



Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Turkey's Response and Black Sea Access Issues

March 11, 2022

Russia's early 2022 [invasion](#) of Ukraine has heightened challenges North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally Turkey faces in [balancing relations](#) between the two countries and managing Black Sea access, with implications for U.S.-Turkey ties. In recent years, Turkey's links with Russia—especially its [2019 acquisition](#) of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system—have fueled major U.S.-Turkey tensions, triggering [sanctions](#) and reported [informal congressional holds](#) on arms sales. Turkey's increasing cooperation with Ukraine may have [some alignment](#) with U.S. interests in [limiting Russia's ability](#) to reassert regional dominance. Turkey has made some efforts to [mediate](#) between Russia and Ukraine in the current crisis. For additional context, see CRS Report R44000, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

Assessing Turkey's Response

In its response to Russia's invasion, Turkey likely hopes to minimize spillover effects to its national security and economy. While Turkey has [denounced](#) the invasion and supplied Ukraine with [armed drone aircraft](#) and [humanitarian assistance](#), the Turkish government [has said](#) Turkey will not join economic sanctions against Russia. The conflict has [already worsened](#) Turkey's ongoing domestic [currency](#) and [inflation](#) crisis, and its economy could be vulnerable to Russian cutoffs of [natural gas and wheat exports](#) or [military actions in Syria](#) that create new refugee flows.

In late February, Turkey [acknowledged](#) a state of war between Russia and Ukraine, invoking Article 19 of the [1936 Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits](#) (the “Montreux Convention”), which bars belligerent countries' naval access to and from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits (see [Figure 1](#)). A few days earlier, Ukraine had [called for](#) the Straits' closure. Shortly after Turkey's decision, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [expressed appreciation](#) for Turkey's implementation of the Convention and support for Ukraine. (The United States is not a party to the convention, but has complied with its terms since it went into effect in 1936 as a treaty that is reflective of customary international law.)

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11885

Figure I. Map of Black Sea Region and Turkish Straits



Turkey's invocation of Article 19 for the [first time since World War II](#) may have limited near-term military impact. Russia reportedly has [naval predominance](#) over Ukraine with its Black Sea fleet and other ships that transited the Straits before the invasion.

The longer the war continues, the more significant Turkish restrictions on passage [could become](#). An exception to the Straits' closure under Article 19 permits access to Russian ships if they are returning to their designated Black Sea bases, but Turkey's foreign minister [has stated](#) that ships returning to base "should not be involved in the war." President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [has said](#) that Turkey seeks to avoid escalation. In March 10 correspondence with CRS, a Turkish official explained that Turkey has advised all countries to refrain from sending warships through the Straits, but has not formally closed the Straits to non-belligerent states. Some naval analysts have [expressed concern](#) that discouraging other countries from transit when Russia can return ships to Black Sea bases could undermine the Convention and put NATO at a disadvantage. [One has asserted](#) that Black Sea access is "essential for the alliance's presence and security as well as to reassure" allies Romania and Bulgaria.

Key U.S. Policy Issues

F-16 Sale and S-400

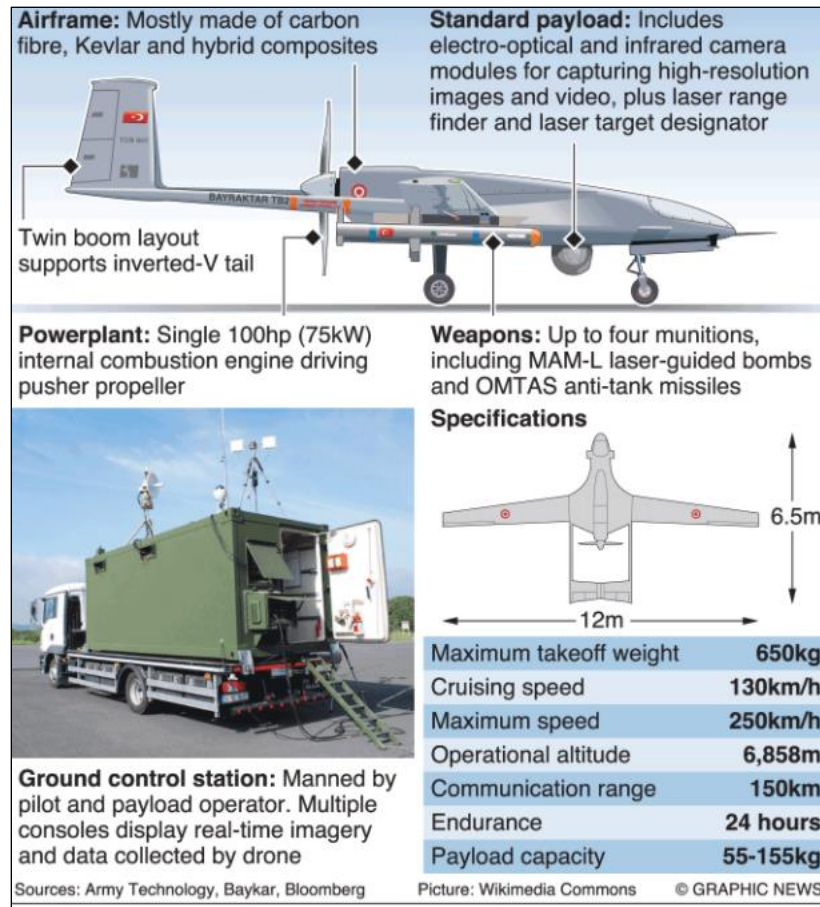
The ongoing war and its effect on Turkey's relations with the United States, Russia, and Ukraine, could influence a [pending request](#) by Turkey for upgraded and new F-16 fighter aircraft. Turkey seeks to [modernize](#) its air force after losing access to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter when it acquired the Russian S-400 system. Analysts have considered [Congress's role](#) in reviewing the proposed F-16 sale (no formal notification has occurred to date), how its failure [might damage](#) the U.S.-Turkey relationship, and whether Turkey [might turn to Russia](#) or [other European countries](#) for fighter aircraft in that case.

Alternatively, it is unclear whether the war and its aftermath might lead Turkey to change its position on keeping the S-400. Removing the S-400 from Turkey could lead the United States to lift the [sanctions](#) mentioned above, and even allow Turkey to receive F-35s under Section 1245 of P.L. 116-92.

Turkish Military Cooperation with Ukraine

The ongoing war is testing the consequences of Turkish military cooperation with Ukraine. How that cooperation impacts the war and how Russia responds to it could have implications for U.S. policy.

Turkey has reportedly sold several Turkish-origin [Bayraktar TB2 drones](#) (see **Figure 2**) to Ukraine as part of [deepening bilateral defense cooperation](#). In recent Turkish-supported military operations in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, these drones have established a [successful track record](#) in targeting Russian-made armored vehicles and anti-aircraft systems. Their ability to affect outcomes might be different in a [higher intensity war](#) with Russia. Some [claims](#) of successful Ukrainian TB2 strikes on Russian military targets have emerged during the war, and [one report](#) suggested that Ukraine may have reportedly received additional TB2s in early March.

Figure 2. Bayraktar TB2 Drone

Based on outcomes in Ukraine, U.S. officials and lawmakers can assess the benefits and drawbacks of Turkey-Ukraine military cooperation, and whether to encourage or supplement it in ongoing or future situations. In the region, Turkey also has recently cultivated closer defense ties with [Azerbaijan](#), [Georgia](#), and [Poland](#).

Turkish Control over Black Sea Access

Turkey's control over Black Sea access could affect the balance of forces in a longer Russia-Ukraine war and beyond. When Turkey itself is not at war, Article 18 of the [Montreux Convention](#) places transit limits on the aggregate tonnage of non-Black Sea country warships, and the duration of their stays.

U.S. officials and lawmakers might evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of Turkish actions affecting access for Russian and U.S./NATO warships, both during the war and its aftermath. Such evaluations could inform U.S. efforts to influence Turkish actions and adjust U.S. military deployments. In answering a question about U.S. Black Sea strategy during a March 8 Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland [said](#), "Turkey has taken some very strong moves since this conflict began under the Montreux Convention to deny warships access."

Author Information

Jim Zanotti
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Clayton Thomas
Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.