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TÜRKİYE AT CROSSROADS AMID GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS -LESSONS FOR EUROPE AND TÜRKİYE

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ABSTRACT

Türkiye's policy moves in the last couple of decades in its regional and global relations have prompted questions regarding its aims, strategies, and place in the world. While superficial looks rapidly move into questioning Türkiye's value and loyalty to its partners, deeper analyses reveal a much more complex outlook and complicated policymaking process with a multi-level pro-con analysis. Given recent interest in Europe and Germany regarding Türkiye's evolving role in European security, defence, migration management, and energy interests, this paper examines Türkiye's recent balancing act between the East and the West, as well as between its traditional allies and newly emerged partners, amid global and regional changes. This is an attempt to go beyond simplified outlooks and decipher the deeper foundations of Türkiye's efforts to achieve strategic autonomy in its foreign and security policies. It will shed light on the country's recent gradual realignment towards its traditional partnership patterns, while maintaining its newly developed relationships. Finally, it assesses how Türkiye can be reintegrated as a constructive security partner for the West.

INTRODUCTION

Sudden shifts in Türkiye's international affairs over the past decade have perplexed observers and policymakers alike. To recap, Türkiye entered the post-Cold War era with strong connections to its Western allies, a significant presence in NATO, a close relationship with the US, and an aim to integrate with Europe. By 2010, it was experiencing trouble with all of them.

The next decade (roughly until 2022) saw an attempt at "strategic autonomy" from its long-term allies, a closer relationship with Russia, and opening to China, Africa, and the Global South in general, an increasing reliance on hard power, negatively impacting its ties with its neighbors. Since then, it has been trying to repair its problematic relationships, rebalance its connections, and realign with the West more recently (3Rs).

Along the way, it shot down a Russian fighter jet in 2015 but refused to join western sanctions against Russia since 2014; came close to blows with Greece several times in 2020-22; took sides in four conflicts (Libya, Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine), opposing Russian positions yet cooperating with it to limit western involvement wherever possible; performed three military operations in Syria and several incursions into Iraq; bought S400 missiles from Russia and was forced out of F35 project, sanctioned by the US and various European countries; delayed the entrance of Sweden and Finland to NATO in 2022-23, while consistently supporting Ukraine's bid for membership since the 2010s; explored membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,[1] spearheaded by China and Russia, and BRICS,[2] bringing together emerging Global South economies with China, while maintaining its membership in NATO and more than 40% of its trade with the EU.

In addition, the country is experiencing a profound political, economic, and social crisis, where democratic values are pitted against autocracy. Several anxieties, including culture wars and the complexities of its Kurdish issue, present challenges that need to be addressed. Thus, dealing with Türkiye typically involves navigating a range of opposing positions, crossing currents, multilevel analyses, and diverse interpretations. To connect with such a country, one needs to have a deeper understanding of its strategic thinking, long-term impacts of its history, cultural and ideological underpinnings, geographic realities, and future expectations.

Türkiye is not a country to be easily ignored, as it is situated where global geopolitical shifts intersect, bordering several conflict zones, and is linked to several connectivity projects, energy lines, and international supply chains. It has had, at least since the mid-1970s, the ability to disrupt regional balances and impact game plans in its vicinity, if not the ability to shape its neighborhood according to its preferences. Recent global and regional geopolitical shifts have once again propelled Türkiye into a position from which it can play key roles in the futures of multiple regions, including Europe. With the ongoing momentous changes in European geopolitics and security, questioning of US contribution to European defence, Germany's strategic reorientation, and the EU's quest for greater autonomy, Türkiye's positioning in the coming years will directly affect the continent's wider security, defence planning, and neighbourhood stability. Whether its impact will turn out to be positive or negative would be consequential for many.

This paper will examine Türkiye's standing in the context of global and regional geopolitical shifts, aiming to make sense of its seemingly contradictory moves in an ever-changing international scene amid global tectonic shifts. The objective is to examine how Türkiye positions itself in the evolving world politics since the end of the Cold War, analyze its security and foreign policy preferences and engagements with key actors between the East and the West, investigate its potential role in the new European security architecture, and provide policy recommendations.

[1] Current members are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India, and Iran.

[2] Current members are Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, South Africa and the UAE.

Why Does Europe Need To Deal With Türkiye?

Türkiye is a significant regional actor with the capacity to influence the policies of global actors in regional matters. Its foreign policy has direct implications for Europe in geographies such as the Black Sea (Ukraine, defense and deterrence, maritime security, relations with Russia), Syria (refugees, ISIS, stability) and the Levant (refugees, stability, terror, Israel-Palestine conflict), South Caucasus (stability, conflict resolution, peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, trade and transport routes, energy), Central Asia (energy, trade and transport routes), and the Mediterranean (Cyprus, Greece, Libya, maritime delimitation, refugees).

At a time when Europe is facing new geopolitical realities and forced to build a new security architecture by a discontented and reckless United States, Türkiye suddenly appears to be a vital actor for this effort due to its geographical position, military capabilities, combat readiness, as well as its robust military-industrial complex, industrial-economic base, regional connections, and vibrant, well-educated, and relatively young population. Within Europe, Germany holds a unique position regarding Türkiye. In addition to a mostly positive public perception of Germany in Türkiye (Aydın 2021a), due to historical memories of alignment, it has traditionally been one of Türkiye's biggest trade partners (€ 55 billion in 2023; the biggest export and third-biggest import partner in 2025) and the host of the largest Turkish diaspora. In return, Türkiye is uniquely positioned to contribute to Germany's domestic stability and international security through military cooperation, defense industry partnerships, cooperation on refugee management, and efforts to combat radicalization. Moreover, the existence of 2.85 million citizens with a background from Türkiye – 3.5% of Germany's population - creates a significant incentive to set the relations on a better trajectory. Furthermore, current geopolitical assessments of the two countries regarding broader European security appear to be increasingly aligning.

Yet, trust issues concerning allegiances on both sides complicate the potential cooperation. Türkiye stands firmly with Ukraine but still cooperates with Russia, a position that has created rifts with its NATO allies and European partners in recent years. There have been, until very recently, significant divergences of interest, perception, and expectation between Türkiye and several European states on various issues, including "Turkish policy in Syria and Libya, as well as in the eastern Mediterranean, where it has flexed its muscle in maritime disputes with Greece and Cyprus" (Aydın & Aydıntaşbaş 2025: 3). The list of European complaints against Türkiye has been quite extensive, and Türkiye has not been part of any positive debate. On the contrary, in several European forums, it was frequently mentioned as a "challenge", "threat", "disruptive power", or having "undue impact on parts of Europe" and was accused of using gunboat diplomacy against EU members (Carassava 2020; Aydın & Aydıntaşbaş 2025: 3).

Türkiye, too, had its own grievances against Europe. Declared or undeclared weapons embargoes by some EU members annoyed Turkish policymakers, who did not forget either the late and lukewarm European response to the 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye.^[1] One often encounters frequent arguments in the media to the effect that the EU would prefer not to see a strong and influential Türkiye (Yanardağ 2004; Bağış 2016; Doster 2020). France is often mentioned as a strategic rival in Africa and the Mediterranean, where it supported EU members Greece and Cyprus against Türkiye, as well as the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA) against the Turkish-supported Government of National Accord (GNA).

The EU's preference on dealing with Türkiye transactionally on issues such as the prevention of refugees moving into Europe, but not on Türkiye's all-but-suspended membership negotiations -due to political conditions put forward by several members on various chapters and Türkiye's non-compliance with them as well as its democratic backsliding especially after the coup attempt in 2016- or the much-promised modernization of the Customs Union between them, primarily because of political reasons, cultivated, at the very least, the suspicion toward European intentions. Finally, the speed with which the EU has moved to offer membership prospects to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia has raised eyebrows in Türkiye, leading to inevitable comparisons with its own experience, which has now spanned over six decades.

[1] While the first international support to the government on the night of the coup attempt came from Russia, US and European countries appeared to adopt a wait-and-see policy until the outcome of the attempt became clearer, thus their reactions were delayed. Moreover, while the first foreign leader to call President Erdoğan after the coup attempt was Russian President Vladimir Putin on the next day, it took 3 days for the Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and 4 days for the US President Barack Obama to call to express their solidarity. The first statement from EU authorities, who had chosen to remain silent on the night of the coup attempt, came next day in the form of a joint statement by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and European Commissioner for Neighborhood Relations and Enlargement Johannes Hahn, condemning the attempt and warning Türkiye for proportionality in the measures adopted against those responsible for the coup. Other European leaders also conveyed messages of condemnation in coming days but refrained from visiting Türkiye. The then-US Vice President Joe Biden visited Türkiye 1.5 months after the coup attempt. By then, several other world leaders visited Türkiye for solidarity expressions, and presidents Erdoğan and Putin had already met.

But the war in Ukraine and, more importantly, the position of US President Donald Trump regarding future European security, have created a new reality for both Europe and Türkiye. The Russian continued aggression in the broader neighborhood has highlighted the existential threat to Europe and a challenge to Türkiye. President Trump's carefree attitude towards this threat perception and his continued attempts to strike a deal with Russia over Ukrainian territory, as well as his approach to US security guarantees to NATO countries, have raised the stakes for European security and deterrence capacity. The realization of Europe's unreadiness against a determined and reckless foe led to an appreciation of the possible Turkish contribution.

While there are still questions regarding Türkiye's geopolitical, diplomatic, and economic direction, as well as its positioning between Europe, the US, Russia, and the Middle East, several of its qualifications make Türkiye uniquely positioned to enhance European abilities to impact broader geopolitics. At the same time, it has several other characteristics that make it challenging for Europe to deal with. To paraphrase a cliché: Europe cannot be with Türkiye nor without Türkiye; It simply needs to find a way to deal with it.

From Strategic Positioning to Autonomy

The geostrategic location of Türkiye, situated at the intersection of Asia and Europe on the east-west axis and between Russia and the Mediterranean and the Levant on the north-south Axis, has always been a key asset in Turkish foreign and security policies (Aydın, 1999, 2004, 2020).

As it borders several sub-regions in international system with distinct identities -e.g., the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Caucasus, the Black Sea, the Balkans- and, in a sense, intimately involved with all in various dimensions -i.e., economic, political, cultural, religious, security, history, identity etc., any changes in these regions have direct bearing on Türkiye. As a result, Türkiye has always been concerned about, and frequently opposed to, fluctuations in its neighborhoods, especially when they are accompanied by instability and might lead to unfavorable modifications in the existing power balances. For the same reason, it has also been overly cautious about international involvement in its neighborhoods, especially since its political, diplomatic, economic, and military capabilities reached a point by the mid-1990s that allowed Türkiye to seek a more active role in shaping regional structures and balances.

On the other hand, being at the crossroads of regions impacts Türkiye's choices, sometimes severely limiting them, as was the case during the Cold War years (Aydin 2000). As such, Türkiye has been acutely susceptible to systemic changes, in addition to changes in regional balances, and the fluctuating interests of regional and global actors. In this context, the end of the bipolar world, weakening of rule-based international society, gradual power shift from West to East, growing economic power of China and several other Global South countries, withdrawal of the US from various sub-regions around Türkiye to more closely focus on China, weakening Russia, struggling Europe, etc. are all noticed by Turkish policy makers and public. The evaluation of these changes, focusing on what they would mean for a strategically positioned middle power, impacts Türkiye's foreign and security policy choices.

Amid all these changes, Türkiye has been steadily moving towards what could be called "strategic autonomy" over the last two decades. As such, it sought to balance its Western alignment and economic connections with new partners from the Global South, including Russia and China. This was in alignment with how the governing leadership -in power since 2002- have been evaluating the global changes; that the bipolarity of the international system ended and it is moving towards a multipolarity where regional hegemons could have bigger role to play; that there is a definite power shift from the West to the East; and that the West is declining economically, militarily and politically, while Türkiye is better positioned to have a growing influence.

Earlier research (Neset et al 2021: 10-11) on goals hierarchy pursued by the Turkish leaders in foreign policy found that "attaining strategic autonomy with a capability to maintain the country's survival on its own, having a flexible orientation in foreign policy, [and] not compromising on...national interests" was their top priority. This was followed closely by "forging new partnerships while maintaining traditional alliances, together with a policy of strategic balancing to reduce Türkiye's over-dependence on its allies", and "becoming an exceptional country in its region to achieve...regional supremacy and respect, which would necessitate strengthening the military, expanding its footprint abroad...and increasing its independence through development of domestic military industry".

The research also showed that attaining strategic autonomy is often linked to Türkiye's survival in rhetoric. The other goals, although important, are viewed as secondary objectives that enable Türkiye to achieve strategic autonomy. The concept of autonomy here should be understood as "being independent of foreign pressures in policy making" and "to have flexibility...regarding its commitments to the Western institutions". In other words, Türkiye's political elite wished to maintain independence in deciding whether to act in line with the West, with non-Western partners, or independently, choosing whichever option best suits Türkiye's national interests on a case-by-case basis, "without feeling undue constraints from formal alliances and partnerships" (Neset et al 2021: 11).

Having moved aggressively in various directions between 2011 and 2022, based on the general understanding of global shifts and opting for militarized strategic autonomy, Türkiye burned a lot of credit with its partners and allies. There was a moment when Türkiye did not have diplomatic representation in three of its southern neighbors, and there were few friendly faces from the Gulf to North Africa. So much so that it prompted İbrahim Kalın, the then Chief Advisor to President Erdoğan, to qualify this as “precious loneliness” (Kalin 2013). At the time, Türkiye also alienated the West by refusing to join sanctions against Russia, which was, in turn, annoyed by Türkiye’s shutting down of its fighter along the Türkiye-Syria border in November 2015. The US was further unhappy about Türkiye’s purchase of a S400 missile system from Russia and over a few other issues where Türkiye had not “toe the line” with the US position. Several European actors, including France and Greece, were further irritated by Türkiye’s assertiveness in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, respectively.

Since then, several changes have taken place. Before delving into recent changes, however, one more underlying (perhaps even structural) characteristic of Turkish international behavior that informs its foreign and security policies needs to be explained.

Constant Balancing

One of the long-standing characteristics of Turkish foreign policy has been its effort to balance its various relationships with neighboring countries and global powers. This has been an often-repeated pattern that cannot be argued to be a new or novel aspect of Türkiye’s foreign policy.

First, the last 100 or so years of the Ottoman era were characterized by a constant attempt to balance the interests of various actors and relations with them, so that the weaker Ottoman State vis-à-vis its contemporaries in Europe can survive (Aydın 2020). As followers of this century-long policy, the founding leaders of the Republican Türkiye, during the national struggle for independence, successfully drove a wedge among Allied powers with their increasingly varying interests, so that they could take them on one by one. This was coupled with an effort to exploit the Soviet disdain for European powers. It led to much-needed international recognition and support, including arms and ammunition, from the Soviet Union during the war. The similar positioning of Türkiye and its diplomacy during the Second World War—signing friendship and/or non-aggression treaties with all the warring parties and remaining out of the war until the last minute—was efficacious enough to prompt a new concept in the foreign policy analysis literature: “Active Neutrality” (Deringil 1989). Many observers have noticed the parallels between Türkiye’s policy during the Second World War and the current positioning between Russia and Ukraine/West: It remains somewhat neutral between the warring parties yet actively supports the Ukrainian war effort while refusing to join sanctions against Russia. This may appear complicated, confusing, or even mendacious to uninitiated observers, but not so to seasoned Türkiye watchers (Aydın & Güvenç 2023).

Yet, every time Türkiye tries the same approach, it meets with similar questioning of its motives by its allies and leads to debates on “whither Türkiye” (Ülgen 2016; Strauss 2023), “who lost Türkiye” (Moise 2009; Levin 2018; Johnson & Gramer 2019), “shift of axis” (Akgün 2010; Başer 2015; Ellis 2022), and Türkiye as an “unreliable ally” (Diakopoulos 2022; Ghazal 2023).

What prompted this questioning last time was the general Western astonishment at how and when long-term adversaries Türkiye and Russia suddenly became friends, to the extent that Türkiye turned to Russia for its long-range missile defense system and its first nuclear reactor. As with many other aspects of recent Turkish foreign policy, the answer is not straightforward or brief.

Russia-Türkiye Cooperation

Türkiye has had a long and hostile history with Russia, marked by conflicting positions that have endured for centuries. More recently, after the end of the Cold War, they found themselves in an intense competition spanning a broad geography, from the Balkans to Central Asia. The legacy of this complex history continues to shape political debates on both sides, influencing perceptions of one another and providing a backdrop for decision-makers.

Yet, Türkiye came to realize in the second half of the 2000s that the benefits of cooperation with Russia started to outweigh the dangers of militarized competition, especially in the Caucasus (Aydın 2003: 136; Çelikpala 2019: 6). While the decline of direct Russian threat at the end of the Cold War opened the way to collaboration (Aktürk 2006: 338), the completion of pipelines from the Caspian Basin passing through their respective territories reduced the intensity of competition (Aydın 2025: 21), allowing them to move “from geopolitical rivalry to strategic cooperation” (İşeri 2010: 182-185). The challenges this move presented for Western policy-making in broader Eurasia came incrementally over the next two decades.

Since then, relations between the two have evolved on economic, political, and diplomatic levels, and trade between them reached more than 30 billion dollars per year in the 2010s, supplemented by growing revenues from construction, investment, and tourism, making it worthwhile for leaders to invest political capital in bilateral relations (Aydın 2021b: 128). Strategic mistrust and disenchantment with the West also encouraged them to turn to each other (Hill & Taşpınar 2006; Balta, Filis, Aydın 2021: 8-9), leading to a tacit understanding that excluded the Western powers from their shared neighborhood in the Black Sea and the Caucasus.

As a result, what began as a tentative cooperation in the early 2000s evolved into a full-fledged partnership by the mid-2010s, encompassing a broader range of issues. Nevertheless, balancing Russia has remained essential to Turkish foreign policy. As Russia extended its reach to Syria, Libya, and the Mediterranean starting in 2014, Türkiye increasingly confronted Russian positions in these regions, while also cooperating with Russia to offset Western, especially US, influence in its neighborhood. As analysts and policy makers rushed to make sense of the sudden emergence of cooperation between the two countries (İşeri 2010; Morozov & Rumelili 2012; Druzhinin 2015), the assorted elements of competition and conflict, though successfully managed by a policy of compartmentalization (Öniş & Yılmaz 2016: 84; Balta 2019: 69), remained constant in the background.

This complex “competitive cooperation”, or coopetition, pattern has defined the Turkish-Russian relations since the mid-2010s, as their relationship proves that even competitors may have common goals, especially against third parties, which would not preclude competition and/or rivalry among themselves when they face each other in any given region (Aydın 2025: 23). For example, similar positions regarding the presence of non-littoral states in the Black Sea, reflecting a compatible understanding of existing equilibrium in the region, helped create what critics labeled a Russian-Turkish condominium in the area (Ananicz 2014), even though they continued to compete for upper hand in regional naval supremacy (Aydın 2025). Likewise, an uneasy balance emerged between them in the Caucasus following Russia’s August 2008 War with Georgia, which also led to the withdrawal of US advisors from the region. The next decade witnessed a significantly weakened European and American role in the Caucasus, with a stalemate emerging in regional politics.

Although the Russian occupation and then annexation of Crimea in 2014 shook Türkiye and necessitated a reassessment of its policies in the Black Sea, the ineffective response from the West to the Crimean crisis led Türkiye to adopt a more pragmatic approach, accommodating Russia on a broader perspective but not accepting the annexation of Crimea. Moreover, Ankara’s focus, by that time, had already shifted to Syria, where a rampant civil war and the US move to cooperate with the Kurdish groups with direct connection to the PKK (Partiya Karkerêñ Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers’ Party, raging terror against Türkiye since 1980s and classified as a terror organization by Türkiye, the US, and the EU) encouraged Türkiye to cooperate with Russia against the US policies.

More recently, however, the relationship is accumulating strains due to various developments in different regions. Ultimately, the strategic impact of Russia's encirclement of Türkiye, from the Caucasus to the eastern Mediterranean, led to a recalibration of Türkiye's stance (Cheterian 2023). Essentially, the combination of the realization that S-400s are not a practical long-term solution for Türkiye's defense, Russian insistence on continuing to use military force against its neighbors, Türkiye's declining need for Russian support in the south, and the increasing cost of staying at crossroads with the US for so long has led to a gradual distancing.

The lynchpin—the unspoken primary motivation for Turkish leaders—that brought Türkiye and Russia closer, moving beyond economic and political cooperation to a strategic relationship, was the above-mentioned Russian efficacy in balancing the US partnership with PKK-affiliated groups in Syria. Collaboration with Russia enabled Türkiye to operate in northwest Syria, where Russia controlled the airspace, without directly confronting the US. After Türkiye-supported rebels stormed Damascus in early December 2024 and took control of the country, Russia had to take a back seat, and the US modified its position on the future of Syria and the Kurds in it; the need for Türkiye to counter the US in Syria diminished. Moreover, as Russia's own future in Syria is being debated with the new regime, its ability to contribute to Türkiye's standing in the country is curtailed. Added to this are closer consultations between Turkish and American policymakers since President Trump took power in Washington in 2024, which reduced the need to balance the US in Syria, thus negating the added value of Russia for Türkiye.

In Libya, Türkiye supported the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) against the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA), which was backed on the ground by a contingent of Russia's Wagner Group (now known as the "Africa Corps") and from outside by the UAE, Egypt, and France. Türkiye's involvement in the conflict, with military advisors and advanced weapon systems, enabled the GNA to halt the LNA's advance on Tripoli and subsequently repel them (Harchaoui 2020). Coupled with changes in Syria, developments in Libya weakened Russian presence in the Mediterranean, which was logistically supported from Russian-held Crimea and its Black Sea Fleet before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The war in Ukraine prompted Türkiye to close the Turkish Straits to all military ships, including non-warring countries, going beyond the Montreux Convention, to prevent the expansion of the conflict to the Black Sea as a whole. Although Russia, according to the Convention, had the right to bring back its ships belonging to its Black Sea Fleet, Türkiye's move prevented it from reinforcing its navy in the Black Sea and replenishing its fleet in the Mediterranean (for details, see Güvenç and Aydin 2023; Aydin and Aydintaşbaş 2025).

In the Caucasus, after more than 30 years of Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory with Russian implicit backing, Türkiye supported Azerbaijan in its 44-day war in 2020 against the Armenian forces that ended with the liberation of all its territories. More to the point, while Russia was considered one of the winners in the early days after it brokered the ceasefire between the two sides, and was able to station its soldier in Azerbaijani territory as peacekeepers, 30 years after its withdrawal, the subsequent developments on the ground and the constant demand for attention from the Ukrainian front led to the eventual withdrawal of Russian forces from the region. Coupled with Russia's strained relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the recent possibility of signing a peace deal between the two supported by the US, these developments and the long-term implications of the Azerbaijan-Türkiye Shusha Declaration of 15 June 2021, as well as improving connections between Türkiye and Armenia, indicate that the balance in the Caucasus has tilted towards Türkiye.

The continuation of the war and Russia's inability to subdue Ukraine have also affected Türkiye's assessment of Russia's military power and value to its regional policies. Having opposed Russian positions and backed opposing sides militarily in four regions – Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine – and came ahead in three of them, Türkiye is now feeling in a stronger position vis-à-vis Russia, whose Black Sea Fleet has been weakened substantially by Ukrainian attrition (Frian 2024), thereby leaving Türkiye, once again, as the stronger naval power in the region.

For European policymakers, understanding the logic behind Türkiye's compartmentalized approach to Russia is crucial, as it will lead to a better response to Türkiye's underlying concerns -mainly related to its security- thus easing the way to align its policies with those of Europe. Moreover, while Ankara's balancing often frustrated allies, especially in the early months of the war in Ukraine, it also allowed unique mediation roles—such as the Black Sea Grain Deal, exchange of prisoners, and occasional direct negotiations between Ukrainian and Russian officials—that Europe could utilise more systematically, especially after the US insistence on addressing the war with diplomatic means.

Tribulations with the West (NATO, US, EU)

Türkiye was a steadfast ally of the West throughout the Cold War, becoming a member of NATO in 1952, relying on the US/NATO for its defense and security planning, and playing an indispensable role in containing the Soviet Union as well as providing bases to monitor developments in the Middle East, the Gulf, and the Eastern Mediterranean. The post-1945 bipolar international system, while encouraging Türkiye's dependency on the West, also sustained unquestioning Western support in military, political, and economic spheres. So long as Türkiye felt threatened by the Soviet Union and the West was committed to assisting its economic and defense development, there was no reason to question its dependency. Not only militarily, but also on the financial front, Türkiye gradually integrated into Europe, signing the Association Agreement with the then EEC in 1963 and completing the Customs Union with the EU by December 1995.

The collapse of the USSR and the subsequent evolution of the international system have, in the medium term, led to a search for alternative connections and a reorientation of Turkish policy. In the short term, though, Türkiye continued to pursue closer ties with the West, applying for full EU membership in 1987, initiating accession talks in 2005, and upgrading its relations with the US to a "strategic partnership" level in the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, the 9/11 attacks on the US ten years after the end of the Cold War, and the Arab uprisings a decade later, dramatically altered Turkish perceptions about international politics. While Türkiye benefited from closer relations with the US in the immediate post-Cold War era, the US insistence on being directly involved in Türkiye's neighborhood in the post-9/11 era –particularly in the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and the Levant– led to the emergence of diverging interests and security perceptions, which were accentuated after the Arab uprisings.

Furthermore, the primacy of Western actors in international politics has been called into question, particularly following the global financial crisis of 2008. Other developments challenging Western dominance include the rise of populism, Russia's resurgence, and China's growing economic power. Adapting to changing circumstances, Türkiye has increasingly focused on its neighborhoods and expanding its worldwide partnerships. While there were both security and strategic, as well as economic and ideological/political reasons for this change, the underlying shift in the international system has played a significant role.

Türkiye's relations with Europe began to sour with the admission of the Greek-Cypriot-controlled Republic of Cyprus to the EU in 2004, despite the island's divided status and the Greek Cypriots' rejection of the Annan Plan.^[1] The growing populist far-right parties in Europe, with their xenophobic positions against Turkish membership, made matters worse (Balta 2005). As the EU enlargement went forward in Central and Eastern Europe without Türkiye, many came to believe in Türkiye that the EU was employing double standards, and that "the EU would not accept Türkiye, whatever Türkiye would do" (Balta and Özel 2019).

As membership negotiations stalled, Türkiye underwent a process of "de-Europeanisation", where the EU membership had lost its normative value in Turkish domestic debates. This then led to a growing skepticism towards Türkiye's orientation towards Europe. The result was the transactional mode in Türkiye-EU relations, which overlooked underlying tensions and focused on short-term deals rather than a norm-based, long-term alignment. This shift in emphasis led to diverging policies among EU member states towards Türkiye, resulting in further weakening of the integration process. As a result, although Türkiye and the EU are each other's important trading partners, they have been unable to implement the modernization of the 1995 Customs Union due to political reasons (European Commission, 2020).

With the US, relations began to sour with its occupation of Iraq in 2003, as the Turkish Parliament voted not to allow the transit of US troops through Türkiye. This was followed by a significant public diplomacy crisis on July 4, 2003, when the headquarters of the Turkish military personnel in Sulaymaniyah, northern Iraq, were raided by US forces. After the ups and downs through the years of the US occupation of Iraq, the Syrian Civil War has significantly complicated the already broken relationship. Although the two countries attempted to collaborate at the beginning of the war, the US's later cooperation with the PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups in Syria was perceived as an existential threat to Türkiye, creating serious repercussions for bilateral relations.

[1] The Annan Plan was a UN proposal to resolve the long-standing Cyprus dispute and came out of negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots under the auspices of the UN, with contributions from Greece, Türkiye, UK, and the EU. It foresaw creation of a new federal state with two constituent states, phased withdrawal of Turkish troops from the island, and eventual membership of the new state to the EU. The plan was put to referendum on 24 April 2004 on both sides of the island and was rejected by the Greek Cypriots with 75,83% of votes and approved the Turkish Cypriots with 64,91% of votes. Despite the Greek Cypriot rejection, thus continuation of the separation of the island, the EU decided to go ahead with Cyprus' EU membership with the Greek Cypriot administration nominally representing the whole island without actual control. Although there were promises by the EU to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots and restore direct economic, political and social engagement with them, nothing came out at the end, which led souring relations between the EU and Türkiye.

As a legacy of long years of divisive positioning in the Middle East, there is a strong suspicion among the Turkish public and the decision-makers regarding US plans for the future of the Middle East. In addition to the future of the Kurds in Iraq, where an autonomous region was established with the help of the US, and Syria, where a de facto autonomous region exists with the backing of the US, its heavy involvement in redesigning the Middle East and unconditional support to Israel's policies are causing significant strains.

In addition to these, Türkiye's relations with the West have suffered from lukewarm condemnations of the 2016 failed coup attempt. Turkish political leaders have accused Western capitals of directly or indirectly supporting coup plotters, or at best failing to support Türkiye's democratically elected leadership. Washington especially comes under suspicion as the accused mastermind of the coup attempt, Fethullah Gülen, was residing in the US at the time. Relations with European countries were also affected by the issue, as European capitals distanced themselves from Türkiye due to the declaration of emergency rule following the coup attempt and accompanying democratic backsliding.

There is an apparent skepticism about the West among the public. It is a widely held belief that the West intends to destabilize Türkiye (Aydin et al. 2022: Slides 44-45). There is also a perception that Türkiye's security needs have diverged significantly, especially since the early 2000s, from those of other NATO members, particularly the US, especially in the Middle East.

Ankara complained that its Western partners were not sensitive to the existential security concerns that Türkiye faced. An often-cited example has been the extended debates that took place in European capitals when Türkiye shot down the Russian fighter jet for violating Turkish airspace in November 2015. Instead of increasing their defensive support to Türkiye, the US and the Netherlands failed to extend the mandates of their Patriot batteries already in Türkiye since the Gulf War, leading to a debate about the value of NATO for Turkish security (Aydin et al. 2022: Slides 54-57). This Turkish skepticism towards NATO was reciprocated by the Allies, who have come to question Türkiye's value to the Alliance.

On top of all these, from the US perspective, the purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia by Türkiye has created one of the most significant crises between Türkiye and the US (Egeli 2019), leading to exclusion of Türkiye from the F-35 program and sanctioning it under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in late 2004.

(Gradual) Realignment with the West: What is Next?

Türkiye is again experiencing tectonic shifts in its vicinity on every side. In the north, Russia's aggressive challenge to the regional and international systems and its increasing reliance on use of military force to achieve its political agenda is rebooting whole European security structure to the west, as well as the sub-systemic dynamics in the Caucasus and the Black Sea, two regions where Türkiye has been particularly active since the end of the Cold War and positioned itself as a regional powerhouse.

Türkiye had sought to establish a regional security system in the Black Sea that could exclude non-regional countries from the basin while containing Russia within multilateral institutions. The aggressive Russian challenge to regional balances undermined these efforts and put Türkiye in a difficult spot. While Türkiye attempted to limit the impact of various conflicts in the region and keep non-Black Sea countries out, the war in Ukraine dealt a fatal blow to the post-Cold War regional security architecture and political-economic cooperation structures that Ankara had established.

In the current circumstances, Türkiye would ideally like an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to the status quo ante. Failing that, it would rather have the current stalemate than a Russian victory, which would revive memories of centuries-old Russian/Soviet domination of the Black Sea, prompting Türkiye to develop counterbalancing partnerships. Ukraine plays a prominent role in this search, as do Türkiye's NATO allies (Aydın 2024: 107). In any case, Türkiye prefers a diplomatic end to the war and offers its mediation -with or without the US involvement- as the ongoing war threatens regional security, rests on a very delicate balance, and at times shows a tendency to expand both regionally and into NATO territory in eastern Europe. Recent naval drone attacks on Russian merchant tankers by Ukraine near the Turkish coast and the Russian reciprocation once again highlighted the fragility of regional stability and threats to regional and Turkish security (Reuters 2025).

In the Caucasus, the balance of power has shifted in favor of the Azerbaijani-Turkish nexus, creating new geopolitical realities. Türkiye has firmly established itself as a security provider for Azerbaijan. It has also taken steps to normalize its relations with Armenia, which would be the first step in creating a stable, integrated region capable of acting as a hub for larger connectivity projects. Türkiye has also made further inroads into Central Asia, expanding its security relations with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Tanchum 2022) to link the Turkic world with Europe through the Caucasus and Türkiye. The realization of the corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan will solidify this connection linking Türkiye with the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and beyond.

Türkiye is currently seen as the most critical balancing power against the potentially threatening position of Russia in the Caucasus in the post-Ukraine war scenario. This makes the current status quo more fragile. For Türkiye, the South Caucasus is one of many geographies where the boundaries of cooperation and competition dynamics with Russia are constantly tested. Türkiye's role in the region will depend on Russia's strength following the war in Ukraine and Türkiye's ability to garner support from its allies/partners for its position in the region.

In the south, the current reshaping of Syria and Russia's uncertain position, various conflicts involving Israel that impact Palestine, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, and others, the emergence of the UAE as an ambitious new actor, and Saudi attempts to change, all lead to a structural rebalancing. Added to these are the recent challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean, which must be considered alongside the decades-long Cyprus dispute. Scene of a tremendous move of displaced people (refugees as well as immigrants) since the end of the Cold War, but more so since the Arab Uprisings, the regional dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant threaten not only regional balances but also European political dynamics and Türkiye's positioning.

Israel's recent war in Gazza, triggered by Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, as well as its skirmishes with Hezbollah in Lebanon, bombing and occupying part of Syria, and Iran-Israel conflict led to not only aligning Türkiye's position more closely with Arab/Muslim countries but also, by weakening Iran and opening a way for cooperation with the US over the situation in Gaza and Syria, empowered Türkiye. Türkiye has undoubtedly been watching Israeli action closely in the region. One of the outcomes is to strengthen its defensive posture, especially with air defense systems, which requires further coordination with the US and European allies. Although Türkiye is rapidly advancing in the production of missiles, rockets, UAVs, armored vehicles, naval ships, intelligent ammunition, and communication systems, its air force requires suitable 5th-generation fighter planes to balance its regional rivals. As its indigenous production of 5th-generation fighter plane is scheduled to enter the force in the early 2030s, Türkiye needs a tie-in through the purchase of either F-16s (US) or Eurofighter (Europe), given that it is unlikely to return soon to the F-35 project (US). Moreover, even its local production of an indigenous fighter plane, at least in its initial phases, is dependent on acquiring motors from the US. These realities push Türkiye closer to its traditional allies.

Finally, Türkiye is now in the middle of various old-and-new, sometimes competing, connectivity projects ('Belt and Road Initiative' of China, 'Global Gateway' of the EU, IMEC Corridor, Middle Corridor with sub-branches, Development Route, Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, International North–South Transport Corridor), and energy initiatives (Blue Stream, TurkStream, Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Gas Pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline, Arab Oil Pipeline, Kerkuk-Ceyhan Pipeline, etc.). Türkiye has long recognized the opportunity to develop into an energy hub and a logistics and manufacturing center along the East-West supply chains, benefiting from its geographical location between Asia and Europe. Even if only some of these projects are realized, their combination goes a long way toward fulfilling that goal in the end.

In the meantime, advances in the Turkish arms industry are creating new opportunities, connections, and alignments. Turkish companies are now cooperating in the joint production of advanced weapon systems with several European countries (i.e., Spain, Italy, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Germany), and further cooperation is expected if Türkiye's participation in the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) goes ahead. It will open a formal path for defense cooperation with the EU.

Beyond the production of weapons, Türkiye's experiences over the last decade in various theaters of operation also highlight other areas where it could contribute to European defense. Acting alone without political or operational support from its allies, the Turkish military and Turkish-supported forces stood against Russian and Russian-supported forces in several regions. The extent, rapidity, and precision of Turkish retaliation against Syrian troops and the Russian-made and operated missile defense systems in February 2020, after 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in air strikes in Idlib, Syria, allowed Türkiye later to replicate similar strategies against Russia-supported forces in Libya and the Caucasus. This affected allied perception of the Turkish military's ability to adapt to changing conflict environments, tactics, and innovative use of new weapon systems. A new type of air warfare, involving the tandem usage of armed UAVs, fighter planes, and airborne control and command systems, along with land forces and land-based strike capabilities, has boosted Türkiye's operational capacity and gained recognition internationally (Mevlütöglü 2020).

In addition, the Turkish military's recent experience in complex operational theatres in training friendly forces, drone warfare, joint and multi-layer operational techniques, urban warfare or counterinsurgency with law enforcement agencies, cross-border operations, and electronic warfare - combination of abilities that no other NATO country except US has - highlights areas where Türkiye could contribute to tactical, operational and doctrinal capabilities of Europe (Mevlütoğlu 2020). In the last decade, Türkiye was able to fight against terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, while at the same time keeping Syrian forces at bay, supporting the GNA forces in Libya and the Azerbaijani Armed Forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, and maintaining its presence in the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, and Qatar under intense international conditions.

While EU members had previously not been particularly keen on cooperating with Türkiye on Ukraine and collaborating on broader European security, President Trump's clear policy line, which is away from long-term US commitments to European security, is forcing European leaders to reevaluate their shared interests with Türkiye. Thus, Türkiye has been invited to participate in pan-European discussions about the future European security structure, plans for a potential tripwire force in Ukraine after a ceasefire, and cooperation in defense production.

As a result, while several bilateral issues that blocked greater cooperation in the past still need to be tackled, Türkiye's willingness to contribute to post-Trump European security is gaining traction in several European capitals, and the government is again being welcomed in European circles, despite domestic political developments taking a turn towards a less democratic polity. Under the current heightened threat perception, Europeans appear willing to set aside most of their moral concerns to a certain extent. The need for caution against rapid rapprochement was, however, reiterated recently by the visiting German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul:

"I believe Türkiye has turned towards Europe, but...We consider it important for Türkiye to accept the values of the EU...such as the rule of law, human rights, democracy, freedom of the press, and parliamentary democracy...I know that Türkiye wants to approach Europe in these areas. However...we should see clear steps in this direction. This will be an argument to our partners within the EU who are currently expressing doubts and hesitations. And when some problems in the region are resolved, then we will proceed with the rapprochement of Türkiye with Europe" (Kostidis 2025).

Moreover, while the recent Greek-Turkish positive agenda and talks for a new and improved relationship have helped ease earlier tensions in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece and Cyprus remain skeptical of Türkiye's efforts to enhance security and defense cooperation with European countries. On the other side, their increasing defense and intelligence cooperation with Israel is causing consternation in Türkiye.

On the other side of the Atlantic, there has been a revival of Türkiye's standing in Washington with the return of the Trump Administration. Although not yet translated into actionable results, Turkish leaders are now welcomed again after a hiatus during the Biden era and have begun to develop close working relations with the US administration on several international issues, including the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks, Hamas-Israel ceasefire talks, the future of Syria, and talks between Ukraine and Russia. In contrast to the earlier purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia, partly in response to long-term, inconclusive discussions to acquire Patriots from the US, Turkish leaders have not rushed to seek alternatives from Russia or China, even as the potential purchases of F-16 and F-35 airplanes from the US remain pending before the US Congress.

There is now a slow but unmistakable realignment in Türkiye's global standing, as well. There is no longer loose public talk by the political leadership about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or BRICS membership. Additionally, a noticeable cooling in relations with India following its recent conflict with Pakistan is also evident. Similarly, it seems that the heyday of a close relationship between Russian and Turkish presidents has passed: President Putin's last visit to Türkiye was on January 8, 2020 (Türkiye is among the most visited countries by Putin, with a total of 14 trips). Although President Erdoğan visited Russia four more times (March 2020, September 2021, August 2022, and October 2024) after this, and Russia remains the second most visited country (16 visits) by Erdoğan after Azerbaijan (19 visits), it is noticeable that Putin now avoids visiting Türkiye.

Moreover, there is unannounced but unmistakably closer cooperation with the US and the EU on the trade of sanctioned goods with Russia. Most recently, it appears that President Erdoğan agreed to halt the purchase of Russian oil during his visit to Washington on September 25, 2025. However, the purchase of Russian natural gas will continue alongside an increase in the purchase of US shale gas. There have also been delays in building the Akkuyu nuclear power plant due to restrictions on international money transfers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Frequent crises in its international relations and abrupt shifts in Türkiye's foreign policy outlook have recently heightened the debate regarding its activist foreign policy. The discussion particularly intensified after 2011, when political stability in the Middle East and the international system began to fluctuate. The changing dynamics of global politics, the transformation of the regional balance of power, the emergence of new actors, and the collapse of order in the Middle East following the Arab uprisings, and more recently the Russian war in Ukraine, have allowed Türkiye to push for a more assertive foreign policy in its near abroad.

This assertiveness, especially after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, can better be understood in the context of Türkiye's search for autonomous action in its neighborhood, with the ability to conduct cross-border and overseas military operations without relying on its traditional allies. To support its search for autonomy in its foreign and security policies, Türkiye has also attempted to balance its relations between its allies on the one hand and Russia on the other. Yet, the use of balancing as a tool risks a) creating a dual dependency, characterized by a vulnerability to Russia and an increased need for assurances from NATO against a resurgent Russia in the Black Sea, and b) increased transactionalism in relations with all sides, which jeopardizes and weakens long-time alliances and partnerships.

On the other hand, after years of procrastination, European countries, under pressure from the Trump Administration in the US, have now begun to develop a new European security structure in response to the perceived threat from Russia. This structure clearly needs Türkiye to be in. Many of the EU's connectivity projects, synergy programs for the neighborhood, and attempts at developing strong footprints in regions around Türkiye, including the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Levant, and the Eastern Mediterranean, would clearly benefit from close coordination with Türkiye. In these areas, Türkiye offers a range of valuable assets.

NATO, too, under challenges from Russia in Eastern Europe and the US for its cohesion, has been trying to develop a new force structure, beefing up its support to members bordering Russia, asking its European members to spend more on defense, investing more in smart weapons and AI, and developing capabilities to combat foreign influences and hybrid threats. Türkiye's recently accumulated military experience, its willingness to contribute more to European defense, its vibrant and fast-evolving defense industry, and its well-trained and well-maintained large military forces near trouble spots offer unique contributions.

Taking these into consideration, the following recommendations could be offered to Türkiye, the EU members, and the US.

For Türkiye

Ankara needs to continue its recent path towards realignment with its traditional allies to show its commitment and that this is not a whimsical move brought about by recent developments. Clear signals are needed to show that Türkiye's intentions are long-term and bypass simple transactional expectations.

For this, Türkiye's ability to move towards the solution of the Kurdish issue and improving the rule of law, democratic governance, and representation at home -thus more closely aligning with the EU core-values- and its stabilizing contribution to the Caucasus' stability and Syria's transition to an internationally accepted governance, as well as closer re-orientation with Western positions on international issues, would be helpful. Turkish leaders need to acknowledge that compartmentalization between international and domestic policies is ineffective when the two sides aim to go beyond general policy coordination, seeking integration and deeper engagement.

Türkiye should be attentive to its strained relations with some European countries. Turkish policymakers ought not underestimate the importance of the "solidarity" requirement among the EU members. They should not assume that Türkiye could carry the day, just because it would be able to move ahead with defense cooperation with several EU member states. In some regions of cooperation and certainly for moving ahead with deeper integration, consensus-based support is needed. Even in majority-rule areas, Türkiye's progress in collaboration with Europe could be stalled for a long time by dissenting voices, thereby creating mutual frustration and tendencies towards de-alignment.

Türkiye also needs to be patient with the US and consistent in explaining Turkish positions to various bodies in Washington. Türkiye-US relations have long been left untended, and the disagreements were allowed to fester as Türkiye had lost almost all its interlocutors in Washington, including the President, until recently. Thus, Türkiye needs to rebuild its connections in the US Congress, the Pentagon, the State Department, and the White House so that they will start listening to Türkiye again. Relying only on Presidential goodwill and support is not a steadfast strategy, especially with a president who prides himself on being unpredictable.

Further engagement with NATO and contributions to strengthen its European component would help Türkiye's reorientation. Its role and contribution to common security are valued in NATO circles. Türkiye should further utilize this by offering innovative solutions to regional security challenges in its neighborhood. In addition to entering joint production of defence products with several NATO-EU members, establishing the MCM Black Sea (Mine Counter Measures Black Sea Task Group, created by Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye), thus addressing immediate security needs of regional NATO members, instead of simply opposing involvement of NATO forces in the Black Sea, and providing a corvette for Romanian Navy has been valuable contributions to security of European NATO members. These examples need to be expanded.

For the EU and European Countries

The EU needs to overcome the aversion of some of its members - primarily for bilateral political reasons - against improving institutional relations with Türkiye. There is a long list of technical improvements that could be achieved with minimal effort that would enormously enhance the political and psychological aspects of the relationship. Moves toward Customs Union modernization, visa facilitation, and better coordination in connectivity projects would immediately lead to a perceptible improvement.

The EU members should not overlook the fact that Türkiye has been experimenting with transactional policymaking for some time now, and that it has become a de facto approach to international relations. However, European integration and newly debated security mechanisms cannot be based on transactional deals with their short-termism and emphasis on national gains rather than common benefits. Given the widespread Euroscepticism among Turkish political elites, European actors must exercise caution when addressing issues that touch on Türkiye's sensitivities.

One area that could derail even the most promising expectations for improvement in Türkiye-EU relations is the stagnation in Cyprus, where the current Greek Cypriot administration is experimenting with building alliances and military power to presumably force the Turkish side to agree to negotiations on its terms – an unlikely expectation that could further alienate Türkiye, leading it to more rigid positions. If the EU fails to find a way to move forward with Türkiye, encircling the Cyprus issue, individual European countries must expand their relations with Türkiye to compensate for the resulting gap.

European countries need to recognize that individual members' moves to get concessions from Türkiye in long-standing bilateral disputes (such as Athens' demand for withdrawal of Turkish warning against extending Greece's territorial waters in the Aegean to 12 nautical miles) in return for their acquiescence to Türkiye's participation in European defense mechanisms is not a strategy that could gain traction in Türkiye. It is up to the other EU members to find a way forward, as these demands clearly do not relate to common European security needs, and Türkiye will not compromise on its existential national security interests just to join a defense cooperation with the same countries that are demanding a change in policy.

Finally, coordination in policy development between Türkiye and the EU towards their shared neighborhoods would go a long way towards overcoming existing misgivings and fostering a better understanding of common interests. Certainly, Türkiye and Europe share many common expectations in the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean. However, policy implementation that ignores the other side's views and needs can damage existing structures and prevent further improvement of relations.

One of the most frequently expressed complaints among political circles in Türkiye is that European countries do not consult with Ankara before implementing their policies targeting regions around Türkiye, which ultimately impacts its security and interests negatively. To listen to Türkiye's concerns and needs is the absolute minimum the EU could do. Even if Türkiye's demand to "be at the table" when such decisions are taken cannot be satisfied in the short term, prior policy coordination surely goes a long way to facilitate Türkiye's realignment.

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