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Armin Dusinovic

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### *The Role Of Türkiye In Ukraine*



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**Author:** Armin Dusinovic is a MA Political Science student at the University of Vienna. His fields of research focus on international relations and security studies. He was a member of different national and international NGOs. He is also highly engaged in the work of international organizations. The views contained in this article are the author's alone.

**Abstract:** Türkiye has always been an important geostrategic partner for NATO, the EU, Russia, and the US. The geographic position of Türkiye makes it crucial in political, military, and economic aspects of global politics. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye has shown great interest in cooperating with all sides, including the US, Ukraine, NATO, and Russia. Moreover, Türkiye has been calling upon Russia and Ukraine to negotiate peace talks, free passage of grain, and humanitarian corridors. Türkiye is a longstanding NATO ally. Since the end of World War I, Türkiye has had full control over the traits in Bosphorus and Dardanelles, resulting in a ban of any military vessels from entering without prior notice. This was concluded in the Montreux Treaty. However, with the new Istanbul Canal, the situation might change, and NATO vessels might freely conduct operations within the area of the Black Sea, raising tension between NATO and Russia and ultimately disrupting Russia's military

assistance through the Black Sea. These ever-changing aspects of the Türkiye's relationship with the West and East show the dangerous strategy that Erdogan is using.

**Problem statement:** How to analyze the role of Türkiye in the War in Ukraine? Did their geographic position and control over the Black Sea influence the inevitable war [Ukraine War] itself and the timing of the invasion?

**Bottom-line-up-front:** The construction of the Istanbul Canal was one of the factors that contributed to the war in Ukraine. The canal is not included in the Montreux Treaty.

**So what?:** The War in Ukraine has proven to be another geopolitical challenge for Türkiye. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully analyze every actor to provide a widened scope of awareness and knowledge not just for historians but also for political actors and civil society. This will create a holistic understanding of this vital actor as a prerequisite for further political assessments.

### **Türkiye And The Iron Curtain**

On the early morning of February 24, 2022, the world as we knew it changed with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[1] This invasion shocked the world, as Russia openly violated three intrinsic, fundamental aspects of a nation: sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence. The invasion was not completely unexpected: a few months before the full-scale invasion started, the US had warned that over 190.000 troops were being mobilized around the Ukraine-Russia border, the largest mobilization since the Second World War.[2]

When examining the unity that the war in Ukraine has brought to the world, one can see a clear distinction between the two sides, mimicking the separation during the period of the Cold War between the West and the East. The Iron Curtain is a specific term that Winston Churchill used in his speech, saying that the iron curtain lies across Europe.[3] He explained the term as a so-called political border between two different political spheres, namely Western Europe, with its political freedom, and Eastern Europe, under Soviet rule.[4]

Some say that the expansion of NATO after the end of the Cold War moved this Iron Curtain closer to the borders of Russia. A notable difference in the current situation is a country like Türkiye. Türkiye was in the spotlight from the beginning of the war. They were committed to the peace dialogue between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Despite being a member of NATO and a country advocating for peace, Türkiye's President Erdogan accused the West and the US

of provoking Moscow. This comes as no surprise because even in the past, Türkiye was calculating its interest from both the West and the East. Türkiye faced numerous criticisms since the beginning of the full-scale invasion because they were opposing the sanctions. Still, President Erdogan claims that sanctions would not help Ukraine but extend the war itself.[5]

Due to the Bosphorus, its military might and diplomatic mastery, Türkiye is considered a guardian of the Black Sea. Erdogan confirmed through the talks with Putin that he accepts grain export only through the Black Sea. The trade route through the Black Sea is one of the most vital routes to our society because of its strong economic importance, trade between the Black Sea neighbors has grown rapidly in the last nine months. Türkiye's exports to Russia grew over 86% to \$1.15bn, while imports from Russia doubled to \$5.03bn. Numerous Russians and several influential Oligarchs moved to Türkiye in 2022, making them the second largest group after the citizens of Germany. Russian exports of energy resources like gas have also covered Türkiye's 45% of the supply. Between January and September, over \$24.9bn of untraceable foreign funds have been transferred to Türkiye. However, the Central Bank of Türkiye declined any comments on this claim.[6]

## Black Sea

Former National Security Advisor under President Karter's administration and author Zbigniew Brzezinski stated in 1997 that if Russia conquers Ukraine and takes over all its resources with its 52 million people, it will regain full access to the Black Sea, making them once again an empire. From Brzezinski's point of view, Türkiye holds an important role in the Black Sea since it stabilizes the region, providing fair access to the Mediterranean Sea and, most importantly, balancing Russia's power.[7]

The Black Sea is situated in Southeastern Europe. There are six national borders alongside its coast: Ukraine to the north, Russia to the northeast, Georgia to the east, Türkiye to the south, and Bulgaria and Romania to the west. Its largest geographical extent accounts for 1,175 km from east to west and the shortest from Crimea to the south, which is 260 km.[8]

To understand the further importance of this sea, one needs to start with the history and the past events that shaped the geopolitical aspects of the region. In 1768, Russia fought a six-year conflict with the Ottomans, leading to the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. This treaty provided Russia with direct

access to the Black Sea. Besides that, Russia was also given the right to protect Christians in the Ottoman Empire. In the year 1783, the Crimean city of Sevastopol emerged, and up until this day, Russia has maintained its military base stationed in the city of Sevastopol. Between 1853 and 1856, the Crimean War was fought, leading to thousands of deaths and injuries. France and Britain stood on the side of the Ottomans to fight Russia because of their fear that Russia's hegemony in the region was growing.[9] The question of the Black Sea was brought up again after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I during the San Remo conference. The conference of San Remo was concluded with the Treaty of Sevres in 1920. The Sevres Treaty was seen differently throughout the world. The main aim of the treaty was to redraw the Ottoman Empire's borders and establish a new state for the Kurdish people. Most of the Ottoman territory was also given to the Allies. The Italian and Greek press condemned it because the promised territory was not given to them in the final settlement. Great Britain saw it as a victory.[10]

The Ottomans signed this treaty at the end of the First World War. The signing was completed on August 10, 1920, after more than fifteen months passed with the discussion on the final form. Britain, Italy, and France signed the treaty on behalf of the Allies, while Russia was excluded, and America withdrew into an isolation policy.[11] This treaty was the West's first step in taking control of the Black Sea region. The Ottoman Empire dissolved, and territories around the sea were separated into different protectorates of the Allies. In 1923, the treaty was replaced with the Treaty of Lausanne. The Treaty of Lausanne had made the Dardanelles a demilitarized zone and allowed unrestricted civilian and military traffic through the Straits, which the International Straits Commission of the League of Nations monitored. However, by the 1930s, the political landscape had changed, with Fascist Italy gaining control of the Greek-inhabited Dodecanese Islands and building fortifications on Rhodes, Leros, and Kos. Türkiye was worried that Italy would try to use this access to expand its power into Anatolia and the Black Sea region. There were also concerns about Bulgarian rearmament. Türkiye was not allowed to fortify the Straits. Still, in 1935, the government asked for a conference to agree on a new regime for the Straits and requested permission from the League of Nations to reconstruct the Dardanelles forts. However, the Abyssinia Crisis, the Treaty of Versailles's denunciation by Germany, and international rearmament efforts left the Straits vulnerable. In 1936, the signatories of the Treaty of Lausanne and others met in Montreux and agreed to return the zone to Turkish military control in response to Türkiye's request to refortify the area.[12]

The Treaty of Montreux was implemented properly and impartially by Türkiye for over seven decades. This treaty helps merchant vessels to enjoy the freedom of passage through the Turkish Straits.[13] Turkish straits are waterways located in the northwestern part of Türkiye. They connect the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas with the Black Sea. On the southern end are the Dardanelles, and in the north, the Bosphorus.

The Montreux Convention was signed on July 20, 1936. The treaty itself was a sign of respect from the Republic of Türkiye towards the rule of law and international comity. This treaty allowed free passage for merchant ships through the Turkish straits, but its real success was that it restricted the military ships from passing through without any prior notice. In 1936, the treaty was signed by the USSR, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Türkiye, Greece, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom. The treaty ended the restrictions on Türkiye posed during the Lausanne Convention but also gave Türkiye an even larger responsibility. In general, the sole responsibility of the passage lies within Türkiye. Warships must notify Türkiye before the passage, and not every warship can pass through. Only certain countries are allowed to use this as a military access point. If Türkiye feels threatened, it may close all straits, and ships like aircraft carriers and submarines can be prevented from passing. If Türkiye is not threatened, permission for submarines is possible if they navigate during the daytime with prior notice. In times of war, when Türkiye is considered a neutral state, the passage is to be closed to all non-neutral parties.[14] This is the case in the currently ongoing war in Ukraine.

### **Role of Türkiye in NATO**

After the end of the Second World War, European security was still at stake, threatened by the possible expansion of the Soviet Union. Therefore, ten European countries founded a new alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). With NATO, the world started its first phase of bipolarity, setting the agenda for the rest of the century and the next.

In this bipolar context after World War II, Türkiye found itself in a difficult position between Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Türkiye was both powerful and weak in this specific geographic position, which made them very influential in the region but also vulnerable to a strong influence from both Western and Eastern powers. In 1952, Türkiye officially joined NATO, ensuring its own security and

moving further away from the Soviet Union. This marked the first official expansion of NATO after its founding in 1949.

During the next century, Türkiye's position within NATO changed drastically. Once driven out of fear of the Soviet Union, now it was stepping out of the NATO policies and building a stronger relationship with Russia. This was a result of the changing attitudes towards the West and maximizing their gains by playing with both sides. During the recent events in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden decided to apply to join the alliance, but Türkiye vetoed. Ankara permitted the new members only under one condition: Sweden and Finland extradited every Kurdish member the Turkish state considered a terrorist and a threat to their political structure.[15] Whereas Finland, meanwhile, joined the Alliance, Sweden still has to wait. This could also be explained by Türkiye's position towards their most important trade partner, Russia. Moreover, Türkiye's decision to veto these aspiring members shows that they do not want to be seen as a direct enemy of the Russian Federation.

Considering this ever-changing position of Ankara, it would be reductionist to conclude that Türkiye is a challenge to NATO. Nevertheless, it is not just Türkiye that has disrupted the North Atlantic Alliance. Other allies like Hungary have also been leaning towards Russia ever since the war in Ukraine began.[16]

The arms trade is considered to be not just a trade agreement for a better opportunity but a political sign. Before the war, Türkiye was constantly relying on Russian gas, and President Erdogan also pushed a deal to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense system, marking yet another shift in the Türkiye's role. Even President Biden tried to convince Erdogan to improve their relations by selling the F-16s and upgrading the existing models.

Furthermore, Ankara's relations have been in a longstanding tension with European Union members like Cyprus and its fellow NATO counterpart, Greece. Back in 1974, Türkiye invaded and created a new Turkish state, the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and it has been ever since recognized only by Türkiye and itself. Also, Ankara refuses to recognize Greek sovereignty over its islands and regularly violates Greek airspace. Greece recently increased its military spending in fear of Türkiye even though both states are NATO members. In 2003, Ankara refused to allow the US to operate its missions in Iraq through Türkiye and even cooperated with the Islamic State during the Syrian conflict, allowing their fighters to travel in and out of Türkiye. NATO'S Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg refused to

criticize Türkiye but rather continued to defend their actions. After the failed coup in Türkiye in 2016, Erdogan replaced several NATO officers with those who held more of an “Ottoman” view, aligning his officers’ corps.[17] This shows the views held by President Erdogan, meaning that he does not consider himself to be pro-western but pro-nationalist, searching for a strong Turkish state that resembles the one during the Ottomans. Moreover, this also explains why Türkiye is maintaining a good relationship with both the West and the East.

Nevertheless, in the latest NATO security strategic concept, Russia is clearly seen as an enemy and a danger to NATO. The decision to flag Russia as an enemy for all allies is questionable when one considers that Türkiye is both a NATO member and a friend of Moscow. Russia has never had an actual presence in the Mediterranean but more in Syria, Libya, and Algeria. However, Türkiye plays a significant role in both regions, so it remains a vital interest of both Moscow and Washington to rely on Türkiye. Ankara is more comfortable discussing the European continent's further security as a NATO member rather than seeking the European Union’s level.[18] This position is justified by Türkiye’s longstanding aspiration to become a full member of the EU, and after all the difficulties over the years, it is slowly evaporating.

After the recent terrorist attack in Istanbul, Erdogan launched a new wave of deadly airstrikes in northern Syria on November 20 this year, tightening the rope around the Syrian Kurds. Türkiye blamed the Syrian Kurdish People’s Defence Unit (YPG) for the attack, but the YPG denied any involvement. This bombing could also revive the terrorist units of ISIS, which General Pat Ryder, Pentagon Press Secretary, confirmed to the press. In Syria, the Kurdish forces are highly backed by the US military, and Moscow, as a Syrian ally, called for restraint.[19] Incidents like this particular one show the complicated relations between the US, Türkiye, Russia, and NATO. While NATO tries to keep the Western allies together, every side is dedicated to its respective policy. However, this relationship could drastically change in the future, so it is important to reflect on the actors' involvement and position in the war in Ukraine.

### **War in Ukraine (2014-2022)**

The official date of the full-scale invasion is in February 2022, but the crisis in Crimea and after Luhansk and Donetsk started long before the full-scale invasion. In late November 2013, Ukrainians started a



protest, transforming into a revolution. The protestors at the time demanded the government's resignation under President Victor Yanukovich, who declined an agreement that would ultimately result in closer Ukraine-EU relations. These protests were not just a demand for closer cooperation but also the rejection of the way of life that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Corruption is something that is rooted deeply in Soviet culture.[20] Moreover, corruption has been strongly affecting lives in these post-soviet countries, and this was a call for change.

The protest, which was named Euromaidan as the protests started on Kyiv's Independence Square or Maidan and escalated throughout the country very quickly. On January 16, the government introduced new repressive laws, which resulted in the death of the first protestors on January 22. In the end, over 100 protestors died, and President Yanukovich fled the country and went into exile in Russia. The parliament voted for new elections, and Petro Poroshenko was declared the new President of Ukraine.[21]

After the Ukrainian parliament announced new ministers, Russia set 150.000 troops on high alert. Armed men took control of two airports and stormed the parliament in Crimea, raising the Russian flag. Ukraine continued to warn Russia to keep its troops away, but instead, Putin gained parliamentary approval to invade Ukraine. Shortly thereafter, NATO and the White House warned Moscow of their actions in Ukraine. The tension started to rise, sham referenda were held, and a few weeks later, the annexation of Crimea by Russia began.[22]

The crisis in Crimea and the eastern parts of Ukraine continued to escalate but remained isolated from the rest of Ukraine. It became a cold crisis; in other words, the world started to forget about Ukraine. A few months before February 2022, Russia started to mobilize troops all around the Ukrainian border. The White House and its intelligence agencies warned the international community about this buildup around the border and on the early morning of February 24, 2022, Russia invaded. In response, the EU and the US introduced numerous sanction packages against Russia, and Russia answered with a spike in gas prices. Moreover, EU member states started looking for an alternative gas supply route. US and Poland became the leading countries of weapons supply to Ukraine.[23]

Interestingly, Poland became one of the leading countries in every sector supporting Ukraine. As Brzezinski explained in his book "The Grand Chessboard" in 1997, the role of a pivot state is the reason behind it. If Russia seizes full control over Ukraine's territory and resources and gains access to the Black Sea, the role of a pivot state would go from Ukraine to Poland. In the end, Poland may be the next target of the Russian imperialistic view. Pivot states are states that hold a strategic advantage. This advantage

can be economic, military, political, or geographical, which in our case (Türkiye) would be geographical. Türkiye's role in the war was clearly defined, but in the first phase of the war, Türkiye made an enormous contribution to Ukraine with their supply of Bayraktar TB2 drones that made a clear difference. This is one of the cheapest and most effective drone models on the market. During the war, drones became notorious. The company's CEO outraged Moscow as the close relations between Türkiye and Russia became blurry once again. Türkiye's foreign minister defended the acts and said that the company is privately owned and that the bought drones should not be labeled as Turkish.[24]

Haluk Bayraktar, the company's CEO, said that the company would never supply Russia with the Bayraktar TB2 drones. He also mentioned that this war is very touching because of the longstanding relationship between the company and Ukraine.[25]

### Istanbul Canal

During a speech in Istanbul in 2011, President Erdogan announced the project of the Istanbul Canal. At the beginning of 2021, the construction started. Bosphorus is one of the busiest waterways, and the different empires in the past recognized the importance of Bosphorus. The new canal should ease the current canal's traffic and provide Istanbul with more security.[26]

In recent years, over 104 Turkish navy commanders appealed to Türkiye not to abandon the Montreux Treaty, which demilitarized the canal due to the longstanding historical battles that were explained in the previous chapters. This treaty brought compromise and peace in the region, but the new canal would likely change the attitudes. Behind the issue of building a new canal, which will not be included in the Montreux Treaty, also lies the military's attempt to overthrow the government over 4 four times in history. Moreover, this multi-billion project that the government defends because of its economic importance will give Türkiye and NATO full access to the new trait without any restrictions whatsoever.[27]

Mustafa Aydın, the President of the International Relations Council of Türkiye, said that Russia has enough firepower in the Black Sea that the entrance of NATO ships wouldn't make a difference. However, as the war continues, the situation might change, and as Türkiye decided to block Russian warships, the relations between the two countries became severely damaged.[28]

Nevertheless, the Russian media also commented on the canal. The prominent Russian news agency TASS reported that Moscow is not concerned about the canal at the moment but that the canal would allow Türkiye to be a center of regional power and the construction of it, which would undermine Russia's influence in the region. The help of Russia to its allies like Syria would be decreased as the deployment of Russian troops to the Syrian territory would be a lot harder.[29]

Russia is deeply concerned with the status quo of the convention. The importance of the Straits was especially reflected during the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The base in Tartus, Syria, is controlled by Moscow, and in total, 134 warships were allowed passage. Russia accounted for 63% of that in 2019. On April 09, 2019, Vladimir Putin called President Erdogan and expressed that Russia insists on the application of the treaty to the Istanbul Canal. The canal would also decrease the affordability of Russian commercial ships to use this canal as the toll would be a lot larger. Nevertheless, it will also depend on the countries like China because they will stand by the Russian side when the questions around the regulation of the canal come.[30] During Erdogan's speech in 2011, he mentioned that the canal did not contradict the current convention but also had nothing to do with it. Erdogan said that the canal would be in use as of 2023.[31]

Looking back at the previous paragraph, the US will surely support the project because the US represents the main promoter of NATO, but if no treaty is passed or the old one is not updated, the canal could leave Türkiye no choice but to fully align with NATO and stop playing both roles, as a longstanding NATO ally and as a strong partner of Russian Federation. Furthermore, the US could establish itself in the Black Sea. By doing so, the US would restrict a rising power like China, amongst others, by threatening its connection with the Greek port of Piraeus (it is a vital point in the Belt and Road Initiative). Moreover, the date of 2023 accounts for great importance and could potentially be why Russia wanted to establish full control of Ukraine in the current year to conquer Ukraine and hold a greater geopolitical position until the Istanbul Canal is finished. Besides, the end of the war will define the hegemony in Eurasia, especially around the Black Sea.

## Conclusion

The future of relations between Moscow and Ankara is yet to be seen. However, this will depend on many factors, one of them being the outcome of the war. Nevertheless, the issue of the new canal,

which is not included in the Montreux Treaty, should also be reconsidered. Without further notice, the canal would allow NATO member states to enter the Black Sea. This notice period and the Bosphorus Canal's restrictions helped Russia maintain partial control and sovereignty of the sea.

The relations between these two “allies” or between the West and Türkiye are still questionable. Türkiye is acting rationally as the West is assuring their security and Russia is a closer neighbor. Still, developing the new canal may change the policy on how NATO allies operate within the area of the Black Sea. As Erdogan takes full control of the Turkish Straits and the new Istanbul Canal, he will be the only man in charge of the ships that go through this area. The role of Türkiye in planning and building this canal may be a possibility for why Putin chose to go to war at this particular time. How Erdogan will react in the future is yet to be seen.

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