

# Drones and Resets

## The New Era of Turkish Foreign Policy

*Soner Cagaptay and Rich Outzen*

**T**urkish foreign policy under Recep Tayyip Erdogan has gone through a number of turns since 2003, characterized by the country's leader continuously taking stock of domestic and global dynamics whilst navigating between the U.S. and Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. He came to power in Ankara 19 years ago after rising through Türkiye's political Islamist movement, serving first as prime minister and since 2014 as president.

Erdogan's foreign policy approach over two decades can be divided into a number of periods: an initial era of aspirational multilateralism with a strong pro-EU tilt, until roughly 2009; an

ambitious period of regional assertion marked by failed support for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab uprisings, until around 2015; an increasingly unilateral, hard-power driven period through 2020; and what appears to be a new era blending hard power—enabled and symbolized by Turkish drones—and a Ukraine war, in which Türkiye is, simultaneously, selling drones to Kyiv and courting Washington while implementing the 1936 Montreux Treaty to limit its frenemy Moscow's access to the Black Sea. Together with recent steps aimed at rapprochement with Israel and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), these last factors

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encapsulate the new era of Turkish foreign policy—albeit one overshadowed at the moment by Ankara's unwillingness to unconditionally approve Swedish and Finnish accession to NATO.

### *Making Friends to Sideline Enemies*

**A**s Türkiye's new prime minister in 2003, Erdogan felt threatened by the Kemalist military that viewed his political Islamist pedigree as contrary to Ataturk's legacy and the country's secularist constitution. Accordingly, as he prepared for an impending showdown with the generals, Erdogan adopted an internationalist approach in order to cultivate as many domestic and international allies as possible against the generals. To this end, he built strong ties with Washington (after a botched initial response the 2003 Iraq War), embraced Ankara's EU accession path, supported negotiations to unify Cyprus, and even attempted to normalize ties with Armenia.

Although the latter two efforts failed for a complex set of reasons, and whereas Türkiye's EU accession would stall in the next decade, the initial promise of

EU membership helped attract record amounts of Foreign Direct Investment to Türkiye, driving robust economic growth.

**C**oupling economic growth with improved access to public services, Erdogan built a powerful domestic coalition bringing together a conservative, religious political base with liberals, a new middle class, ethnic Kurds, Anatolian business elites, and Fethullah Gulen's movement. That movement—which consists of a network of religious, business, and social organizations—is widely believed among Turks and Türkiye scholars to have accumulated illicit influence within Türkiye's military, police, and civilian bureaucracy as a “parallel state.” This coalition helped Erdogan sideline the generals and their secularist allies. Erdogan's ascendancy was cemented by the 2008-2011 Ergenekon trials, in which one quarter of Türkiye's generals were arrested on conspiracy and attempted coup charges conceived and facilitated by Gulen supporters with the sort of evidence that would not have stood up to scrutiny in most Western judicial systems. In 2011, the military's remaining top brass resigned *en masse*, leaving senior ranks open for the rapid rise of officers

less resistant to Erdogan—many of whom were associated with Gulen’s movement.

With the secular generals out of his way and with Ankara’s EU accession talks coming to a halt, Erdogan launched the second era of his foreign policy, pivoting Türkiye away from Europe and to the Middle East under the slogan of “zero problems with neighbors” launched by his erstwhile protégé Ahmet Davutoglu, who at the time served as the country’s foreign minister and was largely responsible for instituting a foreign policy of “strategic depth.” His goal was to make Türkiye a first-rank power through leadership of Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, and the Arab uprisings appeared to provide an opportunity to do so. Erdogan supported Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups across the Middle East, hoping this would help Türkiye-friendly governments in place in Arab capitals from Cairo to Damascus.

### *An Unraveling*

Developments soon disappointed Erdogan, and “zero problems with neighbors” evolved into what some called a posture of “precious loneliness”—an expression coined by Erdogan’s long-standing adviser Ibrahim Kalin in July 2013. Assad took back much of his country from the Turkish-supported opposition, and with that the Turkish leader’s hopes of a friendly government in Damascus. Libya descended into civil war following Qadhafi’s ouster. The Brotherhood was ousted from power in Egypt in July 2013 almost as fast as it had climbed to the top of government. Erdogan’s support for the Brotherhood subsequently put him at odds with Egypt’s new ruler General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and his regional backers, including most of the GCC countries (minus Qatar) and Israel.

Other elements of Ankara’s regional policy unraveled, too. Competition for influence in Iraq

and Syria drove increasingly tense relations with Iran. Peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) failed in July 2015, and a ceasefire in southeast Türkiye ended with brutal violence and urban insurrection instigated by the PKK’s misbegotten “trench warfare” urban campaign. This coincided with U.S. President Barack Obama selecting—with plans in Washington to ally with Türkiye and Turkish-backed forces in Syria to fight Islamic State seemingly going nowhere—the PKK-affiliated Peoples Protection Forces (YPG) as Washington’s main ally in Syria to fight the Islamic State, greatly enhancing the capabilities and prestige of an armed movement that targets Türkiye as its main enemy and has conducted terror attacks in Türkiye for decades. U.S.-Turkish ties took a nosedive soon after.

Meanwhile, Ankara’s ties with Israel frayed further following the 2010 Flotilla Incident, as Erdogan condemned Israel harshly in the wake of failed two-state negotiations and

military escalations in Gaza following the flotilla tragedy. Cementing a sense of regional isolation and threat was a failed coup attempt against Erdogan in July 2016, widely seen by many in Ankara and the analytical community in Washington as the handiwork of the Gulen network.

The 2016 coup attempt throttled whatever idealism remained in Erdogan’s regional outlook. It also presented an opening for the world’s leading

hard-power unilateralist, Russian president Vladimir Putin, to pull Erdogan and Türkiye into an intriguing *modus vivendi*. Putin reached out to Erdogan immediately during the coup, inviting him to Russia for consultations. Despite historically fraught Turkish-Russian ties, a personal bond emerged the two leaders—with Erdogan valuing Putin as the protector of threatened leaders globally and with Putin seeing Erdogan as a valuable ally to dilute NATO unity. A working arrangement of managed competition subsequently emerged, under

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which each country exercised hard power where they saw need and deconflicted with the other as much as possible, while at the same time deepening economic and diplomatic coordination.

### “Drone Package” Hard Power

The Astana process for Syria was a product of this arrangement, as were joint patrols in Syria and de-escalation arrangements in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus. So too were Turkish counter-YPG operations in Syria, tolerated by Putin as long as Assad was not the target. Türkiye and Russia largely lost faith in Western-mediated or UN-led conflict resolution mechanisms during this period, and found one another more honest, if no more trustworthy, than other interested parties. Another product of the arrangement was Erdogan’s summer 2019 purchase of Russian S400 air defense systems, resulting in Türkiye’s expulsion from the U.S. F35 fighter jet program and a further deterioration in U.S.-Turkish relations. Erdogan and Putin pursued a number of economic initiatives, while each used the other as a hedge against diplomatic pressure from the West.

Erdogan avoided antagonizing Putin during a period of relative Turkish weakness: an empowered YPG, tensions with the U.S., Europe, and Israel, reeling anti-Assad opposition, Russian military re-assertion in the Middle East and Ukraine, and domestic turmoil marked by PKK- and ISIS-led terror attacks.

Yet, the Turkish military, which is the second largest in NATO, began a stunning comeback after the 2016 coup attempt, carrying out the first of many military operations in Syria to go after the YPG only six weeks after the failed putsch. Subsequently, Türkiye laid the groundwork during this period for a sophisticated power-projection capability of its own. This was based on an expanded diplomatic network; burgeoning foreign trade; overseas military deployments, basing, and training agreements; a professionalizing military; an increasingly capable defense industrial sector; and a military-technological innovation that upended the military balance in multiple conflicts and regions in Ankara’s favor: drones.

Türkiye’s drone program was born of frustration, in a sense. Having purchased from Israel drones with limited capability, Türkiye was rebuffed in efforts to

purchase more advanced American drones. The U.S. offered to share drone video, for instance pointing at the PKK, but without targeting data and with a time delay. Türkiye then tried the Israeli Heron, with similarly disappointing results.

Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI), a government-owned enterprise, developed a domestic prototype, the ANKA, which struggled to achieve operational capability in 2010-2012, but provided adequate reconnaissance capabilities by 2016. A domestic breakthrough came from the privately-owned Baykar firm, whose scion Selcuk Bayraktar, one of Erdogan’s sons-in-law, designed and demonstrated a small drone in 2005, won a contract for 19 mini-drones the following year, and a mass production contract for the TB2 model in 2012, finally achieving precision strike capability with the latter by 2015. The Turkish military was employing dozens of TB2s and ANKAs between 2015 and 2017, and began exporting them in droves by early 2017.

By 2020, those drones enabled Türkiye to outmaneuver Russia and other powers as a shaper of events on the ground in multiple regional conflicts, such as in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus. Not just drones, of course—to be precise, Türkiye exported an innovative military operational approach centered on drones, including precision munitions fired from manned air and ground platforms, networked software and sensors, electronic warfare systems, professionalized commando and mechanized units, training, doctrine, and field experience.

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This approach enabled Türkiye by 2020 to significantly decrease PKK operations on Turkish territory and to inflict increasing casualties against PKK fighters and leadership in Iraq and Syria. The drone-based strategy also enabled effective counter-YPG operations in Syria, in both Afrin (2018) and the northeast (2019). In 2020 it helped halt Assad’s assault on Idlib province (February) and Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar’s

offensive against Tripoli (May-June). With Turkish assistance, Azerbaijani forces employed the same suite of equipment and tactics in the successful Second Karabakh War to regain territories lost to Armenia decades prior (November). Most recently, Turkish-made drones have been cited by Ukrainian leaders as a critical tool against the ongoing Russian invasion, memorialized even in a patriotic song called “Bayraktar” that was shared on the Ukrainian army’s official Facebook page in early March 2022.

### *Flying Everywhere*

Naturally, Turkish drones have their limitations. To begin with, they depend upon the cooperative access and training agreements and integrated technical arrays referenced above. As stand-alone systems, current Turkish drones—the pioneering ANKA, the flagship TB2, and the “kamikaze drone” Kargu—are of middling quality compared to both U.S. drones and the drones produced in countries like China, Russia, and Iran.

Turkish drones embody today’s Türkiye, a middle-income economy that often falls in the middle of global indicators: they are not super high-tech, but they are affordable, which means they are available to middle-power and other aspirant nations. Indeed, the TB2 is “utilitarian and reliable—qualities reminiscent of the Soviet Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle that changed warfare in the twentieth century. A set of six Bayraktar TB2 drones, ground units, and other essential operations equipment costs tens of millions of dollars, rather than hundreds of millions for the [U.S.-made] MQ-9,” as a June 2021 *Wall Street Journal* article put it.

The features that made the Bayraktar indispensable to the Turkish government’s own security priorities soon proved equally useful to numerous small and middle powers abroad. For a relatively modest investment, a country could obtain lethal military technology that could change the dynamics of a conflict or provide an effective deterrent against insurgents or other forces. In 2017,

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Türkiye began exporting the TB2, and within five years it had sold drones to nearly two dozen countries, including allies and partners in Europe (Albania, Poland, and Ukraine); Central and South Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan); Africa (Ethiopia, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, and Tunisia); the Gulf and the Levant (Qatar, Iraq); and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, considered by Ankara to be its closest ally). Although these arms deals have been driven by a combination of mercantilism and geopolitics, they have almost always involved countries in which Türkiye has a strategic interest.

Turkish drones—or more precisely, the network warfare approach integrating precision fires, real-time intelligence, electronic warfare, rapid targeting, and ground maneuver forces enabled by drones—had a particularly striking impact in supporting Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War. Armenian forces, supported by Russia and entrenched in

mountainous terrain, had seized, ethnically-cleansed, and consolidated control over seven Azerbaijani districts abutting the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), as well as that territory itself, creating a decades-long refugee crisis and national *casus belli* for Baku.

Without a new operational concept enabling precision attack in depth and offsetting the occupation force’s airpower to enable offensive ma-

neuver, there was no hope of ending this occupation—and the international community seemed content to let any resolution play out over decades. Yet the drones—Israeli as well as Turkish—and a Turkish-inspired operational concept enabled Azerbaijan’s forces to rout the occupying force and catalyze a new round of negotiations in late 2020. That Azerbaijan risked Russian retaliation in commencing its operation in Karabakh speaks volumes about the high level of trust between Ankara and Baku, rooted not only in military cooperation but a shared sense of trust and cultural identity.

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Not all the countries that have purchased Turkish drones have enjoyed a similar depth of relationship and commitment, or incorporated the whole technical and tactical package. Some have acquired only small numbers of the systems. Examples include Tunisia, Morocco, Ethiopia, and Somalia. These nations may not gain decisive results against a well-trained or numerically superior enemy, and sometimes they misstep. For instance, earlier this year Ethiopia came under the spotlight for causing civilian casualties with its Turkish-built drones, although the drones were credited with ending an offensive by Tigrayan rebels.

As for the newer, more capable drones coming into service currently—maritime-use TB3, TUSAS Aksungur, and ULAQ, the heavily-armed Akinci, and new unmanned ground systems—these will require extensive training, testing, and operational integration before their effectiveness can be judged. As is the case with most breakthroughs in military practice based on effective operational integration of new technologies, competitors eventually catch up. For now, though, the Turkish approach has produced an advantage for the Turks and their allies.

Another limitation of “drone diplomacy” is that its very success invites counter-alignment. As noted above, since 2017 Turkish producers have sold drones to nearly two dozen customers across a broad geographical area. The image of a drone-empowered revisionist Türkiye upsetting regional balances has incentivized rivals—namely Greece, Egypt, the UAE, Cyprus, and France—to form an informal alliance to push back on Türkiye around the East Mediterranean. Ankara has noted with concern that the U.S. was ramping up military aid to Greece as a hedge against Russia but also, to a degree, against Türkiye. Ankara also faced the reality that given a perceived American inclination for retrenchment in the Middle East, Russia and Iran were likely to seek to expand their own influence; Türkiye’s drones cannot replace cooperative relations with regional allies to constrain such expansion.

Drone diplomacy conferred an operational advantage to Türkiye and its customers but left Ankara facing a nascent anti-Turkish bloc around it. The bloc may not pose much of a military threat to Türkiye, though it removes a number of potential investors and trade partners at a time that Ankara badly needs exports to

fuel economic recovery. This set the stage for another evolution in Erdogan’s foreign policy: from drone-centric hard power to a more balanced multilateral approach.

Nevertheless, after years of go-it-alone unilateralism—which brought Türkiye a growing number of regional adversaries and frayed its alliances with the United States and Europe—the Turkish government has been able to leverage its Bayraktars and other drones to transform its international profile. In the Middle East, the drones have helped Türkiye assert its own interests with relatively limited diplomatic resources. With Ukraine, Ankara’s military assistance has given Erdogan renewed clout in NATO at a time when his government is in a perilous economic position at home and his relations with the United States and Europe have been in crisis for several years. If Türkiye can continue to successfully manage and build upon its drone program, it may have given itself a crucial new form of influence—and redefined drone warfare in the process.

### *Bayraktars in Ukraine*

Türkiye’s drone diplomacy has perhaps proved to be most important, and potentially riskiest, in Ukraine. Kyiv began purchasing TB2s in 2019 and first used them against Russian-backed Donbass separatists in 2021. But with the onset of the war on 24 February 2022, these weapons took on a more fraught status: for the first time, they have been deployed directly against Russia’s own forces. In the first four months of the war or so, there have been more than 75 confirmed successful strikes by TB2s on Russian tanks, artillery pieces, vehicles, and even supply trains—and unreported incidents are likely significantly higher. For Türkiye’s relations with the West, the unexpected role that the Bayraktars have played in strengthening Kyiv’s hand against Moscow has had important consequences. It has elevated Ankara’s standing inside NATO to a level not witnessed in years, and a thaw is now underway with some key European governments, including France.

But Ukraine’s drone war has also raised complicated new questions

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for Türkiye's efforts to maintain working relations with Moscow. Türkiye must deal with Russia in numerous areas, from the Black Sea to Syria to Azerbaijan. On the strategic side, Ankara will do everything it can to ensure that Kyiv does not fall under Moscow's thumb. This is because Putin's "special military operation" against Ukraine has instilled a sense of realism in Ankara when it comes to Russia, Türkiye's historic nemesis. Now more than ever, Ankara values Ukraine and other Black Sea countries as indispensable allies with which to build a bloc balancing against the Russian behemoth north of the Black Sea.

However, at the same time, Erdogan wants to maintain economic ties—including the lucrative tourism sector—with Russia. Tourist arrivals from Russia in 2022 and continuing trade with Moscow are essential to Erdogan's plans to open up the Turkish economy with strong growth this year in order to win the presidential election scheduled for June 2023.

### *Moving Beyond Drone Diplomacy*

There is abundant evidence that Türkiye is energetically pursuing a more conciliatory path in general as Erdogan prepares

for his re-election campaign. His outreach to various states whose relationships with Türkiye had seen better days—in order to attract investment, jumpstart the country's economy, and re-build his base—has already born solid results.

Three examples can illustrate a wider point. First, UAE Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed (MbZ) visited Ankara in November 2021, signing a series of trade and investment agreements. Erdogan returned the visit in February 2022, securing a much-needed swap line between the fledgling Turkish and cash-laden Emirati central banks, as well as an agreement to expand bilateral trade. Second, Israeli President Herzog's travel to Ankara in March 2022 opened a new chapter in a venerable, but recently troubled, relationship, and was followed by Foreign Minister Yair Lapid's visit in mid-June 2022 as well as high-profile coordination against terror threats targeting Israelis in Istanbul. Third, Erdogan visited Saudi Arabia in April 2022, while a return visit by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman took place in mid-June 2022 that yielded initiatives to strengthen security and economic cooperation.

These moves aimed at creating new opportunities for trade and energy cooperation, softening

or dissolving the anti-Türkiye bloc, and improving ties with Washington.

This does not represent a turn away from hard power per se. Nor does it imply a renunciation of Turkish interest in Africa, the Gulf and the Levant, the Black Sea, or the Mediterranean. Erdogan is seeking to consolidate perceived gains of the past several years while simultaneously building down economic and strategic risks incurred during the hard-power turn. This requires a new synthesis of the unilateralism and hard power approach of the past several years with a more balanced and cooperative regional approach. Accordingly, Türkiye's partners in reconciliation will likely be wary yet open to sincere overtures.

Western perceptions that Türkiye is not a good team player will not fade overnight, of course, built as they are on more than a decade of friction over Syria, Iraq, and the East Mediterranean, as well as disapprobation of Turkish domestic political trends. Ankara's

determination to require stronger steps against PKK-linked activity by Swedish and Finnish authorities—and the lifting of an arms embargo imposed in 2019—have generated new accusations in U.S. and Western media that Türkiye's commitment to collective security is insincere, subordinate to a Kurdish preoccupation, or that Erdogan crassly instrumentalizes foreign policy to boost his nativist base at home. Yet NATO's leadership—and a significant number of Western leaders—acknowledge that Ankara's PKK-related concerns (especially regarding Sweden's NATO accession process) are legitimate and must be addressed. A deal may not emerge immediately, but remains plausible and likely over the long term.

Will Erdogan's new approach succeed? It is already bearing some fruit, in terms of economic deals and high-level visits. The real payoff will not be known until the 2023 elections, though; Erdogan seeks above all else to secure re-election by improving Türkiye's economic and security conditions leading up to the vote.

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## Balancing Russia

There are several possible risks or spoilers. One clear risk is Vladimir Putin. His decisive victory in Ukraine would weaken Türkiye's position vis-à-vis Russia in regional conflicts. At the same time, increased Turkish support to Ukraine might incur Putin's wrath. Despite the risks, Ankara views Kyiv as a key ally to build a balancing block against Russia's hegemonic power around the Black Sea and will, therefore, support Kyiv militarily, including by selling further drones under the radar, to ensure that Ukraine does not again fall under Moscow's influence.

In retaliation, Putin can undermine Ankara's interests in Syria, for instance by increasing support to the PKK's Syrian branch or triggering massive refugee flows towards Türkiye from Idlib. Anti-refugee sentiments in Türkiye have become potent recently, mainly due to its domestic economic crisis; Erdogan would not be able to counter the political trends triggered by a sudden and overwhelming increase in Türkiye's refugee population. Putin can use economic levers (i.e., implementing trade and tourism

sanctions) to undermine Türkiye's economic rebound, and, with that, Erdogan's re-election prospects in 2023.

Therefore, Ankara has publicly downplayed its role in arming Ukraine, asserting that it is not the

Turkish government but a private company that is supplying the Bayraktars. Even as it supplies drones to Kyiv, it has also sought to position itself as mediator, including hosting a meeting in Antalya, a city on the Turkish riviera, with the for-

eign ministers of Ukraine and Russia on 10 March 2022. Ankara has sought a deal with Kyiv and Moscow to allow export by sea of Ukrainian grain presently stuck due to mines and military operations, which would benefit world markets (and grant Türkiye a 25 percent discount price, according to the Turkish Minister of Agriculture and Forestry).

Türkiye fears a Russian defeat only slightly less than it fears a Russian victory, in part because Russia is a useful trade partner and in part because the Turks and Russians have working—if adversarial—understandings in the

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South Caucasus, Libya, and Syria that might be jeopardized by a Russian defeat. If Putin has a list of countries he will punish for supporting Ukraine after the war comes to an end, Türkiye may very well be close to the top—although obviously below the Baltic states and Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Erdogan's primary tactical goal remains avoiding a showdown with Putin, who could use economic leverage or even cyber-attacks to derail the Turkish president's reelection prospects.

At the same time, Turkish effectual neutrality regarding Ukraine may put Türkiye on the wrong side of a reinvigorated anti-Russia consensus within NATO, with global sentiment pushing to isolate Moscow, while damping the hopes of a rapprochement with U.S. president Joe Biden—a move that is a key building block of the new era of Erdogan's foreign policy. As a resource-poor country, Türkiye needs global financial inflows to grow. The Turkish president wants to build a narrative of good ties with Washington to trigger investments and subsequently present a strong economic comeback to the voters.

Another risk for Erdogan is getting caught between Biden and Putin. Erdogan wants to lure sanctioned Russian oligarchs

to Türkiye, hoping that their assets and cash could help boost Türkiye's struggling economy. Türkiye could also become a real estate market for Russia's upper-middle class eager to safeguard its wealth.

Erdogan's strategy in Ukraine, therefore, is to provide quiet military support to Kyiv even as he seeks to sustain diplomatic channels to Putin and economic profits from Russia. To that end, Erdogan has refused to support the West's sanctions and export restrictions against Russia, and Türkiye continues to buy Russian hydrocarbons. And unlike its Western counterparts, Türkiye has kept its airspace open to Russian civilian flights.

This Janus-faced strategy might just be acceptable enough for Putin—for the moment, at least. It is unlikely that the Russian leader will pick a fight with Türkiye right now, especially if Erdogan continues to provide him and his oligarchs with a much-needed economic lifeline. But if the war in Ukraine is prolonged, and the TB2s help bring down more major Russian military assets like the *Moskva*, the Turkish ban against Russian naval vessels crossing the Turkish Straits could put Ankara and Moscow into more direct conflict.

A third risk is military escalation. In the South Caucasus, Putin may stir conflict to prevent the successful completion of ongoing Turkish-Armenian normalization talks, complicating things for Ankara, its ally Azerbaijan, and Erdogan personally, who benefits from this global strong man image domestically.

In order to block Putin's potential next steps preemptively, Ankara has recently started to pursue normalization of ties with Yerevan. The lingering effects of the conflict over Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan allows Russia to be militarily present in the South Caucasus—both in the form of troops deployed to bases in Armenia since the end of the Cold War, and, since the end of the Second Karabakh War, as peacekeepers in a part of the former NKAO. The full normalization Turkish-Armenian-Azerbaijani ties would constitute a dramatic geopolitical development in the South Caucasus. This development would, in turn, reduce Russia's overall military presence in the South Caucasus (although it troops would remain in secessionist parts of Georgia and, according to bilateral treaties that are valid until 2044, both in bases in Armenia and on that country's borders with Iran and Türkiye) and,

in turn, its overall influence—an influence that goes back at least to the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) between the Russian and Persian empires, which allowed the former to gain a permanent foothold in the region.

Accordingly, Putin does not appear to favor the full normalization of relations between Türkiye, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. However, with the Russian military occupied in Ukraine and Putin distracted by multiple challenges in that theater from NATO, the timing might now be just right for Ankara to pursue such a course with Yerevan. Baku seems to be in favor of such a development, so long as it is synchronous with the process of Baku-Yerevan normalization—a condition that Erdogan surely understands and accepts, given his close relationship with Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev. Yerevan has been hesitant to fully pursue normalization from a combination of domestic political and regional motivations, but Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has clear incentives to move in this direction. Overall, Erdogan is aware that full normalization of ties between Türkiye and Armenia would eliminate the risk of a Russian-led escalation in the South Caucasus, while improving both Ankara's standing in the U.S. Congress and helping his charm offensive with Biden.

In addition to the South Caucasus, Putin could trigger renewed fighting in Libya, once again complicating things for Türkiye and Erdogan. Finally, there is the risk that Washington—and others in Europe—may be so anxious to be rid of Erdogan that they delay any substantive reconciliation to avoid strengthening him at the ballot box.

### *Political Survival*

Türkiye's, and Erdogan's, stock seems to have risen as a result of support provided to Ukraine. This is certainly true in Kyiv, and in several NATO member state capitals. Erdogan has demonstrated remarkable political survival skills in his previous foreign policy eras,

and may have done so again here. The war in Ukraine, and the degree of traction achieved in follow-up to the new multilateralism, will likely be determinative in how well, and how long, this approach delivers.

What also needs to be stressed is that the onset of Türkiye's heightened standing is traceable to its successes in developing and then exporting an innovative military operational approach centered on drones. Regardless of what happens in the 2023 presidential election, this could represent a source of continuity well into the decade. The concentric circles of Turkish neighbors and neighbors' neighbors—not to mention frenemies and allies—will likely bear this in mind in their respective calculations going forward. **BD**

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