

TURKEY'S INTEREST AS A MEDIATOR IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT IN MAINTAINING SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN REGIONAL SECURITY STABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes Turkey's mediation role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, focusing on its fundamental interest in maintaining regional security stability in Southeastern Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 drastically transformed the Black Sea Regional Security Complex (RSC) into a zone of confrontation, creating direct military, economic, and social threats to Turkey's national security. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical method with the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Conflict Resolution Theory, this study examines how Turkey responded to the crisis. The analysis reveals that Turkey's mediation role is not a passive neutrality policy, but an active and rational conflict management strategy. By leveraging its unique position as a NATO member that maintains dialogue with both Russia and Ukraine, Turkey implemented a series of tiered mediation interventions: political (negotiations in Istanbul), functional (the Black Sea Grain Initiative), and humanitarian (prisoner of war exchanges). These actions successfully de-securitized key threats and managed the patterns of enmity within the RSC. This study concludes that Turkey's role as a mediator is a manifestation of its national interest in preventing the collapse of the regional order, which directly ensures its own security and stability.

Keywords: Mediation, Turkey, Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Regional Security, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

1. INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has become one of the most complex and protracted conflicts in Southeastern Europe in recent decades. The conflict began in 2014 after Russia occupied the Crimea region and supported separatist groups in eastern Ukraine. The situation escalated into a dangerous crisis in late February 2022 when Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This action triggered an international crisis, with the United States and other countries condemning Russia's aggressive actions and violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. On February 24, 2022, Putin officially announced the start of an offensive using land, sea, and air forces to destroy Ukrainian military assets and target cities across the country. However, in September 2022, Ukraine successfully launched a large-scale counter-offensive against Russian forces, managing to recapture several previously controlled territories (Euronews, 2022).

The success of this counter-offensive changed the dynamics of the conflict and gave new hope to Ukraine in defending its territorial integrity. The conflict had a significant impact not only on the people of Ukraine but also on regional stability and international relations. The political, economic, and humanitarian consequences were enormous: thousands were injured and killed, millions were displaced, and infrastructure was destroyed. The international community is actively seeking a solution to end this conflict and find a path to peace.

In this context, the role of international actors as mediators is crucial for resolving ongoing conflicts. A mediator is an independent and impartial party that promotes dialogue and negotiation between conflicting parties to achieve a peaceful solution. One of the regional actors that played a key mediating role is Turkey. As a country with good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, Turkey has a strategic position that allows it to act as a mediator in this conflict. Through diplomacy, negotiation, and other approaches, Turkey aims to facilitate dialogue between the warring parties and seek a solution that allows the conflict to be resolved peacefully.

As a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Turkey has taken tangible steps toward resolution. First, it hosted a high-level peace meeting between Russia and Ukraine at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in March 2023. This meeting provided an important forum for both sides to engage in direct dialogue and discuss core issues of the conflict. Through this initiative, Turkey aimed to enable a more comprehensive and sustainable negotiation process to reach a just and peaceful solution (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Second, Turkey successfully negotiated the reactivation of Ukrainian grain exports through the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The suspension of grain exports from Ukraine to developing countries had a significant impact on global food security. Through its mediation, Turkey helped revive these exports by brokering an agreement with Russia and Ukraine. This success demonstrated its ability to act as an effective mediator in handling economic issues related to the conflict (Interfax, 2022).

Third, Turkey has also successfully facilitated prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine. The warring parties held many citizens as prisoners of war. Through its mediation, Turkey successfully negotiated an agreement to release prisoners from both sides as a step toward restoring relations. This action not only had important humanitarian implications but also helped build trust between the countries (Reuters, 2023).



Picture 1. Map of the countries in the Black Sea region

Turkey, with its strategic geopolitical position in the region, has a number of national interests that influenced its decision to get involved as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. One of Turkey's primary interests is to maintain regional stability and security in its vicinity. Turkey has long emphasized the importance of stability in Southeastern Europe because it has a direct impact on its national security. A prolonged conflict between Russia and Ukraine could have serious consequences for Turkey, including threats to border security and potential destabilization in the region. Therefore, in its efforts to maintain regional stability, Turkey has a strong motivation to act as a mediator in this conflict (Daily Sabah, 2022).

Economic interests are also a crucial factor that encouraged Turkey to get involved. Russia is a major trade and investment partner for Turkey, and Ukraine also has significant economic ties with it. The conflict had a negative impact on economic relations between Russia and Ukraine, as well as affecting Turkey as a neighboring country and trade partner to both sides. In this regard, Turkey had an interest in promoting peace and facilitating a solution that could restore economic stability to the region.

As a mediator, Turkey also gained diplomatic benefits and enhanced its reputation as an active global actor. In this context, Turkey could demonstrate its capability in resolving complex conflicts and show its commitment to the principles of international peace, justice, and security. Success as a mediator in this conflict brought significant benefits to Turkey, both in improving bilateral relations with Russia and Ukraine and in gaining greater international recognition and influence in the international arena.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of a Mediator in International Conflict

Mediation in international conflict is a process of conflict management in which a state actor facilitates conflict resolution through a series of specific actions. This study adopts the operational definition from Beardsley et al. (2022), which defines a mediator as: "A state actor that facilitates conflict resolution through: (a) providing a neutral platform, (b) designing technical mechanisms, (c) guaranteeing the implementation of agreements" (Beardsley et al., 2022: 115).

The Pillars of Turkish Mediation (Bercovitch-Gartner Model): Turkey's mediation role is supported by three main pillars that give it influence and capacity. This model adapts a general mediation framework to the specific context of Turkey.

Mediator Effectiveness Variables: The effectiveness of Turkey's mediation role can be measured through three key variables:

Table 1. Turkey’s Effectiveness as a Mediator

| Variable | Indicator | Source |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Neutrality | Perception of Policy Balance | Kaddorah (2022) |
| Leverage | Ability to control maritime access | Lancaster (2023) |
| Technical Capacity | Number of agreements facilitated | UN Annual Report |

Conflict Resolution Theory

Fisher's Contingency Model (2022): This research uses Fisher's Contingency Model (2022) to analyze mediation interventions. This theory states that effective conflict resolution in armed conflict requires tiered interventions tailored to the intensity of the conflict. Conflict resolution requires tiered interventions:

Level 1: Military de-escalation (confidence-building measures)

Level 2: Economic normalization (win-win solutions)

Level 3: Political reconciliation (institutional frameworks)" (Fisher, 2022: 77).

Application in Turkish Mediation: The application of this model in Turkish mediation can be explained as follows, where the prerequisites for mediation enable tiered interventions that result in a stabilizing impact.

Level 1 (Military De-escalation): The mediation of prisoner exchanges in August 2022 serves as a significant confidence-building measure (CBM).

Level 2 (Economic Normalization): The Black Sea Grain Initiative is a classic example of a win-win solution that successfully exported 32.9 million tons of grain.

Level 3 (Political Reconciliation): The meeting in Istanbul in March 2022 successfully drafted a 15-point peace framework, an initial institutional framework.

Concept of a Win-Win Solution: The success of mediation, especially at Level 2, depends on the ability to create mutual gains. As analyzed by Çelikpala (2023), the Grain Initiative was successful because: "A mediator is successful if it generates mutual gains: Russia: Gained legitimacy for its own grain and fertilizer exports. Ukraine: Reopened vital ports in Odessa and gained export revenue. Turkey: Gained recognition as a regional 'power broker' and transit commission" (Çelikpala, 2023: 83).

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

A Basic Axiom (Buzan & Wæver, 2003): RSCT provides a macro framework for understanding why Turkey felt the need to intervene. The stability of an RSC can be conceptualized through the following formula:

$RSCT_Stability = Gk / (Ti * Ij)$

Where:

Ti: Perceived level of security threat (military/economic).

Ij: Level of security interdependence between member states.

Gk: Collective governance capacity or the role of a regional stabilizer.

Systemic stability (S) is inversely proportional to threat and interdependence but directly proportional to governance capacity. The role of a mediator (Gk) is to suppress T and manage I to increase S.

Application in Southeastern Europe:

Table 2. Application of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to the Black Sea Region

| Karakteristik | Operational Evidence | Impact of Turkish Mediation |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Maritime Threat (Ti) | Increased Russian patrols in the Black Sea >60% | Control of the Bosphorus via Montreux |
| Interdependensi (Ij) | Several Balkan countries' gas dependence on the TurkStream pipeline | Supply guarantee by Turkey |
| Third-Party Vulnerability | Moldova's food dependence on Ukrainian grain | Stabilization via the Grain Initiative |

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive and analytical method. The descriptive method is used to analyze data and general information regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Turkey's role in the mediation. This approach allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of Turkey's national interests as a mediator and

produce findings that are scientifically sound.

In addition, this study will also use a qualitative analysis method to gain a deeper understanding of Turkey's national interests. This method allows researchers to explore the factors that influence Turkey's national interests in mediating the Russia-Ukraine conflict, such as historical, political, economic, and security factors. With this approach, researchers will collect relevant data and information through document analysis and literature studies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dynamics of Southeastern European Security: The Impact of the Conflict on the Black Sea RSC

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is rooted in a long history and complex post-Soviet tensions. Ukraine's desire to integrate with Western institutions, particularly NATO and the European Union, is viewed by Russia not just as a foreign policy challenge, but as an existential threat to its historical sphere of influence and the concept of the "Russian world" (*Russkiy Mir*) (Mankoff, 2022). For Moscow, NATO's eastward expansion is seen as a violation of informal post-Cold War promises and as a maneuver to strategically encircle Russia. The series of events since the Euromaidan Protests in 2014, which overthrew the pro-Russian government, followed by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the proxy war in the Donbas, created a deep and permanent security fault line in the heart of Southeastern Europe (Plokhy, 2017). The full-scale invasion in February 2022 was a dramatic escalation of the eight-year conflict, which instantly changed the scale of the threat from a local-level frozen conflict to a regional-scale interstate war. This transformation fundamentally changed the strategic calculations of every actor in the region, forcing them to redefine their threats, alliances, and national security postures.

According to the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) framework by Buzan & Wæver (2003), the Black Sea Region is a distinct security complex, where the security fates of each coastal state—Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia—are closely interconnected. The Russian invasion not only destroyed the fragile balance of power but also triggered a massive securitization process throughout the region. First, in the military sector, the Black Sea was transformed into a zone of direct confrontation and an active battlefield. The presence of the Russian Navy, the blockade of strategic ports like Odessa, and the deployment of sea mines became real threats to maritime security, freedom of navigation, and the sovereignty of NATO member states such as Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria. This threat is not abstract; incidents such as the capture of Snake Island at the start of the invasion, and more significantly, the sinking of the cruiser Moskva by Ukrainian missiles, show high volatility and a shift in maritime power dynamics. The risk of spillover, both intentional and unintentional, strengthened the need to affirm collective defense commitments (Selçuk, 2023).

Second, in the economic sector, food and energy were explicitly weaponized. The Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports effectively turned grain exports from a trade issue into a global food security issue. For Turkey, as a major grain importer and guardian of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits under the Montreux Convention, this is a direct threat to domestic economic and social stability, while also placing it in a crucial geopolitical position (Yavuz, 2023). Similarly, the dependence of Southeastern European countries on Russian energy supplies became a strategic vulnerability exploited by Moscow. Cutting off gas supplies or manipulating prices is no longer just a tool of economic policy but an instrument of coercion designed to break European unity and pressure countries that support Ukraine (Kara, 2022).

Third, in the social and political sectors, the war triggered the largest refugee flow in Europe since World War II. For Turkey, which already hosts millions of refugees from the Syrian conflict, the prospect of a new wave from the north is a serious concern for national resource capacity and social cohesion. For other neighboring countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, the refugee flow also puts significant pressure on public services and has the potential to become a sensitive domestic political issue. This intense security interdependence—where military, economic, and social threats are interconnected—is what forced Turkey, as a central power within the complex, to take an active role in managing the crisis. Turkey could no longer be a passive spectator but had to act as an actor whose interests were directly threatened (Daily Sabah, 2022).

Turkey's Mediation Role as a Conflict Management Strategy

Turkey's response to this crisis was to implement an "active balancing" strategy that allowed it to become a credible mediator (Çelik, 2018). This ability did not appear out of the blue, but was built on the foundation of its unique foreign policy, complex transactional relationships with Russia, and strong strategic partnerships with Ukraine (Aydın, 2020). On one hand, as a NATO member, Turkey is tied to the collective security architecture of the West. On the other hand, Ankara maintains vital communication channels and economic cooperation with Moscow, even on sensitive issues such as energy (the TurkStream project) and defense (the purchase of the S-400 system) (Robinson, 2017). It is this strategic pragmatism that gives Turkey access and credibility with both sides, a position not held by other Western actors (Kaddorah, 2022). Turkey's main motivation is the rational national interest of maintaining stability in the Black Sea RSC.

The implementation of Turkish mediation can be analyzed as a tiered intervention, in accordance with Fisher's Contingency Model (2022):

Political Mediation (Level 3): In March 2022, Turkey facilitated high-level meetings in Antalya and Istanbul. Although they did not produce a conclusive peace breakthrough, these forums were a crucial step to reopen dialogue and served as an important de-escalation mechanism in the early, uncertain stages of the war (Al

Jazeera, 2022). The failure to reach a peace agreement at this stage can be attributed to the maximalist positions of both sides, who were not yet ready for political compromise. However, these meetings successfully mapped potential areas for future negotiation. Turkey's role here evolved from a mere facilitator to a formulator who helped draft a negotiation framework (Gumrukcu & Toksabay, 2022).

Functional Mediation (Level 2): This is the most significant and globally recognized achievement of Turkish mediation. Recognizing the political stalemate, Turkey shifted its focus to an urgent functional issue: the food blockade. Through complicated negotiations with the United Nations (UN), Turkey successfully brokered the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022 (Interfax, 2022). This agreement created a safe maritime corridor and is a classic example of a "win-win solution." This mechanism involved the establishment of a Joint Coordination Centre in Istanbul, staffed by representatives from Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and the UN to monitor the implementation of the agreement. This was a very successful de-securitization step, moving the food security issue from the realm of military confrontation back into the realm of manageable, albeit limited, technical cooperation (Çelikpala, 2023).

Humanitarian Mediation (Level 1): Turkey consistently mediated prisoner of war exchanges. Success in this humanitarian mediation, such as the large exchange involving the Azov Battalion commanders, served as an important confidence-building measure (CBM) (Reuters, 2023). These steps, although on a smaller scale than the grain initiative, were vital because they showed that negotiated agreements could be respected. This provides a glimmer of hope amid a brutal conflict, while also maintaining Turkey's relevance as an intermediary trusted by both warring parties.

By combining the analysis above, Turkey's mediation role can be seen as a regional security management strategy from within. Within the RSCT framework, Turkey, as a powerful actor within the Black Sea RSC, took on the responsibility of preventing the complex from collapsing into total chaos. Turkey served as an "insulator" that absorbed some of the shocks of the conflict and prevented further escalation, especially between Russia and NATO. By managing patterns of hostility and de-securitizing key issues, Ankara not only pursued its own national interests but also effectively contributed to the stability of the broader regional order. This role challenges the traditional view in RSCT that often sees regional actors more as recipients of impact rather than as active agents who can reshape the security dynamics of their complex.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Turkey's mediation role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a manifestation of its rational national interest in maintaining stability in the Southeastern European Regional Security Complex (RSC). The analysis through the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) framework strongly shows that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 created a series of direct threats—in the military, economic, and social sectors—that were inherently linked and threatened Turkey's national security. In the context of high security interdependence in the Black Sea, where maritime stability, energy security, and trade flows are closely linked, Turkey, as one of the central actors, could not take the position of a passive observer. Instead, Ankara was driven by strategic calculations to act as a regional security manager, a role that was not only reactive in holding back the conflict's impacts but also proactive in shaping an acceptable outcome to protect its interests. This role challenges the traditional view in RSCT that often sees regional actors more as recipients of impact than as active agents who can reshape the security dynamics of their complex.

The research hypothesis is proven: Turkey did not act out of altruism, idealism, or mere external pressure, but as a pragmatic response to manage threats in its environment. By leveraging its unique geopolitical position and an "active balancing" strategy—as a NATO member who simultaneously maintains dialogue and complex transactional relationships with Russia—Turkey was able to position itself as a credible mediator for both warring parties. This ability was realized through a series of calibrated, tiered interventions: political mediation through forums in Istanbul, humanitarian mediation through prisoner exchanges, and most significantly, functional mediation through the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The grain initiative is a prime example of Turkey's success in de-securitizing a crucial issue, transforming it from an arena of confrontation into a platform for limited but vital technical cooperation. This success not only demonstrates Turkey's diplomatic prowess but also highlights the limitations of the Western approach which tends to rely on sanctions and isolation, often closing the door to functional solutions of this kind. However, it should be noted that this success has its limits; Turkey's ability to mediate technical issues may not necessarily transfer to resolving the political and territorial root causes of the conflict itself.

Ultimately, mediation became the most pragmatic and effective foreign policy tool for Turkey to navigate the turbulent crisis on its doorstep. By managing the patterns of hostility and preventing uncontrolled escalation between Russia and the West in the Black Sea, Turkey not only contributed to broader regional stability but also proactively protected its own security and economic stability. This role reaffirms Turkey's status as an autonomous and indispensable regional power, capable of maneuvering between major power blocs without being rigidly tied to any one of them. Moving forward, the sustainability of this role will depend heavily on Turkey's ability to continue to balance these often contradictory relationships, as well as on internal dynamics in Russia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, this case study provides strong evidence that in an increasingly multipolar global order, middle-power actors with unique geopolitical positions can play a crucial stabilizing role that even major powers cannot fulfill.

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