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#### Turkey diplomatic with Russia now, but fissures are showing

* Turkey is key mediator

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BRUSSELS — Commenting on the visit of Vladimir V. Putin to Iran, a member of the Russian Parliament and television talking head, Yevgeny G. Popov, said that the two countries hoped to form an “axis of good,” mocking former President George W. Bush’s description of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an “axis of evil.” Trolling American foreign-policy blunders and rhetoric is a popular sport in Russia, from Mr. Putin, the president, on down, but the growing affection between Russia and Iran is that of two isolated, sanctions-stricken countries whose main connection is their active opposition to the United States, its allies and its domination of the multilateral world order. While the United States likes to wrap its alliances in grandiloquent words about shared values and democracy, Russia, Iran and China, Moscow’s other openly supportive pal and American rival, are far more transactional in their connections. But transactional relations do not make for lasting alliances or disguise the strains within them. “Russia is isolated on the global stage in a way it’s never been,” said Charles A. Kupchan, a former American official who is a professor at Georgetown University. “Putin is looking for recognition and acceptance wherever he can get it, and that he can get it in Tehran speaks volumes.” Even China, which has stood by its anti-American partnership with Russia, “has carefully kept its distance from the war in Ukraine,” Mr. Kupchan said. “And even though the lion’s share of the world’s countries aren’t enforcing the sanctions regime against Russia, they get it: that Russia’s invasion was a bald act of aggression.” Turkey has no interest in being part of any new axis or alliance with Russia or Iran. Instead, Ankara has very artfully managed a foreign policy that is diversified and open to all sides and that gives it considerable leverage with both Moscow and Washington. “Turkey is skillfully walking a middle path, signaling to the Americans that it won’t just be a compliant ally and do what we want, but they’re signaling the same thing to the Russians,” Mr. Shapiro said. Mr. Heisbourg agreed. “The Turks continue to play both sides against the middle and they are in a very strong position to do so,” he said. “It’s a highly profitable game politically, economically and strategically — but that excludes any new alliance.” Turkey has created a vital role for itself as the mediator between Russia and Ukraine — effectively the mediator between Washington, NATO and Russia. It has worked with all sides, including the United Nations, to try to get Ukrainian (and Russian) grain exports out through the Black Sea to the developing world. Mr. Erdogan has bought Russian antiaircraft missiles and has not joined Western sanctions against Russia, which has irked Washington. But Turkey remains a key NATO ally of the United States, signed a tough anti-Russian communiqué at the NATO summit in Madrid, has sold Ukraine weapons and drones that are helping to kill Russians, and has removed its block on the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO, at least for now. Turkey’s mediation may bring even more benefits, Mr. Kupchan said. Mr. Erdogan has credibility and channels to both Moscow and Washington, as well as to Kyiv, and “if he can broker a deal to get Ukrainian grain flowing again, that might be the first step to pivot to diplomacy, a confidence-building measure that would require concessions by both Russia and Ukraine, but could be done under the rubric of humanitarian aid,” Mr. Kupchan said. What Turkey clearly wanted from this trilateral summit, however, was narrower — a green light to conduct a new military incursion into northern Syria against the Syrian Kurds, who Mr. Erdogan says are allies with the P.K.K., or Kurdistan Workers’ Party, which he and the West consider terrorists. Attacking the Kurds is popular in Turkey, even among Mr. Erdogan’s opposition, and is part of his effort to win re-election next year, Mr. Heisbourg said. And Syria is the only issue where the policies of all three countries intersect, even though their interests are different. Iran and Russia have been the firmest allies of Mr. Assad. But Turkey has backed armed groups fighting for his removal; has sent its troops into northern Syria; and has kept Syrian, Iranian and Russian troops from conquering Idlib Province, still mostly controlled by anti-Assad rebels. “With so much leverage, now is a great time for Erdogan to beat up on the Kurds,” Mr. Heisbourg said. While Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, warned Turkey against further attacks in Syria, Mr. Erdogan was unfazed. And it’s likely that Russia does not much care, so long as the Turkish intervention is limited to the north. More likely, Mr. Heisbourg suggested, Mr. Erdogan used the meeting in Tehran to inform Russia and Iran of his plans and to try to avoid unnecessary confrontation.

#### Ukraine war has brought Russia to the table, Erdogan key to diplomacy

* Solves case, affs depends on Ukraine spillover like ocos/ai subs/asats, if DA solves, then case is solved
* Solves any Black Sea Trade scenario

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Russian, Iranian presidents aim to prevent Turkey from a new offensive in northern Syria. The leaders of Russia, Turkey and Iran are gathering in Tehran, with Ankara’s threat of a new incursion into northern Syria likely to top the agenda. While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has both domestic and strategic reasons for the move, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi want to maintain the status quo in Syria, where both their countries have expended significant resources to prop up the Assad regime. Russia’s war on Ukraine will also feature prominently at the trilateral summit. Iran has offered to provide Moscow with drones and Putin and Erdogan are reportedly set to discuss restarting Ukrainian grain exports in the Black Sea. Increasingly, domestic factors also drive Erdogan’s decision-making on a new offensive into Syria. Turkey’s economy is in crisis, marked by nearly 80 percent inflation causing growing hardship for Turkish consumers and deepening anxiety across the country. Turkey’s worsening economic woes are also stoking greater hostility toward the 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. With elections looming in 2023, Erdogan likely calculates he can win voter sympathy with another incursion into Syria, at times tying it to an aspirational promise that Turkey will return one million Syrian refugees to Syria. To varying degrees, both Russia and Iran oppose a new Turkish offensive. Russia holds the most sway on the ground in Syria, and a Turkish move would likely be predicated on a Russian “green light,” however pale. Iran has been more adamant in its opposition to another Turkish incursion, yet continues to focus on a diplomatic resolution. Given the high stakes for Erdogan, he is unlikely to be dissuaded from making at least a symbolic move into Syria. As such, the July 19 trilateral summit could focus on a three-way negotiation delineating the parameters, constraints and timing of a limited Turkish operation, although a last-minute diplomatic resolution could yet forestall another Turkish incursion — at least in the short term. The war in Ukraine has given Turkey more leverage in Syria and beyond with the United States, Russia and Europe. It is expected it would use such leverage to downsize the SDF and Kurdish influence in Syria. Turkey has conducted several military operations in northern Iraq against the PKK and has not shied away from publicly stating its interests in creating a deep security zone along its borders with Syria and Iraq. In the past few years, it has taken incremental steps toward accomplishing that goal. While the United States understands Turkey’s national security interests, it believes a more effective and lasting outcome would come through dialogue and political solution. Drennan: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and resultant push by the West to isolate Moscow has driven Russia and Iran closer together, while Russia-Turkey relations have been more complicated. Officially, Putin is traveling to Tehran to meet with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts as part of the Astana process, seeking a settlement to the conflict in Syria. He is also meeting with each bilaterally, as well as Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Putin likely has at least two goals for his meeting with Raisi, who he has met with two other times since January. In the immediate term, he is likely trying to secure military assistance to support the Russian war effort in Ukraine. Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security advisor, recently went on record to say that Iran is planning to provide Russia with unmanned systems to assist with long-range artillery targeting. Other U.S. officials have stated that the Iranians could begin providing up to 300 remotely piloted aircraft and begin training Russian servicemembers in their use as early as this month. More broadly, both countries have been isolated by Western sanctions, creating an opening — or perhaps forcing function — for them to improve their relations. Ahead of the visit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov noted that the two countries could soon sign a treaty on strategic cooperation, bolstering financial and banking ties in a bid to move away from dollar-denominated trade. Russia’s relations with Turkey have been fraught. On Syria specifically, both Russia and Iran are united in their opposition to any new Turkish offensive, so Putin will likely push Erdogan on this issue when they meet. Putin and Erdogan may also discuss the contours of a notional deal between Moscow and Kyiv on lifting Russia’s blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea ports to allow grain exports to leave. Earlier this month, Erdogan suggested that a deal was close to being reached. Erdogan’s role as go-between in this proposed deal follows from his role elsewhere in the conflict, where he has sought to play an active role in the Russia-Ukraine peace process. Turkey hosted two rounds of negotiations in Istanbul in March that ended as Russia expanded its offensive in Ukraine. The Turkish president has indicated a willingness to continue playing that role, to little apparent interest from Russia. Ankara has been reluctant to sign on to the broader Western sanctions regime against Russia. At the same time, Turkey has supplied Ukraine with Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicles, which the Ukrainian military has used to great effect against Russian artillery and tanks. Putin may attempt to pressure Erdogan into limiting or ending future sales, but Turkey has previously framed the provision of Bayraktars as a private company’s decision, not a state-to-state sale.

#### Ukraine proves the strategic value of Turkey playing both sides

* Mid card

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Turkey’s relations with Ukraine are showing increasing signs of strain five months into Russia’s invasion of its Black Sea neighbor. The brewing friction stems from Ukrainian allegations that Russia is stealing its grain and shipping it to Turkey and Ankara’s reluctance to crack down on the illicit trade. Turkish inaction is a symptom of the deeper malaise besetting the two countries as Ankara seeks to keep ties with the Kremlin steady even as Russian forces continue to commit atrocities against Ukraine. Some accuse Turkey of tilting ever more toward Russia, a view that pro-Kremlin media channels in Ukraine zealously propagate. Turkey insists that it is “pro-Ukraine” but “not anti-Russian.” In an exclusive interview Wednesday with Al-Monitor, Ukraine’s ambassador to Ankara, Vasyl Bodnar, acknowledged that the grain issue was bedeviling the “strategic partners.” Tensions escalated today after Ankara allowed a Russian vessel to leave the port of Karasu on the Black Sea. Ukraine summoned Turkey's ambassador to Kyiv to air its displeasure over what Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko called “an unacceptable situation.” “We regret that Russia’s ship Zhibek Zholy, which was full of stolen Ukrainian grain, was allowed to leave Karasu port despite criminal evidence presented to Turkish authorities,” Nikolenko said. Turkish customs officials seized the Russian-flagged Zhibek Zholy after Kyiv said the cargo was illegally transporting 7,000 tons of grain out of Russian-occupied Berdyansk, a port in southeast Ukraine. The move followed a flood of similar demands from Ukraine for numerous ships, which open-source intelligence reports indicate are transporting Ukrainian grain mainly from Russian-occupied Crimea and from newly wrested Ukrainian ports. Bodnar said Kyiv had “bombarded” Ankara with “notes and information” supporting the claims. But Turkey remained unswayed. “As I was explained by Turkish colleagues so far they only have documents showing that these are Russian ships carrying Russian grains from Russian ports,” Bodnar said, echoing statements by Turkey’s foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu. Bodnar continued, “We provided them different information on grain, including ones of legal character. Let’s look at some details. For example, let’s look at who is receiving the grain. In Iskenderun, for example, there was a Russian company that owns the port and was unloading some of this grain. The Turkish authorities need to thoroughly check who the buyers are and what sort of contracts they have signed.” The envoy acknowledged, nonetheless, that establishing theft is a challenge. The ships typically use false documents and switch off their short-range coastal tracking systems to avoid detection when loading goods. "There is a problem of judicial character; we should be able to establish that the grain is stolen. From a legal standpoint, we need formal testimony from witnesses of the theft, from the owners of the grain or analysis of the grain,” Bodnar noted. However, the case against the Zhibek Zholy was watertight. Ukrainian officials said they had all the evidence that the ship had departed from Berdyansk. Even Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, confirmed that the ship was Russian-flagged but then claimed that it belonged to Kazakhstan and was being “carried on a contract between Estonia and Turkey.” Ukraine was clearly hoping that diplomatic pressure from Washington and the EU combined with a slew of damning investigative reports splashed across prominent Western outlets in recent weeks would shame Ankara into action. The optimism proved premature and the Kremlin was delighted. “Having an important NATO country not joining in sanctions against it is a huge plus for Russia, and if it can drive a wedge between Turkey and Ukraine as it has between Turkey and NATO, all the better,” said a Western diplomat speaking not for attribution. The diplomat was referring to Turkey’s threats to block Sweden's and Finland’s membership ahead of the alliance’s summit in Madrid. While Turkey has sealed its straits linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to Russian naval ships and its airspace to Russian military planes, it has blocked passage of NATO ships through the waterways as well and kept its airspace open to Russian commercial planes. Timothy Ash, a London-based emerging-market strategist who closely follows Turkey and Ukraine, said, “I think in the beginning that the Bayraktar thing won Ukrainian hearts. But now I think there is a realization that the Turks are trying to exploit the conflict.” Turkey’s finance minister, Nurettin Nebati, reportedly told a group of Western financiers as much during a recent briefing. “He said ‘we are going to benefit from the sanctions [on Russia] as we did in Iraq,’” one of the bankers present at the gathering told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. Bodnar concedes that the mood in his country is starting to sour. “Since the start of the war, the Ukrainian public has become very sensitive about Russia and Russians and the narrative that Turkey is balancing both sides. This perception of cooperation with Russia, Russian tourists, affects public opinion in Ukraine. In meetings with Turkish officials, we asked them to consider the opportunity to join in sanctions against Russia, but that it is their choice.” However, with Turkey’s economy in shambles amid rising global food and energy prices and nationwide elections around the corner, Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is desperate for the war to end. “There is a desire to end it at any cost even if it means getting the Ukrainians to end the war on Russia’s terms,” Ash told Al-Monitor. Moreover, opinion polls suggest that many Turks believe the canard that the United States ignited the war and is “using” Ukraine to get at Russia. Bodnar says the reality is more nuanced. “If you look at the figures, almost everyone in Turkey is supporting us.” Moreover, there was “no question” from the beginning of the war and “in view of the heroic resistance the Ukrainian people are displaying” that the Turkish government would “tell us to compromise or bow to Russian demands. There has been no such pressure.” Turkey has offered to serve as a guarantor, but Ukraine remains skeptical. “If Turkey were to be a guarantor country, I have doubts that even when Turkey might be supporting Ukraine politically and diplomatically that it would take any practical steps in case of Russian attacks on Ukrainian ports. I don’t see any kind of military leverage or deterrence, and this is a huge threat to Ukraine,” Gaber said. Erdogan claimed on Wednesday that the sides were close to finalizing a deal. Bodnar shared his optimism, telling Al-Monitor, “I believe that we will see some kind of agreement as a result of combined mediation efforts by Turkey and the UN.”