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Turkey calls for Ukraine-Russia mediation, signaling deal with Syria

As NATO escalates its war on Russia in Ukraine, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in the western Ukrainian city of Lvov Thursday.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, center, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, left, and United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres shake hands after their meeting in Lviv, Ukraine, Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022. [AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka]

During the summit, held nearly two weeks after an August 5 meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Erdoğan reportedly discussed diplomatic initiatives to end the war, exchange prisoners of war, continue grain ship deliveries from Ukraine, and arrange a visit to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear facility by International Atomic Energy Agency officials.

Erdoğan said, “The main topic of our meeting was of course the war, which has been going on for nearly six months.” He also reiterated his government’s support for “Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.”

Regarding Europe’s largest nuclear power plant, currently seized by Russia, Erdoğan said: “We also voiced our concerns regarding the conflicts taking place around Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. We don’t want to experience another Chernobyl.”

“The area needs to be demilitarized, and we must tell it as it is: Any potential damage in Zaporizhzhia is suicide,” Guterres said at a news conference. On Friday, Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron agreed to arrange a mission by officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency to visit the plant.

In a Telegram post, Zelensky said: “We agreed to continue the coordination of the grain initiative implementation.” Four more ships left Ukrainian ports under the July 22 Istanbul grain export deal between Russia and Ukraine, brokered by Turkey and the United Nations, the Turkish Defense Ministry said on Sunday.

Repeating his call for a meeting of Ukrainian and Russian leaders in Turkey, Erdoğan said that ending the war was the focus of the trilateral meeting in Lvov. He hailed the Istanbul deal in July as “exemplary work of historic importance.”

Although Erdoğan called for a “diplomatic solution,” he emphasized Ankara’s support for Ukraine in the conflict: “As Turkey, we exert efforts for the termination of the conflicts by diplomatic means, while also continuing to stand by our Ukrainian friends.”

Ankara has condemned the Russian invasion and has armed Ukraine with Bayraktar drones. However, Turkey has not joined tough US and EU sanctions against Moscow and has significantly increased its trade with Russia since the war began. This has raised concerns in Western capitals that Russia is using Turkey to evade their sanctions.

In an article titled “Surge in Turkish exports to Russia raises western fears of closer ties,” the *Financial Times*(FT) wrote: “Turkey’s exports to Russia grew 46 per cent by value over the past three months compared with the same period last year as Ankara allowed its companies to step into the gap created by an exodus of western businesses.”

Citing two European Union officials, it said, “EU member states are becoming increasingly uneasy about Turkey’s booming trade with Russia and the potential for it to assist Moscow as a substitute for other European imports and exports.” One official told the FT:“It’s on our radar. ... It’s not nice and is not being perceived well by the EU. It’s an irritant.”

Fearing potentially devastating consequences of an escalation of the NATO war against Russia, with which it has strong commercial and military ties, including on energy, Ankara also faces a deepening economic crisis at home and growing working class opposition. With elections slated for next year, the Erdoğan government’s polls are in steep decline. It believes that improved trade with Russia and potential financial aid from Moscow will help contain this domestic crisis.

In Lvov, Erdoğan declared: “Personally, I remain convinced that the war will eventually end at the negotiating table. Mr. Zelensky and Mr. Guterres are actually of the same opinion on this issue. ... I believe that it is possible to revive the negotiations based on the parameters that emerged in March in Istanbul. We stand ready to provide every kind of support in this regard and to play once again a facilitating or mediating role.”

Washington and its European NATO allies do not want the war to end before Russia is brought to its knees, however. In April, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu pointed to Ankara’s deepening rift with its NATO allies, declaring: “Until the NATO meeting, we thought the war would not last long. However, after the NATO meeting, an opinion emerged. There are countries that want this war to continue. They want Russia to be weakened, to fall back and perhaps to bring down Putin.”

Conflicts are mounting behind the scenes. Ankara eventually lifted the objections it had to Finland and Sweden joining NATO in order to fight Russia, denouncing Finnish and Swedish support for Kurdish-nationalist groups. On Saturday, however, Turkish Justice

Minister Bekir Bozdağ said Sweden and Finland could not join NATO unless they extradite “members of terrorist organizations” to Turkey.

Ankara’s overtures to Russian-backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom it has been trying to oust since 2011, risks sparking new conflicts with Turkey’s NATO allies. After Erdoğan’s meeting with Putin in Sochi, Çavuşoğlu said he had met Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad “on the hoof” last October in Brussels. He called for “political reconciliation” between Damascus and the so-called Syrian “opposition” as the only way out. He also said that the Kremlin wants to arrange an Assad-Erdoğan meeting.

“We have no eyes on Syria’s territory. ... We have no interest in defeating or not defeating Assad,” Erdoğan said on his return from Lvov.

In reality, since 2016, Turkey has launched multiple military operations against US-backed, Kurdish-nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria, occupying much of the region to keep the YPG from building a separate Kurdish state. Turkey, along with its Syrian Islamist proxies, has created administrative units and opened universities under Ankara’s control in areas of Syria it controls.

Since May, Erdoğan has threatened new offensives against the YPG to create a 30-kilometer-deep zone along the Syrian border, where Ankara could resettle 1 million Syrian refugees. Erdoğan declared, “It is the US and the coalition forces that are the primary breeders of terrorism in Syria,” referring to YPG militias that Ankara considers terrorist organizations. He recently demanded the withdrawal of US forces in Syria, a demand supported by Russia amid the NATO war in Ukraine.

Before declaring Turkey’s “solidarity” with Russia in Syria, he said, “In every step we are taking in Syria right now, we are in contact with Russia through our security forces, our intelligence and our Defense Ministry.”

The Homeland Party, a pro-China, nationalist ally of Erdoğan, announced that a party delegation will “visit Damascus in 10-15 days” for “talks at the highest level.” In a party statement, it declared: “Under these circumstances, Turkey’s cooperation with Syria was of historic importance. [Çavuşoğlu’s] statements are very correct. We congratulate them.”

Ankara reportedly wants Damascus to support the end of the de facto YPG-controlled administration in northeastern Syria and the return of refugees to Syria. Damascus, on the other hand, is demanding to get back parts of its territory now controlled by Turkey and its Islamist proxies.

Erdoğan's claim to be a "pacifist" working for "world peace" is a hypocritical lie. A key backer of the US-NATO war for regime change in Syria since 2011, Ankara nearly provoked a NATO war with Russia by shooting down a Russian warplane on its southern border in November 2015.

Ankara's feverish diplomatic activity in fact underscores the growing danger of a nuclear war triggered by US-NATO threats against Russia and China. Only a mass mobilization of the international working class against imperialist war based on a socialist program can stop this catastrophic slide towards a third world war.

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