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Turkey's stance on US negotiations with Russia: no discussions on Ukraine without us

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President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Ankara on 18 February provided Turkey with an opportunity to present its stance on negotiations between the United States and the Russian Federation. During a press conference, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that the initiative of the Donald Trump administration, aimed at swiftly ending the war through negotiations, aligns with the diplomatic efforts that Ankara has pursued since the onset of the Russian invasion. He added that Turkey would be an ideal host for talks between Washington, Kyiv, and Moscow. At the same time, Erdoğan emphasised that Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty were of "fundamental importance" to Turkey, and he affirmed that his country would offer "all forms of support" to ensure that the negotiation process leads to lasting peace. He also highlighted that securing trade in the Black Sea could serve as a confidence-building measure.

Positive remarks regarding Trump's initiative stem from Ankara's cautious approach to the new US administration. However, Erdoğan's comments indicate that Turkey opposes attempts to resolve the conflict in Ukraine through bilateral negotiations between the US and Russia. Turkish policymakers believe it is essential to consider the interests of regional actors and fear an excessive strengthening of the Russian Federation in the Black Sea region. This position increases Ankara's willingness to cooperate with European partners.

Commentary

- **Although Turkey anticipates an end to the conflict in Ukraine, it does not consider a resolution achieved solely through US–Russia negotiations to be in its interests.** This position is driven by three factors. The first is the belief among Turkish policymakers that lasting conflict resolutions require the consideration of the security interests of regional actors, rather than an agreement imposed by great powers without their involvement. The second factor concerns Ankara's intentions regarding Ukraine, which not only presents economic opportunities through post-war reconstruction but also plays a significant role in Turkey's plans to expand its defence sector (for instance, as a supplier of engines for the Akıncı and Kızılelma UAVs and as a potential co-producer for the Kaan fighter jet). The third factor relates to concerns that such a resolution could embolden Russia. The Turkish leadership appears deeply concerned about Trump's excessively conciliatory stance towards Moscow. If this were to result in the recognition of Russian territorial gains in Ukraine, it would enable the Russian Federation to rebuild its military capabilities more rapidly, ultimately shifting the balance of power in the Black Sea in its

favour. Furthermore, Ankara would like to reap the benefits of its previous involvement in negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow – hence Erdoğan's proposal to host four-party talks in Turkey, reinforcing its role as a key mediator in the conflict.

- **These factors enhance Ankara's willingness to broader cooperation with European partners regarding Kyiv.** This is reflected in the statements of Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, who asserted that Europe and Turkey should participate in discussions on the future of the conflict in Ukraine. Erdoğan's comments on providing support to achieve lasting peace should not necessarily be interpreted as an indication of Turkey's readiness to deploy troops, at least while Ankara remains excluded from peace negotiations. However, they do indicate that Turkey is open to greater coordination with European countries on this issue. Although Turkey is unlikely to overcome its reluctance to impose sanctions on Russia, it would likely be willing to bolster its military cooperation with Ukraine.
- **Ankara is cautious in its evaluation of Trump's approach towards Ukraine, as it is relying on his administration to make decisions favourable to Turkey in other areas.** It expects that the US president will opt for a complete withdrawal of American forces from Syria. This would terminate US cooperation with the People's Defence Units (YPG), which Turkey considers the Syrian extension of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party. US cooperation with the YPG, initiated as part of the campaign against Islamic State in 2015, has long been a contentious issue in Turkish-American relations. To persuade the United States to withdraw from Syria, Ankara has recently sent numerous signals indicating that it is capable of assuming responsibility for combating Islamic State in the country (see '*Turkey's Syrian dilemmas: success and the road ahead*'). Turkey also hopes that Trump will lift the sanctions imposed in the final days of his first term under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). These sanctions were a consequence of Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system, which also resulted in the cessation of F-35 exports to Turkey and the exclusion of Turkish companies from the consortium producing the fighter jet.