



Turkey Juggles Relationships after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is calling for a decisive NATO response against Russia after the Kremlin began a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24. Turkey has been prioritizing its burgeoning defense and diplomatic partnership with Ukraine in recent years—an action that the Kremlin perceives as a challenge to its sphere of influence. Ukraine is not the first theater of conflict where Turkey and Russia have opposing interests, which they often have been able to compartmentalize. Turkey has challenged Russia's sphere of influence in various theaters—including Libya, Central Asia, Syria, and the Caucasus—while maintaining its close coordination with Russia in its efforts to diversify its relations toward non-NATO states. However, Ukraine is likely the most significant challenge to date to Turkey's bid to balance its NATO membership with its fragile partnership with Russia. Turkey has become increasingly reliant on Russian cooperation in various conflicts and key industries like energy and tourism.

Ankara long sought to avoid a Ukraine-Russia conflict that could upend its diplomatic balance. Throughout the Russian military buildup in early 2022, the Turkish government called for rapid de-escalation between Ukraine and Russia, made an offer to mediate direct talks between two states in Turkey, and downplayed NATO's involvement in order to not exacerbate tensions. With the Russian invasion moving forward, Turkish officials are now trying to identify the lowest-cost policy options between standing with NATO, supporting Ukraine, and minimizing the risks of retaliation from Russia. Ankara remains supportive of Ukraine—including through past military aid and sales—but initial Turkish government statements suggest that Turkey's unilateral support has limits: Ankara seeks to avoid a retaliatory response from Russia and the spillover financial impact of sanctions targeting Russia. Turkish officials have emphasized the need for decisive NATO action as a requirement for deterrence and support for Ukraine without providing details. Turkey's financial and defense ties with Russia will likely limit its lobbying efforts within the alliance.

The update below provides an overview of Turkey's goals and constraints in its approach to Ukraine, Russia, and NATO. Specifically:

- 1) Turkey's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on and after February 24
- 2) Turkey's efforts to mediate and de-escalate prior to the invasion

AFTER RUSSIA BEGAN ITS INVASION OF UKRAINE

Turkey calls for a more active and decisive NATO after Russia began its large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Turkey remains wary of pursuing sanctions against Russia, however.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for more decisive NATO action and signaled a renewed commitment to work with NATO allies in support of Ukraine, despite strong ties with and risk of retaliation from Russia.¹ The Turkish Foreign Ministry and President Erdogan denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 for violating international law and posing a threat to regional and global security.² President Erdogan convened a national security summit with top Turkish government officials on February 24 to discuss developments in Ukraine.³ Erdogan called on NATO and the European Union, to pursue more decisive actions beyond "issuing condemnations to Russia and offering advice to Ukraine" ahead of the virtual NATO Heads of State Summit on February 25.⁴ Erdogan also underlined Turkey's historical ties with and role in Europe—likely signaling his renewed commitment to work with NATO allies in support of Ukraine.

Ukraine asked Turkey to deny Russian vessels access to the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits, though Turkey is unlikely to do so.⁵ The Ukrainian government requested Turkey deny Russian vessels access to the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits under the 1936 Montreux Convention. The Montreux Convention grants Turkey the right to control and regulate the passage of naval vessels through Turkey's two straits. Turkey can choose to close straits to all foreign warships in "wartime" or when it is threatened by aggression.⁶ Turkish officials responded by saying that Ankara is prepared for all scenarios and will continue to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity and abide by the Montreux Convention.⁷ However, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu underlined that the convention's wartime clause still allows Black Sea littoral states to return their ships to their bases—allowing Russian vessels to enter the Black Sea regardless. The Convention also regulates the tonnage and time-of-stay of non-Black Sea states' vessels, which would limit a possible NATO deployment into the Black Sea.⁸

Turkey offered humanitarian aid to Ukraine alongside its existing military support.⁹ Erdogan spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky over the phone and reiterated support for Ukraine's territorial integrity on February 24.¹⁰ Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar discussed Turkish humanitarian aid to Ukraine with his Ukrainian counterpart, Oleksiy Reznikov, on February 25.¹¹ Akar and Reznikov previously had a phone call on February 24.¹² Ankara has also provided its Bayraktar TB2 armed drones to Ukraine since 2019, signed several defense cooperation agreements since 2020, provided military aid, and agreed on future joint defense productions.

Turkish officials increased coordination with NATO allies on February 24, marking a shift from Ankara's earlier hesitant approach. President Erdogan discussed developments in Ukraine with French President Emmanuel Macron on February 24.¹³ Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy High Representative Josep Borrell.¹⁴ Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar communicated with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov.¹⁵ Prior to Russia's invasion, Turkish officials refrained from frequent coordination with NATO and criticized NATO states' statements for exacerbating tensions. Instead, Ankara maintained its unilateral offer to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, which Russian President Vladimir Putin has so far refused. Turkey will likely maintain its symbolic mediation offer, but will also increase coordination with NATO allies.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry failed to urge its citizens to leave Ukraine prior to the invasion. The Turkish Foreign Ministry recommended its citizens leave eastern Ukraine on February

22, but did not issue guidance on the rest of the country before the airspace closure over Ukraine.¹⁶ The Turkish government has not been able to evacuate most of its citizens as of February 25 but is collecting contact and location information for a possible evacuation operation.¹⁷ Separately, Turkey sent two military transport aircraft to Kyiv, Ukraine, hours prior to Russia's invasion announcement on February 23, and the aircraft likely remain in Ukraine.¹⁸ Turkey also sent another military transport aircraft to Rzeszow, Poland, on the Polish-Ukrainian border on February 25.¹⁹ Ankara may have attempted to evacuate Turkish citizens or embassy staff or deliver military assistance to Ukraine.²⁰ Poland has provided ammunition support to Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's invasion.²¹

A likely Russian air assault damaged a Turkish cargo ship off the coast of Odesa, Ukraine on February 24.²² The Turkish Maritime General Directorate announced that a bomb hit a Turkish-owned ship en route to Romania. The incident resulted in no casualties and was likely an accident. The Directorate did not attribute the attack to Russia, and Turkish officials did not comment on the event. Russia's ongoing attack on Ukraine may lead to similar accidental spillover violence in NATO member states and will likely disrupt critical trade routes through the Black Sea.

PRIOR TO RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE:

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey cannot abandon ties with Russia nor Ukraine.²³ Turkey condemned DNR and LNR recognition but is hesitant about imposing sanctions against Russia.

Erdogan had last-ditch phone calls with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on February 22-23 to condemn Russia's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR).²⁴ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had a phone call on February 22.²⁵ Erdogan emphasized that Russia's recognition of the DNR and LNR is unacceptable and stressed the need for diplomacy in a statement after the call.²⁶ The Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a similar statement on February 21 that classified Russia's actions as a clear violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity.²⁷ President Zelensky suggested including Turkey, Ukraine, and Germany in a summit with the United Nations Security Council's permanent members.²⁸ Erdogan reiterated his condemnation of Russia's recognition of the DNR and LNR, called for a return to the Minsk II Accords, and stated that Turkey follows a "constructive approach" within NATO over a phone call with Putin as well on February 23.²⁹ Erdogan later criticized Western leaders' previous ineffective diplomatic efforts with the Kremlin.

Russian jets conducted flights over Turkish-controlled al-Bab, Aleppo Governorate, Syria, on February 23.³⁰ Local social media accounts reported that Russian warplanes dropped flare bombs over al-Bab in Turkish-controlled Syria on February 23. The Syria Civil Defense found evidence of shrapnel but no traces of airstrikes in the city. Other social media accounts also suggested that the jets were conducting an air exercise over the city—likely as a warning to Turkey about its support for Ukraine. The incident occurred after Ukrainian Ambassador to Turkey Vasyl Bodnar requested that Turkey deny Russia access to Turkish straits earlier on February 23.

Turkish officials urged against sanctions on Russia in several statements on February 19-20.³¹ Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin stated that additional sanctions against Russia would undermine or delay a diplomatic solution in an interview with German newspaper Die Welt on February 19. Kalin criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin for seeking to redraw Russia's borders but urged states to listen to Russia and pursue mutual diplomacy, even if they do not fulfill

Russian demands. Kalin also criticized Western and Russian statements for exacerbating tensions and recommended a flexible diplomatic approach—citing Turkey’s existing relations with Russia despite disagreements about Crimea and Libya. Kalin reiterated Turkey’s commitment to mediate between Russia and Ukraine both through NATO channels and bilaterally.

Turkish officials met with NATO leaders between February 18-23. Turkish General Staff Chief Yasar Guler and Hungarian General Staff Chief General Romulusz Ruszin-Szendi discussed current developments on February 23.³² Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar also attended the Munich Security Conference in Munich, Germany on February 18-19.³³ Akar prioritized meetings with Iraqi Kurdish leaders but also met with his German counterpart, Christine Lambrecht, to discuss “regional developments” on February 19. Akar later urged caution against possible escalations due to disinformation campaigns and underlined the need for stability in the Black Sea region. Separately, Turkish Chief of the General Staff Yasar Guler and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Tod Wolters discussed recent developments in NATO over the phone on February 20. Turkish readouts did not refer to Ukraine during these meetings.



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