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Türkiye and the Debate on Neutrality in the Ukraine War

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Abstract

Turkish policy on the Ukraine war has been held under scrutiny from the outset. Western media has accused Ankara of pursuing a policy of neutrality rather than adhering to its member status of the NATO and following the sanctions policy, while the Turkish media has been quick to defend its government's "neutral" response, reflecting Turkish popular opinion polls. But the problem lies in the following situation: If the confrontation escalates on a larger scale, what policy will Türkiye pursue? Can Ankara succeed in keeping itself practically neutral through mediation? Will the West accept this position? Seeking to address these questions, this article begins by situating the concept of neutrality in the modern era and the legal and political conditions necessary, to determine if this description applies to Türkiye. Second, it investigates Türkiye's somewhat neutral stance in the Second World War and explores the similarities to its current stance in the 2022 Ukraine war. Third, it analyses the reality of Turkish behaviour in the Ukraine war. Is Türkiye "neutral" or an involved "participant"? It also discusses the reactions of Western countries and Ukraine on Turkish policy during this war and investigates whether this policy also reflects the interests of Ankara's allies. Fourth, it seeks to answer why Ankara prefers neutrality and uncover the reasons explaining Turkish caution in responding to the Ukraine war. It concludes with a discussion of whether neutrality is an appropriate policy for Türkiye to pursue.

Introduction

Turkish policy on the Ukraine war has been held under scrutiny from the outset. Ankara continues to maintain strong relations with Moscow and has so far declined to join the campaign of European and United States (US) sanctions against Russia. Meanwhile, the Turkish government has condemned the Russian acts and does not recognize any *fait accompli*. It presents itself as a mediator in ceasefire negotiations between the two countries, brokering a comprehensive settlement of the war. Ankara has also positioned itself to undertake the role of Ukraine's security guarantor in a possible peace agreement. More controversial still is that Western countries, including the US, are yet to insist on Türkiye joining the Russian sanctions program.

Despite the silence of Turkish and Western officials regarding Ankara's relations with Moscow, Western media has accused Ankara of pursuing a policy of neutrality rather than adhering to its member status of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and following the sanctions policy, while the Turkish media has been quick to defend its government's "neutral" response, reflecting Turkish popular opinion polls. Two examples of both the criticism and support for the Turkish "neutrality" include an article in the *Washington Post* slamming the Turkish response to this war and the potential consequences, and an article in the *Sabah* newspaper praising the Turkish position and laying out its potential gains for Ankara.

The *Washington Post* article criticises Turkish neutrality and its refusal to join the sanctions, implying that NATO's position towards Türkiye may change, saying:

The longer the war drags on, the harder it will be to sustain Turkey's carefully calibrated neutrality. Erdogan's calculation at the start of the conflict was that he could use his friendship with Putin as leverage with the West. NATO, he reckoned, would be simultaneously anxious to keep him in the Western camp and glad to use him as a backchannel to communicate with his "dear friend" in Moscow.

The author further writes, "If the Turkish leader wants the privileges that come with NATO membership, then he must join the consensus." He points to a list of "geopolitical and economic costs" that Türkiye "cannot afford to ignore", as "Erdogan will find himself pushed farther into the margins of the alliance, even as the Turkish economy sinks deeper into a hole."¹

Meanwhile the Turkish article clearly promotes Ankara's neutrality, with the tagline, "In one word, the West failed in the Russia-Ukraine war while Turkey proved its neutral power in world diplomacy." The article goes on to state that

a neutral, reliable and strong mediator will positively change the course of this human-made calamity. Turkey, as the Black Sea neighbor for both sides, appears as a key mediator. The country's neutral position works as a de-escalation strategy in this conflict as the Turkish military is a stunning powerhouse among NATO allies. According to some Western minds, Turkey presence in the alliance is the first military resistance line where the Turkish military would take part in trench warfare. However, Ankara stands firm with its neutral position while embracing humanitarian and constructive policies and engaging with all sides.

The author even seeks to distance the Turkish government from Ukraine's use of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, which actually contribute to the Ukrainian war effort and can be considered consistent and commitment with NATO policy and efforts. He argues that this does not provide support to Ukraine, saying: "the purchase of drones was just a part of a bilateral trade made within international law norms. That means the drones used by Ukraine are not "Turkish" at the moment but "Ukrainian,"² to emphasize his stance on neutrality.

In fact, neutrality was not a requirement for Türkiye's discussion with its Western allies, or its Russian partners, nor did it declare itself neutral or officially promote this policy. It also adhered to some of Western positions, such as condemning the invasion and demonstrating solidarity with Ukraine, and Ankara provided Kyiv with drones in the lead up to the war. In practice, however, Türkiye is pursuing a policy of neutrality as much as possible to avoid losing its Russian partner, resorting to playing the

¹ Bobby Ghosh, "Turkey's Neutrality on Ukraine is Coming at a High Price," *The Washington Post*, 18/4/2022, accessed on 29/4/2022, at: <https://wapo.st/3w5g74u>.

² Muhammet Ali Güler, "Who is Neutral and Who is Wrong in Ukraine War?" *Daily Sabah*, 1/4/2022, accessed on 29/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3P3rt1l>.

mediator role whereby Ankara can be acceptable to both sides of the Russian and Ukrainian conflict. But the problem lies in the following situation: If the war extends to one of the NATO countries, or Moscow uses strategic and unconventional weapons against Ukraine, and the confrontation escalates on a larger scale, what policy will Türkiye pursue? Can Ankara succeed in keeping itself practically neutral through mediation? Will the West accept this position? Or will NATO expect Ankara to fully adhere to its policies (such as sanctions, de facto contribution to the war, NATO use of Turkish territory and the weapons stored there, etc.)?

This is not the first controversy regarding divergent Turkish and Western positions. Türkiye's cautious stance throughout the Second World War until February 1945 (mere months before the war ended), and its evasion of Western sanctions on Russia after the latter's annexation of the Crimea in March 2014, are two other issues that have raised questions about the position of undeclared "neutrality." Is Türkiye's position really neutral in the 2022 Ukraine war?

Seeking to address these questions and to explain the Turkish position on the Ukraine war since February 2022, this article begins by situating the concept of neutrality in the modern era, highlighting the most prominent examples, and the legal and political conditions necessary, to determine if this description applies to Türkiye. Second, it investigates Türkiye's somewhat neutral stance in the Second World War and explores the similarities between its response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and circumvention of sanctions and, on the other hand, its current stance in the 2022 Ukraine war. Third, it analyses the reality of Turkish behaviour in the Ukraine war. Is Türkiye "neutral" or an involved "participant"? The article also discusses the reactions of Western countries and Ukraine on Turkish policy during this war and investigates whether this policy also reflects the interests of Ankara's allies. Fourth, it seeks to answer why Ankara prefers neutrality and uncover the reasons explaining Turkish caution in responding to the Ukraine war. The article concludes with a discussion of whether neutrality is an appropriate policy for Türkiye to pursue.

1. Neutrality in the Modern Era

Neutrality is defined as "the legal status arising from the abstention of a state from all participation in a war between other states, the maintenance of an attitude of impartiality toward the belligerents, and the recognition by the belligerents of this abstention and impartiality. Under international law, this legal status gives rise to certain rights and duties between the neutral state and the belligerents." Laws relating to the rights and duties of neutrality were contained, mostly in the Paris Declaration of 1856, and the Hague Convention of 1907. However, with the events of World War I and II, the traditional rules and foundations of neutrality were no longer applicable, especially after the violation of multiple countries' neutrality, including the German invasion of Belgium, the Italian invasion of Greece, and the British occupation of Iceland.³

³ "Neutrality," *Britannica Encyclopedia*, accessed on 1/5/2022, at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neutrality>.



Neutrality as a legal status disappeared in the UN Charter. Instead, the first article calls on states to use a general non-specific formula to “to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.”⁴ In certain cases, this may allow some states to adopt the position of neutrality if the belligerent states agree to grant it to them, as some of the following historical examples show.

The concept of neutrality emerged in the fourteenth century, when it is mentioned in some diplomatic correspondence and in treaties relating to non-participation in armed conflicts between the monarchies in Europe.⁵ Since the seventeenth century, neutrality has played an important role in international relations. Neutrality varies in degree from participation, political action, or disengagement from action in world affairs, and can be related to the extent of the state’s sovereignty. This sovereignty is determined by the freedom and independence with which the nation makes its decisions without being forced or influenced by external pressures. Neutrality is not limited to small countries like Switzerland; the United States managed to pursue a policy of neutrality its early history, seeking to maintain friendly relations with each of the two warring nations of France and Great Britain.⁶ In this context, the aim of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was to strengthen the neutrality of the United States within the conflicts between European powers, and to keep these powers from interfering in the Western Hemisphere.⁷

The Swiss neutrality legally enshrined in 1815 is a different and unique phenomenon; desired by both the country itself, as well as by the great European powers represented at the Vienna Conference that year. Switzerland obtained recognition for its status of permanent neutrality through a treaty guaranteeing the inviolability of its territory in exchange for a neutral position in any war that might break out.⁸ After the Napoleonic Wars ended, this conference unanimously declared “the formal and unconditional recognition of Switzerland’s perpetual neutrality,” with neutrality formally included in Switzerland’s constitution of 1848.⁹ The Treaty of Versailles of 1915 also recognized this neutrality during World War I. With this unique status, Switzerland obtained membership in the League of Nations in 1920.¹⁰ Countries also pledged to respect this neutrality at the beginning of World War II in 1939.¹¹

4 United Nations, United Nations Charter, Article 1, accessed on 9/4/2022, at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

5 Peter Lyon, “Neutrality and the Emergence of the Concept of Neutralism,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 22, no. 2 (April 1960), p. 256.

6 Herman Frohman, “An Analysis of Neutrality and Modern Neutralism,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1958), pp. 187, 189.

7 See: The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, National Archive, “Monroe Doctrine (1823),” accessed on 1/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3LX6qf3>.

8 Frohman, pp. 189 - 190.

9 Dorothy H. Veon and Adolph Meyer, “Switzerland and her Place in International Unity,” *Pi Lambda Theta Journal*, vol. 27, no. 2 (December 1948), p. 94.

10 Lyon, p. 264.

11 Veon and Meyer, p. 94.



Switzerland's geographical context accounts for this unique status, since, as a small country sandwiched between warring great powers, and formed of multiple European ethnicities, it would be vulnerable to civil conflict if it became embroiled in any war. Furthermore, it occupies a strategic position in Europe, which could render it an object of conquest for any major power, but also means its stability and neutrality is important to these conflicting powers. European powers have found it in their interest to maintain Switzerland as a centre of neutrality for the past two centuries; It has become the home of many international agencies, used as a base for important diplomatic negotiations, and for mediation on countless critical issues.¹²

Frohman argues that “It is necessary to distinguish between the legal form of represented by Switzerland and the political type adopted by nations in the course of history — the United States, Scandinavia, and Belgium.” Finland and Sweden, which have always maintained “political” neutrality were spurred by the Ukraine war to trade in their neutral status and apply to join NATO. “The legal neutrality of Switzerland is vested national law and treaty.”¹³ In other cases, political neutrality has been a temporary situation related to the prevailing political environment at the time, and from the desire of the neutral countries not to engage in the competition and wars between the major powers in their region, a status that was not enshrined in the local laws, and not necessarily approved of by belligerent countries, but was temporarily respected according to interests and circumstances.

2. Türkiye's History of “Neutrality”

The legal definition of neutrality has never applied to Türkiye, which was established as a republic in 1923. Its attempt at neutrality in World War II (1939-1945) expressed cautious political anticipation of the changing balance of power between the warring countries. Meanwhile, Ankara's stance on the 2014 Ukraine crisis was close to neutral, but best described as pragmatic. While it condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea, it also avoided directing any hostility toward Moscow, declining to comply with European and US sanctions.

In World War II, Türkiye was able to avoid getting caught up in the turmoil, despite its vital strategic location and weight relative to the warring parties. Although it had signed the “Treaty of Mutual Assistance” with Britain and France on 19 October 1939, that is, after the outbreak of the war, “President [İsmet] İnönü and the close circle of foreign policy advisers around him knew that Türkiye was in no condition to take part in any modern war. She was only just beginning to heal the wounds left by the continuous wars from 1909 to 1923, when the Republic had been founded. Therefore, Türkiye had to be kept out of the war, and yet her sovereignty and territorial integrity safeguarded.”¹⁴

¹² Frohman, p. 190.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Selim Deringil, “The Preservation of Turkey's Neutrality during the Second World War: 1940,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (January 1982), p. 30. On 12 May 1939, “Britain and Turkey jointly declared their intention to conclude a reciprocal security pact.” They agreed to “co-operate and assist one another in the event of aggression leading to war in the Mediterranean. They further stated that their agreement was not aimed against any other power. On 19

The most significant stage of the war for Türkiye was 1940, which brought severe crises and unexpected events. Ankara had not anticipated “either the German successes in Western Europe and the developments which brought the Axis to the very doors of Türkiye, or the threat of complete hostile encirclement ...” In 1939, “during the [Turkish] treaty negotiations the British had spoken in terms of the ‘Maginot line’ and the French having ‘the best existing land defences in the world’, this making ‘a direct attack on France most unlikely.’”¹⁵ But the German advance demonstrated to Türkiye the importance of maintaining its cautious policy of non-participation and limiting the scope of the treaty, which seemed to pose a threat to the Germans. “On 14 March the German Ambassador von Papen proposed to İnönü a German-Turkish treaty including a statement from the Turkish Government that Türkiye would defend its neutrality, ‘even with the force of arms’ against the Allies. The British Foreign Office felt that the Germans feared the Allies would be granted facilities in Thrace, the Straits, or the Caucasus even when Türkiye was not a belligerent.”¹⁶

On the other hand, Russia was keen on rapprochement with the Turks as the German threat grew closer. By the end of 1940, Germany wanted to “know what Türkiye’s attitude would be if Russia decided to put into practice her plans in the Straits and the Gulf.”¹⁷ Indeed, the great change represented by the German attack on Russia led to the conclusion of the “German-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and non-Aggression” on 18 June 1941. After the Nazi advances at Stalingrad and El-Alamein were halted, the Allies began again sought Türkiye’s entry into the war, but Türkiye was reluctant to provoke the German forces that were stationed on Türkiye’s borders. But the opening of the second front in Western Europe came as relief to the Turks: with the entry of the US, and “as Allied forces converged on Germany from both east and west, any advantage they might have gained by Turkish entry was superseded by events.”¹⁸ With the declaration of the Allies’ victory and the defeat of Germany approaching, the Turkish government announced itself as joining the Allied forces and declaring war on Germany and Japan on 23 February 1945, mere months before the end of the war officially, and it did not participate in active combat.¹⁹

When Russia annexed the Crimea in 2014, Türkiye tried to follow a policy that bored on neutrality. It condemned the annexation and would not recognise it legally, but it maintained strategic partnership relations with Russia. Türkiye also refused to comply with Western sanctions despite its membership of NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and despite Crimea’s strategic and historical importance to Türkiye, for which it fought a war with Russia from 1853-1856, supported by Britain and France. Russia’s takeover of Crimea did arouse concerns for Türkiye, giving Russia an advantage in the Black Sea by ensuring the continued presence of its fleet without the need for an

October 1939, the declaration became tripartite, when France joined it.” See: Y. Olmert, “Britain, Turkey and the Levant Question during the Second World War,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October 1987), p. 437.

¹⁵ Deringil, p.30

¹⁶ Ibid. p.31

¹⁷ Ibid. p.49

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ State Department and Foreign Affairs Records, National Archive, “RG 84: Turkey,” accessed on 1/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3P42ETc>.

agreement with Ukraine and guaranteeing Russian control over the north as well as the east of the Black Sea.²⁰ But Türkiye dealt with the crisis pragmatically. While it increased its share in the Russian market to compensate for the shortage resulting from Western sanctions, the crisis increased Western dependence on Türkiye as a NATO country, and as one of Europe's defence lines. Türkiye's response to this crisis brought its loyalty to the Western organizations of which it is a member into question.

3. Is Türkiye Neutral in the Ukraine War?

Russia's war on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 renewed controversy about Türkiye's cautious policy, and its stance on the war was dubbed as neutral in both critical western press coverage and supportive Turkish coverage. But is Türkiye truly neutral?

Officially, the Turkish government has not declared neutrality in the Ukraine war. Rather, it considers itself politically on the side of Ukraine and its allies in the West, despite not joining the new and intensified Western sanctions against Russia. When, on 23 February, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree recognizing the "independence" of the two Ukrainian regions of Donbas, the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, and ordered Russian troops to enter as "peacekeepers," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded with a phone call to Putin, stating that "Türkiye will not recognize any violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity and said that his country remains dedicated to de-escalation efforts."²¹

In addition, Türkiye worked to implement the terms of the Montreux Convention of 1936, which gives it the right, during times of war, to restrict the passage of unregistered warships at its bases in the Black Sea through its straits.²² Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that Türkiye had informed Russia that it would close shipping traffic to Russian warships, and that Russia had responded positively that "the ships will not cross the strait." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky praised Ankara's decision, and President Erdogan described him as "my dear friend."²³

Türkiye's pro-Ukrainian position in its conflict with Russia is not new. Türkiye has developed a strong military and trade partnership with Kyiv and was in favour of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO. In Erdogan's meeting with Zelensky in October 2020, during the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Erdogan stressed that "Türkiye considers Ukraine a pivotal

²⁰ Emad Y. Kaddorah, "Flashpoint Ukraine: The Pivot of Geography in Command of the West's Eastern Gateway," *Siyaset Arabiyya*, vol. 2, no. 9 (July 2014), p. 53.

²¹ Natalia Konarzewska, "Turkey, Ukraine and Russia: The Illusion of Neutrality," *Turkey Analyst*, 4/3/2022, accessed on 29/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3MRPEXy>.

²² Article 19 of the Convention stipulates that "in a conflict, Turkey being neutral, vessels of war belonging to belligerent powers should not pass through the Straits", see: Süleyman Seydi and Steven Morewood, "Turkey's Application of the Montreux Convention in the Second World War," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1 (January 2005), p. 79.

²³ Konarzewska.

country to ensure stability, security, peace and prosperity in the region.”²⁴ He reiterated Türkiye’s position that it will not recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea to Russia²⁵.

Turkish-Ukrainian military cooperation has also become a reality that worries Moscow. The two countries have begun to cooperate on a range of military products, such as the Akıncı drone systems. Ukraine purchased 12 Bayraktar drones, with plans, at the time, to purchase a total of 48.²⁶ The aircraft that arrived in Ukraine were used in the war. This infuriated Russia, with Putin protesting their use and calling it a “provocative activity” that undermined the Minsk Accords that had previously halted the war between the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian separatists in the Donbas region. However, Türkiye denied that Turkish arms sales to Ukraine were targeting Russia. Erdogan’s visit to Ukraine on 3 February 2022, shortly before the outbreak of the war, also served to re-affirm Türkiye’s friendship with Ukraine. The two countries signed important new defence agreements and a long-awaited free trade agreement, which had been under negotiation for 12 years. It was expected to raise the bilateral trade volume to more than \$10 billion.²⁷

On the other hand, Türkiye has maintained its strong relations with Moscow, which have developed into a strategic partnership based on two decades of cooperation. It has tried not to allow crises such as the downing of the Russian plane in November 2015, the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara in December 2016, regional competition in Syria and Libya, or the Ukraine conflicts, to undermine this partnership, which it has carefully moulded to balance its relations with the West. Therefore, Ankara sought to take a “balanced,” but not necessarily neutral, position in the recent Ukraine war, presenting itself as an acceptable mediator to both Moscow and Kyiv, given its good relations with the two sides, to find common ground on contentious issues and defuse the war. Turkish officials remained in contact with the parties to the crisis, managing to gather the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine at the Antalya Diplomatic Forum on 11 March 2022, as well as in Istanbul on the 29th of that month.

Erdogan argued that Russia and Ukraine have “legitimate concerns”, calling on both sides to put an end to the “tragedy”. He emphasised that progress in the negotiations would pave the way for a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian presidents, and that there is no loser in a just peace, and that the negotiations between the two countries have entered a “critical” phase.²⁸ His words are chosen carefully, validating the concerns of both sides, and claiming that both seek a “just” reconciliation, apparently with the aim of ensuring the continuation of the negotiation process and Ankara’s continued mediation and painting itself as “neutral” or unbiased at the diplomatic level.

²⁴ “President Erdogan: Annexation of Crimea illegal,” *Anadolu Agency*, 8/7/2020, accessed on 30/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3rvnpu2>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Taras Kuzio, “Turkey Forges a New Geo-Strategic Axis from Azerbaijan to Ukraine,” The Royal United Services Institute, *Commentary*, November 2020, accessed on 1/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3w5AsWy>.

²⁷ Konarzewska.

²⁸ Dea Odeh, “Ankara Is Optimistic about the ‘Istanbul Negotiations’.. Will Putin Take Erdogan’s Advice?”, *Al Hurra*, 29/3/2022, accessed on 30/4/2022, at: <https://arbne.ws/3PFB05Q>.



Türkiye also sought to emphasize the advantages of its balanced position with the emergence of the Ukrainian grain export crisis, especially after Russia announced that “was ready to facilitate the unhindered export of grain from Ukrainian ports in coordination with Türkiye.”²⁹ According to Turkish state media, the agreement of the Russian and Ukrainian parties on Türkiye’s role in this matter gave Ankara the “historical responsibility” to spare the world famine, and as a “guarantor of the application of international law regarding the freedom of movement of goods,” citing the mediation role that Ankara can play to overcome obstacles. Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said it could de-mine Ukrainian ports, but Ukraine does not want Russian warships to enter Odessa, and Russia does not want cargo ships loaded with weapons to arrive at Ukrainian ports, claiming the only way to guarantee this would be a monitoring mechanism.³⁰

It seems that Ankara’s primary goal in these endeavours is to maintain its domestic, as well as regional, stability as much as possible. As long as the war continues so will the exacerbation of the Turkish economic crisis resulting from the depreciation of the Lira and the increase in inflation, especially both Russia and Ukraine are important trading partners. Thus, Türkiye declined to heed the sanctions imposed on Russia, because, according to the writer Yusuf Erim at *TRT*: “Turkey has not taken part in sanctions because it understands that those sanctions will probably hurt Turkey just as much as they will hurt Russia, so Turkey wants to continue to take a balanced position and it will do this as long as possible as long as Russia does not cross any serious red lines.”³¹

The war in Ukraine has far-reaching security and economic consequences for Turkish regional security. Türkiye may eventually have to make the inevitable decision to side with either Russia or Ukraine due to the length of the war, its potential extension to NATO members, or amplified pressure from Western allies to commit to sanctions against Russia. The war is also spilling into Türkiye’s backyard in the Black Sea, which will have security consequences for in the surrounding area, and the continued closure of its straits to warships, and perhaps also to merchant ships if chaos prevails. Added to this is the possibility of direct threats or retaliatory attacks from Russia if Türkiye fully aligns itself with Western allies.

Fundamental questions arise in this context. Has any specific, publicized, official request been made by NATO for Türkiye to comply with full sanctions? Has a request been issued to Türkiye to participate in any military operations against Russia in Ukraine? And what are the demands of Ukraine itself from Türkiye?

There does not in fact appear to be an official request regarding Türkiye’s compliance with sanctions against Russia, although, as indicated above, the Western press has criticised Türkiye’s position. Western countries are aware of the extent to which the Turkish economy is currently dependent

²⁹ “Putin ready to facilitate unfettered grain exports from Ukraine’s ports - Kremlin”, *Reuters*, 30/5/2022, accessed on 10/6/2022 at: <https://reut.rs/3Co5DSC>.

³⁰ “Save the World from Starvation... Turkey’s Efforts to Lift the Siege on Ukrainian Grain”, *TRT Arabic*, 1/6/2022, accessed on 10/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3HaNilT>.

³¹ Yusuf Erim, is Türkiye’s English-language state broadcaster *TRT World*’s Editor-in-Chief, see: “Turkey, a Mediator in Ukraine, Mends its Own Ties with Neighbours,” *Al-Jazeera*, 30/3/2022, accessed on 30/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3vRSQ7a>.

on Russia, especially in light of the current economic situation, and its dependence on Russian energy and the “TurkStream” pipeline that reaches Europe. European countries in particular are also aware that Türkiye’s dependence on Russia has deepened in part due to the delay and suspension of negotiations regarding European Union membership for years. For their part, no NATO member has been requested to join hostilities in Ukraine. On the contrary, warnings have been issued against members being drawn into the war, because the Russian response to any member will oblige NATO to officially enter the war under Article V of its charter.³² Thus, there is no need to assess whether Türkiye is “neutral” or not, in terms of sanctions or participation as there is no official invitation to Ankara to engage in them.

However, Türkiye can be considered as following NATO policy in general, as:

1. It is fully committed to Western policy, having condemned the Russian acts and requested Moscow’s withdrawal from Ukraine. Nor does Türkiye recognise the annexation of Crimea or the separatist republics in Eastern Ukraine or any new status quo in Ukraine.
2. It is obligated to close the straits to warships under the Montreux Convention, also in response to the request of Ukraine and the West.
3. Ankara is also committed to solving the conflict through negotiations and diplomacy, as requested by NATO and the West generally. Germany and France tried to mediate an end to the war, sending top officials to Moscow and Kyiv to broker a ceasefire, in much the same manner.
4. Türkiye continues to support Ukraine militarily, selling Ukraine many of its drones despite Russian objections.
5. Türkiye has welcomed Ukrainian refugees, as the West has, but at a slightly slower pace given the geographical and logistic, and even cultural, challenges. Most displaced Ukrainians have headed to Europe where they have been welcomed with open arms.

In addition, Türkiye has recently modelled a regional confrontation with Russia, despite the bilateral strategic partnership between them and the vast mutual interests. What puts these interests at risk? In addition to Türkiye’s military interventions in Syria in 2016-2020, and in Libya in 2020, with an indirect confrontation with Russia, the Azerbaijan war in late 2020 demonstrated the threat that Ankara can pose to Moscow.³³ Türkiye helped Azerbaijan militarily to end the war decisively and regain much of its territory. It is not unlikely that Türkiye will review its policies and behaviour in Ukraine based on developments on the ground and the risk of a spill over into Europe.

Ukraine itself has directed no criticism towards the Turkish position on the war, and does not consider it neutral, nor has it formally requested of Ankara to join the sanctions. Rather, Kyiv has praised

32 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Collective Defence - Article 5,” accessed on 5/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3wfaYa7>.

33 Türkiye has been bound to Azerbaijan by the Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement since 2010, while Russia has been linked with Armenia by the the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) since 1997. See: Kuzio; Daria Isachenko, “Turkey–Russia Partnership in the War over Nagorno-Karabakh,” SWP Comment 2020/C 53 (November 2020), accessed on 5/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3w35nCO>.

Ankara's role in mediating the negotiations and asked for Türkiye to act as a guarantor of security for any peace agreement ending the war.

Conversely, Zelensky has criticized Ankara for taking steps to boost Russian tourism and, in an interview with the state-run Greek channel ERT saying, “on the one hand, Türkiye acts as a mediator and supports Ukraine with important steps, and on the other hand, we see, for example, preparing several tourist routes at the same time, especially for Russian tourism [...] You cannot deal with it that way, it's a double standard [...] because a choice must be made — are you in favour of the truth or not?”³⁴ It must be noted that such criticism is rare, even now. Since it was given as an answer to a question for Greek television, already critical of Türkiye, it can be understood in its context. However, this position does not conceal Ukrainian hopes that Türkiye will play a greater role, perhaps in terms of putting pressure on Moscow, or providing Kyiv with more weapons and drones, or making more efforts to de-escalate. These demands are similar to those that the Ukrainian president has also repeatedly directed towards the West since the start of the war. Ukraine's priority is to end the war, and it seeks to use all the cards for this, including Türkiye, which could successfully invest its friendship with Moscow achieving this end.

Taken together, the risk-reward calculations in the West and Ukraine's assessment of Türkiye's position on the war thus far, may indicate the following:

1. NATO is currently in dire need of the efforts of every member, including Türkiye, especially if the war expands. NATO cannot afford to lose Türkiye because of the issue of sanctions alone, as one of the largest countries in the alliance, with the second largest number of soldiers, while the risk of entering a world war looms.
2. Türkiye's geographical position on the frontlines, its weight in NATO, and its stores of nuclear weapons will dissuade President Putin from expanding and luring a NATO member into the war, avoiding any action that could cause Türkiye to officially enter this war. Türkiye represents an economic balancing element for Russia, as it did not participate in the sanctions in 2014 and 2022, while its current economic significance makes it valuable to Moscow in light of Russia's declining trading options, especially if the European oil embargo is fully implemented.
3. Europe is shouldering the huge cost of enforcing sanctions against Russia, including energy shortages and rapid inflation. The European Union cannot afford to lose another major economic partner, such as Türkiye, with which its trade exchange amounted to about \$178.4 billion in 2021.³⁵ Türkiye is one of the most promising energy sources following the discoveries of natural gas in the Black Sea, the total of which has been confirmed so far has risen to 540 billion cubic meters.³⁶ It is also one of the most important potential export routes for gas in the eastern Mediterranean,

³⁴ “Zelensky Complains of Turkey's Double Standards on Russian Tourists,” *Ahval*, 2/3/2022, accessed on 4/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3KUfOyS>.

³⁵ Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), “Exports by Country Group and Year” 2021; “Imports by Country Group and Year,” 2021, accessed on 7/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3uJqv0j>.

³⁶ “Erdogan says Turkey Discovered 135 bcm Additional Natural Gas in Black Sea,” *Reuters*, 4/6/2021, accessed on 7/5/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/3MWLYLn>

especially after the improvement of its relations with Israel, and the possibility of reviving gas transportation projects.

4. Why do Turks prefer neutrality?

The public mood in Türkiye towards the war in Ukraine is cautious, with the public in favour of neutrality over antagonizing Russia or being drawn into sanctions that could have negative consequences for their own country. The overwhelming majority of Turks would prefer their country to play a constructive role based on mediation to end the war. This position is evident in public opinion polls conducted since the beginning of the war. One poll revealed that about 80 percent of respondents prefer that their country remain “neutral” in the war between Russia and Ukraine, and believed that if Türkiye were to become embroiled in the conflict, it will end up suffering “negative” consequences. The poll results also revealed that over 90 percent of respondents said that they are “concerned” about Moscow’s military campaign against Kyiv. It further showed that 78.2 percent of respondents believed that Ankara should remain “neutral”. At the same time, only 2.4 percent of respondents said that Türkiye should side with Russia, while 19.4 percent supported aligning with the positions of NATO.³⁷ Another polling indicated that nearly 84 percent of Turks want their country to either mediate in the conflict or remain neutral.³⁸

The Turkish government’s position seems to reflect the public mood. In fact, Turkish policy towards the Ukraine war has not transcended these opinions in practice. These opinions can be explained by the following reasons:

1. Ankara views Moscow’s offensive behaviour as a strategic challenge, and not an existential threat. It seems that Türkiye has assessed Russia’s conjuncture and considered it limited in both strength and decisiveness.³⁹ Moscow has never threatened Türkiye, nor considered it a hostile state, even while Ukraine used Turkish weapons and drones. As explained earlier, Russia would be reluctant to lose its Turkish economic partner. The exchange of trade between both countries is huge, reaching about \$34.7 billion in 2021.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Türkiye realizes that the US, the EU, and other allies such as the UK, Australia, and Japan are backing Ukraine, and that their collective capabilities and policies are sufficient to constrain Russia and prevent it from expanding the war, which in turn limits the prospects of dragging Türkiye into the conflict.

³⁷ *Turkey Monitor* Poll, conducted by Aksoy Research, see: “80% of Turks ‘Neutral’ to War between Russia and Ukraine,” *Asia News*, 5/3/2022, accessed on 5/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3yjlcaO>

³⁸ Poll conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, see: David Lepeska, “Why don’t Turkey’s People Want Their Government to Back Ukraine?” *The National News*, 18/4/2022, accessed on 5/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3kNs35x>.

³⁹ Şaban Kardaş, “The War in Ukraine and Turkey’s Cautious Counter-Balancing Against Russia,” The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 3/3/2022, accessed on 1/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3sf7GCz>.

⁴⁰ The exchange of trade between Russia and Türkiye came in the interest of the former; as Russia’s exports to Türkiye reached about \$29 billion, with energy exports comprising a major share of it, while the Turkish exports to Russia reached \$5.7 billion. See: Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), “Imports by Country and Year (top 20 country),” 2021; “Exports by Country and Year (top 20 country),” 2021, accessed on 7/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3uJqv0j>

2. Türkiye's reluctance to challenge Russia directly during the 2014 Ukraine crisis was in part because of the timid response by the US and the EU, which was neither sufficient to address the root causes of the crisis nor assure its allies. This response has indeed enforced a key feature of Türkiye's strategic culture — adopting a risk-averse approach during volatile circumstances. Being aware of this, Türkiye's main concern was reflected in its avoidance of being dragged into an unwarranted escalation by tepid Western policies, which would then leave Türkiye standing alone in a bilateral confrontation with Russia⁴¹. This concern intensified when Türkiye shot down the Russian plane in November 2015, with both countries coming close to cutting their relations, and escalating tensions to a point that stopped just short of a military clash. As a member of NATO, Türkiye felt let down by the insufficient reaction and solidarity from the alliance. Therefore, Türkiye is still watching its allies' moves closely, and does not yet seem to be interested in taking escalatory steps towards Moscow, losing an important partner, and potentially being abandoned by NATO. Perhaps Türkiye suspects that the West will not respond to its security demands and concerns in the same way as it responded to Ukraine's.
3. In prevailing Turkish opinion, the US represents a threat to Türkiye's regional interests, which has contributed to a Turkish-Russian rapprochement that has acted as a balancing factor with Washington.⁴² Many policies taken by the latter are seen as inconsistent with the alliance, beginning with an arms embargo following the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in 1974, hosting Fethullah Gülen, who Ankara has accused of plotting the 2016 coup attempt, the US support for the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) in northern Syria, the US suspension of Ankara's delivery of the F-35 fighter aircraft, the economic sanctions passed by the US Congress⁴³ and President Joe Biden's recognition of the so-called "Armenian genocide" of 1915 during the Ottoman rule.⁴⁴ These facts, spanning over nearly five decades, seem to have convinced the Turks that the US, although formally an ally, is a threat. Therefore, it is not in Türkiye's interest to end its carefully designed partnership with Moscow, despite the various challenges and disagreements.
4. Türkiye seeks to prevent the expansion of the war into the Black Sea basin, a region bringing together Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, and Bulgaria. These countries are among Ankara's most important partners in fields that include economics, politics, defence, and security. And given the size and weight of Türkiye in this region, it will thus be one of the

41 Kardaş.

42 Ibid.

43 Nurullah Gür, Mevlüt Tatlıyer and Şerif Dilek, "The Turkish Economy at the Crossroads: The Political Economy of the 2018 Financial Turbulence," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Fall 2019), p. 148.

44 Biden repeated this position twice so far. He made his first statement in April 2021, three months after assuming presidency, and then re-asserted it in April 2022. This means that it has become a steady policy for his administration, and perhaps subsequent administrations, and he may remind Türkiye of it and use it as a leverage, despite the current US need for Ankara's cooperation, while it is on the verge of a possible conflict on an international level in the Turkish neighborhood. See: The White House, "Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day," 24/4/2021, accessed on 28/4/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3gMdlld>; The White House, "Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day," 24/4/2022, accessed on 7/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3kUFAIs>



most affected by the turmoil and chaos, which may also reflect on the stability of the straits and its financial income.

5. Until the presidential and parliamentary elections of June 2023, public opinion will be heavily monitored. The current government will likely consider the public polling results regarding the Ukraine war, and establish a balanced or neutral policy, amping up mediation efforts in an attempt to prevent the conflict from escalating or expanding into NATO countries.
6. However, despite Türkiye's cautious position, which opponents or supporters may perceive respectively as either negative or positive "neutrality", Ankara should not continue to assess the current situation in terms of its past experiences solely with the West or Russia. Rather, Türkiye can benefit from the transformations in each new phase given the immediate and strategic challenges. The war in Ukraine has ended an era of relative global stability that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War, or even since World War II, exposing the world once again to a new world war. It may be difficult for Türkiye to maintain its balanced position itself, as it is possible that the conflict extends geographically beyond Ukraine and spills into some NATO countries. It is also possible that the new divisions between the West and Russia, and the subsequent sanctions imposed on the latter, will lead to the conflict's expansion to other regions, perhaps the Middle East, Taiwan, or elsewhere. These potential transformations may demand that Türkiye redefine the threats to its national interests. Ankara must thus re-determine its priorities based on a close reading of the future, taking into account and moving beyond its previous experiences. Even if Turkish public memory remembers disappointments with allies and partners, it is the duty of governments to lead the nations and refine their memories with new successful experiences.

Conclusion: Is Neutrality Türkiye's Best Option?

In answer to the question at hand, Türkiye cannot be defined as neutral in the current Ukraine war; as neutrality is a rare incident in modern history, with Switzerland being the only state to have adhered to it for two centuries now, and most states do not accept or respect the state of absolute neutrality anywhere else, despite the great wars Europe has seen. As mentioned above, this neutrality is legally enshrined in the constitution of Switzerland and has been agreed upon between nations since the Congress of Vienna in 1815. More recently, Finland and Sweden⁴⁵, have only adhered to political neutrality in intermittent periods to avoid supporting warring parties or suffering the repercussions of their wars.

⁴⁵ Finland and Sweden became increasingly concerned about the intense security situation after the Ukraine war, and they preferred to end the reality of their neutrality and asked to join the NATO. Türkiye has expressed its objection to this request, explaining that there are activities by organizations in both countries that it considers terrorist, which in turn represents a threat to the Turkish security. Ankara can reject this request; since approval requires the unanimous consent of the 30 member states of the alliance. However, Türkiye's position has changed as the two countries promise to meet its concerns. See: Bryan Pietsch, "Why Turkey Dissents on Finland and Sweden Joining NATO and Why it Matters," *The Washington Post*, 17/5/2022, accessed on 10/6/2022, at: <https://wapo.st/3O5GvTe>; "NATO Talks to Address Turkey's Concerns on Sweden, Finland Accession," *Daily Sabah*, 1/6/2022, accessed on 10/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3xzQc6S>



In legal terms, and in the context of the current war, neutrality is perhaps the best option for Ukraine itself. In this regard, Azmi Bishara argues that “the only option that is likely to provide long-term stability for Ukraine is neutrality rather than membership of one or another military alliance, in exchange for Russian recognition of its sovereignty” considering this model “crucial for Ukrainian democracy.” He argues that if it had been followed, “Europe might have avoided war.” He believes that this neutrality should be enshrined in the “constitution in such a way that the question could no longer be contested in elections.”⁴⁶ Thus, just as Switzerland has avoided episodes of war throughout history, and in turn spared its neighbouring countries from any conflict that may have arisen from the presence of multiple European ethnicities, Ukraine could also be spared this fate through a similar formal neutrality sponsored by the major powers.

Türkiye meanwhile faces great difficulties in pursuing neutrality, which Western countries cannot accept because of its NATO member status. Türkiye has sought to enhance its position over the past two decades and would do well not to follow the example of small countries like Switzerland, or of fragile buffer states like Ukraine.

Indeed, Türkiye has never been neutral — neither historically nor recently. During World War II, it was bound in a treaty with Britain and France signed in 1939, but it did not activate the terms of the treaty fearing German retaliation. Türkiye was also bound in a friendship treaty with Germany in 1941 which it abandoned, along with its policy of caution, when it declared war on Germany few months before the end of the war. Furthermore, Ankara was not neutral in the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and even condemned Russia’s annexation of the Crimea. However, it maintained a balanced position, distancing itself from sanctions and any possible negative repercussions of antagonizing Russia. Currently, Ankara has not officially declared its neutrality, but rather committed itself to the positions of its Western allies, with the exception of economic sanctions. Ankara has not been formally requested to adhere to these sanctions that could harm Türkiye perhaps more than Russia, given that Turkish exports to Russia do not exceed one-sixth of its imports from Russia, with energy needs comprising the bulk.

Instead of Türkiye being in a state of impossible neutrality both legally and politically, its balanced behaviour and inclination towards a mediator role or as guarantor of a peace treaty should be emphasised. This could mean major strategic gains for Türkiye, if successful. However, this will require new thinking about the effectiveness of Türkiye’s role in the event that this trajectory does not pan out and otherwise heads towards an escalation of the conflict.

⁴⁶ Azmi Bishara, “Russia, Ukraine and NATO: Reflections on the Determination to Not Avoid the Road to War”, *Studies*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 27 February 2022, p. 20, accessed on 7/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3c187LC>

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