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Türkiye

TÜRKİYE-UKRAINE RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN SECURITY

**Defense Cooperation, Regional Stability,
and Reconstruction Opportunities**

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ANALYSIS

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Foreword

The evolving partnership between Türkiye and Ukraine is much more than just a bilateral relationship. It is emerging as an important pillar of the post-2022 European security landscape. For German policymakers, the strategic cooperation between Ankara and Kyiv is of particular interest, as it is likely to influence calculations relating to NATO cohesion, Black Sea maritime dynamics and the wider structure of European defense cooperation.

In the face of an increasingly complex strategic environment characterized by renewed great-power competition, accelerating developments and geopolitical uncertainty, Germany would do well to take note of Türkiye's approach to regional ownership in the Black Sea. This is particularly pertinent given Berlin's previous tendency to view the Black Sea as peripheral to core European security concerns. Notably, the partnership between Türkiye and Ukraine may serve as an example that effective security frameworks in contemporary Europe may require

the empowerment of capable regional actors, the adoption of flexible diplomatic approaches, the acceptance of trade-offs, and the acknowledgement that opportunities for solutions often arise from partnerships that transcend traditional multilateral cooperation.

The strategic imperative for Germany to engage with the Türkiye-Ukraine axis extends beyond immediate crisis management to encompass fundamental questions about European security architecture. As Berlin considers Ukraine's long-term security guarantees, NATO's southeastern flank, and the future of EU-Türkiye relations, the Türkiye-Ukraine partnership examined in this study provides a practical basis for engagement, including in defense cooperation, infrastructure, energy and Ukraine's reconstruction.

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1. Introduction

Ukraine's future is intricately linked to broader developments within the Euro-Atlantic framework, encompassing alliances such as NATO as well as diplomatic and security-oriented arrangements with the EU and the US. Understanding how the European security architecture will be defined in response to the Russian war against Ukraine is critical, as is determining the role that the US will assume in these efforts. The complex web of relationships between actors such as the EU, the US, Türkiye, and Ukraine plays a key role in shaping the European security order. It is equally important to evaluate how non-EU European stakeholders will position themselves in light of the ongoing conflict, and the long-term prospects for Ukraine. The power dynamics in key maritime regions, especially in the Black Sea, are crucial in influencing current geopolitical shifts. Against unstable regional and global conditions, relations between Türkiye and Ukraine have attained increasing significance, evolving from mere bilateral interactions into a partnership with considerable implications for European security.

Türkiye has predominantly formulated its approach to security through “regional ownership,” advocating for regional solutions to address regional challenges. This philosophy reflects Türkiye's pursuit of “strategic autonomy,” wherein it engages in discussions with Western allies while prioritizing regional development. However, the global ramifications of regional security issues, the involvement of major powers, and the expectations of other regional actors to undertake balancing roles impose

significant constraints on Ankara's strategic endeavors. Furthermore, Türkiye's economic capabilities and military capacity substantially influence its effectiveness in these matters.

Ukraine's geopolitical positioning oscillated between Russian influence and Western affiliations, leading to fluctuating security priorities that impacted its perception of Türkiye and the broader regional landscape. Concurrently, Türkiye's relations with its Western allies were strained, particularly concerning its aspirations for EU membership, which shifted from initial competition with Russia to a more collaborative stance considering increasing challenges posed by the West. Moreover, Türkiye's strategic pivot towards the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, and the Caucasus/Central Asia—integral to the Turkic sphere—has actively shaped Ankara's priorities and regional agenda. Ukraine, in the last decades, increasingly confronted Russia's assertive posture as it progressively aligned itself more closely with Western institutions by pursuing NATO and EU membership. That also affected the evolving balance of power in the Black Sea.

These developments have necessitated a recalibration of foreign relations strategies for both countries, resulting in a closer partnership. While there are divergences in approach and methodology, the Türkiye-Ukraine relationship is fundamentally strategic with a substantial potential to contribute to the changing European security architecture.

2. Overview of Bilateral Relations between Türkiye and Ukraine

Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, there was a relative stagnation in bilateral activities between Ankara and Kyiv. Maryna Vortnyuk characterizes this period as the “Pre-Strategic Partnership Era,” during which the following logic prevailed: “the Black Sea unites, rather than divides, these two nations.”¹ Türkiye and Ukraine prioritized their aspirations for integration with the EU and NATO, alongside concerns regarding the security of the Black Sea, which significantly influenced their bilateral relations.

Türkiye designated Ukraine as a ‘Priority Country’ in 2003, thereby envisioning Ukraine’s strategic importance within Turkish foreign policy.² Prime Minister Erdoğan’s visit to Ukraine in April 2004, just before the Orange Revolution, resulted in the signing of the ‘Enhanced Joint Action Plan.’ This plan established a structural framework for bilateral cooperation and identified key areas of engagement, including security, economic collaboration, scientific and technological advancement, energy dynamics, environmental considerations, and navigation. Additionally, it addressed mutual concerns such as Black Sea security, the combat against terrorism and organized crime, and enhancements in transit capabilities between the two nations.³

Despite the differences between Türkiye and Ukraine since the early 2010s—concerning perceived threats as well as the pace of deepening bilateral relations—recent developments signal a political willingness from

both sides to enhance their partnership and expand its scope. The current regulatory framework encompasses over 150 bilateral agreements, among which certain agreements hold strategic significance: the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between Ukraine and Türkiye (1992), the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of a High-Level Strategic Council between Ukraine and Türkiye (2011), and the Free Trade Agreement between the Governments of Ukraine and Türkiye (2022). The following key interests are identified within the framework of their common goals: economic and commercial relations (including tourism, energy cooperation, and connectivity projects); the development of ties with the EU and NATO; shared security issues, particularly related to Black Sea security; relations with Russia; defense cooperation; and the status of the Crimean Tatars in the context of cultural and humanitarian ties. Since Russia attempted to annex Crimea in 2014, Türkiye and Ukraine have expanded their strategic partnership. Ankara has been a staunch advocate for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Türkiye’s refusal to recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea, along with its commitment to uphold Ukraine’s territorial integrity and oppose the legitimacy of the unlawful referendum conducted in Crimea, has strained its relations with Russia. The period in question indeed marked the peak of Turkish-Russian bilateral relations, especially regarding energy-focused economic and commercial ties. During this time, Putin introduced the TurkStream project, aimed

at bypassing Ukraine and creating heightened expectations for cooperation between the two countries. However, Russia's occupation of Crimea led it to distance itself from Türkiye, which had begun to be viewed as a regional cooperation partner. Russia began to prioritize its own interests, fundamentally altering regional balances. Additionally, the Crimean issue not only changed these regional dynamics but also significantly impacted Ankara's policy towards the Turkic world. The Crimean Tatars' clear preference for Ukraine, which Ankara supported, caused discomfort for Moscow. Furthermore, Russia's engagement in global competition with the West over the Black Sea, as well as in Syria and the Levant, brought Ankara's interests and expectations toward Russia back into the spotlight of politics and security. Ultimately, the downing of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish air force led to the collapse of the bilateral relations and resulted in Russia imposing sanctions on Türkiye. In this context, it can be argued that a new common ground has emerged between Ukraine and Türkiye regarding their views and discourse on Russia.⁴ Furthermore, the perceived inadequacy of support from Western allies has intensified Türkiye's efforts to establish itself as a self-sufficient and autonomous regional power. In this context, Ukraine has transitioned from being primarily an economic and commercial partner to being recognized as a strategic ally, particularly with its know-how in the defense sector.

The Black Sea security and the situation of the Crimean Tatars have further reinforced the strategic vision shared by Ankara and Kyiv. Consequently, Ukraine has become a vital partner for Türkiye. A comprehensive

institutional system for bilateral consultations and enhanced cooperation has been established, promoting the bilateral agenda. From 2019 to 2021, there was a marked increase in the frequency of meetings of bilateral bodies.⁵

Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Ukraine on February 2-3, 2022, just before Russia's full-scale invasion. This visit aimed to establish a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), enhance military cooperation, and convey to Russia that it cannot unilaterally dictate the terms of bilateral relations with neighboring states. In this context, both before and after the invasion, Turkish enterprises supplied weapons and critical ammunition to Ukraine in a covert manner, with cooperation in the defense and security sectors emerging as a major pillar of their relationship (see below).

Following the establishment of a strategic partnership, Türkiye has become Ukraine's largest investor, with investments approaching \$5 billion over the past five years. Notably, despite the ongoing conflict, new Turkish investments have reached \$300 million between 2022 and 2025. More than 1,100 Turkish companies are involved in various sectors, including construction, industrial production, agriculture, and energy. By 2024, one in every five foreign businesses established in Ukraine was Turkish-owned.⁶

Furthermore, Türkiye is an invaluable partner in the agricultural sector, helping to import Ukrainian grain, particularly corn and soybeans. In the first half of 2025, Türkiye boosted its imports of Ukrainian agricultural products by 16%. But one pressing issue concerns the illegal export of stolen

Ukrainian grain by Russia from occupied territories. Ukraine has reported over 4.5 million tons of this grain and is determined to take decisive action against the companies, vessels, and owners involved in these unlawful activities.⁷ Energy cooperation stands as another vital pillar of the economic relationship between Ankara and Kyiv. According to the Turkish-Ukrainian Business Association (TUID), Türkiye has become one of the top three countries supplying essential equipment and materials for the energy sector, including transformers, cables, and power generators.⁸ Turkish energy companies contribute to 8% of Ukraine's renewable energy production. As Turkish investments in energy projects and wind power plants—a total capacity of 400 MW—come online, it is anticipated that the share of Turkish capital in Ukraine's renewable energy production will exceed 10%.⁹ Furthermore, Ankara's strategy is focused on creating new east-west connections and establishing an integrated network for transportation and communication that stretches from Central Asia to the Baltics, whereby one of the aims is to integrate Ukraine into connectivity initiatives that provide successful alternatives

to Russia, such as the revitalized Middle Corridor. In this context, Ankara participated in projects under the 3 Seas Initiative, focusing on securing funding for infrastructure investments and becoming a permanent partner in EU-centered connectivity projects. It is clear that Ankara seeks to link this initiative with the Middle Corridor and, in addition, intends to establish a north-south route from the Persian Gulf to Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, as discussed in the recent Development Road project. The EU's interest in including Ukraine in its priority projects indicates that Ankara is reconsidering its connectivity projects to incorporate Ukraine. This shift can be seen as a new dimension in Turkish-Ukrainian bilateral relations.¹⁰

In summary, despite the backdrop of conflict and global uncertainties, the evolving dynamics of Turkish-Ukrainian bilateral relations mirror the broader geopolitical aspirations of both Türkiye and Ukraine. The partnership between Türkiye and Ukraine has great potential, and the collaboration between the two countries contributes to mutual growth and the rebuilding of a stronger Ukraine.

3. Ankara's positioning since February 2022

From the outset of the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine, Ankara has pursued a diplomatic approach, acknowledging the conflict as a major disruption to regional stability. While some may critique Türkiye's characterization of the war as a localized issue, Ankara's initial reaction was decisive—swiftly condemning Moscow's actions as a declaration of war. Türkiye invoked Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, effectively

closing the Turkish Straits to warships from both Russia and Ukraine, officially recognized as “warring parties.” Based on its commitment to a balanced approach in the Black Sea, Ankara called upon all countries—regardless of their littoral status—to refrain from sending warships through the Turkish Straits. This initiative, grounded in Article 21 of the Montreux Convention, is a strategic move that has effectively limited

naval access to the Black Sea for military vessels. By implementing this restriction, Türkiye has notably curtailed Russia's ability to introduce new forces into the region, which has the potential to disrupt the existing balance of power. This is particularly significant given the impact of the Russia's occupation of Crimea, which severely damaged Ukraine's naval infrastructure. At the same time, this diplomatic maneuver helps to reduce the risk of escalating tensions by keeping non-Black Sea states out to prevent a broader conflict.

Efforts aimed at terminating the war and establishing enduring peace through political cooperation have brought Ankara's priorities into sharp focus. Specifically, Türkiye aims to resolve the conflict while ensuring Ukraine's security and regional stability. Noteworthy developments include Türkiye's participation and support in Ukraine's peace plan, facilitation of prisoner of war releases, and endorsement of Ukraine's reconstruction efforts. Türkiye hosted high-level talks in Antalya in March 2022, in Istanbul in March 2022, and again in Istanbul in May 2025. The Istanbul Process and the resulting Istanbul Communiqué served as an important step in facilitating negotiations between Russia and Ukraine on a ceasefire agreement and, later, an agreement aimed at achieving lasting peace in Ukraine. This process positively influenced Ankara's efforts to facilitate prisoner exchanges and foster cooperation between Ukrainian and Russian officials. As the negotiation platform shifted to one focused on Washington, the draft agreement—which the U.S. sought to shape—initially contained 28 articles but was ultimately reduced to 19, establishing a new agenda. While Ankara's exact role in this agreement remains unclear, negotiations

are reported to be centered on Ukraine's territorial integrity, the status of occupied territories, and security guarantees for Ukraine.¹¹ Ankara appears prepared to take an active and effective role within the "Coalition of the Willing" led by European actors. Statements from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicate that this role will concentrate on ensuring security in the Black Sea. To that end, there is a growing understanding that Ankara prioritizes establishing a mechanism involving primarily coastal states to monitor the ceasefire in the Black Sea and ensure regional security thereafter.¹² This approach aligns with Türkiye's rhetoric on regional cooperation over the past 20 years. However, this stance does not directly address the role Türkiye might play in Ukraine's expectation of a ceasefire and subsequent peace, supported by a military presence on Ukrainian territory as a military security guarantee. Ankara's emphasis on close cooperation with Western allies, particularly European ones, aligns with Kyiv's expectations, though the concrete outcomes of this collaboration remain uncertain. Frequent meetings between senior Turkish and Ukrainian officials indicate that the two actors are coordinating. This issue is becoming increasingly important amid global competition and the evolving European security architecture, where uncertainties about Western allies' approaches to Ukraine and Türkiye's positions raise questions about the progress of the process. Ultimately, Türkiye and Ukraine are likely to pursue closer regional security cooperation, as evidenced by the ongoing deepening of their bilateral relations.

As a member of NATO and an active participant in Western geopolitical dynamics, Türkiye has taken a firm stance supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity while

simultaneously seeking to manage its relationship with Russia, a major regional player. The goal is to keep Russia from becoming marginalized, as that could increase the likelihood of aggressive actions. While complex and often scrutinized, this balanced perspective aligns with Ankara's broader views on regional stability.

Against this backdrop, Türkiye has sustained its relations with Russia, particularly within economic and diplomatic spheres. Ankara believes that engaging constructively with Moscow can facilitate an initiative to resolve the Russia-Ukraine war. While this strategy has drawn some criticism from Western allies—especially regarding Türkiye's positions on sanctions against Russia—there is reason to appreciate Türkiye's diplomatic approach. Ankara's reputation as a regional leader is crucial for Ukraine, especially within multilateral diplomatic channels like the UN. Türkiye has supported Ukrainian resolutions at the UN that condemn Russia's aggression and highlight violations of international law, demonstrating its commitment to justice and peace.

Since President Zelensky introduced his 'Peace Formula,' Türkiye has proudly taken the lead on food security, positioning itself as an influential player in broader regional peace efforts. In June 2024, Türkiye participated in the inaugural Peace Summit in Switzerland, openly supporting its Communiqué and emphasizing its commitment to a peaceful resolution. Moreover, Türkiye has expressed its readiness to actively participate and lead in the Coalition of the Willing, a military-political format supporting Ukraine in establishing security guarantees. In April 2025, Ankara hosted a technical-level meeting with representatives from Türkiye, Ukraine, the United

Kingdom, and France to discuss maritime security in the context of this coalition.¹³

To foster a just and enduring peace, Ukraine has embarked on several regional initiatives that tackle specific challenges and geographical issues, with Türkiye playing an influential role in these efforts. A standout example is the Crimea Platform, an international consultation and coordination initiative launched by Ukraine in 2021, reflecting Ukraine's proactive approach. Türkiye is also actively engaged in the regional format known as Ukraine–South-Eastern Europe, which brings together Ukraine, Türkiye, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro. Regular meetings at the level of leaders and ministers are convened to discuss key security matters in the Black Sea region, demonstrating a unified commitment to stability and cooperation.¹⁴ Furthermore, Türkiye has been instrumental for Ukraine in raising awareness about the challenges posed by Russia's war against Ukraine, particularly in the Global South. Ukraine is seizing opportunities presented by Ankara to engage meaningfully with these diverse regions. For instance, during his visit to Türkiye in April 2025, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiha had productive discussions with representatives from ten African nations at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum.

Ankara is also making commendable efforts to engage other countries on food security matters, particularly in the Global South. Ukraine has formally acknowledged Türkiye at the highest political tiers as a pivotal leader in establishing a food security mechanism. Ankara's active facilitation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, signed in July 2022 by Russia, Ukraine, Türkiye, and the UN, is a testament

to this leadership. Although this initiative has encountered disruptions due to Russia's adverse stance, Ankara played a pivotal role in effectively operating the new supply line that aligns with Kyiv's expectations. Thanks to this initiative, from July 2022 to July 2023, Ukraine successfully exported 33 million tons of agricultural products to global markets to meet pressing humanitarian needs. Through President Zelensky's humanitarian initiative "Grain from Ukraine," Türkiye has facilitated Ukraine's grain shipments to African nations, focusing on Nigeria and Sudan.¹⁵ Despite the ongoing conflict, Ukraine continues to be a pillar of food security for numerous countries, a role that depends on the support of Black Sea partner states in ensuring the safe transportation of humanitarian aid across the sea, even in the face of ongoing hostilities. In 2025, strengthened cooperation with Türkiye in securing food supplies allowed Ukraine to enhance food security in Syria through an evolved format of the "Grain from Ukraine" program, now aptly renamed "Food from Ukraine."¹⁶ Collaborative efforts between Turkish and Ukrainian authorities achieved a significant milestone by restoring freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, leading to a considerable rise in exports through the corridors connecting Turkish and Ukrainian ports since late 2023.¹⁷ Türkiye's decision to enhance accessibility for Ukrainian vessels in its ports has significantly improved export logistics, fostering a spirit of cooperation that benefits both nations.

Ukraine's post-war reconstruction is emerging as another area of major importance in Türkiye-Ukraine relations. Official estimates suggest that Ukraine will necessitate more than \$500 billion for its reconstruction initiatives.¹⁸ Turkish companies are projected

to take an active role in this rebuilding process. In August 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed during a meeting of heads of state, focusing on infrastructure recovery.¹⁹ To advance these initiatives, the Türkiye-Ukraine Reconstruction Task Force was established in 2024, and it is expected to actively engage with the €50 billion fund allocated by the EU for Ukraine's recovery. Key areas include the restoration of road infrastructure, the construction of temporary bridges and overpasses on critical routes, the development of water transport infrastructure, the protection of crucial facilities, housing restoration, and aviation projects. Turkish construction firms are actively working on approximately 100 projects across Ukraine. This structured approach highlights a shared vision for a rebuilt and thriving Ukraine. However, some challenges must be addressed to enhance collaboration between the two nations, particularly concerning the adherence to sanctions against Russian entities that have acted against Ukraine. Throughout ongoing political discussions, Ukraine has consistently raised concerns about allegations that some Turkish companies may be circumventing sanctions by transporting banned goods to Russia.²⁰

The humanitarian dimension of the Türkiye-Ukraine partnership is also crucial. Since February 2022, over 840,000 Ukrainian citizens have found refuge in Türkiye in their search for safety from the conflict. As of 2025, around 30,000 remain temporarily in Türkiye, although many have relocated to third countries or returned home.²¹ Türkiye's notable efforts in humanitarian support are further emphasized by its active role in mediating the release of Ukrainian prisoners of war held by Russia, including Crimean Tatars.

4. Defense Industry Cooperation

While Türkiye's stance on Ukraine's security concerns may still unfold, Ankara remains committed to being an active partner, reflecting its awareness of the larger global context. In this light, ensuring the security of the Black Sea and fostering cooperation among its neighboring states are paramount priorities for Ankara, significantly enhancing the Turkish-Ukrainian partnership, especially in the area of defense industry cooperation.

Indeed, the military-technical cooperation established well before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been instrumental, allowing Ukraine to mount an effective defense right from the onset of the Russian offensive.²² Special emphasis has been placed on collaborations involving military Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAVs) and naval cooperation. By 2018, more than 20 joint defense and industrial collaboration projects had already commenced. In 2020, a new bilateral format for political and security consultations, Quadriga, was established at the ministerial level of foreign affairs and defense, indicating a strategic institutional approach to military-political cooperation. The signing of the Ukraine-Türkiye Framework Agreement on Military-Financial Cooperation in 2020 further enhanced cooperation in defense and security. A significant milestone was reached in July 2021 when Ukraine received its first Bayraktar UAV complex. Furthermore, collaborative efforts deepened, highlighted by a promising partnership between LUCH and Aselsan to create the groundbreaking Ukrainian-Turkish anti-tank missile launching system, the "SERDAR."²³ Moreover, Türkiye is aiding Ukraine in enhancing its maritime capabilities by constructing corvettes under

MILGEM, Türkiye's national warship-building initiative.²⁴

Overall, since 2014, Türkiye has provided military assistance to Ukraine, showcasing its commitment through the provision of combat drones such as the Bayraktar TB2, laser-guided missiles, personal protective gear, Kirpi armored vehicles, and Canik M2 heavy machine guns. These systems were crucial in repelling Russian forces along the entire frontline during February and March 2022. While the deployment strategies for Turkish strike drones have evolved with changing combat scenarios, their threat to the adversary remains substantial, especially in operations within the Black Sea region. Although the Bayraktar Machine Factory, considered a key pillar of bilateral relations, began operations at a limited scale in 2023 and was projected to achieve full capacity by 2025, ongoing Russian attacks hindered this progress.²⁵ Ukrainian firms supply engines for various Turkish defense platforms, including the KAAAN fighter jet, Kızılelma, Akıncı, and Anka III combat drones, as well as the Atak II helicopter. Türkiye considers this cooperation not just a transaction but a critical aspect of technology transfer, with a genuine commitment to enhancing these relationships across diverse sectors.²⁶

Since 2022, Türkiye has also been an active Ukrainian Defense Contract Group member, known as the 'Ramstein Group'. In this framework, Ankara has participated in various military capability coalitions, including the Maritime Capabilities Coalition and the Drones Coalition. Recognizing the strategic importance of their partnership, Ankara and

Kyiv have taken significant steps to institutionalize their cooperation. In August 2023, the 8th meeting of the Joint Commission on Defense-Industrial Cooperation was held, co-chaired by the Deputy Ministers of Defense from both countries. In March 2024, a Memorandum of Understanding was approved by both governments, facilitating mutual acceptance of state quality guarantees for defense-related goods, services, and works. This document enhances the scope

of military-technical cooperation that began in 2020 and establishes protocols for mutual quality control across all stages of defense product manufacturing.²⁷

Overall, the collaboration between Türkiye and Ukraine strengthens their military capabilities and establishes a robust alliance that will foster greater security and stability in the Black Sea region.

5. Black Sea Security and Regional Cooperation

The Black Sea represents a crucial front in Ukraine's ongoing conflict, serving as the nation's sole maritime access point, vital for both economic sustainability and military effectiveness as an independent and sovereign state. For Türkiye, the Black Sea is equally important as it sustains essential trade routes for energy, grain, and fertilizer exports. Moreover, it has assumed strategic significance as a vital area for countering Russian influence in the region.²⁸

Key factors shaping Türkiye's approach to Black Sea security include the Montreux Convention, which governs maritime passage through the straits, and the imperative of ensuring freedom of navigation in the region. The proliferation of littoral states following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ensuing geopolitical transformations has kept this issue critically relevant since the early 1990s. Türkiye has framed its post-Cold War discourse around principles of 'regional ownership' and cooperation among littoral states. Central to this

approach is the conviction that no single actor in the Black Sea, particularly Russia, should achieve a position of unchallenged dominance. Furthermore, the Black Sea must not become a theater of competition among major powers. In light of this, it is crucial for Ankara to work with other littoral states to prevent Russia from dominating the Black Sea region.

Since the late 1990s, Ankara has consistently challenged the characterization of the Black Sea as a security vacuum, particularly as articulated by some Western allies, most notably the US. In this context, regional security initiatives such as Blackseafor and Black Sea Harmony and economic and commercial cooperation frameworks like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) bolstered Ankara's efforts of regional ownership until the early 2000s. These initiatives addressed pertinent regional security needs and garnered acceptance from other littoral states, establishing a foundation for cooperation through confidence-building measures.

However, the geopolitical landscape has been altered by key events such as the Russia-Georgia war, the annexation of Crimea, and Russia's subsequent invasion and attempted annexation of Ukraine, undermining Ankara's foundational diplomatic approach. While Ankara's discourse on regional ownership retains relevance, substantial modifications are necessary both in terms of content and practical implementation. A central question now arises regarding Ankara's capacity to autonomously address its neighboring states' security concerns and expectations concerning Russia. Bulgaria and Romania are NATO and EU member states, while Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia actively pursue membership. The contemporary circumstances necessitate establishing a new, pragmatic regional framework.

Ankara is cognizant of this evolving situation. Indeed, it has been posited that "Turkey and the West have long collaborated on Black Sea stability, countering Russian revisionism, supporting the resilience of post-Soviet states, and enhancing the region's energy and connectivity".²⁹ Despite this collaboration, Türkiye's pursuit of strategic autonomy has sometimes been considered to conflict with its NATO commitments, raising questions about whether Türkiye's actions support or hinder NATO objectives. From Ankara's perspective, its grievances stem from a perception that Western partners have inadequately acknowledged Türkiye's security concerns, often overlooking the broader array of threats that Türkiye faces beyond those specific to the Black Sea region.

In the context of security and cooperation within the Black Sea region, the perspectives

of both Türkiye and Ukraine significantly influence their bilateral relations. Like Bulgaria and Romania, Ukraine advocates for a strengthened NATO presence in the Black Sea to counteract the Russian threat. Türkiye prefers limited engagement from non-littoral NATO states, contending that the presence of external powers is unnecessary. However, this dynamic shows a difference in approach to strategy rather than a fundamental disagreement about security principles between Ankara and other regional actors or Western allies.

Türkiye's stance does not fundamentally oppose establishing a robust NATO presence to counterbalance Russia; instead, it emphasizes initiatives prioritizing littoral states' roles and interests. Ankara champions that such actions managed autonomously by the littoral states should be supported by both NATO and EU member states.

Türkiye itself conducts continuous air and naval reconnaissance missions in the Black Sea, providing up to 67% of all situational awareness information to NATO and Ukraine.³⁰ Since February 2022, Türkiye has engaged with NATO across various domains, while avoiding high-profile actions that could provoke Russian aggression. In June 2022, Ankara assumed command of the maritime component of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. By December 2022, Türkiye's Rapid Deployable Corps, based in Istanbul, was designated as a NATO Warfighting Corps in preparation for contingencies in 2023, positioning Türkiye at the forefront of NATO's response capabilities to potential Russian aggression against allied states.

Furthermore, in January 2024, Türkiye signed an agreement with Romania and Bulgaria to establish a Mine Countermeasures Black Sea Task Group, aimed at collaboratively addressing the issue of drifting sea mines that have threatened shipping routes in the Black Sea. Türkiye additionally supports NATO's forward presence in Romania and Bulgaria, contributing to the NATO battlegroup in Bulgaria and deploying four F-16 aircraft along with 80 personnel to enhance Romania's national air policing capabilities from December 2023 to March 2024.³¹ Additionally, Türkiye has committed to contributing to NATO's Baltic Air Policing Mission in Estonia in 2026. These actions reflect Türkiye's strategic emphasis on 'regional solutions for regional problems.'³²

In a nutshell, Ankara believes that maintaining robust regional ties with its NATO allies and empowering Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are critical to counteracting Russian influence in the Black Sea. This strategy demonstrates Türkiye's long-standing commitment to preventing Russian naval dominance in its maritime vicinity.

NATO and the EU have yet to devise a Black Sea strategy that is pragmatic, sustainable, and capable of curbing Russian overreach while safeguarding the autonomy of Black Sea littoral partners. This situation redefines the roles of Türkiye and Ukraine, making them critical components of the European security framework. European actors' perception of Türkiye and Ukraine as integral to Europe will significantly influence the policies of Ankara and Kyiv, along with their bilateral relations.

Previously, core EU member states were skeptical regarding Türkiye's inclusion in

discussions on resolving the Russia-Ukraine war, EU defense initiatives, and broader European security matters. Currently, there is a shift in this approach. In March 2025, the Turkish leadership was invited to a summit in London to discuss the establishment of a potential European tripwire force designed to deter further Russian aggression in the event of a ceasefire. Türkiye was also invited to participate in the EU leaders' summit in March 2025 in Brussels. While these discussions extend beyond the specific context of Black Sea security, establishing a credible partnership focused on defense could eventually facilitate Türkiye and Ukraine's integration into broader European defense initiatives, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation in defense.

In this context, Aydın and Aydıntaşbaş suggest that NATO should prioritize the bolstering of naval capabilities among its coastal members—specifically Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria—as well as its partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia within the Black Sea region.³³ This is deemed more conducive to fostering a robust collaboration with Ankara than the deployment of additional non-littoral NATO vessels, which may alienate Türkiye and potentially encounter limitations imposed by the Montreux Convention. The alliance should establish low-profile, regional "mini-partnerships" with littoral Black Sea partners, as such initiatives are likely to elicit a more favorable response from Türkiye compared to high-profile collaborations with the US, the UK, or France.

The readiness of the Turkish leadership to engage in regional partnerships with Romania and Bulgaria, along with efforts to facilitate the modernization of Ukraine's

navy through arms sales and shipbuilding initiatives, is essential for shaping security dynamics in the Black Sea in a post-war context. Moreover, Ukraine's emergent strategies involving the use of land-based missiles and drones to target Russian naval assets have underscored the limitations of surface ship operations within the constricted confines

of the Black Sea. Given Ankara's expertise in technological collaboration with Ukraine and UAV capabilities, further cooperation in this domain is crucial. Financial and technological assistance from Western allies for these initiatives will enhance the sustainability of regional security cooperation.

6. Prospects for Bilateral and Regional Cooperation

While building a strong bilateral relationship, striving for strategic autonomy and regional responsibility, Türkiye and Ukraine operate in the distinct geopolitical context. Moving forward, cooperation in the Black Sea must encompass strategic dialogues and bolster the operational capabilities of NATO and the EU. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize the shared objectives that unite Türkiye, Ukraine, NATO, and the EU in the Black Sea region. These include:

- Achieving a just and lasting resolution to the war in Ukraine;
- Diminishing Russian political and military presence in the region;
- Developing a robust European security framework that ensures reliable

defense and deterrence;

- Safeguarding freedom of navigation;
- Encouraging sustainable economic growth;
- Ensuring energy security and environmental protection;
- Addressing hybrid threats effectively.

Türkiye will continue to play a pivotal role in enhancing security in the Black Sea, actively contributing to the development of effective mechanisms to bolster Ukraine's safety and stability. Areas of common interest include the negotiation process, security partnerships, reconstruction and humanitarian assistance, as well as energy and environmental issues.

Dialogue and negotiations

In 2025, Türkiye successfully hosted a meeting that brought together Ukrainian and Russian negotiating teams, resulting in meaningful progress on critical humanitarian issues. Ankara's commitment to avoiding ultimatums in negotiations

underlines its dedication to pursuing a constructive path toward a ceasefire and establishing a just and lasting peace. With its extensive negotiation experience, Türkiye is well-equipped to guide or facilitate the process.

Furthermore, Turkish President Erdoğan has been in close contact with both Ukrainian President Zelensky and Russian President Putin, emphasizing the importance of a leadership meeting. While such a meeting may appear unlikely, Erdoğan remains optimistic about the potential for facilitating a gathering in Türkiye. Ongoing discussions between Ukraine and Türkiye regarding a potential meeting between their leaders reflect a shared commitment to dialogue.

Apart from high-level dialogue, Ukraine appreciates Türkiye's role as a mediator, aiming to facilitate the exchange of prisoners of war and civilians unjustly held in

Russia. Türkiye's past successes in similar negotiations inspire optimism regarding future efforts. Moreover, it is essential—supported by mediators like Türkiye and international organizations such as the UN—to establish and maintain humanitarian corridors for exporting Ukrainian agricultural products. This initiative is crucial for safeguarding global food security.

Türkiye's experience negotiating with Russia and Ukraine reflects a commitment to finding collaborative solutions, whether to ensure freedom of navigation for commercial vessels or to advance humanitarian efforts.

Security partnerships

By combining the naval expertise and military strengths of Türkiye and Ukraine with the EU and NATO's strategic capabilities and financial resources, both parties can create an effective strategy to mitigate Russia's influence, thereby reducing its ability to engage in conventional and hybrid warfare.

Leveraging existing the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training, and Education Centre (JATEC) mechanisms to analyze Ukraine's combat experience presents a valuable opportunity for NATO to formulate a fresh defense and deterrence strategy for both the Black Sea and the Baltic Seas. This vital topic is poised to be a central discussion point at the upcoming NATO summit in Türkiye in 2026.

As part of the Maritime Capabilities Coalition, Türkiye, Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine are positioned to foster innovative security solutions in the Black Sea, drawing insights from

contemporary military trends observed in Ukraine's defense and deterrence against Russian aggression. This collaboration could pave the way for enhanced regional stability and security.

In addition, Türkiye is well-positioned to monitor and verify compliance with any temporary ceasefire at sea between Russia and Ukraine. With its significant experience and military capabilities, Türkiye can enhance its technical abilities with the aid of partners from the Coalition of the Willing,' as well as NATO and the EU.

To control the ceasefire effectively, Türkiye may need to explore additional measures aligned with the declared security guarantees, particularly regarding civilian shipping in the Black Sea. One strategic focus could be maritime demining, initiated through a joint mission involving Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine.

According to Naryman Dzhelal, Ukraine's ambassador to Türkiye, Ankara is also considering proposals for participating in humanitarian landmine clearance as part of the collaborative efforts within the Coalition

of the Willing' and through bilateral agreements with Ukraine. Furthermore, Türkiye is prepared to extend its commitment to security guarantees by potentially deploying troops to Ukraine.³⁴

Reconstruction and humanitarian assistance

Ukraine sees Türkiye as an essential partner in the post-war reconstruction period. To maximize the export potential for Ukraine and Türkiye, improve logistics, and launch global humanitarian projects, Ukraine is eager to engage Turkish businesses in the post-war recovery effort, guided by the inspiring principle of "Build Back Better." From a strategic perspective, Ukraine is particularly enthusiastic about involving Turkish enterprises in logistics, reconstruction, and developing Ukrainian seaports. Türkiye's role will be instrumental in rejuvenating Ukraine's maritime transport infrastructure in the Black and Azov Seas, laying the groundwork for an expanded partnership focused on food security and new transportation routes.

Türkiye brings numerous advantages to the table. Public and private businesses boast substantial technical knowledge and vast experience in post-conflict reconstruction, as proven by their successful projects

in Afghanistan and Iraq, alongside their involvement in large-scale infrastructure initiatives with international organizations. Moreover, the positive reputation of Turkish construction companies in Ukraine is noteworthy, highlighted by their achievements in major projects like the Zaporizhzhia and Kremenchuk bridges.³⁵

A further opportunity, promoted by the Turkish business community, includes collaboration with third parties in Ukraine's reconstruction efforts. Initiatives currently underway include Türkiye-Japan-Ukraine, Türkiye-Sweden-Ukraine, Türkiye-Poland-Ukraine, Türkiye-South Korea-Ukraine, and Türkiye-US-Ukraine partnerships. These tri-lateral partnerships are developing mechanisms that enable Ukraine's partners to access financing and technology, while Turkish experts contribute their invaluable technical know-how and human resources.³⁶

Energy and environmental initiatives

Both Türkiye and Ukraine intend to prioritize regional energy and environmental initiatives alongside traditional security matters. Considering ongoing aggression, the immediate need to secure Ukraine's energy supplies is significant, but both countries are also keen to explore long-term

energy projects of regional importance. Like many Central and Eastern European countries, Ukraine is actively seeking to diversify its energy sources, moving away from its historical reliance on Russian oil, natural gas, and nuclear fuel.

In conversations with Türkiye, Ukraine sees great potential to bolster natural gas transportation through the Trans-Balkan gas corridor, utilizing the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP). This initiative stands to not only meet Ukraine's domestic energy needs but also provide significant benefits across the broader Central and Eastern European region.³⁷

On the environmental front, Ukraine and Türkiye need to enhance their collaborative efforts to safeguard the Black Sea ecosystems at the diplomatic level. Russia's repeated violations of international law have had far-reaching consequences beyond

military engagement. For instance, a major environmental disaster in December 2024 in the Kerch Strait resulted from an accident involving Russian tankers, leading to a significant oil spill that posed a serious threat to the Black Sea's delicate environment.

However, the effective operation of regional organizations such as the Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution, established under the Bucharest Convention, is currently restricted by institutional limitations. Türkiye and Ukraine aim to work together towards a more secure future for the region by addressing these shortcomings.³⁸

7. Policy Recommendations

Türkiye-Ukraine Bilateral Track: Recommendations for Strengthening Partnership

I. Enhancing Public Awareness and Understanding:

Parties should develop a well-structured government plan to increase each country's visibility within the other's information landscape. This initiative will help cultivate public interest and understanding, reinforcing the importance of the bilateral relationship.

Parties should actively promote collaboration in the economic and energy sectors. Focused media engagement should spotlight the benefits of these initiatives to both nations and their citizens.

II. Ratifying the Free Trade Agreement:

Active endeavors should be developed to encourage Ukraine to take decisive political steps to ratify the Free Trade Agreement with Türkiye. This ratification is essential to expanding economic cooperation and paving the way for joint Turkish-Ukrainian initiatives that can enhance their presence in third markets. It will set preconditions for creating a cohesive economic zone among Black Sea littoral states, excluding the Russian Federation. This effort can foster regional stability and economic growth.

III. Safe navigation and trade in the Black Sea:

Ukraine is interested in Turkish businesses participating in projects related to the reconstruction of Ukrainian seaports, and their development. Türkiye can contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine's maritime transport infrastructure in the Black Sea and the

Sea of Azov. These projects could mark the start of broader Ukrainian-Turkish initiatives in food security and the development of new transport routes. Parties should prioritize reinstating ferry connections between Ukrainian and Turkish ports. This initiatives would strengthen cooperation and enhance food security for both nations, particularly as we work towards restoring safe navigation in the Black Sea.

Multilateral Track: Strengthening Cooperation and Security in International and Regional Partnerships.

IV. Promote Joint Initiatives and leverage NATO Resources:

The regional principle of responsibility, announced at the NATO Summit in Vilnius, allowed Türkiye to take the initiative to create a Mine Countermeasures Group in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea). Ankara should facilitate the formation expansion of the Mine Countermeasures Group (MCM Black Sea) spearheaded by Türkiye to enhance maritime security in the Black Sea. Further cooperation between Ankara and Kyiv within the framework of NATO programmes in the Black Sea will significantly strengthen the regional security dimension in the Black Sea. New joint initiatives could be prepared as flagship projects for presentation at the NATO Summit in Türkiye in 2026. To this end, the work of the NATO Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) could be utilized, as well as the promising medium-term plans of the Maritime Capabilities Coalition.

V. Engage with EU Strategies:

The new European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea region, launched in May 2025, provides for the need for cooperation with Türkiye, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Ankara and Kyiv may collaborate with the EU via EU member littoral countries on the EU's strategy, focusing on security, connectivity, sustainable growth, and resilience to climate change.

At the same time, both parties should explore opportunities for reshaping the EU's Eastern Partnership policy to include additional security guarantees for countries in the Black Sea region, as well as consider the roles of Ankara and Kyiv in advocating the need for comprehensive regional security frameworks. Both parties should promote new regional security initiatives with the participation of not just Türkiye and Ukraine, but also Romania, Bulgaria, and the Eastern Partnership partners.

VI. Collaborating on Sanctions Efforts:

International sanctions on Russia are one of the most powerful tools for limiting the funds available to the Kremlin for sustaining the war against Ukraine. Despite Ankara's reluctance to actively participate in the sanctions regimes imposed by the G7, the European Union and its partners, parties continue with the ongoing consultations to enhance Türkiye's position in discussions on international sanctions, aiming to block the supply of dual-use goods from Turkish companies to Russia. Stepping up the fight against Russia's shadow fleet, which actively uses the Turkish Straits to trade Russian oil around the world, should be given extra attention. Both Ukraine and Western partners are expecting Ankara to take a clear stance on this issue.

VII. Trilateral Business Partnerships for Ukraine's Recovery:

In the context of Ukraine's reconstruction, Turkish business initiatives to establish trilateral partnerships, in which Turkish companies would be responsible for project implementation while partners would provide funding, are worthy of attention and replication. Meetings have already been held with representatives from the United States, South Korea, Poland and Sweden. Such approaches should also be initiated with other EU countries, particularly Germany, France and Italy.

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