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# Bridging the Gap: Turkey Between East and West

Anna Borshchevskaya  
Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow,  
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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Chairman [Self](#), Ranking Member [Keating](#), honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. President Vladimir Putin made Russia's war in Ukraine about the United States and the West more broadly. How the war in Ukraine ends will have far-reaching implications for America's credibility, security, and economy. It will also affect American allies and partners across the world. A Russian victory may lead to a bigger confrontation with NATO and its partners. In this context, the United States has an interest in focusing on a constructive, pragmatic relationship with Turkey.

My testimony will cover three key issues. First, Turkey now has the potential to emerge as the primary naval power in the Black Sea. Second, the Russia-Turkey relationship is no longer decisively tilted in Russia's favor, though Russia still retains some advantages. Third, Turkey has maintained a pragmatic balancing act between Ukraine, Russia, and NATO since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It would be in our interest to likewise be as pragmatic. Washington has an opportunity to use Turkey's new position to its advantage in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, especially as the United States shifts its strategic investments toward the Indo-Pacific.

## **Russia and Turkey: What Changed and What Stayed the Same**

**Energy, trade, and defense.** For years, the Russia-Turkey relationship was skewed in Russia's favor, as Putin sought to deepen Ankara's strategic reliance on Moscow. Putin worked to exacerbate divisions between Turkey and the West overall, and within NATO in particular. He was successful. Turkey grew dependent on Russia's oil, natural gas, nuclear technologies, trade, and tourism. Turkey also became vulnerable to Russian disinformation operations, primarily through Moscow's state-owned media organization Sputnik. This dynamic remains the same today. Moreover, Turkey's exports to Russia during Putin's tenure have been a fraction of its imports, putting the bilateral trade relationship in Russia's favor.

In addition, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's purchase of Russian S-400 air defense systems in late

2019 remains an area of tension with Washington and NATO. In response, the United States sanctioned Turkey under CAATSA Section 231 and prohibited it from purchasing F-35 joint strike fighters. Turkey also lost its coproduction work in the program.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the TurkStream pipeline carrying Russian gas to southern Europe since January 2020 strengthened the bond between Ankara and Moscow. This is no accident, as Putin long envisioned making Turkey a Russian gas hub; in late 2022, he proposed creating a gas base in Turkey as a way of redirecting supplies from the damaged Nord Stream pipeline to the European market. Developing this role for Turkey also allowed Putin to bypass Ukraine, thus replacing it as a transit hub. In August, Turkey announced plans to expand gas export as part of a new “Turkish Blend” project mixing gas from various sources, which would export between 7-8 billion cubic meters of gas through Bulgaria to Central Europe. Russia’s state-owned giant Gazprom reportedly has a 40 percent share in the mix, though the real amount is likely higher. Furthermore, the construction of Turkey’s nuclear *plant* at Akkuyu is based on four units of Russian-designed VVER-1200 reactors. Rosatom, Russia’s state-owned nuclear energy company, is both financing and building it.

**Upper hand in Syria and the South Caucasus.** Yet something significant has changed. The dramatic opposition victory in the Syrian civil war means that Moscow can no longer use Syria as a pressure point against Turkey. In fact, Turkey has gained the upper hand.

Kurdish nationalism has been a perpetual concern of the Turkish state. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been engaged in an insurgency against Turkey since 1984, initially seeking an independent Kurdish state and later advocating for autonomy within Turkey. The United States and EU, as well as Turkey, consider the PKK a terrorist group.

Moscow’s deep ties to the Kurds go back over two centuries. Russian and Soviet leaders have used them against Turkish leaders to exercise influence. Indeed, the Kremlin supported the PKK’s creation during the Cold War with that goal in mind. Turkey’s fear of Kurdish nationalism was behind its interventions in Syria in recent years, while Russia’s military presence in Syria created another point of leverage over Erdogan, both to keep Bashar al-Assad in power and to convince Ankara to change its posture against him.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Turkey became vulnerable to refugee flows from Syria, which Russia also used as leverage throughout the civil war. Previously, Erdogan had maintained that Assad must go, but after Russia intervened and became the dominant power on Syrian soil, he no longer issued such demands. But now Turkey has outmaneuvered Moscow in Syria.

Russia is also losing a substantial degree of military control in the South Caucasus, where it has historically competed with Turkey (and Iran). This creates openings for Ankara as well. Russia’s failure to come to the aid of Armenia, its treaty ally, has pushed the country closer to the West in the past few years, and closer to a peace treaty with Azerbaijan. Moscow does not want peace and stability in this region. At the same time, it is gaining influence in Georgia, a Black Sea power, by exerting greater political control and potentially gaining military control there. The South Caucasus as a whole is crucial at this juncture. Given the region’s shifting power balance, Washington has a unique window of opportunity. Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan would be in the interest of both the United States and Turkey, and would significantly curtail Russian influence.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, “The Kurdish Role in Russia’s Middle East Power Play,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kurdish-role-russias-middle-east-power-play>

## A Balancing Act Between Russia and Ukraine

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Erdogan has played a pragmatic balancing act between Moscow and Kyiv to boost his domestic and foreign political standing and improve Turkey's influence in regions such as the South Caucasus and the Black Sea. As my colleague Soner Cagaptay has noted, Erdogan's position has been pro-Ukraine but not anti-Russia.<sup>2</sup>

At the start of Russia's invasion, Erdogan condemned the move as "unacceptable" but also emphasized that Turkey will not abandon ties with Russia or Ukraine. Describing the American and Western stance as "indecisive," he emphasized that Turkey will not compromise its commitments to alliances, including NATO, nor its commitment to its own national interests.<sup>3</sup> He also stated on a number of occasions that Ukraine deserves to be in NATO.

Turkey did not join Western sanctions on Russia but sold armed drones to Ukraine as part of bilateral coordination with Ukraine that began in 2019, prior to Russia's invasion. Turkey played a key role in negotiating the Black Sea Grain Deal (which collapsed in July 2023 when Russia pulled out) and mediated or facilitated several prisoner exchanges. These included a release of over 200 Ukrainian prisoners in September 2022, a deal Turkey brokered jointly with Saudi Arabia. Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MIT) also helped coordinate an August 2024 prisoner exchange between the United States and Russia—the largest such exchange since the Cold War.

Turkey (along with the UAE) emerged as a top destination for Russian oligarchs, including those sanctioned in the West. In March 2022, shortly after Russia's invasion, the number of Russian-owned businessmen quadrupled over the previous year. These businesses planned to take advantage of Turkey's "golden passport" law, which allows foreigners to obtain Turkish citizenship within 3-4 months by investing at least \$250,000 in real estate or \$500,000 in government bonds, companies, investment funds, or local bank accounts.

Turkey also expanded a number of flights between Russia and Turkey, helping facilitate the flow of Russian tourists to further boost Turkey's economy. In 2023 and 2024, Turkey was ranked as the top destination for Russia's tourists.<sup>4</sup> The increased flights also offset Russia's isolation by Western closures of airspace and sanctions on Russian airlines and companies. Turkey has correspondingly emerged as a key connectivity link for Russia on the international flights market.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, in July 2024, Erdogan reaffirmed his commitment to increase bilateral trade between Russia and Turkey from \$55 billion to \$100 billion.

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<sup>2</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy," March 7, 2023, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unpacking-turkeys-non-binary-ukraine-war-policy>

<sup>3</sup> "Erdogan says Turkey cannot abandon ties with Russia or Ukraine," Reuters, March 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/erdogan-says-turkey-cannot-abandon-ties-with-russia-or-ukraine-2022-02-28/>

<sup>4</sup> "Top travel destinations Russian tourists visited 2023," February 14, 2024, Russian Travel Digest, <https://russtd.com/top-travel-destinations-russian-tourists-visited-2023.html>

"Outbound tourism from Russia up one-fourth in 2024," Interfax, February 6, 2025, [https://www.interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/109646/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/109646/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey became key for those who need to fly between Russia and America or the rest of Europe," Aviacionline, March 6, 2022, <https://www.aviacionline.com/turkey-became-key-for-those-who-need-to-fly-between-russia-and-america-or-the-rest-of-europe>

"Russia, Turkey agree to increase flights for Russian tourists," TASS, April 28, 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1611361>

## Black Sea, NATO, and Strategic Autonomy

In effect, the result of Turkey's balancing act between Russia and Ukraine appears to be a continuation of Ankara's policy of strategic autonomy in terms of its foreign policy overall, and within NATO in particular.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this approach, Turkey extracted benefits from the West for its support of Ukraine. Turkey's actions also highlighted the desire to keep both the West and Russia out of the strategically vital Black Sea region.

Soon after Russia's invasion, Turkey closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits to Russian military vessels, the first such closure since World War II. Turkey invoked Article 19 of the Montreux Convention for the closure, but also went further and asked "non-riparian" states (which implied NATO non-riparian states), to abstain from requesting permission to enter the Black Sea, a decision that appeared at the time to favor Russia. It was a decision that highlighted Turkey's longstanding desire to keep the West out of the Black Sea region, an interest Turkey shares with Russia. Indeed, this interest for Turkey is longstanding. Still, in hindsight, as Turkey analysts had pointed out, the Straits closure limited Russia's ability to reinforce its Black Sea fleet,<sup>7</sup> which was consistent with Turkey's pragmatic balancing act between Ukraine, the West, and Russia while still leaning closer to the West. Indeed, as the war progressed, Turkey consistently supported NATO's defense efforts in the Black Sea, for example, by contributing F-16 fighter jets to a NATO policing mission in Romania and sending forces to a NATO battlegroup in Bulgaria, established shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, throughout the course of the war, Ukraine has been remarkably successful in its attacks on Russian naval forces in the Black Sea, putting Moscow on the defensive there. Russia has lost approximately forty percent of its naval tonnage according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.<sup>8</sup> Ukraine's success is largely due to uncrewed surface vessels (USV), as well as other military tools. Kyiv has thus managed to push Russia's Black Sea Fleet back to Novorossiysk.

The fact of the matter is, NATO remains one of very few venues where Turkey can exert pressure on the West. Putin for his part preferred that Turkey remained in NATO precisely for this reason. Russia's war in Ukraine gave Erdogan an opportunity to draw greater Western attention to Turkey's security concerns. Thus, the United States appeared to have rewarded Turkish approval of Sweden's NATO membership bid with a promise of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey, an important concession to Ankara that showed Erdogan's transactional approach with the West. In December of last year, Turkey announced that it was scaling back the F-16 fighter jet package, but reports also suggest that Turkey is looking to acquire 40 Eurofighter Typhoon fighters.

## Policy Recommendations

**Check Russia's ability to return to the Eastern Mediterranean.** Russia will inevitably seek to return to the Eastern Mediterranean. It is a historic Russian state aspiration that transcends not only Putin's 2015 Syria intervention but also the Cold War. After the partial withdrawal from Syria, Russia moved a number of assets to Libya, while Sudan announced "no obstacles" to a Russian base on the Red Sea

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<sup>6</sup> Sinan Ulgen, Sophia Besch, and Ilke Toygur, "Strategic Autonomy as a Dynamic of Convergence in Turkiye-EU Relations," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 22, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/strategic-autonomy-as-a-dynamic-of-convergence-in-turkiye-eu-relations?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> Alan Makovsky, "Turkey and the Ukraine War: Ankara Charts its Own Course," *The Turkey Analyst*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/687-turkey-and-the-ukraine-war-ankara-charts-its-own-course.html>

<sup>8</sup> "Maritime Domain Lessons from Russia-Ukraine," *Conflict in Focus*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, transcript, February 27, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/maritime-domain-lessons-russia-ukraine-conflict-focus>

coast.<sup>9</sup> At present, Russia is only halfway out of Syria; it retains leverage there as it looks to build relations with the new caretaker government in Damascus. The United States should look for linkages between European and Middle Eastern theaters, and in Syria, in particular, the United States should see how it can work constructively with Turkey to block Russia's influence. This could include tackling Russia's so-called "ghost fleet" of illicit oil tankers by cracking down on the fleet's legal violations and ecological threats, especially given the massive oil spill in the Sea of Azov in December 2024.

**Take advantage of Turkey's growing primacy in the Black Sea.** Restoration of security in the Black Sea region is a goal Turkey and the West share, even if Turkey, like Russia, does not want to see the West in this region. Over the long term, the United States should use the end of the war in Ukraine to limit Russia's presence, if not expel it altogether, from the Black Sea. Russia was expelled from this region before by the 1856 Treaty of Paris, which effectively "neutralized" Russia in the Black Sea, limiting Russia's military presence to a small fleet of ten small ships. It is in the U.S. interest to remove the threat of Russia from NATO's underbelly; neutralizing Russia in the Black Sea could also help to blunt Russia's presence in the Levant, which is important given Russia's strategic partnership with Iran. Neutralizing Russia in the Black Sea would be to America's overall strategic advantage, and to that end, the United States can seek shared interests with Turkey.

**Support Turkey's normalization with Armenia and a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan.** If Ukraine is to achieve a lasting victory, the West will need to act outside of Ukraine—by putting Russia under pressure in other theaters, and specifically by depriving it of resources and influence in those regions. This includes the South Caucasus, which straddles both Europe and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Russia has held a key military position here for over two hundred years. Weakening Russia's influence in this region will hurt Russia strategically, as it will demonstrate that Russia no longer has the same degree of control in its so-called "near abroad." Promoting stability in this region is especially crucial now that Russia is reportedly building a military base in Ochamchire, Abkhazia, a breakaway region of Georgia. The United States can look for ways to work on projects in this region that support Turkish and Western objectives, rather than Russia's interests.

**Work to reduce Turkey's dependence on Russian gas.** Approximately 15 percent of the EU's gas still comes from Russia, and the revenue Russia generates helps it fund its war effort in Ukraine. TurkStream and the new "Turkish Blend" project create an opportunity for Moscow to hide the origin of its gas and exert influence across Europe. The United States could sanction companies involved in TurkStream infrastructure and the new "Turkish Blend." The United States sanctioned one line of TurkStream in 2020, but more sanctions could help reduce Europe's dependence on Russia's gas and send the message that the West supports Ukraine. At the same time, the United States could look for opportunities to work on alternative energy projects with Turkey to further eliminate dependence on Russia.

**Take advantage of Turkey's role as a mediator.** Turkey's mediation in the Black Sea grain deal was useful even if the deal ultimately collapsed. To the extent that it is advantageous to U.S. strategic interests, the United States should leverage Ankara's role as a mediator in the future.

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<sup>9</sup> Basillioh Rukanga, "Sudan-Russia deal: Final agreement reached over Red Sea naval base, says Sudan," BBC, February 13, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c30del8dz51o>

<sup>10</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya and Andrew J. Tabler, "Iran's Tensions with Azerbaijan Point to Broader Shifts in the South Caucasus," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 31, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-tensions-azerbaijan-point-broader-shifts-south-caucasus>