

“Don’t poke the Russian bear”: Turkish policy in the Ukrainian crisis

By Balkan Devlen

■ Executive summary

From the start of the Ukrainian crisis Turkey kept a low profile and adopted a strategy best described as “don’t poke the Russian bear”. Russia is a major Turkish trading partner and Turkey relies heavily on Russian natural gas for its energy needs, while Turkish prime minister Erdogan has also been dealing with serious domestic challenges in the last year. Therefore, due to both external and internal factors, Turkey will avoid confronting Russia directly and will pass the buck to the U.S. and EU. In the short to medium term there are three plausible scenarios under which Turkey will change its current policy. They include the oppression of Crimean Tatars by the Russian authorities; military confrontation in the Black Sea between Russia and NATO; or a more unified, tougher stance against Russia by the West. In the long term Turkey most likely will revert to its traditional role of balancing Russia by strengthening its ties with the West, while reducing its energy dependence on Russia.

From the start of the Ukrainian crisis Turkey adopted a cautious policy towards Russia. Turkey declared its support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, denounced the referendum in Crimea as illegitimate, stressed the protection of the rights of Crimean Tatars, and called for dialogue and negotiations to solve the crisis. Throughout all these declarations, however, Turkey was careful not to openly criticise Russia or blame it for the crisis. This is in line with Turkish foreign policy towards Russia in the last decade, which can be summarised as “don’t poke the Russian bear”. Another example of this policy was Turkey’s relatively muted reaction during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. In the Syrian crisis Turkish prime minister Erdogan and foreign minister Davutoglu have been very careful not to denounce Russia for its support of the Assad regime, while simultaneously blaming the West for not doing enough to help the rebels, despite the fact that the Syrian issue was and is central to Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East.

Turkey and Russia

Turkish policy towards Russia in the last decade has four major motivating factors:

- Economically, Russia is very important to Turkey, which imports almost 60% of its natural gas from Russia. The

- Turkish market is second only to that of Germany in terms of the size of Russian energy company Gazprom’s natural gas exports. Turkish businesses also invest heavily in Russia, especially in the construction sector. Turkish producers export billions of dollars worth of agricultural goods to Russia, and Russian tourists are a crucial source of revenue for Turkey’s tourism industry.
- Turkish prime minister Erdogan has a close personal working relationship with Russian president Putin and shares many of the latter’s views on national sovereignty and suspicions of Western intentions in the Caucasus and Central Asia.
 - Historically, the Ottoman Empire fought against Russia 12 times between the 18th and 20th centuries, the largest number of wars conducted against any foe by the Ottomans, who lost most of these wars in the 19th and 20th centuries. Turkey was on the other side of the Iron Curtain during the cold war, neighbouring the Soviet Union in Turkey’s north and east and thus covering NATO’s southern flank. Turkey wanted to avoid being in a similar position after the end of cold war and thus sought to develop closer economic ties with Russia in order to create economic interdependence between the two countries. It is, however, important to note that Turkey’s traditional reflex when faced with an assertive and revanchist Russia is to move close to the West, as it

did during the 19th century and after the Second World War. We could expect this traditional policy to return in the medium to long term if Russia continues with its revisionism.

- Turkey's position in the Black Sea is based on defending the status quo, and the country opposes interference by outside powers, creating a de facto Turko-Russian condominium in the Black Sea. Very strict adherence to the Montreux Convention of 1936, which regulates the passage of naval warships from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits, forms the basis of Turkish policy.

Turkey and the Ukrainian crisis

From the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis Turkey adopted a strategy of avoidance and buck-passing, trying to avoid openly criticising Russia, blaming it for the crisis or taking a clear stance against it. Turkey has also tried to pass the cost of confronting Russia over Ukraine to the U.S. and European Union (EU). European (particularly German) reluctance to impose heavier economic sanctions on Russia and U.S. unwillingness to adopt a more proactive and aggressive stance are in line with the Turkish preference for dealing peacefully rather than dueling with the Russians. However, if the EU and U.S. change course, Turkey will prefer for them to pay the economic and political price. It believes that the struggle over Ukraine is not its fight.

Turkey's reluctance to get involved in the crisis also has domestic political causes. The Erdogan government is battling with a series of domestic challenges. These started with the Gezi Park protests in May 2013, which turned into mass, multi-city anti-government rallies after a brutal crackdown on the protestors by the security forces. These challenges further continued with graft and corruption investigations against four ministers and several businessmen close to the ruling Justice and Development Party in December 2013 and January 2014, which led to government reprisals against and purges of prosecutors and the police who carried out the investigations. Erdogan accused the Gülen movement, his former ally, of trying to orchestrate a coup d'état. Turkey is entering an election period, starting with presidential elections in August 2014, in which the president will be elected by direct popular vote for the first time, followed by parliamentary elections in the spring of 2015. Many observers believe that this presidential election is the first step towards a presidential or semi-presidential system in Turkey. Erdogan is widely expected to run in August. In short, the ruling party and its leader are facing significant domestic challenges – possibly fighting for their political survival – in the next 18 months, and thus confronting a powerful neighbour and important trading partner is the last thing they want.

Public debate in Turkey about Russia and the Ukrainian crisis is very limited. Most of the Turkish public do not care about it and the Crimean Tatar lobby is currently keeping a low profile. Most of the journalistic and political commentary has a pro-Russian slant and comes mostly from the fringe left-wing newspapers and political parties. These groups have bought into the Russian propaganda of a so-called "fascist putsch" in Kiev and portray Russian actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine as self-defence by Russia and Russian-speaking populations against the "junta in Kiev". The main reason for this is the habitual and reflexive anti-Americanism among the Turkish far-left. There is little pro-Ukrainian and pro-NATO commentary and it is limited to outlets such as the "On Turkey" project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.¹ Overall, the public is in favour of the government's cautious policy of not getting involved in the Ukrainian crisis.

Future scenarios

There are three possible scenarios in which Turkey might adopt a more confrontational stance towards Russia:

- *Outright hostility towards and oppression of Crimean Tatars by the Russian authorities in Crimea.* In this scenario, Turkey would be compelled to act. Crimean Tatars have cultural and linguistic ties to Turkey and there is a significant Crimean Tatar community in Turkey that will be important in the upcoming elections.
- *Naval confrontation or clashes in the Black Sea.* A possible Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports, such as Odessa, or a confrontation between the Russian and Bulgarian or Romanian navies would force Turkey to react against Russia to protect shipping lanes and the Turkish Straits. Such a confrontation would also invite further NATO presence in the Black Sea, which Turkey generally opposes.
- *A more unified NATO adopting a tougher stance towards Russia.* This would also force Turkey to follow suit, albeit reluctantly. In the final analysis, Turkey would go along with a unified NATO position because the value of being a member of the Western alliance outweighs the benefits of close economic ties with Russia. But this is a choice Turkey would rather not make.

Future of Turkish-Russian and Turkish-Western relations

What does the Ukrainian crisis mean for Turkish-Russian and Turkish-Western/NATO relations in the future?

In the short to medium term Turkey cannot afford to alienate Russia. Turkey's energy dependence on Russia is too high, while the two countries' commercial ties are too important for this. Therefore, unless Turkey is forced to take a tougher stance by its allies or subsequent Russian actions, it will continue its policy of avoiding confrontation

¹ The German Marshall Fund of the United States is a non-partisan U.S. institution that promotes greater cooperation and understanding between North America and Europe.

and not poking the Russian bear. In the long term, however, Turkey will try to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and thus give itself more freedom of action. Historically, Turkey has always been wary of Russian revisionism and strengthened its ties with other great powers whenever Russia started to act more aggressively. One can also expect Turkey to speed up its plans to build nuclear power stations and increase its efforts to diversify its energy sources, particularly natural gas supplies.

The current U.S. and EU unwillingness to seriously punish Russia for its annexation of Crimea and fomenting of

irredentism in eastern Ukraine enables Turkey to have and eat its cake. Therefore, as long as Western reluctance to confront Russia continues, Turkey will toe the Western line. However, if Russian aggression continues and Ukraine descends into civil war, the West could decide that it is time to get tough. In that case, Turkey would have to make some difficult choices, but would eventually go back to its traditional policy of balancing Russia by siding with the West. This crisis might even be a blessing in disguise for Turkey, because it will most likely lead to greater appreciation of its NATO membership. ■

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