

Chapter 9

Understanding the “Balancing Act” of Turkey in the Russia–Ukraine War

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the conflict, Turkey, as a regional powerhouse, has remained intact in its position as the “honest broker.” In a nutshell, Turkey has been trying to consolidate a balance between the resurgence of Russian aggressiveness and the Western aspirations to protect Ukraine at all costs. For so many in the West, Turkish actions were defined as even damaging at some point to the causes of NATO and the EU. Nevertheless, Turkey’s role conception in this war is nothing new and rooted very well back to the earlier Republican experience with the Black Sea. In other words, Turkish foreign policy towards the Black Sea and Ukraine/Russia has always leaned toward a strategic behavior of balancing these significant powers. The latest act has been no different from a Turkish way of “sticking with the plan.” Therefore, deciphering the dynamics of this role is undoubtedly a must to undercover the geopolitical interest of Turkey from the region amid a fully-fledged war. This chapter proposes three related sections to understand and analyze the story’s Turkish side.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the war, Turkey, a regional powerhouse, has remained intact in its position of being an “honest broker” among its Western allies and Russia. To be more specific, Turkey has been balancing the equilibrium between the resurgence of Russian expansionism in the Black Sea and the Western involvement in defending Ukraine adamantly. Interestingly enough, for so many in the Western sphere of influence, especially in the media, Turkish actions have been defined as unorthodox for a NATO member and even damaging at some point to the EU/US efforts, for example, Turkey’s insistence on not collaborating in economic sanctions against Russia. Nevertheless, Turkey’s role conception in this war is nothing new when one looks at the history of Turkish foreign policy since the formation of the modern

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-8521-7.ch009

republic. Turkish foreign policy toward the conflicts in the Black Sea, and precisely the Ukraine/Russia issue, has always leaned toward a strategic behavior of staying cautious and transactional. And the latest act has been no different from a Turkish way of “sticking with the plan.” This chapter is designed to identify Turkey’s “balancing act” through historical analysis and deciphers the dynamics behind this geopolitical foreign policy behavior. The chapter is composed of three sections. The first section delivers the history behind the development of Turkey’s foreign policy behavior in the Black Sea concerning two factors explaining this choice. The second section offers a critical analysis of the ongoing relationship between Turkey and Russia/Ukraine, and the final section evaluates the sustainability of Turkey’s approach in the long run by introducing policy implications and future projections.

A Short History of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Black Sea After 1920

To understand Turkish actions in the war, one must revisit history and see the continuation or repetition of this act in almost every conflict that has ever happened in the Black Sea since Cold War. But, of course, this suggested role does not mean somehow an (in)direct support to Russia or any Russian cause in the Black Sea. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Turkey has been a NATO member since the beginning of the Cold War and a candidate state of the EU. Therefore, the already settled rapprochements have aligned the country moderately with these organizations’ regulations and organizational principles and automatically limit Turkey’s hypothetical convergence with Russia. To keep this in mind, the aftermath of the Turkish War of Independence and Turkish-Soviet relations in this post-WWI era could be a good starting point.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the decade that signified the formation of the modern Turkish republic, Turkey’s position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and various tensions in the Black Sea had been very careful and prudent (Üstün, 2010, p.232). The official standpoint towards the Soviet Union was relatively positive and appreciative of Moscow’s economic and military support for the Turkish War of Independence (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018, p.73). In the 1920 and 1930s, calming bilateral relations resulted in expanding political and economic ties along with continuous dialogue, which eventually played a prominent role in the signing of the Lausanne and Montreux conventions (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018, p.73). In terms of Black Sea geopolitics, the Montreux convention’s importance must be stated and explained. The Convention has given Turkey the right to arm and defend the straits in wartime, and Russia has taken the ability to access the Mediterranean with Turkey’s permission (Koru, 2017). According to Koru (2017), the convention has settled a delicate balance between Russian aggression over straits and Western efforts to contain this aggression. Yet, Joseph Stalin had become the game changer. His constant attempts to compromise the Montreux Convention and threats of expansionism on Turkey’s northeastern provinces during WWII led Turkey to reconsider its options and become ever closer to its Western allies (Koru, 2017). The covert aspirations of Stalin and the increasing threat of communism were only some of the reasons for Turkey’s NATO membership in 1952.

The start of the Cold War came with Turkey’s allegiance to the Western camp and the inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria in the Warsaw Pact. This Cold War equilibrium strengthened NATO’s position in the Black Sea via Turkey while relinquishing the Soviet hopes of having complete control over the region (Özdamar, 2012, p.23). However, despite becoming adversaries and being members of two opposing blocs, Turkish-Russian cooperation and Turkey’s aspirations to keep the balance among West and East managed to exist during the Cold War (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018, p.73). A détente came after a deterioration in Turkey-US relations associated mainly due to the imposed arms embargo after Turkish

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