

Will Turkey Help Washington If Russia Invades Ukraine?

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Brief Analysis

Fears of Russian military power may keep Ankara out of the spotlight, but its Black Sea calculations and Crimean Tatar sympathies indicate a willingness to assist behind the scenes if necessary.

With concerns rising over a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine, many observers are wondering how Turkey might react to war between its Black Sea neighbors. In particular, would Ankara back U.S.-led efforts to defend Kyiv's sovereignty?

On one hand, Turkey is keen on maintaining the balance of power in the Black Sea littoral. It also opposes Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, due in part to its sympathies for the indigenous Turkic Tatar community. Together with growing Turkish-Ukrainian defense cooperation, these factors would seem to bode well for Ankara backing Washington in the event of war.

On the other hand, Turkey has an ingrained policy of avoiding direct conflict with its **most powerful military neighbor (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-desert-storm-putins-plan-use-americas-military-playbook-against-ukraine>)**, and the level of rapport and diplomatic engagement between Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin has grown substantially since the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. Thus, while Ankara may provide quiet assistance to Ukraine if war breaks out, it is unlikely to match the robust public support exhibited by Britain, Poland, and other key governments in a potential U.S.-led coalition.

Black Sea Balance

Russia is Turkey's historic nemesis, and Ankara has long viewed its northern neighbor with consternation. In the Cold War era, the threat of Russian military action played a major role in convincing Turkey to join NATO in 1952 and gradually form a close bilateral relationship with the United States.

These fears have made the Black Sea a special area of concern for Turkey. The Montreux Convention rendered the sea a limited-access zone in 1936, and its terms continue to guide Ankara's strategic vision of ties with Moscow and Kyiv nearly a century later.

The sole maritime access to the Black Sea is through Istanbul's Bosphorus Strait. The Montreux Convention grants free naval access to littoral states only, and forbids non-littoral states from maintaining a permanent naval presence in the sea. In addition to this time limit, non-littoral navies face restrictions on the type and tonnage of warships they can send through the strait (e.g., the weight limit for some foreign states is as low as 15,000 tons, restricting their potential naval presence to two or three surface combatants at most).

In theory, all six littoral states share the Black Sea militarily. Yet four of these states—Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, and Ukraine—have relatively small navies (e.g., mostly coast guard vessels in Tbilisi's case). Hence, the Black Sea is effectively a maritime condominium shared by Turkey and Russia. Since the end of the Cold War, Ankara has courted the other littoral states more intensively to build influence against Moscow's military might.

Turkish ties with Ukraine in particular have improved considerably under Erdogan. They have increased their trade activity in recent years and launched a visa- and passport-free travel system for citizens. Military cooperation runs both ways as well. Ukraine has purchased Turkish drones and used them against Moscow-backed separatists in the Donbas region. Moreover, Turkey's flagship drone company, Baykar, recently signed an agreement under which the Ukrainian firm Motor Sich will provide vital engine parts for Turkey's third-generation Akinci drones.

The Crimea Factor

Until the late eighteenth century, Crimea was part of the Ottoman Empire—more precisely, part of a commonwealth administered by a Turkic state called the Crimean Khanate. In 1783, however, the Russian Empire annexed the area and established its Black Sea fleet in the deep-water port of Sevastopol. From then on, it regarded Crimea as a vital outlet to the warm seas.

Over the years, the tsars settled many Russians in the peninsula to solidify their rule, engaging in religious and political persecution of the Tatars to force their mass migration. Even so, Crimea's population was still 39 percent Tatar at the onset of World War II. After the war, Joseph Stalin furthered the area's Russification by deporting the Tatar population and other communities to the Soviet interior en masse, alleging that they had collaborated with Nazi Germany.

Following Stalin's death, some of these displaced groups were eventually deported to their communal homelands abroad. Yet the Tatars were not allowed to return to Crimea, underlining the peninsula's strategic importance to Moscow.

After the Soviet collapse, some expelled Tatars finally made their way back to Crimea. In Ukraine's most recent official census—way back in 2001—Tatars constituted around 11 percent of the peninsula's population.

Today, most Tatars in Crimea vehemently oppose the return of Russian rule. That sentiment is shared by Turkey's large Crimean Tatar diaspora, estimated to number in the millions. Hence, the chances of Ankara ever formally accepting Russia's annexation are slim, regardless of Putin's **intensive diplomatic and security outreach** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-f-16-request-may-not-stave-inevitable>) to Erdogan since the abortive 2016 coup. They may have reached significant (albeit tenuous) power-sharing deals in Syria, Libya, the South Caucasus, and other locales, but Crimea seems like a different political animal given Turkish views toward Ukraine, the Tatars, and the Black Sea littoral.

Erdogan and Putin's Calculations

C rimea concerns aside, Erdogan will still tread carefully in reaction to Putin's moves on Ukraine, likely shying away from any actions that might be perceived as openly and militarily confronting Russia's policy. This caution stems in part from the multiple challenges Erdogan is facing at home. The Turkish economy is in trouble due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's financial mismanagement. Politically, Erdogan's support base is dwindling after two decades of dominance, and the opposition is on the rise. Moreover, the aforementioned conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus have left Ankara increasingly exposed to the Kremlin's vicissitudes.

Indeed, Putin has a number of effective levers he can employ against Erdogan immediately if Ankara pursues a forward policy on Ukraine. For instance, he could institute a tourism boycott. Russians were the number-one visitors to Turkey before the pandemic, and Erdogan needs a strong tourism season this summer to help the economy rebound. Russian trade sanctions could stymie Turkey's recovery as well, essentially terminating Erdogan's prospects of winning the 2023 presidential election.

Elsewhere, Putin could give Syria's Assad regime a green light to attack the rebel stronghold of Idlib province. This would raise the threat of another 2-3 million refugees streaming across the border to Turkey, which already hosts nearly 4 million. Given the rise in economic problems and anti-refugee sentiments at home, Erdogan would not be able to overcome the social and political forces unleashed by another mass influx. Putin can also spoil tenuous ceasefire deals between Russian and Turkish allies in Libya and the South Caucasus, undermining Erdogan's carefully cultivated domestic image as a global powerbroker.

Policy Implications for Washington

If Russia invades Ukraine, Turkey is unlikely to be at the forefront of any international coalition to stop it. Yet taking into account Ankara's views on the Black Sea balance of power, Washington could expect Erdogan to provide behind-the-scenes military assistance and other support to Kyiv.

Ankara's most immediate vulnerability to Russian pressure is potential refugee flows from Idlib. If Washington and its European allies provide ironclad guarantees that they would push back against an all-out Assad regime assault against that province, Turkey would be more likely to expand its support for their efforts to counter Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the book [A Sultan in Autumn: Erdogan Faces Turkey's Uncontainable Forces](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sultan-autumn-erdogan-faces-turkeys-uncontainable-forces) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sultan-autumn-erdogan-faces-turkeys-uncontainable-forces>). ❖

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