

Policy Report



Turkey's And Iran's Drone Supply In The War In Ukraine

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Turkey's and Iran's military supply to the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces has been evidenced by the presence of TB2, Mohajer, and Shahed 136 drones on the battlefield. This strategic and military support disavowed by Tehran and Ankara is not exclusively a symptom of a security alliance or military cooperation.

The supply of drones reflects actual political and geopolitical bets for Erdogan and Raisi. Both leaders face situations of internal fragility in their countries. Turkey because of its criticized political authoritarianism and the unprecedented economic crisis it is facing; Iran because of its international isolation coupled with the recent revolt movement emanating from its civil society.

The support that the Turkish and Iranian authorities provide to both Kyiv and Moscow allows them to capitalize politically on these drones in order to see their geopolitical and economic interests prevail on the regional and international scene.

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- Through its supply of TB2 drones to Ukrainian forces, Ankara is securing its so-called balancing act that is necessary to confirm its alignment with NATO and counter Russian influence in the Black Sea, while keeping the dialogue open with Russia for economic and geopolitical reasons.
- With the legislative and presidential elections of June 2023 in mind, Erdogan's balancing act aims to strengthen the Turkish president's position internally by improving his image.
- The Iranian Mohajer and Shahed 136 drones supplied to the Russian forces allow Tehran to hope to obtain counterparts both in Syria - where Iran seeks to establish a direct corridor between Tehran and Beirut - and in Central Asia - where the Iranian power is destabilized by Azerbaijan and its allies.
- This support provided to the Russian forces allows Iran not only to develop its drone technologies but also, more broadly, to restore the balance of power with its regional opponents (Israel in particular) and thus strengthen its axis of resistance in the Middle East.

Introduction

Iran's and Turkey's involvement in the Ukrainian conflict through a supply of military drones to the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces has been highly publicized. It questions the Turkish and Iranian incentives behind their respective support of the two belligerents. Initiated in 2016 with a [military cooperation agreement](#), the strategic rapprochement [accelerated in 2019 with the signing of a \\$69 million contract](#) between Baykar Marina and Ukrspetsproekt for the purchase of drones: Ukraine then became one of the main importers of Bayraktar TB2 drones. These exchanges allowed Ukraine to have an [initial fleet of 24 combat drones](#) at the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022. On the Russian side, according to information provided by the United States, the first delivery of Iranian Shahed-136 and Mohajer drones has taken place at the [end of August 2022](#). The international community monitored [their appearance on the Ukrainian battlefield in September](#). Iranian drones are not very sophisticated, but [their low cost \(about \\$ 20,000\)](#) represents an obvious advantage for the Russians: wear down the Ukrainian rear front and benefit from a relative rebalancing at a lower cost¹. Indeed, through cumulative effects, the Russians hope to weaken the Ukrainian rear front, following [a logic of attrition](#).

This dual supply from Iran and Turkey follows economic logic: indeed, the deployment of these technologies in a conflictual theater allows them to be perfected while allowing the two providers to acquire [greater credibility as exporters of drones and ultimately increase their market share](#). However, the Turkish desire to distance itself from the export of drones to Ukraine since February 2022 and the [non-recognition from the Iranians that they have supplied the Russians during the war show that](#) the decision of whether or not to supply a belligerent state entails several (geo)political issues.

Therefore, apart from economic considerations, what are the political incentives that determine the supply of Iranian and Turkish drones to Ukraine? To what extent do the political strategies that determined Turkish and Iranian supplies differ?

In the first part, we will discuss the Turkish political incentives, but also the geopolitical gains that Erdogan hopes to gain in view of the June 2023 elections. In the second part, we will focus on the Iranian motivations for supplying Russia with drones. We will show that Iran's external priorities have favored its support to Russian armed forces in the conflict in Ukraine.

Turkey's Motivations Behind Its Supply Of TB2 To Ukraine

During the first months of the war in Ukraine, the Bayraktar TB2 quickly gained popularity and those drones were promoted as a [symbol of Ukrainian resistance](#) because of their feats of arms. Indeed, the surprising disorganization of Russian troops and the [absence of a real Russian air campaign](#) (that would have aimed at establishing dominance in the airfield at the beginning of the war) allowed these drones to distinguish themselves while reducing the [Kremlin's military arsenal](#). These drones [are not the Ukrainians' "secret weapon"](#) and will not, on their own, drive the Russians out of Ukrainian territory. However, they helped slow the advance of Russian troops

¹ Dr. Delanoë's interview conducted on November 16, 2022, on Russia-Iran relations in the context of the war in Ukraine and a growing supply of Iranian drones.

while supporting the Ukrainian counteroffensive. This military success allows Turkey to strengthen its technological and political credibility in several respects. Indeed, the results of the TB2 on the Ukrainian battlefield [attract new customers](#), but, above all, allow Ankara to capitalize politically on this technology.

The supply of TB2 corroborates a strategic proximity between Kyiv and Ankara despite the latter's fluid relationship with Russia. Turkey's cooperative relations with both Russia and Ukraine have imposed a so-called "[balancing act](#)" and responded to an internal political interest: the re-election of Erdogan and the AKP in the next presidential and legislative elections in June 2023. Erdogan's desire to ensure the continuity of his authoritarian power in 2023 requires him to accommodate both Ukrainian and Russian interests for geopolitical and economic reasons.

Firstly, cooperation between Turks and Ukrainians responds to a common concern, that of potential Russian supremacy in the Black Sea. The access this sea offers to the Mediterranean Sea makes it a strategic matter, particularly because of the amount of exports of hydrocarbons and agricultural products that come from the bordering countries and then transit through it. Ukraine and Russia are [the two largest exporters of cereals, sunflowers, and fertilizers](#) and use the Black Sea to convey their exports.

Therefore, Turkey, which derives many economic and political benefits from its control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits, is concerned about recent Russian maneuvers around this maritime area. Those maneuvers aim at [opening up Moscow by providing an access to the "warm seas" \(in particular the Mediterranean\)](#) by strengthening Russia's [position in the Black Sea](#). Indeed, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 provided Russia with a sea area three times larger in the [Black Sea](#). Its destabilizing operations in Georgia, both its [military intervention in 2008 in South Ossetia](#) and its [massive propaganda campaigns during parliamentary elections in 2020](#), show its interest in destabilizing another coastal state in the area. For Ankara, this revisionism foreshadows a relative encirclement and Russian supremacy over this [hydrocarbon-rich space](#). Now, the additional acquisition of Ukrainian coastal territories could grant Moscow supremacy in the Black Sea and impose a quasi-bipolar situation (except for Romania and Bulgaria) that will [not be in favor of](#) Turkish security and economic interests.

Cooperation between Kyiv and Ankara is therefore strengthened by the struggle against Russian aspirations in the Black Sea, but also by the Turkish expression of [sensitivity towards the Crimean Tatars, particularly since 2014](#). This rapprochement has facilitated the intensification of [armament cooperation](#) that became, in 2019, a strategic partnership essentially based on [Turkish drones](#). These exchanges have enabled Ukraine to strengthen, for a time, its deterrent and defensive capabilities in the face of Russia's aggressiveness. It has also allowed Kyiv to enjoy Turkish support in its bid to join NATO. For Turkey, this rapprochement strengthens its position within NATO. It also potentially allows it to assert its interests despite its [aggressive foreign policy](#) in Syria or certain tensions with the United States following Ankara's purchase of Russian [S-400 air-defense missile systems](#) and the [purchase of Russian gas in rubles](#). Thus, Turkey manages to ensure its alignment with its NATO allies through its drone supply while maintaining its economic ties with Russia.

Indeed, Ankara has been able to maintain the dialogue with the Kremlin despite the invasion of Ukrainian territory as of February 2022. This so-called "[equilibrist](#)" positioning is all the more

surprising since Turkey and Russia have repeatedly demonstrated significant geopolitical divergences in [Syria](#), [Libya](#), but also in the [Caucasus](#). This paradox regarding Turkish-Russian ties is a [pragmatic connivance](#). More concretely, Turkey and Russia cultivate ties that are neither binding nor costly alliances, but allow them [“to control the international agenda for a while, to influence the world diplomatic stage, to constrain others and to achieve immediate results”](#).

Secondly, Erdogan's current positioning allows him to maintain his economic ties with Russia, Turkey's [third-largest trading partner](#). This strong economic activity between the two countries does not allow Turkey to risk losing this trading partner by applying Western sanctions against Russia, especially given the current Turkish economic slump characterized by [inflation exceeding 80% over one year and a 44% decline of the Turkish lira against the dollar in 2021](#).

From a geopolitical point of view, Turkey needs to maintain its ties [with Russia, the power dominating Syrian airspace, to establish its 30-km-wide “safe zone”](#) along its southern border in Syria. Indeed, although the Russian projection in Syria is threatened by the balance of forces in Ukraine, [the Russian Aerospace Forces \(VKS\) still have a stronghold in northeastern Syria](#). The Russian desire to establish [a defense system](#) in the Qamishli region (the Kurdish area) confirms Russia's presence in the long term and ultimately gives Putin leverage over Erdogan. Between 2016 and 2019, Turkey launched three operations in northern Syria against the Kurds, mainly against the coalition of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Those were backed by Washington and, previously, by [an international coalition that aimed at retaking Kobane](#) from the Islamic State in 2015. [Russia has tolerated those Turkish military interventions in northern Syria even as the Kremlin seeks to avoid dividing Syrian territory into areas of influence](#). On November 13, 2022, an attack in Istanbul has been attributed by the Turkish government to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the YPG (People's Protection Units). [Erdogan has since launched the “Claw-Sword” offensive](#) in northern Syria and Iraq. [The Kurds, despite being Washington’s allies, are calling on the Russians and not the Americans to contain the Turks and their desire for a ground offensive](#). In other words, if Turkey wishes to continue its attacks on the SDF to ensure the establishment of a “safe zone” on its southern flank, it must first ensure that Russia does not oppose it in order to avoid the Russian bombing of Turkish troops.

Turkish involvement in Ukraine has therefore responded to internal political interests. With his so-called balancing act, Erdogan is trying to obtain economic and security gains in the Black Sea and Syria to restore his image on the Turkish internal scene and promote his and his party's re-election. Indeed, [Turkey's civil opposition is growing and public opinion is exasperated both by the economic slump and political authoritarianism](#), which could threaten Erdogan's and the AKP's power base in future elections.

Iranian Motives Behind The Supply Of Mohajer And Shahed 136

Iran's willingness to supply drones to Russia mainly responds to geopolitical considerations. It is about strengthening Iran externally, both by developing its “Shiite axis of resistance” in the Middle East and by protecting its interests in Central Asia. Those regional aspirations are intended to thwart any external attempt to destabilize the regime, all the [while having its power internally weakened](#).

Iran has every interest in supporting the Russians in their war in Ukraine both to prevent the Russian government from suffering a setback that would be politically costly, and to confirm a strategic rapprochement between the two countries. Historically, Iranian support has been linked to obvious ideological proximity with Russia. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, officials have been perceiving the international environment as hostile and therefore as a threat to its survival. This perception is fed and fostered by virulent anti-Westernism. However, after decades of isolation on the international scene due to its “Neither East nor West” strategy, Iran opted in [2005 for a “Look to the East Policy” \(Nagah be Shargh\)](#) formulated by Ari Larijani². Despite attempts under President Rouhani to move closer to the West with the establishment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) from 2015 on, Iran has never really abandoned its desire to foster its ties with the “East”, and to demonstrate its [Eurasian sense of belonging, something that Iran and Russia have in common](#). The long process of Iran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where it obtained [permanent membership in September 2022](#), is a good illustration of this desire.

Moreover, Iran has not hesitated to violate [Security Council Resolution 2231](#), which prohibited it from supplying military weapons until 2023 (one of the founding rules of the JCPOA) even though negotiations for the restoration of the agreement had resumed in April 2021. Thus, delivering military equipment to Russia shows an undeniable Iranian anchoring in the “East”. It also means that Iran overlooks the risk of abandoning its reintegration into the international system once and for all. In addition to the ideological proximity between the two states, the strengthening of their cooperation also responds to Iranian security and strategic interests.

The supply of drones to Russia allows Tehran to secure a Russian ally, to avoid isolation on the international scene, and to [circumvents Western sanctions](#) that are aimed at suffocating the Iranian economy. At the same time, this cooperation offers Iran potential levers of pressure vis-à-vis Russia on the Syrian issue and promotes the implementation of its Eurasian strategy⁴.

Indeed, Russia is historically the hegemon in Central Asia. However, China has been developing its influence for several years, especially through the [Belt and Road Initiative](#). In this context, and given the rapprochement between Baku and Tel Aviv, Tehran is forced to base its Eurasian strategy on Russia in order to promote its interests, including, by extension, in the Caucasus, a region where frozen conflicts are being revived (a tendency that dates back a couple of years).

As early as 2020, when the war in Karabakh broke out, an indirect confrontation started between Azerbaijan and Iran. Yerevan was supported by the Iranian armed forces and Baku by Turkey, [but also by Israel](#). The lightning Azeri victory over Armenia was made possible mainly by the supply of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and was experienced as a humiliation by both Armenians and the Iranian power. Thus, the current supply of drones to Russia in the context of the conflict in Ukraine sends a clear signal of deterrence towards Turkey and Israel: that of an undeniable technological catch-up in terms of drones. The Russian shipment of [captured Western military equipment on Ukrainian ground](#) is part of the Iranian plan for military modernization and comes

² Interview with Professor Pahlavi conducted on November 9, 2022, on Iranian diplomatic strategy in general and in the Ukrainian conflict.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

as compensation for its drones. At the same time, tensions with Baku have recently intensified, following Ilham Aliyev's statements regarding the establishment of the [Zangezur corridor](#), which will directly connect Azerbaijan to Turkey (via the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan, but also through Armenian territory) de facto excluding Iran from the itinerary. This project is all the more considered dangerous by the Iranians because of the [economic and military ties](#) between Israel and Azerbaijan. [Tehran suspects that Israeli troops are present on Azeri soil](#) and this reinforces the feeling of a “citadel besieged”⁵ among the Iranian authorities.

To put pressure on Baku and limit its rapprochement with Israel, Iran wants to thwart the Zangezur corridor project (still under construction) by promoting [the Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Transport Corridor \(ITC\)](#). The exclusion of Azerbaijan from this corridor would prevent it from benefitting significantly from international transport and trade in Central Asia and it would probably have heavy political costs. To strengthen the pre-eminence of the ITC and its credibility over the future Zangezur, the Iranians must benefit from Russian support. Indeed, Moscow holds greater pressure on Turkey and Israel, the two main countries that support Baku in its plan to isolate Iran in Central Asia.

The recent supply of drones also allows Iran to ask for counterparties and [put pressure on Russia in Syria](#), an area over which the strategies of these two allies can be very different. On one hand, Moscow became involved in Syria in 2015 with the main objectives of [safeguarding the Al-Assad regime and amplifying its presence in the Middle East](#). On the other hand, Iran seeks, through its involvement, to preserve its security interests, but also to project power in the Middle East. Since the 1980s, Tehran has sought to influence Syrian spheres of power, and the 2011 civil war represented an [opportunity for Iran to promote its administrative control over a part of Syrian territory](#) and the country's officials. Tehran is therefore pursuing its “[proxy war](#)” strategy by supporting pro-Iranian militias and deploying a part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria and more broadly in the Middle East. Ensuring its influence over the failed Syrian state would enable Iran to establish [a direct territorial corridor between Tehran and Beirut via Iraq and Syria](#). Iran's increased presence in Syria thus makes it possible to strengthen its “axis of resistance” and to modify a balance of forces that is currently to its disadvantage in the Middle East because of the economic and military superiority of its regional rivals, the main one being Israel.

In an effort to counter Iran's growing influence in the Middle East and particularly in Syria, Tel Aviv has established a “[deconfliction mechanism](#)” following Russia's involvement on the ground and in the air, in 2015, during the Syrian war. This mechanism aims at ensuring military coordination with Moscow to avoid indirect clashes with the Russian armed forces when Israel conducts its air raids and operations against Iranian deployments. Of course, this mechanism is not in favor of Iran's interests and demonstrates the absence of Russian support for Tehran's geopolitical ambitions - tinged with confessionism - in Syria and more broadly in the Middle East.

Indeed, while the [Russians and Iranians have agreed to keep Assad in power](#), they have two distinguished political solutions in mind. Russia seeks to stabilize Syria to ensure a foothold and does not perceive the presence of pro-Iranian non-state armed groups as being advantageous for

⁵ *Ibid.*

them. Moscow does not approve of Iran's desire to strengthen a Shiite axis in the region and to influence the Syrian government to develop its influence in the region. Indeed, Iran's proxy war strategy results in increased support for the presence of these militias in Syria and it undermines the strengthening of the Syrian central power (and this is not in Russia's interests).

Nowadays, Russia is, therefore, in a delicate situation. The war it is waging in Ukraine is weakening its strategic positions in other areas, particularly in Syria. This war effort effectively foreshadows an "[economy](#)" for the Russians in the deployment of their military capabilities in Syria. Tehran could take advantage of this new need to develop its drone sales, but also acquire a greater lever of pressure on Moscow.

The supply of drones is therefore a way for Iran to strengthen its alliance with Russia in order to obtain its support in Central Asia, but also represents an opportunity to develop levers of pressure on Moscow that will allow it to obtain concessions on the Syrian issue.

This analysis showed that the political strategies of the two countries differ in several respects. Indeed, Ankara seems to be guided by political rather than geopolitical considerations. Erdogan's desire to strengthen his power and ensure his re-election in June 2023 partly explains his strong diplomatic dynamism on the Ukrainian issue. Its links with Ukraine and Russia allow Turkey to extend its influence on the international sphere through its capacity to mediate between the belligerent states despite having aggressive behavior in its regional environment (Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, etc.). The desire to secure its position in the Black Sea through a rapprochement with Kyiv and its need to preserve its links with Russia for economic and security reasons (especially in Syria) could allow it to improve its image in order to strengthen its position internally.

As for Iran's supply of drones to Russia, the focus is on responding to geopolitical dynamics and protecting the Iranian regime from Israeli destabilization attempts in its direct regional environment: The Middle East and Central Asia. The power asymmetry between Tehran and Tel Aviv undermines the development of Iran's "axis of resistance" and consequently threatens its internal security and its projection of power on the regional scene. To change this unfavorable balance of power, Iran favors a strategic rapprochement with Russia, a rapprochement needed to support its Eurasian strategy and develop its deterrence capabilities against Baku and in Syria against Israel. This dependence on Russia is intensified in the context of a weakening Iranian political power due to the [internal revolt movement](#).

The supply of drones for the war in Ukraine represents an economic opportunity for both countries but therefore responds to different pressures and interests. These military supports can be seen as risky bets for Ankara and Tehran. By providing these drones, both countries are encouraging the continuation of the conflict, but the stalemate that could result from this military support would be counterproductive: given the current balance of forces on the battlefield, a continuation of the conflict would contribute to the weakening of Russia (even if Moscow resumes the initiative on the battlefield). For Turkey, this weakening would undermine its double game between NATO and Moscow and would certainly reduce the economic gains it derives from Russia's circumvention of international sanctions. For Iran, the likelihood that the Russian

government will sideline Iranian interests to ensure its survival will also increase with Moscow's potential weakening in Ukraine. Indeed, Iran would pay a high price for a strong positioning in the “East” and without Russia’s power, it would be extremely vulnerable to Israeli destabilization operations and the general pressure of the international community.