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## Turkey: The Real Winner of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis and Lessons for India

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When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian fear was a powerful NATO force on its doorstep due to the growing western influence in Ukraine and its bid to join NATO under the 2008 deal.<sup>1</sup> But after almost six months of the inconclusive war, Russia's belief in sweeping the Ukrainians hit a wall; while also inflating the threat environment nearby, resulting in Finland and Sweden seeking NATO's shelter.<sup>2</sup> While both Ukraine and Russia are bleeding, exploiting the fissures in world politics, Turkey is relishing the moment to turn the crisis into a positive gain for itself. Initially, Turkey blocked their bids to join NATO, however, it dropped its objection later, as opportunism dwarfed the ill-conceived decision.<sup>3</sup>

### **Independent Foreign Policy under Pressure:**

For Ankara, Washington is responsible for the war due to its expansionism, which sowed the seeds of insecurity in the Russian regime. Criticizing its allies, Ankara strongly demurred the West, suggesting that "the outbreak of the conflict is due to years of expansionism... after the fall of the Berlin Wall." Taking this plunge, Ankara unsettled the EU and the US whose pressures tactics failed to budge the Turkish independent stance. Ankara now necessarily leverages autonomy for pursuing its national interest.

The conflict is turning out to be a treasure trope for Turkey. Ankara is mending its ties with neighbours, including Armenia, Israel, the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> Ankara's reputation and credibility as a reliable ally hit a blow when it defended its human rights violations and intervened in Syria. In anticipation of undoing the wrongs, Turkey emphatically offered its territory as a neutral ground to diffuse the tensions between Moscow and Kyiv. Turkish efforts, indeed, demonstrated its intent to behave more responsibly. Although tempering down of conflict was desired, following the Bucha killings revelation, the negotiations were put on hold and there has been no progress since March. Clearly caught between a hard place and a rock, Ankara cherished 'fence' sitting without strongly taking a stance against anyone. While realising its dependency on Russia's oil and gas, Turkey softened its approach toward Russia, without taking any tangible action. Furthermore, to sate its allies and earn their goodwill and trust, it offered a verbal condemnation, criticising the Russian offence as "unacceptable".

Ankara has good ties with Ukraine in military and economic terms. Before this conflict, Ankara was selling weapons to Ukraine. According to figures released by the Turkish exporters' assembly on April 6, in the first quarter of 2022, Ankara sold weapons worth \$59.8 million, including famous the Turkish TB2 (Bayraktar) drones that were also deployed by Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh war against Russian-backed Armenians.<sup>5</sup> The drone proved effective, with a devastating impact on

Russia. Now, Ankara is facing tough manoeuvring by warming its military ties with Russia, and purchasing military equipment like the S-400 while also providing military equipment to its Russian adversary. In other words, Turkey has positioned itself well in this strategic calculus. Playing well between the two adversaries, Ankara pursued its interests without slacking or sacrificing its relations with either power, further suggesting that commitment to allies may not outweigh Ankara's reliance on strategic autonomy.

### **Trying to be friends with everyone:**

Ankara's dependencies on Russia, which are mostly 'asymmetric', forced it to rely on Moscow. The unbalanced economic relations create vulnerabilities if Turkey tries to irk Russia, while such dependencies also give leverage to Moscow to put pressure on Turkey. If relations go sour, the ultimate cost will be inflicted on Turkey. More so, the Turkish dependence on Russian gas imports and the construction of the first nuclear power plant exacerbate the fears of 'decoupling', which will mostly harm Turkey's national interests. Thus, it is hard for Ankara to anger its third-largest trading partner, but following pragmatism, it is trying to balance one side with another.

A recent survey was conducted by Metropoll in January this year about improving its relations with the world.<sup>6</sup> While 39.5% favoured good ties with Russia and China, 37.5% desired improved relations with the US and EU. Balancing the demand, Erdogan is trying to project himself as the only one who can balance between two opposing sides, thereby reflecting his desire to secure more diplomatic space in western and non-western capitals.

### **The win-win deal for Erdogan:**

When Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO, leaving their history of neutrality behind, following Ukraine's invasion, Turkey blocked their attempt to join the 30 member alliance. On the sidelines of the alliance summit in Madrid, on June 29, Turkey signed an agreement with Finland and Sweden to support their bid to join NATO after getting assurances from the country's leaders on its demand.

Under the agreement, Finland and Sweden will fast track the extradition of 33 Kurdish militants.<sup>7</sup> Ankara has been blaming Helsinki and Stockholm for supporting and harbouring terrorists on their soil. The Kurdish worker's party (PKK), which has been declared a terrorist organization by Turkey, is functioning from Stockholm. This agreement will also ensure that Finland and Sweden vow to "not provide any kind of support" to the YPG- a PKK offshoot working in Syria against Turkey, along with banning the PKK.

Erdogan evinced that Turkey “got everything it wanted” from Sweden and Finland when they agreed to remove the arms embargo which they applied after Turkey’s offence against Syria in 2019, for human rights violations.<sup>8</sup> This NATO bid by the two Scandinavian countries was a chance for Turkey to kill two birds with one stone. Along with getting assurance from Finland and Sweden to end their support for militants, it also got a good deal from the US. To felicitate the agreement between Ankara and Finland and Sweden, the US is now willing to sell a newer version of the F-16 to Turkey, which has been a longstanding demand from NATO allies.<sup>9</sup> After Turkey was removed from the F-35 program due to its decision to buy the Russian S-400 missile defence system, the F-16 aircraft became very important for Turkey's defence.

### **Lessons for India:**

India’s management of the whole Russia-Ukraine crisis by maintaining its strategic autonomy in taking decisions is commendable even after being under immense pressure from the west and especially the US. However, India can still learn valuable lessons from Turkey’s behaviour in successfully sailing through the crisis while also managing to maximise its gains. First, India has to learn how to play both sides in the same game. While India provided medical assistance to Ukraine and refrained from voting against Russia in all the UNs meetings, it faced backlash from the Western democracy. During the evacuation of Indian students from Ukraine, it faced a struggle from Ukrainian authorities at the beginning of the conflict, while Turkey has managed to play both sides equivocally.

Second, India has to come out of its shell of comfort and should project itself as a power that has stakes in global events. Unlike other countries like Turkey and France, who suggested mediating between Moscow and Kyiv, India never bothered itself to project itself as a neutral ground for such mediation. India has to grow out of the thinking that providing mediation will increase other countries' chances to interfere in its internal matters. Such thinking restricts Indian options in this strategic game but is a detriment to the pursuance of its interests.

**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> Aditi Sangal et al., “February 24, 2022 Russia-Ukraine news”, *CNN*, February 24 , 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-24-22-intl/index.html>. Accessed on June 30, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> “Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO”, *NATO International*, May 18, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_195468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm). Accessed on June 30, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Sabbagh, “Turkey lifts objections to Finland and Sweden’s NATO bid”, *The Guardian*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/28/turkey-lifts-objections-to-finland-and-swedens-nato-bid>. Accessed on July 1, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Benjamin Osterlund, “Turkey, a mediator in Ukraine, mends its own ties with neighbors”, *Aljazeera*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/30/turkey-a-mediator-in-ukraine-mends-its-own-ties-with-neighbours>. Accessed on July 1, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Bejamin Ostelund, “Amid war fears, Ukraine stocked up on Turkish defence equipment”, *Aljazeera*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/12/amid-war-fears-ukraine-stocked-up-on-turkish-defence-equipment>. Accessed on July 1, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Samuele Damilano and Sergio Cantone, “Why turkey’s Erdagon is trying to cast himself as the main mediator between Russia and Ukraine”, *Euronews*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/05/17/why-turkey-s-erdogan-is-trying-to-cast-himself-as-the-main-mediator-between-russia-and-ukr>. Accessed on July 1, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Padmashree Anandan, “Explained / How Turkey made peace with Sweden and Finland joining NATO”, *The Hindu*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-how-turkey-made-peace-with-sweden-and-finland-joining-nato/article65582760.ece>. Accessed on June 30, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> AFP, “Turkey seeks extraditions from Finland, Sweden under NATO deal”, *The Hindu*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/turkey-seeks-extraditions-from-finland-sweden-under-nato-deal/article65582760.ece>. Accessed on June 30, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Michael D. Shear and Steven Erlanger, “The U.S. moves closer to selling F-16S to Turkey”, *The New York Times*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/world/europe/us-turkey-f16s-nato-ukraine.html>. Accessed on July 1, 2022.