

KAROLINA WANDA OLSZOWSKA ▶▶

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0535-912X>

Turkey forever balances between East and West¹

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Abstract

When looking at contemporary Turkish politics, an incorrect notion is often circulated that Turkey has only in recent years, as far back as under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, begun a policy of balancing between East and West. The purpose of this article is to analyze Turkey's posture – in terms of balancing between spheres of influence – after the end of World War II until Turkey joined NATO and then compare it with Turkey's stance during the Justice and Development Party government in the context of relations with the United States and Russia. This will help answer the question: to what extent is Ankara's current balkanizing attitude something surprising? Aren't specific patterns of the 1945–1952 period similar to those of the 21st century, and the differences are the attitudes of Washington and Moscow rather than Ankara?

Keywords: Turkey, Cold War, Soviet Union, United States, Russia

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Турция навсегда балансирует между Востоком и Западом

Аннотация

При взгляде на современную турецкую политику часто бытует неверное представление о том, что Турция только в последние годы, еще при Реджепе Тайипе Эрдогане, начала политику балансирования между Востоком и Западом. Цель этой статьи – проанализировать позицию Турции – с точки зрения балансирования между сферами влияния – после окончания Второй мировой войны до вступления Турции в НАТО, а затем сравнить ее с позицией Турции во время правления Партии справедливости и развития в контексте отношений с США и Россией. Это поможет ответить на вопрос: насколько нынешняя балканизирующая позиция Анкары является чем-то удивительным? Разве конкретные закономерности периода 1945–1952 гг. не аналогичны таковым в 21 веке, а различия заключаются в отношении Вашингтона и Москвы, а не Анкары?

Ключевые слова: Турция, холодная война, СССР, США, Россия

When looking at contemporary Turkish politics, an incorrect notion is often circulated that Turkey has only in recent years, as far back as under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, begun a policy of balancing between East and West. Reflecting on this issue from a historical perspective, a simplistic association arises again as it relates to Turkey during World War II. For almost the entire duration of the global conflict, Ankara remained neutral while concluding trade agreements and borrowing from both the Axis and Allied states. It did not declare war on Japan and the Third Reich until February 23, 1945, when the outcome was practically a foregone conclusion, and a declaration of war was necessary to sit among the founding states of the United Nations (UN).

The purpose of this article is to analyze Turkey's posture – in terms of balancing between spheres of influence – after the end of World War II until Turkey joined NATO and then compare it with Turkey's stance during the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government in the context of relations with the United States and Russia. This will help answer the question: to what extent is Ankara's current balkanizing attitude something surprising? Aren't specific patterns of the 1945–1952 period

similar to those of the 21st century, and the differences are the attitudes of Washington and Moscow rather than Ankara?

The importance of Turkey in the Cold War superpower rivalry

Turkey's location bordering the USSR and controlling access to the Black Sea straits, the transition from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and access to the Middle East and the Balkans, made it very valuable to the rival powers while at the same time threatened by potential attack. It was feared that once the USSR expanded into the Middle East, Turkey would have to defend a very long border line that had no natural barriers that could provide a defensive line. American planners estimated that the USSR could field 110 divisions against Turkey, the attack on whom would be carried out from two directions, from Bulgaria toward Eastern Thrace and from Transcaucasia toward Anatolia. According to their calculations, a stranded Turkey could defend itself for about 120 days, after which Moscow would open the way for further expansion toward the Mediterranean, Iran, and Iraq. Because of this threat, the US felt it needed Turkey as a base for Allied operations in the event of war with the USSR (Holmes, 2016, p. 47; NATO Archives, 03/SGM-2150-51, p. 4.).

The Turkish side was aware of its difficult position and that it would not be able to defend itself effectively against Soviet expansion without help from the United States. Toward the end of World War II, the tension in Turkish-Soviet relations became increasingly evident. Joseph Stalin claimed Turkish territory as early as the Moscow Conference (1943). İsmet İnönü, President of the Republic of Turkey, tried to arrange correct relations with the Soviet Union. To show "benevolent neutrality," Turkey agreed to transport Allied ships through the Black Sea straits with war materials for the Soviet Union (it should be remembered that Turkey was formally neutral and should not have made exceptions for either side) (Weisband, 1973, p. 297). However, this was of little use as the USSR increasingly insisted on a revision of the Montreux Treaty (1936) relating to the status of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.

Ankara's attitude during the war. This came to a head at the Yalta Conference when Stalin announced that after the war, the status of the Straits must be reviewed because it had "grown old" and that the USSR could not

allow a situation in which Turkey would “keep its hand on Russia’s throat” (Weisband, 1973, p. 300). After the end of World War II, Turkey could not count on the support of its interests from Western countries, which were “disappointed” with Turkish neutrality during the war. President Roosevelt hoped that Turkey and the USSR could live in harmony shortly. Prime Minister Churchill said that revising the Montreux Convention seemed right since the security of Soviet interests in the Black Sea should not depend on a narrow isthmus. In realizing its advantage in the post-conflict international arena, on December 17th, 1925, Moscow terminated the Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality with Turkey. It was willing to negotiate but under the conditions of revising the Treaty of Montreux and surrendering the provinces of Kars and Ardahan to the USSR (NA, PREM 3/447/4A, p. 1).

Turkey, to avoid losing its sovereignty, had to seek support from Western countries. However, disappointment with Turkey’s attitude during the war led to concern for its interests in the context of the Soviet Union’s expansionist policy. In June 1945, the U.S. took the position that it would be best for Turkey to agree to keep the Straits under neutral control (NA, AIR 20/2464, p. 1), but the U.S. attitude changed as American capital penetration in the Middle East increased.

On April 6, 1946, the liner USS Missouri entered the port of Istanbul. It brought on board the body of Turkish Ambassador Mehmet Münir Ertegün, who died in Washington on November 11, 1944. At the time of his death, there was still no mosque in the U.S. capital, so it was impossible to hold a funeral ceremony according to Islamic principles. However, the Americans, bringing the remains of the Turkish diplomat to his homeland, did not want to use this gesture symbolically, fearing tensions with the Soviets. We now know that the appearance of the U.S. battleship in the waters of the Bosphorus was a propaganda ploy on the part of the U.S., showing that they had the means to come to Turkey if necessary. Still, at the time, the U.S. did not regard Turkey as an ally at all.

The Turks learned much from the situation and used it for propaganda, presenting it as proof of Turkish-American friendship. In his welcome speech, Prime Minister Mehmet Şükrü Saracoğlu stressed that he is very grateful to the Americans for the genuine and deep company shown to Turkey. At the same time, he assured Ankara would always be at Washington’s

side in its plans to build a new united, peaceful world (T.C. Başbakanlık 30-1-0-0/11-65-2, p. 2). Commemorative postage stamps were even issued for the occasion. The Turkish side was keen to create the impression that it enjoyed considerable support from the U.S. and could count on Washington's military assistance in a conflict.

However, this did not protect Ankara from further demands from Moscow. On August 7, 1946, citing the arrangements made at the Potsdam Conference and violations of the Montreux Convention (Olszowska, 2021, p. 43-61), the chargé d'affaires of the Soviet Embassy in Ankara, Aleksandr Andreyevich Lavrishchev, handed a note to the Turkish government. It stressed that the shape of the Montreux Convention provisions at the time did not adequately safeguard the interests of all Black Sea states (MFA, 6/100/1588, p. 4). The Soviet Union feared the establishment of U.S. bases in Turkey, Greece, Palestine, and Trieste (Wilson Archives, 27.09.1946), and the failure to close the Straits during the war to Moscow's opponents (NA, CAB 122/977, p. 6). Turkey hoped for American support and a jointly agreed response. Still, the Americans decided to respond directly to the Soviet Union by sending the Turks only a copy of the note. Thus showing that the U.S. was keenly interested in the straits issue. However, Washington realized that Turkey could maintain its unequivocally negative stance toward Soviet claims without receiving support from Washington (FRUS, 1946/VII, p. 841). Subsequent notes exchanged between the Soviet Union and Turkey brought no change. The American and British interest in the issue allowed Ankara to continue to disagree with Soviet terms.

The Soviet threat absorbed Turkey into closer cooperation with the West. In August 1946, a British military supply base was established in the Dardanelles. Construction of radar stations over the Black Sea and in Thrace also began. The Turkish army airfield at Yeşilköy near Istanbul also used them (Дранов, 1948, p. 233). These gestures were significant propaganda-wise. Turkey stood in a much better negotiating position with British support. London, observing Soviet inclinations in the Middle East, realized that it had to fight for its interests, and Turkey could be its only ally in the region.

In the first years after World War II, Turkey did everything to gain the support of Western countries, or at least the impression of support, while avoiding escalation with the Soviets. By this time, Turkish-Soviet contacts were

already limited mainly to diplomatic ones, while others, such as commercial, cultural, and scientific ones, were frozen. Even so, there was no doubt that the İsmeta İnönü government would have been eager to resume cooperation in these fields if only it did not have to fear the revisionist policies of the USSR. Therefore, in December 1946, Faik Zihni Akdur (who held his post from 1946 to 1949) (*Büyükelçilik*, online) became Turkey's new ambassador to Moscow. One of his tasks was to probe in Moscow whether concessions from the USSR would be possible on points four and five. He was even given official instructions not to discuss the Straits issue and to direct all inquiries to the Turkish Foreign Ministry (Драхов, 1948, p. 445). So you can see how much the Turkish government hoped for the possibility of an agreement and a return to friendly relations.

As a result of this threat, Turkey sought help from the West. Turkey remained neutral in World War II, so its economy did not suffer due to the hostilities. However, it was in such a dire situation that without outside help, the country would become increasingly backward relative to Western countries. As U.S. Ambassador to Ankara Edwin C. Wilson aptly noted. Moscow deliberately fueled this threat so Ankara would be forced to keep a large army on standby and consequently cause the Turkish economy to collapse (FRUS, 1947/V, p. 91). The United States began to consider providing financial assistance to Greece and Turkey only after Britain declared that it was recommending such a solution but could not give help itself. U.S. Secretary of War Robert Patterson said that from a military point of view, the independence of Greece and Turkey is crucial to the U.S. strategic position (FRUS, 1947/V, p. 57).

The United States wanted to avoid accusations of taking Britain's place in the Middle East, so the Turkish side was informed that Ankara had to request financial assistance officially. According to the official communiqué, the Turkish government ordered the aid, even though talks had been held much earlier (FRUS, 1947/V, p. 190–192). Of course, this did not escape the attention of the Soviet Union. In March 1947, specialists were sent to the USSR Embassy in Ankara and the USSR Consulate General in Istanbul to report on developments related to the Marshall Plan. On April 23, 1947, the U.S. Senate approved \$100 million in aid to Turkey to strengthen the armed forces and improve road infrastructure. On July 12, 1947, an agreement on

American assistance to Turkey was concluded in Ankara (Shaw, Shaw, 2012, p. 604). As a result, the process of modernizing the Turkish army began. Details of the aid were published in the Turkish press but in a truncated way. The likely reason for withholding information about the new deal with Washington was Turkey's fear of aggravating relations with the Soviet Union. As a result, Turkish and U.S. expectations regarding the dimension and destination of U.S. aid diverged. The U.S. was anxious to modernize the army to ensure security in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union on the Middle East, as well as to engage Turkey on the western side of its influence so that in the event of a change in the geopolitical situation it could not revert to the neutral policy of World War II. On the other hand, Ankara was keen to improve the living standards of its citizens, modernize the country's infrastructure and cover its budget deficit. The U.S. focus on the military caused a lot of confusion, especially since Turkey received 50 cents in aid per capita, compared to \$18–24 per capita in other Marshall Plan countries (MFA, 11/36/562, p. 12).

Turkey feared a Soviet response to joining the Marshall Plan, and to reassure Moscow, Minister Sadak stated in a speech in the Turkish parliament that Turkey did not belong to any bloc of influence and would be happy to communicate with peace-loving countries (AAN, 2/1633/0/2.4/510, p. 3). However, Turkey was careful not to provoke the USSR because, at the time, it had no assurance from the U.S. of assistance during a Soviet attack. At the same time, Turkish efforts to get the United States to sign a formal military alliance with Turkey began. However, Washington was more interested in modernizing the Turkish military without getting directly involved in a potential conflict. Turkey was intended to be a “buffer zone”, a country linked to the West that could be supported, but need not fulfill the obligations of direct combat². Of course, it was very quickly rumored that Turkey was ready to break off cooperation with Britain and the United States while signing a friendship pact with the USSR (FRUS, 1948/IV, p. 148). Of course, the Turkish side denied it, but given Ankara's dissatisfaction with the amount

² This is reminiscent of the situation of Ukraine after the Russian aggression on February 24, 2022, NATO countries can support the Ukrainian side by donating weapons, but given that it is not in the alliance, they do not need to get directly involved and declare war on Russia.

of U.S. aid, noting that much of it went to military expenses, which would not have been so high were it not for the USSR threat, one can venture to say that they were not just rumors. What needed to be added, however, was a willingness on Moscow's part for an agreement that did not amount to both relinquishing Turkey's sovereignty over the straits and a threat to its sovereignty.

The first significant challenge to Turkish-American relations was the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO) proclamation. Turkey's failure to join NATO was a major blow to Turkey and also increased its security concerns in the event of an attack (TCCA, 2/13–36, p. 8). The United States, in an attempt to reassure Turkey, proposed alternative military alliances with Britain and France. However, there was a growing opinion in Turkish political circles that Paris and London could not guarantee their security. If the United States was not interested in providing Turkey with such guarantees, then consideration should be given to seeking an agreement with the USSR (MFA, 11/36/562, p. 24). Increasingly articulating their dissatisfaction, Turkey's foreign minister, when asked what Turkey would do in the event of a Soviet attack on Iran, replied that it would do nothing without adequate American guarantees (MFA, 11/39/588, p. 17).

Washington was increasingly concerned that the Turkish military would not feel it could defend U.S. interests in Iran and the Arab countries in the event of an attack by the USSR, would not agree to the use of its naval and air bases, and, in addition, would use its power over the Straits to the disadvantage of NATO countries (NATO Archives, 03/SG 80/2, p. 3).

At the same time, as Moscow showed no desire to reach an agreement with Turkey but only expected concessions, the Ankara government continued to seek admission to NATO. The Turkish army's participation in the Korean War was the U.S. condition for both talks on Turkey's access to the alliance and continued financial assistance. The Turkish government decided to send its troops there, but its application to NATO was rejected. The situation was becoming all the more complicated as American financial aid to Turkey and Greece was to cease in the early 1950s. Once again, this prompted Ankara to declare a reduction in arms spending and enter talks with Moscow to negotiate a new friendship treaty. Washington realized the situation was becoming increasingly tense, and the vision of Turkish

neutrality again threatened American interests, especially since Turkish troops had proven themselves during the Korean War. So it was decided to extend American aid to Ankara and Athens and eventually agreed to admit these countries to NATO.

This, of course, provoked the displeasure of Moscow, which issued protest notes (MFA, 11/39/591, p. 22). The Turkish government declared that it would not surrender its bases to anyone, significantly threatening the Soviet Union. American experts have been present in the country for a long time, and no hostile intentions were involved (MFA, 11/39/588, p. 37). Turkey was finally admitted to NATO in February 1952. This date can be regarded as Ankara's final commitment to the Western side. Until the end of the Cold War – with some breakouts, of course – its stance could be considered unequivocally pro-American.

Balancing Turkey between the US and Russia in the 21st century

After the end of the Cold War, Turkey deepened cooperation with countries formerly in the Eastern Bloc. However, it only returned to a policy of balancing on a larger scale in the second decade of the AKP rule. The process of normalizing relations with the Kurds was interrupted. Turkey became involved in the war in Syria. This led to a growing disagreement between Ankara and Washington over U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD). In 2015, Turkey broke peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) while accusing the U.S. of supporting terrorists. However, it was a time of "flexing its muscles" by Turkey, as in November 2015, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24. This led, among other things, to an embargo on several Turkish products and a halt in tourism. This state of affairs continued until June 27, 2016 (Olszowska, 2018, p. 25–39).

The failed putsch (July 15, 2016) brought a tightening of Turkey's ruling party politics and growing disagreements with the United States. Hizmet movement leader Fethullah Gülen, who is in exile in the United States, was accused of staging the coup. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan demanded Gülen's deportation, but Secretary of State John Kerry declared that the U.S. needed evidence, not accusations (Klapper, 2016). This was quickly

responded to by Turkey's Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, who accused the Americans of orchestrating the coup (*ABD'den*). On top of that, the Turks blockaded the American military base in İncirlik near Adana³, and cut off the electricity supply. American soldiers and their families were imprisoned there, and B61 tactical nuclear bombs were stored at the air base (Lamothe, 2016). It is worth mentioning that blocking Turkish airspace to U.S. aircraft from the bottom would have prevented the bombing of positions of the so-called Islamic State. Such a situation was possible. After all, in 2003, Turkey did not agree to make its bases available to the Americans for an attack on Iraq, which showed that Washington could no longer count on an alliance with Turkey in any situation.

At the same time, there was a tightening of relations with Russia. Gazprom declared its immediate readiness to resume talks with Turkey's BOTAŞ Petroleum Pipeline Corporation regarding constructing the Turkish Stream offshore gas pipeline. Both sides are very keen on the construction of this pipeline. The contract for the construction of Türk Stream (then Turkish Stream) was signed on November 10, 2016 (Olszowska, 2022). This investment is significant to Moscow, as it reduces Russia's dependence on transit through Ukraine.

The embargo on Turkish products was also lifted, and Russian tourists flocked to the Bosphorus country. Economic issues have often been a tool of pressure on Turkey since then. Russia is one of Turkey's most important trading partners. The trade volume between the two countries reached 2019 – \$26,309 billion, with Turkish exports worth \$3,854 billion and imports worth \$22,454 billion. In August 2021, Trade Minister Mehmet Muş announced that Turkey and Russia aim to increase trade volume to \$100 billion and increase cooperation in energy, industry, agriculture, and tourism (*Turkey*, 2021).

Russian tourists also comprise the largest group of those choosing Turkey for their summer vacations. However, the situation changed in 2021, when, in response to President Erdoğan's statement that Turkey does not recognize the annexation of Crimea (in 2014), as well as closer cooperation

³ In the spring of 1951, the American company Matcalfe, Hamilton and Grove began construction of the aforementioned air base in İncirlik. The Americans received a large plot of land near Adana from the Turkish government, where figs had previously been grown, hence the later name of the entire complex (*incir* – fig; *incirlik* – fig grove).

with Ukraine, including selling it Bayraktar TB2 drones, Russia suspended air links with Turkey. Moscow justified the move with the epidemiological situation related to the SARS-Cov-2 virus outbreak. Anna Popova, Russia's chief sanitary doctor, reported that among Russians who returned from abroad and tested positive, as many as 80 percent were in Turkey. As a result, flights were initially halted from April 12 to June 1, and the decision was made even though 533,000 Russians had already purchased trips to Turkey during that period. The ban was then extended further until June 21 (*Rusya*, 2021). Russian tourists in 2021, with 78.2 percent more arriving in Istanbul in the first nine months (counting the two-month flight ban) than in the previous year (*Rus*, 2021).

A big echo in Turkish-American-Russian relations was Russia's purchase of the S-400 air and missile defense system (Wasilewski, 2017). Turkey had already wanted to become independent from purchasing arms from Western countries and was negotiating with China, among others. Still, the tender was canceled under pressure from the United States. While negotiating the purchase of arms from Russia, the Turkish side wanted to force the Americans to sell the latest version of Patriot systems, with access to technology, but also at a favorable price (Strachota, 2017). The U.S. did not agree to these terms, and the Turks decided in July 2019 to purchase the S-400. This led to their exclusion from the consortium producing the F-35 fighter jet, and they refused to sell the – previously agreed – fighters. As a result, the United States imposed sanctions on Turkey, and although they were not severe, they showed that Washington would not allow Ankara to continue hitting U.S. interests. All the more so as it was increasingly signaled that the Americans were considering their Middle East strategy but needed the participation of their Turkish ally.

Turkey's attitude in times of war

The international situation changed dramatically after the Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. For Turkey, the case led, on the one hand, to a threat to its interests, especially economic interests with Ukraine. But on the other hand, it enabled Ankara to play the role of a mediator and accentuate its importance in international politics. Very soon after the

outbreak of the war, the issue of the Black Sea straits arose. It turned out that exercising control over them has retained its importance despite the passage of years and the development of technology. The Ukrainian side called on Turkey to close the course to Russian ships, and Ankara decided to apply Article 19 of the already mentioned Montreux Convention, that is, to complete the passage through the straits to ships of countries at war while allowing the fleet to return to bases (Olszowska, Polskie Radio). Of course, Turkey could have chosen to close the Straits passage entirely, but then it would have had to declare that it also felt threatened, which would have made it impossible to maintain its position as a neutral player.

The issue of the Black Sea straits returned in July 2022. After negotiations between Turkey, the UN, Ukraine, and Russia, the conditions were created to create a safe corridor for transporting deposits, food, and fertilizers. The agreement has already been extended twice, and it was not without consequences, but no matter what, it was a significant success for Turkey, which was able to show its importance as an impartial mediator in the war.

This neutrality was essential to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, especially in economic issues. The elections scheduled for mid-2023, 2022, brought record inflation for Turkey, officially at 65 percent and unofficially as high as 180 percent (Olszowska, INE). To alleviate its effects, the Turkish president decided to balance, at least in the economic context. As a result, Turkish exports to Russia increased by 60 percent to \$9.3 billion in 2022 (Michalski, Wiśniewska, 2023). Russians have also become the largest group of foreigners to purchase real estate in Turkey, including Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, who rents a property in Istanbul for \$50,000 a month. Moreover, Turkey has allowed the Russian capital to evade sanctions, with Russians launching more than 1,300 companies in the Bosphorus country in 2022, 670 percent more than the year before. Turks also counted on significant Russian investments, such as building a nuclear power plant in Mersin province and making Turkey a European gas hub.

The rapprochement with Russia has increased tensions with the United States. This is all the more so because the AKP has pursued an anti-American narrative for years. This is reflected in the Turks' views on cooperation with Western countries. For example, a March 2022 poll shows that 59.6 percent of those surveyed believe Turkey should remain in NATO. Still, only 39.3

percent believe that relations with the European Union and the United States should be prioritized over China and Russia⁴. At the same time, in the same survey, as many as 51.7 percent of respondents considered the United States the greatest threat to Turkey, followed by Russia. Still, only 19.4 percent of respondents thought it was the most significant threat (Metropoll, s. 15).

Even though a widespread anti-American narrative indicates that the US is no longer the only player in international politics to be reckoned with, its influence in the region is increasingly diminishing. Pressure from Washington continues to act as a game-changer in Turkish politics. Ankara has practically been accused of violating Western sanctions from the beginning of the war. Under the U.S. Treasury Department's embargo of five Turkish banks, they withdrew from using the Russian Mir payment system (Ciesielski, 2023). On March 10, 2023, Bloomberg news agency, citing a senior Turkish government official, confirmed reports that Ankara had halted the transit of E.U.- and US-sanctioned goods to Russia.

Of course, the change in Turkish attitude resulted from months of pressure. In August 2022, the U.S. State Department sent letters to Turkish people in business warning of the possibility of imposing sanctions on Turkish businesses helping to circumvent sanctions. In early March 2023, the U.S. Departments of Finance, Commerce, and Justice issued a report warning U.S. companies against violating sanctions, including using transshipment in Turkey (Michalski, Wiśniewska, 2023). Adding to the pressure were other aspects, such as the February 6, 2023 earthquake. It claimed over 50,000 lives, with losses estimated at 1 percent of Turkey's GDP. It is already clear that long-term assistance will be needed. Turkey cannot cope with such losses and expenses on its own and can only count on Western countries for help that matters. Immediately after the earthquake, the U.S. pledged about \$80 million in aid. The E.U. granted Turkey \$3.3 billion (in grants and loans).

⁴ In the same poll, 29.5 percent of respondents said relations with China and Russia should be a priority, while 31.1 percent said they had no opinion, Metropoll, *European Union and NATO*, March 2022, pp. 13–14.

Conclusion

Turkey's location at the confluence of the Middle East and the Balkans, guarding the passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, made it strategically important, as it was during and after World War II. However, over the years and with the development of technology, it has lost its importance. In the 1940s and 1950s, thanks to them, it was possible to control the flow of fleets into the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea, i.e., to allow the Black Sea fleet to attack the Balkans or to allow the fleets of Western countries to enter the Black Sea which threatened the coasts of Eastern countries. During the Cold War, Turkey allowed the passage of U.S. submarines through the straits while concealing this fact. The importance of the straits more than half a century later has changed. However, it still allowed control over the flow of ships. After applying Article 19, Turkey allowed the Black Sea fleet to return to bases, but at the same time, they could not bring, for example, the Baltic fleet into the Black Sea.

According to the Montreux Agreement, the movement of commercial vessels should be free. However, Turkey has sovereignty over the straits and has the right to inspect shipments, among other things, to check where goods come from and whether they are stolen or sanctioned. In the context of the competition for economic influence that is so important in the conduct of war, the ability to verify and ban the flow is a powerful source of leverage.

After the end of World War II, Turkey was not determined to side with any side of influence unequivocally. However, it was anxious to preserve its full sovereignty and not lose its impact. The USSR did not want to negotiate, as it was anxious to revise the status of the straits in its favor. Ankara, fearing aggression, had to look for allies, which was not easy, as it had deceived the Allies during the war and wanted to avoid getting involved in the conflict. So it took every opportunity to make it known that they were not alone in this game. They took advantage, for example, of bringing the body of the Turkish ambassador on an American ship. At the same time, realizing that only the U.S. could financially help Turkey, Ankara was willing to do much to bind itself to a formal alliance with Washington. Still, it is worth noting that whenever its efforts were rebuffed, it threatened neutrality and the start of talks with the USSR.

The situation in the 21st century was different, as Turkey wanted to pass itself off as a regional power that could pursue policies unrelated to the interests of its American ally. This can be seen perfectly in the rapprochement with Russia, the attempt to become independent of buying weapons from Western countries, and the economic rapprochement with Russia. President Erdoğan, even while conducting anti-American rhetoric at home and making decisions that did not suit Washington, always considers the U.S. response. The issue of selling upgraded F-16V fighter jets became an essential topic for Turkish politics in 2022, and it was the United States that was able to force a change in Ankara's attitude in the context of not passing Western sanctions. The earthquake also showed that Turkey could not cope with the magnitude of the disaster on its own (it would be complicated for any country to do so). If not for help from Western countries, it would be challenging to recover from the losses. Of course, Russia or China, like many other countries, sent aid immediately after the quake, but this is about long-term assistance to rebuild the damaged provinces and economy.

Turkey, because of its location but also a lesson learned from World War I, from which it still emerged as the Ottoman Empire with a truncated territory, tried not to get involved in conflicts and, as long as possible, to balance between sides of influence. After the end of World War II, this proved unfeasible due to the unambiguous stance of the Soviet Union, Turkey, despite threats to return to neutrality, had to choose sides if it wanted to gain military security and aid. In the 21st century, Ankara tries to balance East and West, pursuing a pragmatic policy geared toward economic cooperation while showing Russia and the U.S. that it has a choice. It is worth noting, however, that its attitude of pragmatism and balancing has remained the same over the decades. What has changed is the attitude of other countries willing to negotiate with Turkey or place certain conditions on it.

KAROLINA WANDA OLSZOWSKA, PHD

Institute of History
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
Gołębia 13 St., 31-007 Kraków (Poland)
karolinawanda.olszowska@uj.edu.pl

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