

The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on the Middle East: The Role of Turkey

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Abstract

This paper examines the concepts of interdependence and correlations within the context of the ongoing conflict between Russia and NATO, alongside the dynamics involving regional states and non-state actors in the region. At present, the conflict's epicentre seems to be the Black Sea region. Nevertheless, the intricate challenges stemming from the Middle East continue to highly significantly influence the management of conflicts between global and regional powers. In the midst of these intricate relations, Turkey confronts a pivotal quandary: it must either assume the mantle of a proficient mediator in the Ukraine-Russia conflict or risk relegation as a marginalised supporter. Thus, Turkey's multifaceted role in both the Black Sea and the Middle East stands as a

litmus test for the interplay of interdependency and correlations.

Introduction

In contrary to prevailing expectations, the recent incursion of Russia into Ukraine and its subsequent occupation of various regions within the nation have elicited a far more pronounced and robust response

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from global North nations². In 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its penetration into Ukraine had generated only a limited reaction from NATO and the European Union. While they did condemn these actions and imposed restricted sanctions on specific sectors of Russia's economy and diplomatic engagements, Russia's hosting of the 2018 World Cup managed to mitigate the negative global perceptions to some extent. Fast forward to 2022, and the landscape shifted dramatically.³ Russia found itself subjected to an intricate and multidimensional onslaught. This onslaught manifested in a near-complete embargo of economic and diplomatic ties with Russia, accompanied by substantial albeit limited military and economic support for Ukraine.

In defiance of all anticipations, the conflict has endured and appears poised to persist for years ahead.⁴ Amidst this prolonged turmoil, several pivotal questions demand exploration. One such inquiry revolves around the underlying motives of this conflict. The manner in which Volodymyr Zelenskyy became entangled in the NATO-Russia dynamics warrants scrutiny, as does the covert role of China behind the scenes to strength Russia's position. Not to be overlooked are the roles of Turkey and Iran, two influential regional actors deeply entwined in this unfolding drama. Moreover, the unexpected narrative unfolds with Russia resorting to Iranian-supplied suicide drones while Ukraine acquires Turkish drones—a development hardly foreseen. Within this complex milieu, questions naturally arise: Does Russia indeed possess the most formidable weaponry? Could NATO and the US offer superior drone technology to Ukraine?

At the heart of comprehending this intricate web is unravelling the interplay between global and regional forces, deciphering the dynamics that either extend or curtail the hostilities. Intertwined with

²The concept of Global North vs. Global South is common in the recent political literature

³Adam Krzymowski 2020. "The Significance of the Black Sea Countries of the Three Seas Initiative Relations with the United Arab Emirates," *Journal of Meddling the New Europe*, No. 34, pp. 86-104.

⁴Luke Coffey. 2022. "Major Power Rivalry in the Black Sea. Research and Studies," *Arab News*, p. 7.



this inquiry is the interrelation between the Black Sea regions and the Middle East, both exerting their influence on the conflict's essence. While the comprehensive answers to these questions transcend the scope of this succinct paper, their contemplation serves to illuminate the central question at hand: Can Turkey transition from a mediating entity to an embroiled participant, potentially incurring losses on both the Black Sea and Middle Eastern regions.⁵

The Geopolitical Significance of the Black Sea

The Black Sea has brought six countries into close proximity, yet the history of conflict over political and geographical supremacy between Turkey (Ottoman Empire) and Russia (Imperial Russia) stands out prominently.⁶ However, the presence of the United States and NATO among the smaller Black Sea nations, notably employing Ukraine as a dependent or even a proxy state, is readily apparent. Similar to the Middle East, the Black Sea has evolved into an arena for various global and regional powers to contend. Russia, the United States, China, Turkey, and both regional state and non-state entities together shape the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea. What emerges most strikingly in this new conflict between Russia and NATO is the utilisation of proxy actors. These extend beyond non-state forces such as Islamist terrorist groups operating in both the Black Sea and the Middle East, encompassing entities like the Wagner Group and Kadyrov Chechens. Moreover, state actors like Ukraine and Zelenskyy have also been thrust into roles as proxies. Notably, Turkey's role extends further, functioning as both a regional power and state influence, serving as a proxy on both sides of the conflict.⁷

Historically, no single state has ever fully dominated the Black Sea, except for a fleeting period when the Ottoman Empire held

⁵ Andrei Covatarui. 2021. "Energy Transition and Climate Change efforts in the Black Sea," Middle East Institute.

⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick. 2022. *The Shortest History of The Soviet Union* (New York: Columba University Press).

⁷ Duygu Calgar Bayram and Ozgur Tufekci. 2028. *Turkey's Black Sea and Its Dynamics*. Karadeniz Arastirmalari Merkezi. p. 7.

considerable sway over the region.⁸ In the Cold War era, the Black Sea was divided between Turkey as a NATO member and the former Soviet Union states. Since then, the strategic equilibrium of the region has undergone a transformation. The economic and geopolitical importance of the Black Sea has expanded significantly. Ukraine and Georgia have assumed pivotal geostrategic positions on the eastern and western coasts, thereby amplifying their challenges to Russian dominance. The annexation and separation of Abkhazia and Ossetia, recognised solely by Russia, along with the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, serve as radical actions underscoring the undeniable geopolitical and strategic weight of the Black Sea.⁹

The eruption of hostilities in Ukraine aligns with two primary Russian objectives: safeguarding its own territory and countering NATO's military encirclement to the south and west. Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania stand as steadfast members of NATO and integral components of Western alliances. In parallel, as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Finland has joined NATO, while Sweden soon will. Thus, Ukraine becomes Russia's ultimate frontline against NATO's threats on its borders. Additionally, Russia's second major aim is to resurrect the stature reminiscent of the Soviet era—lost not just for three decades, but also representing a national humiliation and a grievous defeat that continues to haunt the Russian populace and their governing system and thus becoming a sort of psychological complex.¹⁰

For NATO, this conflict has little to do with the rights and aspirations of the Ukrainian people. Apart from Russia's authoritarianism, and China's discreet backing, NATO's true commitment to safeguarding human rights and easing the significant human suffering experienced by Ukraine appears less than genuine.

⁸ Nurzhigit Abdukadyrov. 2015. "Russian-Turkish war of 1828-1829 and Political Positions of European States", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 191, pp. 2040 – 2043.

⁹ Adam, Krzymowsky. 2020. "The Significance of the Black Sea Countries of The Three Seas Initiative Relations with The United Arab Emirates," *Journal of Meddling the New Europe*. No. 34. pp. 86-104.

¹⁰ The concept of psychological complex is commonly use in political literature.



In this showdown between NATO and Russia, it is undeniable that the Ukrainian peoples have been caught in the crossfire. However, their fate remains of secondary importance to the core issues at hand for both sides. The crux lies in the pursuit of supremacy and the safeguarding of their respective interests. Thus, the central focus lies on the geostrategic and geopolitical value of the Black Sea, an area where NATO and Russia encounter barriers to consolidating their dominion. Within this vital struggle of hegemonic powers, Turkey, a pivotal state actor, and certain non-state actors possess the potential to tip the balance and trigger substantial policy shifts within the region. Nonetheless, being the kingmaker doesn't necessarily equate to victor; often, those who play this role end up being utilised and later discarded.

Evidently, both powers are ceaselessly competing to harness the influence of regional state and non-state entities in the area to their advantage, attempting to impose their dominance. Yet, underlying these efforts is their overarching aspiration: to establish control over the Black Sea, a critical conduit and reservoir of energy and food security. The ramifications of this conflict extend beyond just these realms, permeating a multitude of sectors within Europe. For instance, since the commencement of the Ukrainian conflict, the European Currency (Euro) and the British (Sterling) have depreciated by at least 25 percent. Consequentially, prices for sustenance and fuel have witnessed a significant surge.¹¹ In essence, the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea unfolds in multifaceted ways, exerting an impact not only on the region itself but also resonating across the globe.¹²

The Reciprocal Influence of the Black Sea and the Middle East

In its most basic form, interdependence signifies a connection between two or more entities necessitating cooperation and reliance upon one another. Even if these entities hold opposing viewpoints,

¹¹ Nalin Kumar Mohapata. 2021. "Geopolitics of the Black Sea Region (BSR) and Russia-NATO Strategic Game: India's Policy Options," Jawaharlal Nehru University. Usanas Foundation, pp. 4-15.

¹² Luke Coffey. 2022. "Major Power Rivalry in the Black Sea. Research and Studies". *Arab News*. p. 7.

they persist in their relations, safeguarding mutual interests. For instance, relations between Russia and China, Russia and Turkey, as well as the ties between the United States and France, particularly through NATO, persist grounded in unity and necessity. Neither Russia nor the United States can independently safeguard their interests without taking into account certain facets of their adversaries' interests within the region. The concept of interrelation follows a similar trajectory. Relations among multiple forces are forged upon shared interests and cooperative endeavours between these forces.¹³

Presently, both the Black Sea and the Middle East witness the involvement of multiple global powers, regional powers, and state and non-state actors in the geopolitical arena. On one side stand the United States and its NATO allies, while Russia finds itself aligned with direct allies such as Iran and indirect ones like China and Turkey. These entities wield power, safeguard interests, and strive for hegemony across both regions. Intriguingly, several non-state actors, including extremist militias affiliated with Iran and Turkey on one end, and the forces of the Kurdistan Freedom Movement on the other, exert influence, interests, and control over geopolitical and military manoeuvres in both domains.¹⁴

Taking into consideration the potency, scope, and dominion of each side, whether global or regional, state or non-state, a shared code of interactions and correlations dictates their manoeuvres. This implies the continuation of crisis management, with each force flexing its influence within equations defined by interrelation and interdependence. The Syrian crisis serves as a pertinent example, along with the protracted suffering of Syrians, and even more acutely, the enduring tragedy of Ukrainians—both vividly illustrate the prolonged conflict and warfare between Russia and NATO. The intriguing aspect is that, in order to perpetuate and steer this complex

¹³ Vachtang Charaya and Mariam Lashki. 2020, "A Sea Change? China's Role in The Black Sea," Middle East Institute. p. 11.

¹⁴ Kristian Åtland. 2021. "Redrawing Borders, Reshaping Orders: Russia's Quest for Dominance in the Black Sea Region," *European Security*, vol. 30, no.2, pp. 305-324.



dynamic, all forces, regardless of their size, status, or alignment, assume designated roles and importance, precluding any entity from being excluded from the equation. Consider ISIS in Iraq and Syria alongside Wagner in Russia and Ukraine. Presently, both ISIS in Turkey (with NATO's acquiescence) and Wagner in Belarus (with Russia's endorsement) repose in a state of readiness, capable of re-entering the stage at a moment's notice, if circumstances warrant. Of paramount significance is the reality that no force, regardless of its magnitude, is permitted to overstep its designated role. Should any entity endeavour to extend its influence beyond established boundaries, all other forces—irrespective of their opposing stances—collaborate within the framework of coexistence to curtail such undue expansion.

In the wake of the Ukraine conflict, a facet of the larger NATO-Russia confrontation, Turkey and Erdogan's populist Islamist administration often find themselves ensnared in their own ambitions. Periodically, Turkey overlooks its role as a regional state actor, yearning instead to portray itself as a global player. It aspires to transcend its role as a party to the conflict and, being part of NATO, seeks to arbitrate between the warring sides. Turkey aims to leverage the Ukraine war to bolster its standing in the Middle East, particularly by launching assaults against the Kurdish populations in Syria and Iraq. However, a crucial question emerges: Is Turkey genuinely equipped to serve as an impartial arbiter of war, or is it compelled to acknowledge its place as a combatant in the conflict?¹⁵

Turkey: Mediator or Participant?

If Turkey is to straddle both sides of the conflict, it finds itself in a complex position. On one hand, as a NATO member, Turkey actively contributes by aiding Ukraine and deploying suicide drones. On the other hand, it aligns with Russia and gravitates towards the Eastern Alliance, forging close ties with Russia even at the risk of straining relations with NATO, the European Union, and the United

¹⁵ Duygu Calgar Bayram and Ozgur Tufekci. 2018. "Turkey's Black Sea and Its Dynamics," Karadeniz Arastirmalari Merkezi. p. 9.

States. Essentially, Turkey seeks to seize more attention than the ordinary role allows. However, this doesn't imply exclusion from the broader dynamics; rather, it underscores the nature of the equation, wherein each force operates within its limits and capabilities. Removing not just Turkey, but also Wagner, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Iranian-backed Shiite militias would disrupt the delicate equilibrium.¹⁶

This concept, which underscores equilibrium and the cohesiveness of opposing forces in a necessary arrangement to prolong and manage conflict, diverges from the essence, title, and central question of this concise exploration. My contention posits that Turkey will either emerge as an adept mediator, ending the senseless war imposed upon the Ukrainian people, or it will become an active participant in the conflict, ultimately retreating geopolitically and militarily in both the Black Sea and the Middle East.¹⁷

A counter-argument to this notion is that Turkey's allegiance lies with NATO as a current member, necessitating a complete dissociation from Russian influence. This transition would invalidate the possibility of mediation and neutrality in the ongoing war. To elucidate this incongruity, consider that the cessation of the unjust war against Ukraine does not equate to the termination of the broader NATO-Russia conflict. Turkey's support for NATO in the Ukraine conflict doesn't imply absolute antagonism toward Russia.¹⁸ Given the Black Sea's geopolitical significance and Russia's entrenched presence in the Middle East, Turkey is compelled to navigate a course of compromise with Russia. Despite its NATO membership, Turkey cannot sever its ties with the East. Turkey's strategic interests span Central Asia, the Black Sea region, and the Middle East, as its influence within the Mediterranean remains circumscribed. Abandoning Russian and Chinese spheres would

¹⁶ Nalin, Kumar Mohapata. 2021. "Geopolitics of the Black Sea Region (BSR) and Russia-NATO Strategic Game: India's Policy Options". Jawaharlal Nehru University. Usanas Foundation. pp. 4-15.

¹⁷ Pavel Baev. 2021. "Russia and Turkey. Strategic Partners and Rivals", *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 35, Ifri, p. 13.

¹⁸ Pavel Baev. 2021. "Russia and Turkey. Strategic Partners and Rivals", *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 35, Ifri, p. 14.



entail relinquishing not only geopolitical worth with Russia, but also with NATO and the Western bloc. Therefore, Turkey's role as a mediator between NATO and Russia remains unlikely. Should an arbiter emerge, China or at the very least, the major BRICS countries—perhaps excluding Russia, would fill that role. Turkey's strategic manoeuvring, once again, involves a delicate balancing act between Russia and NATO.¹⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the war unfolding in Ukraine has become the defining challenge of 2022. While we cannot predict whether the conflict will escalate into a more prolonged and devastating war, it is certain that the confrontation between NATO and Russia will endure, presenting dire consequences. The threat of deploying weapons of mass destruction and atomic bombs looms as an unpredictable possibility. The crux of the matter does not revolve around assigning blame; it's evident that the majority of both Russian and Ukrainian populations are disillusioned by the war. This isn't merely a clash between these two nations; rather, it's a clash between the aspirations of an ambitious leader (**Putin**), seeking to revive Soviet influence and restore Russia's dignity post the collapse of the Soviet Union,²⁰ and an inexperienced president (**Zelensky**), who mistakenly perceives politics as an all-or-nothing endeavour. The strife pits two authoritarian global powers, both steadfast in their unwillingness to make concessions to the other. Both Russia and NATO bear the core responsibility for this conflict, while regional state and non-state actors serve as proxies entangled in this post-Cold War watershed.²¹

The West and NATO's profound anxiety about losing this war doesn't merely stem from Russia's potential triumph over Ukraine; it's rooted in the apprehension of forfeiting unilateral global supremacy and inaugurating an era where unipolar dominance

¹⁹ Vachtang Charaya and Mariam Lashki. 2020, "A Sea Change? China's Role in The Black Sea", Middle East Institute. p. 11.

²⁰ Nalin Kumar Mohapata. 2021. "Geopolitics of the Black Sea Region (BSR) and Russia-NATO Strategic Game: India's Policy Options". Jawaharlal Nehru University. Usanas Foundation. pp. 4-15.

²¹ Luke Coffey. 2022. "Major Power Rivalry in the Black Sea. Research and Studies". *Arab News*. p. 5.

wanes. Anticipated is the dawn of a multipolar epoch, distinctly divergent from the bipolar dynamics witnessed during the Cold War. The equations of interrelation and cooperation will inevitably evolve in this new era of multipolarity.

Class dynamics significantly underscore the conflict's dimensions. Currently unscathed by the war, China perceives an opportunity to showcase its mediating prowess between NATO and Russia²². In addition, China's diplomatic and economic strategies have gained momentum amid the Ukraine conflict. China's ascent traverses not only the economic realm but extends to the political, cultural, and diplomatic spheres, thereby outpacing the West and the United States. This trend is particularly discernible in the Middle East and the Global South.²³

Undoubtedly, the Black Sea and the Middle East regions exert a mutual influence upon each other, characterised by a bipolar interplay. Virtually all active actors within these regions are embroiled on both sides of the conflict. Notably, China's fresh and assertive involvement heightens the prospects of reconfiguring the political and economic landscape in both domains. While Turkey remains a highly active participant in both regions, its stature has been undermined significantly due to the Ukraine conflict, the Kurdish predicament, and enduring internal economic, political, and cultural challenges.²⁴ Consequently, Turkey's position has substantially weakened.²⁵ It seems unlikely that Turkey could effectively mediate; moreover, even if it avoids direct involvement in the Ukraine conflict, it's destined to become a fragile participant in the broader NATO-Russia confrontation, with the probable outcome of aligning more closely with NATO.

²² Seevan Saeed. 2023. Kurd û rola Çînê li Rojhelata Navîn. *Yeni Ozgur Politika*, Frankfurt <https://kurmanci.ozgurpolitika.com/nuceya-kurd-u-rola-cine-li-rojhelata-navin-176375>.

²³ Yachtang Charaya and Mariam Lashki. 2020, A Sea Change?: China's Role in the Black Sea". Middle East Institute. p. 12.

²⁴ Seevan Saeed 2019. 'The Dilemma of the Kurdish Struggle in Turkey', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* vol 21no.3, pp. 274–285.

²⁵ Kristian Åtland .2021. "Redrawing Borders, Reshaping Orders: Russia's Quest for Dominance in the Black Sea Region, *European Security*, vol. 30, no. :2, pp. 305-324.

