

THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKEY

SUMMARY OF A 'MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE' WEBINAR 27 MAY 2022



OVERVIEW

During the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia, Turkey has engendered goodwill in the West by serving as a mediator between the two nations. However, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's public warning that Turkey may block Sweden and Finland's bids to join NATO risks destroying that goodwill.

In a MEI webinar, a panel of experts¹ looked at how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected Turkey's standing and geopolitical calculations and if Moscow's action led Ankara to rethink its defence ties with Russia. The panel also considered if this provided Turkey with an opportunity to take advantage of a more isolated Russia and advance its interests in places such as Syria and the South Caucasus.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS MADE BY THE PANELLISTS

- Turkey is trying to maintain a delicate balance between the two parties in the ongoing war in the Ukraine.
- It has provided drones to Ukraine and has closed its air and sea spaces to Russia (especially Russian flights over Turkish air space to Syria).
- However, it still welcomes Russian oligarchs and their money while placing certain obstacles before NATO such as its reservations about adding Sweden and Finland to its membership. Also, Russia's plans to build a nuclear reactor that is financed by Russia itself continues to remain intact.
- Turkey is concerned and worried about the fact that the war is entering a new phase which will be a protracted one, leading in the longer term to a new cold war.
- As results, much to its displeasure, this predicted scenario

¹**ALPER COŞKUN** (Senior Fellow within the Europe Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC); **GENERAL (RET.) PHILIP BREEDLOVE** (Former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, currently a Distinguished Professor at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Tech); **SERHAT GÜVENÇ** (Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University)

will make things more complicated for Turkey, especially in context with its relationships in NATO.

- In the Black Sea, while Turkey remains opposed to any restructuring of the Montreux Convention, it does at the same time want to do or show something for boosting NATO in the Black Sea without provoking Russia.
- Turkey is thinking beyond the war especially as no one thinks that there is likely to be a clear winner. Turkey's response however is likely to further exacerbate its ties with the US Congress.
- What Turkey does not want is escalation and especially any escalation in the Black Sea and above it all it does not want to see Russia defeated (i.e., wanting it to remain intact) as it sees Russia as a future security partner.
- Nonetheless, Turkey is unlikely to sign up with Russia for a Black Sea blockade of grain from the Ukraine.
- Previously, in general and especially in places like Syria, Turkey had an asymmetrical relationship with Russia that favoured Russia. Now, in the aftermath of Russia's disastrous showing in the war and the alleged reduction of its forces in Syria, that asymmetric relationship is favouring Turkey.
- Finally, with elections looming in the near future and with the Turkish economy taking a nose-dive, it is likely that Turkey will try and use Russia's weakened position in Syria to launch a new offensive to liberate new areas in Northern Syria for the accommodation of Syrian refugees currently in Turkey – something that will be a vote getter for Erdogan.
- Finally, as a result of the war, Turkish plans for buying engines from Ukraine for various military platforms (planes and helicopters) in its armed forces (that were sanctioned by the US) as well as its plans to sell 4 Corvettes to Ukraine have all fallen through.

