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## **Turkey's Middlepowermanship, Foreign Policy Transformation and Mediation Efforts in the Russia-Ukraine War**

### **Abstract**

This article provides insight into Turkey's strategic pursuit of a more active and influential role as a mediator in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Turkey, positioning itself as a middle power, seeks to elevate its global standing. This involves a delicate diplomatic balancing act in its foreign policy approach towards both Russia and Ukraine. The equilibrium thus achieved positions Turkey as a natural mediator, serving as a catalyst for brokering a peace initiative among the conflicting parties. Ankara's diplomatic activism is not just a tactical move but also a manifestation of Turkey's broader global ambitions, underlining its commitment to playing a more significant role in shaping international affairs. These aspirations clash with a rising penchant in Turkey to pursue a more militaristic and coercive foreign policy, which stands in contradiction to the role of a benign power.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Mediation, Middle Powers

### **Introduction**

In the era of changes occurring in the international order, characterised by what Andrew Hurrell (2006, p. 12) has termed “hegemonic decompression” and Fareed Zakaria (2008) has referred to as the “rise of the rest”, and as articulated by Amrita Narlikar and Rajiv Kumar (2012) in the context of a “pax mosaica”, countries that were previously located

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on the semi-peripheries or even in the peripheries of the global system are increasingly influencing the shape of world politics and the economics. This concerns not only the much-debated BRICS countries, but also – as labelled by Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay (2013; 2017; 2020), “near-BRICS”, such as Turkey, Mexico, and Indonesia. Following the example of those so-called “big revisionist players”, these countries have also started challenging the established hegemonic powers and demonstrating a firm determination to chart a more autonomous course in their policies, one that transcends being merely a reflection of the interests of major powers. They have begun to fill diplomatic niches, strategically searching for global specialisations that would enable them to stand out or escape the ranks of non-major powers. Middle powers stand out among the nations witnessing an increased significance within the global power structure. Examples of such countries include Brazil, India, South Africa, Mexico, and Turkey, and their growing significance is driven by factors including burgeoning economic development, heightened involvement in regional dynamics, and proactive participation in international initiatives and organisations.

In the last 15 years, Turkey has indeed significantly strengthened its international status. Moving from a semi-peripheral state, essentially that of a satellite state whose foreign policy was largely shaped by the interests of a great power in the form of the United States, Turkey has transformed into a more independent player in international relations. It now aspires to conduct its autonomous foreign policy and, in selected areas, even demonstrates leadership ambitions on a regional and global scale. Ayşe Zarakol (2014, p. 740) notes that some observers “were struck by the speed with which Turkey went from a country pursuing a classical secondary state type of foreign policy (and one that was single-mindedly focused on its European and American alliances) to a country with regional or even global leadership ambitions”.

Undoubtedly, today Turkey is no longer perceived as a state on the fringes, and it is increasingly referred to as a “central” player (Davutoğlu, 2008), exerting real influence on international politics and striving to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Some now include Turkey, alongside Brazil, China, Germany, India, Israel, Russia, and the United States, among the countries shaping the international landscape – so-called *shaper nations*. They “all share one major characteristic; in our multipolar and interdependent world, these states will have a decisive influence on their geopolitical *neighbourhoods* and perhaps on international relations the world over” (Hitchcock, 2016, p. 1). Thanks to the “new geographical mental map” or the transforming “geographical

imagination” of Turkish leaders (Aras, Karakaya Polat, 2007; Aras, Fidan, 2009), Turkey has succeeded in significantly diversifying the directions, forms, and instruments of its international engagement. Instead of a cold-war policy of self-isolation in the region, it has begun to strive to play the role of a regional leader. Transitioning from an introverted state, it has become an extroverted player, open to collaboration not only with regional partners but also making efforts to strengthen ties with other emerging powers. It has shifted from being a reactive, passive state, basing its foreign policy on bilateral relations and focusing on security issues, into an active, constructive, and multidimensional player (Keyman, 2009, p. 8). Fuat Keyman and Şebnem Gümüşçü (2014, pp. 72–73) note that “Proactivism and active globalisation constitute Turkey’s response to global turmoil giving rise to uncertainty, insecurity, and the risky nature of the present. Rather than reactionism and inward behaviour, Turkish foreign policy behaviour has been formulated as *active globalisation*, that is, involving and engaging in global problems, as well as in global debates, very actively, and acting in a proactive and outward fashion to strengthen its place and position *vis-à-vis* global turmoil”.

As a result, this article delves into Turkey’s response to the ongoing conflict initiated by Russia against Ukraine since February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, with particular emphasis on Turkey’s proactive mediation endeavours. These efforts serve as tangible evidence of Turkey’s expanding aspirations, underscoring its growing role as a stakeholder in international diplomacy and peace-building. At the same time, one can question whether Turkey, whose foreign policy has been undergoing transformative changes under the AKP government, is best suited to serve as an honest middleman in conflicts in its closest vicinity. Consequently, this article posits that there is a self-expectations-capabilities gap in Turkey’s mediation efforts – a disparity between how the country perceives its role as a mediator and its actual capabilities. As Tarık Oğuzlu (2023, p. 674) aptly notes, Turkey’s “efforts to play an over-ambitious middle power role in global politics seem to have largely failed to produce expected results”.

There has been a notable surge in academic interest and publications related to middle powers’ behaviour, Turkey in particular (Parlar Dal, 2016; Ongur, Zengin, 2016; Öniş, Kutlay, 2017; Karim, 2018; Oğuzlu, 2023). Recently, scholarship has put emphasis on the changing nature of middle powers’ behaviour (Kutlay, Öniş, 2021; Altunışık, 2023; Soyaltin-Collela, Demiryol, 2023), becoming increasingly “unusual” or “modified”. As this paper focuses on recent developments regarding Ankara’s ambitions to mediate between Ukraine and Russia, the empirical part of the analysis concerning the war Russia has been waging against Ukraine and Turkey’s

mediation efforts primarily relies on press releases and reports from think tanks, with a lesser emphasis on the still nascent academic discourse surrounding Turkey's role.

The paper is structured as follows; section 1 discusses what middle powers are and explores why they are perceived as predestined to act as intermediaries in conflicts. Section 2 examines the evolving dynamics of Turkish foreign policy, highlighting a growing inclination towards hard power instruments, resecuritisation, and a quest for strategic autonomy. The subsequent section reviews Turkey's mediation efforts, with a particular focus on Ankara's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war. The final section presents the conclusions.

### **What Are Middle Powers?**

Defining a middle power, like any type of power, is not an easy task, hence the abundance of definitions. Jennifer Welsh (2004, p. 585) and many other researchers, including Carl Ungerer (2007, p. 539), as well as Richard Rigby and William Tow (2011, p. 157), argue that there is no objective definition of a middle power. Andrew Hurrell (Hurrell, 2000, p. 1) writes that the term "middle power" has been applied to such a large number of states with various internal and external conditions that it is difficult to define common patterns of what these states "will" do and what they "can" do. Consequently, there is also no consensus when it comes to delineating the roles assumed by middle powers in the realm of international relations and characterising the nature of their international involvement.

Eduard Jordaan (2003, p. 165) defines middle powers as "neither great nor small in terms of their power, capacity, or influence, and exhibit the capability to create cohesion and obstruction toward global order and governance". They must show a willingness to "assume, in some form, responsibility" for regional affairs, including influencing the behaviour of other states to build stability in the region (Fels, 2016, p. 213). It is underscored that middle powers transcend their regional agendas, embarking on proactive international endeavours that extend to the global stage. What is essential for assessing Turkey's role is the fact that middle powers are expected to act in a way that matches their material capabilities – as benign regional or global actors capitalising on their soft power capabilities (Kutlay, Öniş, 2021, p. 3052).

Selectively, middle powers also harbor leadership ambitions in specific domains. Frequently, they take the lead in niche initiatives, which, precisely due to their niche nature or even secondary or tertiary status,

do not always capture the interest of major powers engrossed in grand global issues. Given their comparatively limited resources compared to great powers, these states cannot engage across the full spectrum of global politics. Thus, within a functional approach, they prioritise their objectives and specialise in narrow areas of international activity. The selection criteria for these “functional niches” are based on the calculation of both narrowly defined national interests and the likelihood of achieving greater influence, as the involvement of middle powers in niche areas lacks a normative foundation that would compel them to assume the role of a “good international citizen” or a “good multilateralist” (Cooper, 1997, p. 7). This approach enables middle powers to achieve a relatively substantial return on their invested resources while simultaneously shaping their image as engaged participants in international politics. It represents a “result-oriented diplomacy” (Higgott, 1997, pp. 37–38), underscoring the importance of actions taken by states that transcend ideological, regional, or developmental differences and divisions. Peyton V. Lyon and Brian W. Tomlin (1979), pointing to the roles characteristic of medium powers, write, among other things, about the role of a “mediator”. Mediations, as William Zartman and Sadia Touval (1985, p. 32) note, may serve the mediator two interests: “one is essentially defensive; the continued conflict between two actors threatens the mediator’s own interests (...). The second self-interested motive for mediation is the desire to extend and increase influence”.

Yet a distinction has to be made between traditional and emerging/new middle powers. In the shifting dynamics of the post-hegemonic global order, characterised by a growing multipolarity and a diminishing Western-centric influence, emerging middle powers are demonstrating a decreased allegiance to international organisations and the norms associated with the liberal order. Their focus has shifted towards a quest for increased autonomy in navigating the complexities of both regional and global political landscapes (Soyaltin-Collela, Demiryol, 2023, p. 127).

### **How Do Changing Dynamics of Turkey’s Foreign Policy Affect Its International Activism?**

In the initial years following the AKP’s rise to power, Turkey underwent a transformative process of democratisation, marking a pivotal shift in the nature of the Turkish state. This period not only significantly bolstered Turkey’s global image but also paved the way for a more pronounced utilisation of soft power. The attractiveness of Turkey’s evolving political

model became a cornerstone for its diplomatic engagements. With the de-securitisation of the Turkish state, traditional power politics, which had long characterised Turkish diplomatic practice, gradually ceded ground to more innovative and nuanced approaches. This shift allowed Turkey to explore creative means, beyond conventional power dynamics, in fortifying its position both regionally and on the global stage. The shifts in the conduct of Turkish foreign policy have transformed Turkey into a benign power. The concept of “zero problems with neighbours” became the official doctrine of Turkish foreign policy. Consequently, non-military instruments took the place of securitisation and the primacy of force in foreign policy as means of building security. Desecuritisation meant a shift of emphasis from hard actions towards Turkey’s civil engagement and developmental cooperation in its immediate and broader neighbourhood.

Yet, the Arab Spring clearly highlighted the geopolitical limitations of Turkey’s imagination, forcing a resecuritisation of its foreign policy. Faced with regional isolation, Turkish decision-makers created slogans, such as “precious loneliness” (Coşkun, 2015) aimed at legitimising this new geopolitical situation, which undermined the achievements of a decade-long regional engagement. In recent years, Turkey has witnessed a departure from its earlier emphasis on diplomacy and soft power approaches towards a reassertion of security concerns and a recalibration of its foreign policy objectives. This shift has been particularly evident in Turkey’s responses to regional conflicts, where the language of security and the prioritisation of national interests have gained prominence. The Syrian civil war, the Kurdish question, and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and East Africa have all played pivotal roles in prompting Ankara to reevaluate and resecuritize its foreign policy. This resecuritisation is often marked by a more assertive stance, an increased military presence in certain regions, and a heightened focus on securing Turkey’s borders. Mustata Kutlay and Ziya Öniş (2021, p. 3051) write about coercive diplomacy and coercive methods that Ankara started employing in its increasingly interventionist foreign policy practices. In regional politics, Turkey has transformed from that of a neutral regional player into a partisan state, engaging in a conflict on one side, thereby damaging its image as an impartial player with mediation capabilities. This is evidenced by, among other things, the intensification of relations with Qatar following the isolation of that country by a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia. The resecuritisation of foreign policy has been even more evident since July 15<sup>th</sup>’s coup attempt. It has also been evident in

its policies in multilateral settings, including NATO, where Turkey has been blocking a further enlargement of the Alliance.

As Turkey grapples with complex geopolitical challenges, the resecuritisation of its foreign policy underscores the intricate interplay between security imperatives and diplomatic considerations in shaping the country's approach to regional and global affairs. This has had an impact on how Turkey perceives itself as a mediator – the country's "conception of its role as a mediator and integrator, drawing on the *logic of interdependence*, was gradually replaced with an assertive quest for *strategic autonomy*" (Kutlay, Öniş, pp. 1102–1103).

This has been coupled with "the recent regression in reforms [which] caused a withdrawal from middle-power activism, and a more recent shift towards populism and anti-democratic tendencies have resulted in foreign policies that not only hinder regional peace but also contribute to the sources of instability within the liberal international order" (Aydın, 2021, p. 1379).

### **What Are the Manifestations of Turkey's Mediation Ambitions?**

As early as the 1980s, Turkey aspired to play a mediator role in international disputes, offering its services to its neighbours such as Iran and Iraq. During the years 1980–1988, these countries were engaged in a war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and caused immense material losses. Turkey also offered its services in the disputes between Iraq and the United States. However, in both cases, Turgut Özal did not want Turkey's actions to be labelled as mediation. He rejected the possibility of acting as an intermediary in intra-state conflicts, as evidenced by the refusal to mediate in talks between the Central Asian republics and Moscow, even before the dissolution of the USSR (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2019, p. 119).

Ankara also exhibited mediating ambitions in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, engaged in the frozen dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh (Oran, 2001, pp. 154, 402). It proposed a "friendly mission" to President Shevardnadze regarding Georgia's dispute with Abkhazia. In the context of the Middle Eastern conflict, both Özal (as prime minister in the 1980s) and Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ismail Cem, in the late 1990s, attempted to act as mediators. With the outbreak of the second intifada, Cem engaged in shuttle diplomacy between Israel, Palestine, and Egypt. He believed that Turkey had the potential to play a mediating role in conflicts and disputes in the Caucasus (Bayer, Keyman, 2012,

p. 76). In 2002, a few months after the September terrorist attacks in New York, under Cem's leadership, the Istanbul Forum of the European Union and the Organization of the Islamic Conference took place, with representatives from 76 countries in attendance. This meeting can be considered a precursor to the Alliance of Civilizations, one of the flagship projects of AKP diplomacy.

With the implementation of a new philosophy in Turkish foreign policy under the rule of the Justice and Development Party, mediations became a significant expression of Turkey's growing ambitions, not only regionally but also globally. Turkey has also mediated in less publicised, more local disputes, even in remote corners of the globe. Undoubtedly, Turkey's activity in the Middle East and its broader neighbourhood falls into the first, "conflicts of considerable significance" category. Turkey viewed its engagement in resolving conflicts in its own neighbourhood as a tool to strengthen its own security, especially concerning the Israeli-Arab conflict. Turkish decision-makers from JDP have often referred to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire as a just and impartial mediator in disputes among communities residing in the Empire. This legacy has practical implications for resolving current disputes – for example, Ahmet Davutoğlu maintained that the Jerusalem status dispute cannot be resolved without utilising the Ottoman archives that Turkey inherited from the Empire (Aras, 2009, p. 131).

Turkey has been actively engaged in facilitating internal reconciliation in several conflict-ridden regions. The first major mediation initiative by Turkey in the Middle East was an attempt to resolve a dispute surrounding Iraq, accused by the USA of possessing weapons of mass destruction. At Turkey's initiative, Iraq's neighbours' meetings were launched. In total, both before the US' intervention in 2003 and after the commencement of military actions, there were 11 official meetings and 3 unofficial meetings, some of which occurring in Baghdad and Tehran. Turkey, resorting to unconventional diplomatic methods, secretly brought the Vice President of Iraq, Taha Yasin Ramadan, one of Saddam's closest collaborators, to Istanbul. However, the attempt to use him as an intermediary to persuade the Iraqi regime to make concessions proved unsuccessful (Murinson, 2006, p. 954). Other than that, Turkey's mediation efforts in the Middle East also include Ankara's activity in defusing the conflict between Israel and Arab states. In November 2007, shortly before the Annapolis summit, a meeting took place in Ankara between Presidents Mahmoud Abbas and Shimon Peres. Both politicians addressed the Turkish parliament. Until the start of the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip at the end of 2008, Turkey mediated between Damascus and Tel Aviv. Between May and



December 2008, four rounds of talks between the conflicting parties were held through Turkey's implementation of so-called "shuttle diplomacy". The legitimization of Turkey's role as a mediator in the disputes between Israel and Arab states stemmed from its familiarity with the local realities of the Middle East. At the same time, Ankara, nurturing its transatlantic identity for decades, remained a regional outsider – it was not directly involved in regional affairs and issues, which made it easier for Turkey to play the role of a broker, a state objectively assessing the disputes taking place in that volatile region.

It is also worth noting that Turkey has repeatedly declared its willingness to mediate in the matter of the Iranian nuclear program. As suggested by Havva Kök and İmdat Öner (2016, p. 58), since the Justice and Development Party came to power, the Turkish government has transitioned in this issue from being an observer to a facilitator, ultimately assuming the role of a mediator. The Turkish-Brazilian initiative, aimed at resolving the crisis in Iran's relations with the West, resonated widely. Both countries presented the initiative regarding the Iranian nuclear program in 2010.

Transcending its ambitions to be active as a mediator in the Middle East, Turkey launched trilateral cooperation mechanisms with Serbia and Croatia to ensure stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and another one with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Additionally, Turkey has provided assistance in facilitating talks between Somalia and Somaliland and offered support to the peace process in the southern Philippines. Turkey's mediation activity has become one of the most significant manifestations of the Turkish quest for middlepowerdom, alongside its engagement in humanitarian and development assistance.

Turkey has been actively institutionalising its involvement in mediation by proposing initiatives within the framework of international organisations. In collaboration with Finland, Ankara inaugurated the "Mediation for Peace" initiative under the auspices of the United Nations, aimed at highlighting the significance of mediation in conflict prevention and resolution while advocating for increased resources to support mediation endeavours. Concurrently, Turkey hosts the "Istanbul Mediation Conferences".

### **How Has Turkey Contributed to Mediations Between Russia and Ukraine?**

Turkey's desire to actively mediate in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict brings into focus its carefully observed policy of cautious neutrality.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Turkey stands out as the most accommodating NATO member in its dealings with Moscow, refraining from imposing sanctions or disrupting diplomatic and economic ties. Instead, Ankara champions the importance of maintaining open channels of dialogue with Russia, emphasising the potential for constructive conversations to pave the way for peaceful reconciliation.

In the debate on Turkey's foreign policy, its relations with Russia have been described as an example of "cooperative rivalry" (Secrieru, Saari, Bechev, 2021), "conflictual cooperation" (Isachenko, 2021) or "managed regional rivalry" (Köstem, 2022). Carlo Frappi (2018, p. 54) writes about the logic of "double compartmentalisation", which involves the separation of economic and political-diplomatic relations on the one hand, and a tendency to marginalise problematic matters that could trigger tensions on the other. Instead, Turkey and Russia tend to focus on those regional issues where their interests converge. This logic makes it possible to "insulate tactical convergences from persistent strategic divergences, effectively capitalising on the former while avoiding being affected by the potentially negative repercussions of the latter" (Frappi, 2018, p. 54).

In parallel, Turkey remains resolute in its commitment to maintaining a delicate balance *vis-à-vis* the war. In a strategic move, it promptly closed its waterways to military vessels at the outset of the conflict, serving as a deterrent to Russia's naval build-up efforts. Additionally, Turkey has not hesitated to provide military support to Ukraine – Turkish drones could be a "game changer" on the battlefield, according to Francis Fukuyama (Daily Sabah, 2021). President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has consistently exhibited dedication to upholding Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

During his official visit to Kyiv in February 2022, at a time when tensions between Ukraine and Russia were rapidly escalating, the Turkish president, in a resounding display of diplomatic leadership, emphasised the paramount need for all parties to exercise restraint. He not only reiterated Turkey's steadfast commitment to upholding Ukraine's territorial integrity but also urged for an immediate de-escalation of hostilities. The President's dedication to seeking a peaceful resolution to the unfolding crisis did not go unnoticed on the international stage. His efforts were lauded and commended by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who extended his praise on February 7<sup>th</sup>, acknowledging the significant role that Turkey was playing in diffusing the mounting tensions.

Within the Turkish media landscape, the President's commitment to fostering regional peace garnered significant attention. This commitment was underscored when he vehemently condemned Russia's decision to

recognise the independence of the self-declared “Donetsk and Luhansk Republics” on February 22<sup>nd</sup>. President Erdoğan regarded this move by Russia as not only provocative but also wholly unacceptable, firmly opposing the unilateral declaration of independence by these regions.

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, President Erdoğan issued a clear and unequivocal condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, categorising it as a grave obstacle to regional peace, stability, and calm. He reiterated Turkey’s staunch backing of Ukraine’s ongoing endeavours to protect its territorial integrity, underscoring the fundamental importance of preserving the sovereignty of all nations (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2022).

In March 2022, an important development in the Russia-Ukraine war materialised as high-ranking officials, including Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitro Kuleba, came together for diplomatic discussions (MFA Turkey, 2022). This dialogue, moderated by Turkey’s Foreign Minister, marked a critical attempt to stop the war in the very first phase thereof. Following this significant development, on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022, substantial peace negotiations unfolded in Istanbul, with both Russian and Ukrainian delegations in attendance. The progress realised during these deliberations was described by Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, as the “most substantial” breakthrough witnessed since the initiation of the conflict. Furthermore, on the very same day, the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, the Istanbul Mediation Conference convened, shedding light on Turkey’s noteworthy contributions to international diplomatic efforts.

This intricate tightrope walk and strategic wavering between Russia and Ukraine position Turkey, according to its leadership, as a potential mediator between the conflicting parties and a key catalyst for fostering peace in the region.

Turkey’s diplomatic efforts were a key factor in brokering an important deal in Istanbul. This deal brought together Turkey, the United Nations, Russia, and Ukraine and led to the reopening of several Ukrainian ports. This allowed for the release of a large grain stockpile that had been stuck there for months due to the ongoing conflict. The Black Sea Grain Initiative has played a vital role in addressing a growing global food crisis, preventing a potential worldwide food shortage.

The initial agreements governing the export of food and fertilisers from Ukraine’s Black Sea ports had a duration of 120 days. However, in October 2022, Russia suspended its participation in the agreement, citing suspected air and sea attacks on Russian naval vessels in Sevastopol, Crimea. Russia contended that Ukrainian air and sea forces may have been responsible for the attacks, purportedly using civilian vessels for

the operation. It was only after Ukraine provided written assurances, facilitated through Turkish mediation, that Russia consented to reengage with the Black Sea grain initiative. Consequently, the agreement was extended for another 120 days. The successful resolution of this crisis owed much to the diplomatic endeavours led by Turkey's President, Defense Minister, and Foreign Minister, who all played a pivotal role in persuading the parties to return to the negotiating table.

On the 22nd of September, 2022, an unforeseen breakthrough was achieved as Ukraine and Russia reached an agreement on a prisoner exchange, a pivotal moment facilitated by Turkish mediation, and President Erdoğan personally, who met President Putin at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. This historic accord led to the liberation of a significant number of detainees, encompassing 215 Ukrainian citizens and 55 Russian and pro-Russian combatants (Reuters, 2022). Three weeks later, president Erdoğan intensified his personal commitment by proposing a meeting between Putin and Western leaders. Moreover, by mid-November, he had actively promoted the idea of direct and comprehensive peace talks between Ukraine and Russia (Butler, 2023).

Fast forward to a significant international conference held in Ankara in January 2023, with the presence of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. During this gathering, Ukraine's human rights ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, engaged in a sideline meeting with his Russian counterpart, Tatyana Mosalkova. Their discussion yielded a preliminary announcement of an agreement involving the exchange of "more than 40 prisoners" from each side (Anadolu Agency, 2022). However, this initial announcement was subsequently retracted, underscoring the intricate nature of such negotiations and the challenges inherent in navigating complex diplomatic terrain.

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Russia announced a 60-day extension of the grain deal, stating that this duration would suffice for evaluating the success of the memorandum signed with the United Nations. As per the United Nations, the agreement's terms allowed Ukraine to export approximately 28.8 million tons of agricultural products, including 14.6 million tons of corn and 7.8 million tons of wheat. Although Russia's refusal in mid-2023 to extend the agreement once again was – despite successive attempts by the Turkish leader, including during his trip to Sochi where he met Vladimir Putin in September 2023 in yet another opening of "grain diplomacy" (France24, 2023) – allegedly grounded in its grievances over unmet commitments concerning the liberation of its food and fertiliser shipments (Reuters, 2023), it is essential not

to downplay Turkey's significance as a facilitator in the Russia/Ukraine conundrum.

In addition to brokering the grain deal, an Istanbul-based Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) has been established. It includes officials from the three concerned nations and the United Nations and is responsible for ensuring the smooth implementation of the Initiative and managing the transportation of goods from Ukraine's Black Sea ports.

## Conclusions

The structural transformations unfolding within the global political and economic landscape have triggered a reevaluation of foreign policy priorities among Turkish elites. This recalibration may be seen as a strategic response to Turkey's positioning amid systemic shifts, notably the decreasing strength of the West. The waning relative power of the United States and the European Union on the international stage, along with adverse developments in domestic politics, serve as impetuses pushing Turkey toward a course of more autonomous foreign policy and a diversification of its international engagement strategies.

Today, Turkey is at a pivotal juncture, wherein it seeks to reinforce its position as a middle power while simultaneously aiming for greater regional and global autonomy. A tangible manifestation of this evolving role is Turkey's proactive involvement as a mediator in the war Russia has been waging against Ukraine. By assuming a mediator role and trying to ensure open lines of communication with both opposing factions, Turkey has tried to reinvigorate diplomatic endeavours aimed at finding a resolution to the crisis. Turkey's equidistant policy *vis-à-vis* Russia and Ukraine reflects its diplomatic balancing act in the face of the ongoing conflict. Ankara has sought to maintain a pragmatic middle ground, engaging with both sides. This signifies Turkey's increasing determination to assert its independence and take on a more self-reliant role in shaping the course of global affairs.

Turkey's recent foreign policy trajectory, marked by assertiveness and militarism, introduces a potential clash between roles. On one hand, there is the role of a benign power focused on humanitarianism and mutual benefit. On the other, however, there is the role of a more assertive power readily employing hard power tactics. This dynamic presents a complex interplay that may lead to conflicts in role performances.

Moreover, the surging trend of securitisation raises considerable apprehensions regarding Turkey's capacity to maintain neutrality and impartiality in its mediation efforts. The heightened prioritisation of

security measures could cast doubt on Turkey's image as a neutral mediator, especially in the context of regional conflicts. The intricate balance between assertiveness, militarism, and the traditional role of a benign power adds layers of complexity to Turkey's evolving foreign policy landscape.

The timing of the Ukraine-Russia war coincides with a phase in which Turkey has strategically embraced more pacifist approaches in its foreign policy. The considerable political and economic challenges faced by Turkey in recent years have compelled a shift toward a more cautious diplomatic stance. This shift is reflected in Turkey's efforts to enhance relations with various nations, including Armenia, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and the European Union, as highlighted by Akpınar (2022). In response to the complex geopolitical landscape, Turkey is expediently attempting to reconstruct its image and ideational capabilities as a mediator in regional conflicts. In an alternative phrasing, it incorporates mediations as a key instrument within its diplomatic toolbox.

Being an "unusual" or "modified" middle power, Turkey's role as a mediator is primarily driven by a dual objective; firstly, to safeguard its own interests, and, secondly, to expand and amplify its influence. Contrary to the conventional role of middle powers as "good international citizens", Turkey's motivations for mediation efforts are pragmatic and strategic. Despite the varying degrees of success in Turkey's mediation endeavours as demonstrated, for instance, by the grain deal – its underlying motivations deviate from the idealised roles of traditional middle powers. Instead, they align more with the ambitions and aspirations characteristic of emerging, rising powers.

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