military bases in Qatar (2015), Syria (2016), and Somalia (2017), cross-border military special operations in Syria (2016-2022) and Libya (2019), the establishment of long-term military presence in Iraq and Northern Cyprus, and active military and technical assistance to Azerbaijan during the Karabakh war in 2020 served as additional tools of Turkey's growing influence.

The primacy of Islamic identity became no less important for ensuring strategic autonomy. In Erdoğan's view, Turkey is the leader of the Islamic world and its historical mission is to protect the interests of Muslims (Shlykov, 2020). The Turkish armed forces are "the support and hope of all oppressed ... and of the entire Muslim Ummah" (Anadolu Ajansı, 2020b). Within the framework of the North-South dichotomy, the Turkish leadership positioned Turkey as one of the "leading countries of the Global South," which, together with the BRICS countries, defends the polycentric world and protects less developed countries. This postulate was supported by a significant number of Turkey's international development assistance programs, which Erdoğan never failed to mention proudly: "Whereas in 2002 Turkey allocated only \$85 million in aid to other countries, in 2020 we spent almost \$9 billion, which puts us in the sixth place overall and in the first place by the ratio of funds allocated to GDP" (Erdoğan, 2020). The Turkish government demonstratively included countries that were at odds with the West, such as Palestine, Venezuela, and Sudan, in the list of its aid recipients (TİKA, 2022).

The expansion of financial, trade and military-technical partnership with Russia and China became the core component of strategic autonomy, which, in Turkish authorities' view, should reduce Turkey's economic and security dependence on the West. Thanks to impressive economic growth in the 2000s, Turkey was often ranked not only as a middle, but also as a rising power, which spurred the interest of Turkish politicians towards such symbols of the polycentric world order as the SCO, BRICS, and G20. In the 2010s, Russia and China firmly ranked second and third among Turkey's main trade and economic partners after Germany. Politically, Ankara appreciated Moscow and Beijing's support after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.

In recent years, the AKP government has initiated a series of special laws regulating cooperation with China in areas of energy, trade, transport, high-tech, healthcare, and culture.² Bilateral trade with China increased nearly 20-fold during Erdoğan's rule (from \$1.6

² Thirteen laws were enacted by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey between 2010 and 2022.

billion in the early 2000s to \$32.5 billion in 2021), and Chinese firms became contractors in an ambitious high-speed rail network project linking the country's largest cities—Ankara and Istanbul. Turkey has strongly supported China's BRI, which Erdoğan called “the political and economic foundation of a new era of stability and prosperity in the region” (Erdoğan, 2017). China, for its part, eagerly helped Turkey in times of economic troubles: it provided large loans in 2018 during the currency and debt crisis and in 2019 after municipal elections unsuccessful for Erdoğan. In 2020, when Turkey's economic situation worsened amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing allowed Turkish companies to use the Chinese yuan for trade payments to overcome the hard currency shortage (Anadolu Ajansı, 2020a).

An explicit focus on the leaders of the non-Western world has become a major trend in Ankara's policies. In 2012, Turkey was the first and only NATO country to institutionalize relations with Russia and China, gaining the SCO dialogue partner status. In 2018, Turkey attended the 10th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg as a representative of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Erdoğan described this as Turkey's recognition as a “potential BRICS member” (Hürriyet, 2018b). In 2019, at a regular Turkish ambassadorial conference then Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu proclaimed the Asia Anew initiative (*Yeniden Asya Açılımı*), implying the priority of economic partnerships with the leading Asian powers (Yeni Şafak, 2019).

Partnership with Russia was at the core of most of Turkey's global initiatives at the turn of the 2000s and the 2010s. At the same time Turkey's investment, trade and security cooperation with leading Western countries continued to develop. This, however, did not prevent Erdoğan from using anti-Western rhetoric to effectively consolidate the electorate by demonizing the West as a force that infringes on Turkey's national interests, refuses to extradite the plotters of the 2016 coup to Ankara, supports the Kurds in Syria, and stands by Greece on the issue of control of the Mediterranean energy resources.

Despite its NATO membership and traditional role as an important geopolitical partner of the West in the Middle East, Turkey has fundamentally revised its international political position over the past

ten years and made the West perceive Turkey in a new way. While boosting cooperation with Russia, China, Iran, and countries of Central Asia and Africa, Turkey in its policy tried to follow the principle of separation and complementarity so that tensions and disagreements would not harm the positive aspects of relations. In this vein, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu explained the Turkish position on Ukraine: “Turkey as a country that has developed cooperation with Russia and Ukraine, cannot take sides. On the contrary, we must build a dialogue between all parties to bring this war to an end” (Hürriyet, 2022).

Combining foreign policy balancing and risk hedging is not Turkey’s own invention, but Turkey’s case is unique in many respects. Ankara has turned strategic hedging into an element of a larger and more ambitious foreign policy strategy, making it a central focus in building relationships with Western and non-Western partners, engaging with Turkish diaspora and kin communities abroad (Kinship..., 2019) and building up geopolitical influence in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus (Shlykov, 2018, pp. 34-59). Turkey takes a similar approach in developing a UN reform project based on its well-known slogan “The world is bigger than five” (Erdoğan, 2018a). The project envisions an expansion of the UN Security Council and a more inclusive and comprehensive UN structure, reflecting the contemporary multifaceted and multipolar world order (Erdoğan, 2021).

Turkey does not only aspire to achieve international political autonomy. It seeks to define the parameters of the current transformation of the liberal (West-centered) world order and its basic international institutions and norms. Russia, for its part, has been openly supporting Ankara’s aspirations since the late 2010s, stressing the need for Turkey to join the G7/G8, along with China and India, as a symbol of the West’s diminishing role in global economic and political affairs (Anadolu Ajansı, 2019).

RUSSIA AS A RESOURCE FOR TURKEY’S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

In its drive for cooperation with all countries dissatisfied with the Western dominance, Turkey saw the development of multidimensional partnership with Russia, however complex and non-linear, as an

important resource for enhancing its strategic autonomy. This logic was evident throughout the 2010s on five tracks: political, international-institutional, military-technical, economic, and regional.

Politically, Turkey's further rapprochement with Russia had three reasons: disappointment with the alliance with the West and awareness that its integration with Europe is limited, the systemic consequences of the domestic political transformation (growing authoritarian tendencies during the AKP's rule), and personal affinity between President Erdoğan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. The Russian authorities unconditionally supported Erdoğan during the July 15-16, 2016 coup, which contrasted sharply with the behavior of Turkey's Western allies.

The Russian authorities not only promptly condemned the plot, but also showed solidarity in the prosecution of the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (*Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü*, or *FETÖ*)—the official reference to the followers of the Islamic preacher and the organizations he created. Gülen's schools in Russia were closed back in 2007, and after 2016 the Russian authorities blocked the activities of the few remaining institutions associated with Gülen and his followers. This strengthened the trust between the two countries and their leaders and resulted in intensified bilateral contacts. In the second half of the 2010s, Putin and Erdoğan held regular telephone conversations and met even more frequently (there were almost three dozen face-to-face meetings between the two presidents in 2016-2022).

Institutionally, Turkey, which since the second half of the 20th century sought to get integrated in the pan-European structures and essentially became part of the West, in the mid-2010s, reconsidered its reliance on the Western experience in the economic modernization and friendly relations with the West as the cornerstone of its foreign policy strategy (Dalay et al. 2020). Turkey's institutional ties with the West—membership in NATO, the EU Customs Union, and other pan-European structures—remained, but Ankara openly declared its desire to enhance the country's status and role in international organizations and demonstrated interest towards such symbols of the post-Western world order as the SCO, BRICS, and the G20.

The very idea of rapprochement between Russia and Turkey in response to their alienation by the West has been popular since the 2000s. The two countries have formed what Turkish scholar Omer Taspinar described as an “axis of the excluded” (Hill and Taspinar, 2006, pp. 81-92). Indeed, despite diverging views on many global and regional issues, Russia and Turkey shared frustration with the West and its “policy of double standards” (Baev and Kirişçi, 2017), including towards the Middle East and, more specifically, the Syrian crisis.

Putin and Erdoğan’s rapprochement was neither an anomaly in terms of the historical development of Russia and Turkey nor the result of a good personal relationship between the two leaders. The aspiration to secure a worthy place for their countries in the international system originated from the historical development of both states. At the same time, the goals of the two countries differed significantly. Turkey sought an equal position among the leading European powers—Germany and the UK—and a revision of its relations with the U.S. in a more favorable way. Russia was keen to regain its status as a world power, equal to the U.S., and to reconstruct its relations with Europe based on civilizational and cultural unity (The Kremlin, 2021).

In terms of *military-technical and economic cooperation*, the purchase of Russia’s S-400 surface-to-air missile systems (Lenta.ru, 2017) and the construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline under the Black Sea became landmarks for Russian-Turkish relations.³ The contract for the supply of S-400 systems made Turkey the only NATO country to have acquired high-tech Russian weapons. Also, the S-400 deliveries to Turkey had a positive impact on the international image of Russian weapons. However, Turkey’s deepening military-technical cooperation with Russia entailed some serious consequences. The U.S. not only excluded Turkey from the F-35 fifth-generation fighter jet program, but also imposed sanctions against it under the U.S. Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

³ The presidents of the two countries first announced the TurkStream project in December 2014, but negotiations over its implementation were frozen after the shooting down of Russia’s Sukhoi-24 jet by the Turkish Air Force in November 2015. Formally, the agreement on the construction of the pipeline was signed in the fall of 2016 and finally ratified in 2017 (Lenta.ru, 2016).

TurkStream plays a special role in economic cooperation as it makes Turkey, though not having substantial energy reserves of its own, one of the key players in the global energy market. Moreover, it enables Turkey to enjoy a discount on gas supplied from Russia while continuing to explore alternative routes for oil and gas transit from Central Asia to the West. By the end of the 2010s, Turkey had consolidated its role as the most important transit country for the export of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea region to Europe—Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary. When the U.S. and the EU sanctioned the Russian energy sector, Moscow and Ankara enhanced their energy cooperation. In October 2022, President Putin proposed the idea of creating an international gas hub (Interfax, 2022b) using TurkStream. The participants in the project will be able to set the price conditions for pipeline and liquefied gas in the near future, which will potentially enable Turkey to unite different suppliers on one platform, thereby significantly influencing prices on the world market. Erdoğan expectedly supported the idea and actively joined its promotion.

The regional dimension of the Russian-Turkish interaction in the 2010s and the early 2020s became a visible case of Turkey's effective use of regional asymmetries for building up its capabilities. It also highlighted Turkey and Russia's ability to accommodate each other's interests in sensitive areas of regional security.

The Middle Eastern transformation towards greater polycentricity reactivated Russia-Turkey cooperation. This transformation happened as the U.S. and EU's role in the region diminished and Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the UAE, and Qatar filled the emerging vacuum. Accordingly, the Turkish establishment perceived the specific nexus of partnership-competition with Russia that emerged in the Middle East as a direct consequence of the shifts in the international system and an obvious geopolitical imperative for Turkey. The new format of regional cooperation resulted in a specific interaction between Moscow and Ankara in resolving crises in Syria, then in Libya and, finally, in Nagorno-Karabakh. The crisis in Syria, which broke out at the beginning of the 2010s, had a major impact on the development of Russia-Turkey relations. It framed a special model of regional

partnership between the two countries with overlapping interests.

In general, Russian-Turkish relations in the late 2010s had two key features, which enhanced Turkey's strategic autonomy. First, on most of the issues sensitive to Turkey, Russia showed understanding and willingness to take into consideration the "Turkish circumstances." This approach contrasted with those of Turkey's traditional Western allies—the U.S. and the EU. Second, even though respect for each other's interests required some self-restraint, it let Turkey tap new foreign policy opportunities. Subsequently, this phenomenon became visible in the Ukraine crisis as well.

THE UKRAINE CRISIS AND RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS

After Russia started its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Western countries unanimously condemned Moscow's actions and imposed large-scale economic sanctions against Russia. Ankara immediately refused to join the anti-Russian sanctions and offered to act as a mediator. Turkey saw a chance to assert its position of a country capable of determining the configuration of the emerging new regional order, and possibly even a global one. Ankara's approach to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine marked a new stage in Turkey's balancing between the West and Russia and in hedging the growing foreign policy risks.

Since the mid-2010s, Turkey has consistently adhered to a pro-Western stance on the Ukraine crisis. Ankara did not recognize Crimea's reunification with Russia in 2014 or the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, and strengthened relations with Kiev within the framework of the High-Level Cooperation Council. In 2015, Turkey opened a more than \$50-million credit line for Ukraine (Reuters, 2015), announced the disbursement of \$10 million in humanitarian aid, and finally went ahead with signing a military and technical cooperation agreement with Kiev in 2020 (Anadolu Ajansı, 2020c), followed by a free trade zone with Ukraine in 2022 (Daily Sabah, 2022a). In addition to arranging the supplies of modern communications equipment for the Ukrainian army, the Turkish company Baykar Makina planned to build a drone manufacturing plant

in Ukraine, and create a joint Turkish-Ukrainian aerospace technology center. Ukraine hoped to use Turkish technology in the production of Sokol-300 drones at the Luch Design Bureau. Turkey concluded contracts for the import of Ukrainian engines for its strategic combat drones and developed several joint projects for installing Ukrainian engines on the heavy drone Bayraktar Akıncı. Another ambitious joint project envisaged the development of a supersonic combat drone. Turkey also became one of the major partners in the development of the Ukrainian Navy by signing a contract to build a corvette for Kiev.

Remarkably, before February 2022, the leading Western countries had been skeptical about Turkey's involvement in the Ukraine crisis. Despite Turkey's support for Ukraine (arms supplies, diplomatic solidarity), Ankara was barred from participating in the Western consultations on the Ukraine crisis and the general debate on European security. U.S. President Joe Biden did not invite Erdoğan to join his videoconference on Russia and Ukraine with the European leaders on January 24, 2022.

Ankara described Russia's special military operation as an "illegal military invasion" (even though it was in no hurry to do so) and voted to condemn Russia at the UN General Assembly on March 2, 2022 (UN News, 2022a). For its part, Kiev lavished compliments on Turkey's policies. In late February 2022, Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky emotionally thanked his "friend President Erdoğan" for supporting Ukraine and closing the Black Sea straits to Russian ships in accordance with the Montreux Convention (Twitter, 2022a), forgetting that in early February Russia had moved significant naval forces to the Black Sea through these straits (Naval News, 2022). The Ukrainian defense minister thanked Turkey for the delivery of a new batch of Bayraktar TB2 UAVs in addition to those Ukraine had received in 2021 (Janes, 2022).

At the same time, Ankara was keen not to annoy Moscow and preferred to distance itself as much as possible from the sanctions war against Russia. Ibrahim Kalın, Erdoğan's spokesman and one of his main foreign policy advisors, never missed a chance to stress that Turkey found it impossible to join the sanctions against Russia

(Hürriyet, 2022). Turkey sought to protect its economic interests and assert its status of an honest mediator that maintained relative neutrality and good relations with all parties to the conflict. This policy enabled Turkey to more than double trade with Russia (to over \$70 billion from \$33 billion, according to some estimates) (Interfax, 2022a) and by the end of 2022 made Turkey second, after China, in trade with Russia, for which Turkey began to serve as a link to Europe in solving transportation, logistics, commodities and energy issues.

The ambivalent position on the Ukraine crisis matched the logic of the Turkish strategic autonomy imperative, but the foreign policy and economic instruments of maintaining it have changed. Amid the escalating West-Russia confrontation, Turkey clearly indicated its desire not only to act as a mediator in the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, but also to become a real “third force” in the East-West standoff. Rather than getting benefits from simply joining the Western or anti-Western camp Turkey clearly identified the range of its national interests and its aspiration to raise its status of an international political actor.

Turkey, on the one hand, armed itself with the Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile systems, despite the U.S. and NATO objections, but, on the other hand, supplied Ukraine with Bayraktar TB2 UAVs, which are used against Russia. It condemned the “Russian invasion” of Ukraine, but categorically refused to support the anti-Russian sanctions. In Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey and Russia continued to support the opposing sides, but this did not prevent Moscow and Ankara from engaging in a productive diplomatic dialogue on the settlement in all these cases. NATO membership did not stop Turkey from extending its demand to Sweden and Finland when they applied for joining NATO in the summer of 2022.

Turkey provided a venue for high-level peace talks between Ukraine and Russia after the start of the special military operation. A symbolic meeting of the delegations led by the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers, Sergei Lavrov and Dmitry Kuleba, in Istanbul on March 10, 2022, had little effect in settling the conflict. However, it gave Turkey an opportunity to position itself as “the only country that really wants

an end to the Ukraine conflict and is making sincere efforts for peace” (Twitter, 2022b).

Assuming the role of a mediator was in Ankara's current and medium-term interests. First, it guaranteed Turkey and Erdoğan the media's attention worldwide, which had a positive impact on the popularity of the president and the ruling party, whose ratings had been going down for a long time amid the economic crisis. Second, it gave Turkey an additional argument in defending its right to continue interaction with Moscow and to abstain from joining the anti-Russian sanctions. Third, it created a springboard for Turkey to increase its geopolitical and diplomatic influence in the region. It is no coincidence that it was in Turkey that a former U.S. Marine, Trevor Reed, who had been convicted in Russia, was exchanged for Russian aircraft pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, who had been serving a prison term in the U.S. Both the Russian and U.S. authorities publicly expressed gratitude to Ankara for the success of that operation (RIA Novosti, 2022; Daily Sabah, 2022b). In the summer of 2022, a “grain deal,” an agreement among Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and the United Nations to establish a safe sea corridor for agricultural cargo traffic from Ukraine, was concluded (UN News, 2022b), and in the fall of 2022, amid speculations about soaring risks of a nuclear escalation, talks were organized in Ankara between the head of the Russian foreign intelligence service SVR, Sergei Naryshkin, and CIA chief William Burns. It was the first personal meeting between high-ranking representatives of Russia and the U.S since the start of the special military operation in Ukraine (Kommersant, 2022).

Turkey's mediation activities correlated to a certain extent with Russia's interests. The latter showed its readiness for dialogue and diplomacy, which by no means contributed to the cohesion of the Western anti-Russian coalition.

The aggravation of the situation in Ukraine seriously affected Turkey. The viability of Erdoğan's “new economic model” (fighting inflation without raising central bank interest rates) raised public concern even before the special military operation. The aftermath of the Ukrainian war ruined Ankara's plans for overcoming Turkey's

debt to other countries by boosting exports and stabilizing its national currency through the introduction of a state program to protect lira-denominated deposits. Russia and Ukraine had long been among Turkey's main economic partners in the agricultural trade, energy sector, defense industry and, above all, tourism. The tourism industry is Turkey's vital source of hard currency revenue. The country nurtured hopes for returning to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, but the flow of holiday-makers from Russia and Ukraine plummeted⁴ and that from the European countries dropped markedly.

Energy price hikes after the start of the military operation in Ukraine hit Turkey, too, as each \$10-increase in the price of oil inflated Turkey's current account deficit by \$5 billion. Disruptions in supply chains and foreign payments from Russia created additional economic problems for Turkey. The war halted the transportation of goods to Ukraine and blocked overland routes to Russia through Ukraine. The Turkish textile industry was hit the hardest. The textile and leather centers in Istanbul suffered the most, for they depended heavily on customers in Russia and Ukraine (the Russian and Ukrainian markets had accounted for 40 percent of annual sales of more than \$3 billion).

Since Russia and Ukraine are major world wheat exporters, the conflict has raised global wheat prices to record levels, fueling food inflation around the world. For Turkey, which used to buy almost 80 percent of its grain from Russia and Ukraine, this consequence has been particularly painful.

In early 2022, Turkey was just beginning to gradually cope with a severe economic crisis. The sanctions against Russia and the resulting energy collapse actually reversed the positive trends of late 2021. The uncontrolled growth of energy prices, coupled with accelerated inflation, ruled out the positive scenario of economic stabilization by the summer of 2022.

At the same time, Ankara set its mind on maximizing likely dividends from the sanctions war against Moscow. Specifically, it

⁴ Russians were the largest group of foreign tourists in Turkey in 2021—about 4.7 million (or 19 percent of all tourists). Ukrainians were in third place after Germans—about 2 million, or 8 percent (T.C. Kültür..., 2022).

expected to attract major international companies that hastily left Russia, and to arrange supplies of its goods to the Russian market to fill the niche following the withdrawal of many Western brands from Russia. Also, Turkey began to develop—quite actively—the infrastructure for the Russian payment system MIR. The largest public and private banks started accepting Russian cards. Then Turkish Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati said in April 2022 that about 15 percent of Turkish companies worked with the MIR system (Milliyet, 2022). However, in September 2022, due to the threat of secondary U.S. sanctions, Turkish banks stopped accepting MIR cards. The Turkish government announced that it was working on a new mutual settlement mechanism with Russia (Aydınlık, 2022).

Turkey's foreign policy in the 2020s has developed a trend towards maximizing its geostrategic potential by building transactional relations even with those who had been Ankara's open antagonists for years. Thus, Erdoğan began to take steps to establish a constructive dialogue with Israel, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and even Armenia. These efforts also correlated with attempts to ease tensions with the EU and the U.S. amid the campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. A telephone conversation between Biden and Erdoğan before the Russian-Ukrainian talks in Istanbul in March 2022 (The White House, 2022) illustrated the same trend. The strategy of building a transactional relationship with the West, that is, removing the "values agenda" from the framework of bilateral and multilateral interaction, was obviously more in line with Ankara's interests and the role that Turkey seeks to play in world politics.

While on the diplomatic track the crisis opened a window of opportunity for Turkey, from the military standpoint the aggravation of the situation in Ukraine came as no less a challenge for Turkey's hedging strategy than the economic problems. The room for maneuver narrowed significantly. Turkey had to switch to a policy of firm balancing, increasing its military capabilities in the Black Sea,⁵ expanding military and technical cooperation in the region

⁵ After 2014, the Turkish Navy lost supremacy in the Black Sea, with Russia taking a dominant position.

within NATO, and establishing cooperation in the field of military technologies with Ukraine. These steps, however, were unable to change the overall political-military balance established in the late 2010s. Turkey's new naval base in Trabzon, in addition to the old ones in Sinop and Samsun, given its moderate equipment (Kökçü, 2018), has not increased Turkey's military capabilities to any significant extent. Turkey's participation in the U.S.-Ukrainian exercise Sea Breeze 2021 can hardly be considered a fundamentally new phenomenon (United World, 2021): as a NATO and BLACKSEAFOR member, Turkey has participated in many similar naval exercises over the past two decades.

Ankara's only significant step, which seems to have violated the logic of strategic hedging, was the enhancement of cooperation with Ukraine in the security and military-industrial field. Importantly, in its cooperation with Ukraine Turkey did not aim to create a defensive alliance, let alone join the anti-Russian front formed by the Baltic and some Eastern European countries. Through its limited and largely ad hoc military cooperation with Kiev, Ankara sent signals to Moscow that it was concerned about Russia's military buildup in the region.

* * *

It is hard to explain Turkey's ambiguous position towards Russia in terms of the neorealist paradigm as it does not fit fully into the logic of either balancing, or bandwagoning, or maintaining full neutrality. Given Ankara's ambiguous signals to Moscow amid growing tensions in different regions, where the two countries interact directly or indirectly (the Black Sea region, the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Mediterranean), and Turkey's multistep complex efforts to manage the "risks born of neighborhood with a global power," it is quite difficult to explain Turkey's position in terms of mainstream theoretical approaches. In this context, the concepts of strategic hedging and strategic autonomy add analytical value to the understanding of Turkey's multi-vector, contradictory foreign policy and the complex nature of Ankara's relations with Moscow since the late 2010s.

Analyzing Russian-Turkish relations and Turkey's foreign policy through the prism of strategic hedging concept helps overcome the

common delusion that the economic interests were the main driver of Moscow-Ankara interaction. Ankara's close and thriving economic ties with Moscow have not prevented Turkey from taking steps to counterbalance Russia's military and strategic potential in the Black Sea region, the Mediterranean, and the Near and Middle East, that is, to prevent Russia from shifting the regional balance of power in its favor. These trends prove that in its foreign policy, in general, and in relations with Russia, in particular, Turkey is seeking to ensure its own security rather than achieve purely pragmatic objectives. This is what constitutes the key characteristic of its strategic hedging.

Turkey is a unique example of a country that successfully combines strategic hedging, various forms of balancing, and a proactive foreign policy aimed at increasing its strategic autonomy on all possible tracks. Turkey's assertive regional and macro-regional policies combined with reactivated beneficial foreign policy projects (turning Turkey into a logistics and energy hub), which until recently remained on hold due to the lack of resources or international constraints, have yielded a strong synergistic effect owing to skillful foreign policy maneuvering and favorable circumstances.

Turkey so far has managed to use Russia as an important resource of its strategic autonomy and the Ukraine crisis as a means to strengthen its economic and foreign policy positions. This approach has enabled Turkey to vie for a much higher international status than its actual resources allow for (the lack of real support in the region, difficult relations with neighbors, and economic problems). It has even made Turkey able to overcome structural limitations of its NATO membership. Turkey regards Russia as a source of enhancing its role in international affairs and seeks to consolidate its status of a special transit hub, a unique negotiating platform and a channel of communication with international structures with which Russia either has stopped its dialogue or is unable to use them to solve the most important problems.

References

Anadolu Ajansı, 2019. Putin'den G7'ye Türkiye önerisi [Putin Suggests Turkey to Be Part of G7]. *Anadolu Ajansı*, 5 September.

Anadolu Ajansı, 2020a. Denge arayışındaki Türkiye-Çin ticareti ve swap anlaşması [In Search of Balance: Turkey-China Trade and Swap Agreement]. *Anadolu Ajansı*, 22 June.

Anadolu Ajansı, 2020b. Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Karada, denizde ve havada karşımıza çıkacak herkes Türkiye'nin kararlılığını gördü [President Erdogan: Everyone Who Tried to Oppose Us on Land, at Sea and in the Air Saw Turkey's Determination]. *Anadolu Ajansı*, 30 August.

Anadolu Ajansı, 2020c. Ukrayna ile Türkiye stratejik ortaklığı pekiştirecek [Ukraine and Turkey to Strengthen Strategic Partnership]. *Anadolu Ajansı*, 16 November.

Aydınlık, 2022. MIR'e alternatif [An Alternative to the Mir Payment System]. *Aydınlık*, 28 September.

Baev, P. and Kirişçi, K., 2017. *An Ambiguous Partnership*. Washington: Brookings.

Daily Sabah, 2022a. Turkey, Ukraine Ink FTA Deal, Agree on Battle-Tested Drone Production. *Daily Sabah*, 3 February.

Daily Sabah, 2022b. US, Russia Thank Turkey for Support in Prisoner Exchange. *Daily Sabah*, 28 April.

Delay, G., et al., 2020. Turkey and the West. The German Marshall Fund of the US. *Policy Paper*, 6 (June).

Erdoğan, R.T., 2017. Bölgemizde İstikrar ve Refah Temelli Yeni Bir Dönemin Kapıları Aralanacak [A New World Based on Stability and Prosperity Is Opening for Us]. *T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı*, 14 May. Available at: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/75192/> [Accessed 9 May 2023].

Erdoğan, R.T., 2018a. Dünya 5'ten büyüktür' sözümüz küresel adaletsizliğe karşı yapılmış en büyük başkaldırıdır [Our Motto "The World Is Bigger than Five" Is the Biggest Revolt against Global Injustice]. *T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı*, 10 January. Available at: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/89038/> [Accessed 9 May 2023].

Erdoğan, R.T., 2018c. How to Fix the UN – And Why We Should. *Foreign Policy*, 26 September.

Erdoğan, R.T., 2020. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Kabinesi İki Yıllık Değerlendirme Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma [Speech at the Meeting Assessing the First Two-Years of the Presidential Government Cabinet's Performance]. *T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı*, 21 July. Available at: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/120687/> [Accessed 9 May 2023].

Erdoğan, R.T., 2021. *A Fairer World is Possible*. İstanbul: Turkuvaz Kitap.

Goh, E., 2005. *Meeting the China Challenge*. Washington: East-West Center.

Hill, F. and Taspınar, O., 2006. Turkey and Russia: Axis of Excluded? *Survival*, 48(1), pp. 81-92.

Hürriyet, 2018b. BRICS'e 'T' eklenirse bize fırsat yaratabilir ["T" Added to BRICS Will Create a Great Opportunity for Us]. *Hürriyet*, 29 July.

The State of Strategic Hedging: Turkey's Foreign Policy and Relations with Russia

Hürriyet, 2022. İbrahim Kalın, “Rusya’ya yaptırım planlamıyoruz” dedi [İbrahim Kalın: “We Are Not Planning Sanctions against Russia”]. *Hürriyet*, 1 March.

Interfax, 2022a. Tovaroborot Rossii i Turtsii za 9 mesyatsev udvoilsya [Trade Turnover between Russia and Turkey Doubled in Nine Months]. *Interfax*, 21 November.

Interfax, 2022b. Novak privyol podrobnosti proyekte [Novak Gave Details on the Project]. *Interfax*, 23 December.

Janes, 2022. Ukraine Conflict: Turkey Airlifts Additional TB2 UCAVs to Ukraine. *Janes*, 2 March.

Karar, 2016. Dış politikada otonomi arayışı [In Search of Autonomy in Foreign Policy]. *Karar*, 7 December.

Kinship, 2019. Kinship and Diasporas in Turkish Foreign Policy. *PRIO Cyprus Centre Report*, 10. Nicosia.

Kökçü, A.A., 2018. Türk Deniz Kuvvetleri'ne Yeni Üs [New Base for Turkish Naval Forces]. *Defence Türk*, 6 December.

Kommersant. 2022. Rossiya i SShA skhodili v razvedku drug na druga [Russia and the United States Reconnoitered Each Other]. *Kommersant*, 14 November.

Kuik, C.C., 2008. The Essence of Hedging. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30(2), pp. 159-185.

Kuik, C.-C., 2016. How Do Weaker States Hedge? *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25(100), pp. 500-514.

Lenta.ru., 2016. Moskva i Ankara zaklyuchili soglasheniye po “Turetskomu potoku” [Moscow and Ankara Signed an Agreement on the TurkStream]. *Lenta.ru*, 10 November.

Lim, D.J. and Cooper, Z., 2015. Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia. *Security Studies*, 24(4), pp. 696-727.

López i Vidal, Ll. and Pelegrín, À., 2018. Hedging Against China: Japanese Strategy towards a Rising Power. *Asian Security*, 14(2), pp. 193-211.

Milliyet, 2022. Bakan Nebati: Rusya'nın Mir kart sistemi var [Minister Nebati: Russia Has the Mir Card System]. *Milliyet*, 26 April.

Naval News, 2022. 6 Russian Warships and Submarine Now Entering Black Sea Towards Ukraine. *Naval News*, 8 February.

Rangsimaporn, P., 2022. *Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Exploring the Dynamics of Greater Engagement*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reuters, 2015. Turkey Offers \$50 million Loan to Ukraine, Urges Protection of Crimean Tatars. *Reuters*, 20 March.

RIA Novosti, 2022. Putin poblagodaryl Erdoğana za organizatsiyu obmena [Putin Thanked Erdoğan for Organizing the Exchange]. *RIA Novosti*, 28 April.

Shlykov, P., 2018. The “Turkish Model” in Historical Perspective. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 16(2), pp. 34-59. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2018-16-2-121-148.

Shlykov, P., 2020. Istoricheskaya politika v sovremennoy Turtsii [Historical Politics in Modern Turkey], *Istoriya*, 11(12). DOI: 10.18254/S207987840010436-8

T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2019. 11 Büyükelçiler Konferansı Açılış Konuşması. 5 Ağustos 2019, Ankara. [Keynote Speech at the 11th Ambassadors’ Conference. 5 August 2019, Ankara.] T.C. *Dış İşleri Bakanlığı*. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/BAKAN/bkon2019.pdf> [Accessed 9 May 2023].

T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2022. *Sınır İstatistikleri. Yıllık Bülteni* [Border Statistics. Annual Bulletin]. Ankara: T.C.KTB.

The Kremlin, 2021. Vladimir Putin Spoke at the Session of the Davos 2021. *The Kremlin*, 27 January. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64938> [Accessed 9 May 2023].

The White House, 2022. Readout of President Biden’s Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey. *The White House*, 10 March. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/10/> [Accessed 25 February 2023].

TİKA, 2022. *Türkiye Kalkınma Yardımları 2021 Yılı Verileri* [Turkey’s Development Aid Data for 2021]. Ankara: TİKA.

Twitter, 2022a. I Thank My Friend Mr. President of Turkey R.T. Erdoğan. *Twitter*, 26 February. Available at: <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1497564078897774598> [Accessed 9 May 2023].

Twitter, 2022b. Kalın İ. Ukrayna savaşının bitmesini gerçekten isteyen ve barış için samimi çaba gösteren tek bir ülke var: Türkiye [İbrahim Kalın: There Is Only One Country That Really Wants the Ukraine War to End and Makes Sincere Efforts for Peace—Turkey]. *Twitter*, 21 September. Available at: <https://twitter.com/ikalin1/status/1572566998328180737> [Accessed 9 May 2023].

UN News, 2022a. General Assembly Resolution Demands End to Russian Offensive in Ukraine. *UN News*, 2 March.

UN News, 2022b. Black Sea Grain Exports Deal “a Beacon of Hope” amid Ukraine War—Guterres. *UN News*, 22 July.

United World, 2021. Why Did Turkey Participate in the Sea Breeze 2021 Naval Exercise on a Low Key? *United World*, 7 November.

Wezeman, P.D., et al., 2022. Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021. *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March.

Yeni Şafak, 2019. Çavuşoğlu “Yeniden Asya” açılımını duyurdu [Çavuşoğlu Announces the “Asia Anew” Initiative]. *Yeni Şafak*, 5 August.