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The role of Turkey in European security: In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

The interdependence of geopolitical developments in the Middle East, and Eastern Europe has long been recognized as a historical axiom. In the twenty-first century, these regions are once again descending into turbulence almost simultaneously. However, several specific features distinguish the present conjuncture from those observed over the previous three centuries.

The eighteenth century marked a period of Russian expansion both southward and westward, culminating in the destruction of Poland's statehood, the annexation of Crimean Khanate. The disappearance of the Polish and Crimean states significantly undermined the Ottoman Empire's ability to deter Russia deeper into the European continent both westward and eastward. A comparable loss of geopolitical autonomy was experienced by the Turkish people, who for several centuries remained within the sphere of influence of Western powers. Moreover, the course of the history in Eastern Europe seriously reverberated on the history of the country. The First and Second World Wars particularly. For example, Turkey's strategic culture continues to bear the imprint of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, much as the Yalta settlement shaped Polish strategic culture.

In the twenty-first century, the regional dynamics of contemporary powers extend beyond the patterns that characterized the previous three centuries, a period marked by repeated strategic setbacks for Turkey and Poland. Several major events served as "wake-up calls" for Eastern Europe and Turkey, prompting efforts to enhance strategic autonomy and self-reliance. For Turkey, these events included the American invasion of Iraq, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and consequent Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015. In geostrategic terms, Turkey and Poland increasingly found itself positioned between competing great-power interests.

It was during this period that Turkey's foreign policy began to evolve toward greater independence, both in its strategic posture and its doctrinal outlook, most notably through the articulation of the Mavi Vatan doctrine. The

doctrine that outlines Turkish geostrategic interests along its borderlands. The reassessment of Turkey's regional and global position became more consolidated following Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 Karabakh War and was further reinforced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The year 2025 was particularly significant for Turkey, largely due to a shift in U.S. policy toward Ankara following the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States. The United States now appears to regard Turkey as one of the key pillars of its strategy in Western Eurasia together with Israel what will eventually create serious strategic dilemma for Washington. At the same time, the evolving strategic environment, marked by changes in U.S. – EU relations on the one hand, and developments in U.S. – Russia relations, as well as a more assertive U.S. posture in the Greater Middle East on the other hand, created an unprecedented level of manoeuvrability and influence for Ankara. Though causing greater level of the threats and unpredictability from such geopolitical dynamics in the Western Eurasia.

Turkey expanded its activism across Africa, European Union and the Greater Middle East generally, but particularly in Central Asia, the Caucasus, in the traditional Middle East. It emerged as an increasingly significant actor in international diplomatic processes. Turkey year by year more and more steps into the with European and all-Eurasian security processes. Special attention should pay to the activities of Turkey in in the European continent and particularly to the Turkish efforts to enhance deterrence against Russia in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, while simultaneously seeking a larger role in shaping European security policies. Ankara asserts that Turkey's participation is essential to the construction of a new European Security Architecture (ESA).

Given its scope, this article does not aim to provide definitive answers but instead focuses on analyzing key geostrategic developments on the European continent and Turkey's role within them in 2025. It shows that in 2025, both Europe and the United States reassessed Turkey's geostrategic importance within their grand strategies in Eurasia. However there serious distinction over the role of Turkey in the future security dynamics in Eurasia between American and European perspectives. While the United States increasingly viewed Turkey as a core component of a new geopolitical architecture in the Greater Middle East, European actors gradually recognized Turkey as an important element of the continent's future security architecture particularly securing European southern borderlands and crucial component of the deterrence of Russia. At the same time, Turkey itself expanded its geopolitical engagement in both Europe and the Greater Middle East, signaling its willingness to assume a more prominent regional role. This article concentrates on Turkey's European strategy and treating its other regional initiatives in the Greater Middle East as background context rather than the central focus.

Turkey and the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Diplomatic activities

Since 2014, Turkey has consistently upheld the official stance that it recognizes Ukraine's sovereignty over all internationally recognized territory, including Crimea, which it considers an integral part of Ukraine. Turkey has maintained close relations with the Crimean Tatar self-governing institutions (Mejlis), supporting their efforts to achieve autonomy within Ukraine and opposing the annexation of Crimea. Throughout this period, Turkey has pursued a careful balancing strategy between Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Turkey emerged as a central venue for diplomatic efforts aimed at conflict resolution. It is the only NATO member that has simultaneously maintained pragmatic relations with both Russia and Ukraine, as well as other NATO members. In contrast to Hungary, Turkey has successfully sustained its balancing strategy since the annexation of Crimea, and Ukraine continues to regard Turkey as a reliable strategic partner.

The first meeting between the Ukrainian and Russian delegations took place in Antalya on 28 February 2022, followed by two subsequent sessions in Belarus. The fourth and fifth sessions (on 10 and 14 March 2022) were once again held in Antalya, as Ukraine considered Belarus to be acting in Russia's favour. During the initial phase, negotiations were conducted under Turkish mediation, with Ankara actively facilitating discussions between the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine, rather than merely providing a venue. By the end of March, the negotiation process was relocated to Istanbul, where the delegations worked on the Draft Peace Agreement. This agreement was not made public until two years after the commencement of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, reflecting the sensitivity of the discussions and the complexity of the diplomatic process.

A second phase of diplomatic engagement unfolded in May 2025, when President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Turkey on 12 May and met President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan amid speculation that Istanbul might also host Russia's president. The scope of negotiations expanded beyond bilateral channels to include a trilateral framework involving the United States, Turkey, and Ukraine. Turkey's participation encompassed not only its diplomatic representatives but also officials from its intelligence and defense sectors, reflecting what Western media characterized as Ankara's "360-degree" foreign policy approach.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan traveled first to Moscow to meet with President Vladimir Putin and subsequently to Kyiv, conducting direct, high-level engagements with both parties. While parallel interactions took place between Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Okay Memiş, Secretary-General of Turkey's National Security Council. During these exchanges, Shoigu publicly acknowledged and commended Turkey's conflict mediation

efforts. Throughout this period, President Erdoğan repeatedly called on Presidents Zelensky and Putin to undertake direct negotiations on Turkish territory, thereby reinforcing Ankara's strategic objective of positioning itself as a central mediator in the conflict. A subsequent round of negotiations took place in June 2025 in Istanbul under Turkish supervision, during which President Erdoğan reiterated his offer to host immediate leader-level talks, either bilaterally or within a broader framework that could include himself and the U.S. President Donald Trump, although signals from Washington remained ambiguous. A third phase began on 23 July, but progress was severely limited due to the lack of willingness to make major concessions and the continuation of Russian military operations. Turkey once again proposed a four-leader meeting in Istanbul. At the same time, Ukraine strengthened its cooperation with Ankara by appointing a Crimean Tatar representative Nariman Dzhelyalov, who spent years in the Russian prison for his pro-Ukrainian and pro-Crimean Tatar position as ambassador to Turkey and expanding defence-industrial collaboration. Moreover, Rustem Umerov, a Crimean Tatar origin closely connected to the Turkish political and economic establishment, played a central role in Ukraine's defense and diplomatic efforts. Between September 2023 and July 2025, he served as Ukraine's Minister of Defense and, more importantly, as the lead representative responsible for peace negotiations with Russia. Umerov was subsequently appointed head of the National Security and Defence Council and served as the chief negotiator of the Ukrainian delegation throughout 2025.

Following this phase, neither side identified sufficient grounds to continue negotiations. Proposals to relocate negotiations to Hungary were rejected by President Zelensky, who maintained that Turkey remained the most suitable venue. Zelensky also indicated openness to Turkish participation in peacekeeping arrangements in Ukraine and the Black Sea region. Kyiv recognized that an enhanced role for Turkey, as a NATO member with one of the most capable armed forces in the Western world, would provide a significant deterrent against Russian expansionism.

President Erdoğan subsequently described the situation as a diplomatic deadlock. Following the SCO summit in China, he noted that neither party was prepared to make the concessions necessary to achieve peace. During a late-September visit to the United States, he further cautioned that Europe might face challenges in sustaining unprecedented levels of assistance to Ukraine, while emphasizing Turkey's readiness to assume greater responsibility to prevent escalation beyond Ukrainian territory.

Turkish proposals on the peace in 2025

During the second phase of negotiations in 2025, Turkey positioned itself as an advocate of peace while emphasizing that Ukraine must remain an equal participant in any diplomatic process determining its future. Ankara indicated that it anticipated a different approach from U.S. President Donald Trump's compared with the previous administration and welcomed corresponding shifts in Washington's rhetoric, arguing that Turkish and American positions on the conflict had become more closely aligned following the elections, despite prior divergences. In May 2025, Poland's prime minister, Donald Tusk, reportedly suggested that if the United States failed to broker settlement in Eastern Europe, Turkey and China could emerge as alternative mediators. Within this framework, Turkish officials increasingly argued that maintaining a "frozen conflict" would be preferable to ongoing high-intensity hostilities. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan subsequently proposed specific measures, including the establishment of a demilitarized zone in Donbas region and the temporary suspension of Ukraine's NATO trajectory, in exchange for allied security guarantees and continued military support for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. These proposals reflected Turkey's broader strategy of balancing regional stability with its role as a diplomatic intermediary. Turkey adopted a cautious approach regarding military escalation in the conflict. Ankara opposed NATO initiatives that would allow Ukraine to employ long-range missiles against targets on Russian territory, with President Erdoğan characterizing such measures as escalatory and emphasizing that the immediate priority should be a durable ceasefire. Turkey further maintained that, once a ceasefire is in place, it could act as a guarantor of peace and potentially contribute troops, envisaging deployment in Ukraine and along the Black Sea coast, possibly near Odesa. However, it emphasized that any such deployment would require coordination with NATO and a thorough risk assessment. Turkish media, including *Hürriyet*, reported that Ankara views peacekeeper discussions as premature without a firm ceasefire and a clearly defined mandate outlining objectives and format (observer mission, traditional peacekeeping, or enforcement), along with transparent burden-sharing commitments.¹ Turkey seeks a major role in Ukraine's post-war recovery. Ankara has expressed interest in reconstruction projects in construction, energy, and critical infrastructure, and Turkish business representatives suggesting that Turkish companies could implement tens of billions of dollars' worth of projects over the next decade through long-term public-private partnerships.

¹ A. Selvi, "Mehmetçik Ukrayna'ya gidecek mi", *Hürriyet*, 22 August 2025, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/abdulkadir-selvi/mehmetcik-ukraynaya-gidecek-mi-42922436> (access: 20.03.2026).

The war and Black Sea

It should be emphasized that Turkey pursues following core geostrategic imperatives. First, to preserve Ukraine as an independent state, even in the absence of NATO or European Union membership. The continued existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state constitutes a geostrategic imperative for Turkey, regardless of its membership in Western institutions. Second, Turkey aims to ensure that Ukraine retains control over its remaining Black Sea coastline, including the chain of ports stretching from Ochakiv, Yuzhny, and Odesa to Izmail, as well as sovereignty over the estuaries of the Dniester and Dnipro rivers. For Turkey, this objective carries not only geostrategic but also historical significance. The annexation of the Crimean Khanate at the end of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of Russia's second phase of expansion into indigenous Turkic lands, which included a network of ports and fortresses stretching from the Dnipro River to the Danube port of Izmail. Thus, for Turkey is less important how the war is going to end in Donbass as the future of the Central and Western Ukraine and particularly is to ensure the sovereign Ukrainian government will be the only possessor over the Black Sea shores around Odesa and Ochakiv.

Third, Turkey seeks to prevent escalation in the Black Sea and to preserve traditional maritime trade routes linking both Ukraine and Russia to global markets. Ankara regards itself as a principal guarantor of security in the Black Sea, a role grounded in the authority granted by the 1936 Montreux Convention.

Proceeding from these imperatives, Turkey called from the very outset of the war for the stabilization of the security situation in the Black Sea and for an end to the conflict. Ankara framed Black Sea security and the resumption of maritime trade as central priorities, positioning itself as the principal sponsor of the Black Sea Grain Initiative (22 July 2022 – 17 July 2023). The agreements were signed in Turkey and institutionalized through the Joint Coordination Centre in Istanbul, with Turkish authorities participating in vessel inspections. When Russia signalled in late October 2022 that it might withdraw from the arrangement, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Nations proceeded with an alternative mechanism under which sixteen vessels transited toward the Turkish Straits on 31 October. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar underscored Ankara's determination, stating that Turkish-flagged vessels would continue exporting grain regardless of Russia's participation. In practical terms, Russia's withdrawal would primarily have reduced its role in inspections at the Istanbul anchorage rather than halting the corridor altogether. Turkey, supported by its naval capabilities as a NATO member, signalled its readiness to manage the associated maritime risks. Moscow reversed its decision on 2 November 2022 and resumed participation. Ankara subsequently continued diplomatic efforts to sustain the initiative until

July 2023, even as the evolving military and geostrategic context gradually eroded incentives for both belligerents to maintain the arrangement, which ultimately came to an end.

In 2025, Ankara's Black Sea agenda was further shaped by the escalation of drone warfare and attacks affecting commercial shipping. Turkey responded firmly to incidents involving civilian vessels, warning of risks to maritime security, environmental safety, energy flows, and regional stability, and repeatedly emphasizing that the Black Sea should not become an arena for the settlement of scores. Turkish officials summoned Ukrainian and Russian representatives and called for restraint, while Erdoğan publicly condemned attacks on commercial shipping as unacceptable. Simultaneously, Turkey sought to formalize a regional security role: Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan announced a Turkey-Bulgaria-Romania working group tasked with addressing threats such as drifting mines and attacks on commercial vessels, with Turkish naval forces engaged to the Mine Counter Measures (MCM) Black Sea Task Group, formed with Romania and Bulgaria in early January 2026.² Ankara also proposed a limited interim agreement to protect navigation and energy assets, presenting the proposal as a confidence-building measure toward a broader settlement. In this framing, safe Black Sea navigation is treated as a regional and global economic imperative, and Turkey's claim to leadership is grounded in its status as a NATO member with the largest navy in the Black Sea.³

Coalition of drones and Turkey

The international "Drone Coalition", established in February 2024 within the framework of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group and the NATO-Ukraine Council, is a multinational initiative aimed at supplying Ukraine with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), electronic warfare and counter-EW systems, and related technologies in order to enhance its battlefield and offensive capabilities. Within this framework, member states coordinate funding and centralized procurement of drones, with the United Kingdom serving as the leading country of the initiative.⁴

² "Turkish Navy begins Black Sea mission amid Russia-Ukraine war", *Daily Sabah*, 12 January 2026, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkish-navy-begins-black-sea-mission-amid-russia-ukraine-war/news> (access: 20.03.2026).

³ "Dışişleri Bakanı Hakan Fidan, Ukrayna Konulu Gönüllüler Koalisyonu'nun Ardından Konuştu", *Hürriyet*, 6 January 2026, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/disisleri-bakani-hakan-fidan-ukrayna-konulu-gonulluler-koalisyonunun-ardindan-konustu-43078399> (access: 20.03.2026).

⁴ Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrija, „Starptautiskajai Dronu koalīcijai oficiāli pievienojas Beļģija un Turcija”, 2 July 2025, <https://www.mod.gov.lv/lv/zinas/starptautiskajai-dronu-koalicijai-oficiali-pievienojas-belgija-un-turcija> (access: 20.03.2026).

Turkey joined the initiative on 2 July 2025. The Ukrainian experts described this decision as strategically significant, given Turkey's status as a major global producer of UAVs. Moreover, they argue that Ankara now accounts for approximately 60% of global exports of strike drones and is approaching the capacity to produce hundreds of thousands and potentially over one million drones annually in the near future. The experts further note that Ukrainian-Turkish cooperation already exists in practice, including joint ventures and plans for local production. In this context, the combination of Ukrainian battlefield innovation with Turkish industrial scale and global market access creates the conditions for a deepening Ukrainian-Turkish drone partnership.⁵

Turkey entered this initiative not from a blank slate but on the basis of pre-war agreements already in place. For example, Turkey has established several Bayraktar plants in Ukraine that were recently targeted by Russian drone strikes.⁶ In addition, Ukraine supplies Turkey with the engines used in some of the most advanced Turkish drone prototypes known as Akici and Kizilelma.⁷

Drones are not the only area where Ukrainian and Turkish military specialists cooperate. Ankara is constructing two corvettes for the Ukrainian Navy, and personnel training for one of them is currently underway.⁸ Additionally, Turkey has supplied Ukraine with one of the most widely used armored vehicles on the frontlines – 200 BMC Kirpi MRAP – as well as additional weapons systems, including TRG-230 multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), ammunition, and mortars. The Kirpi vehicles played a direct role in the liberation of the Kherson and Kharkiv regions.⁹ Another important indicator of Ukraine's strategic reliance on Turkey is Kyiv's decision to deploy 321 Ukrainian service members to Turkey and the United Kingdom to operate and maintain Ukrainian naval vessels currently located in those countries.¹⁰

⁵ "Ukrainian-Turkish Drone Alliance: A partnership that could redefine the global arms market", Freedom, 19 December 2025, <https://uatv.ua/en/ukrainian-turkish-drone-alliance-a-partnership-that-could-redefine-the-global-arms-market/> (access: 20.03.2026).

⁶ "Ukrayna'da Bayraktar üretim üssü vuruldu! İki Rus füzesi isabet etti", *Dünya*, 28 August 2025, <https://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/dunya/bayraktar-uretim-ussu-vuruldu-iki-rus-fuzesi-isabet-etti-1141646> (access: 20.03.2026).

⁷ V. Venckunas, "Ukraine continues to deliver engines for Turkey's Kizilelma stealth drone", AeroTime, 23 November 2022, <https://www.aerotime.aero/articles/32056-turkey-ukraine-continue-to-work-on-kizilelma-stealth-drone> (access: 20.03.2026).

⁸ Д. Шмигаль, „Провели зустріч з послом Туреччини в Україні Мустафою Левентом Білґеном“, Telegram, 2 вересня 2025 р., 18:59, https://t.me/Denys_Smyhal/11349 (access: 20.03.2026).

⁹ Р. Яворський, „Допомогли звільнити Херсон і Харківщину: що відомо про турецькі бронемашини Kirpi і як їх використовує ЗСУ“, Espresso, 14 July 2024, <https://espresso.tv/rozasnuemo-dopomogli-zvilniti-kherson-i-kharkivshchinu-shcho-vidomo-pro-turetski-brone-mashini-kirpi-i-yak-ikh-vikoristovue-zsu> (access: 20.03.2026).

¹⁰ „Президент підписав закон про направлення підрозділів ЗСУ до Туреччини та Великої Британії“, ZAXID.NET, 22 October 2025, https://zaxid.net/prezident_pidpisav_

Thus, the initiative forms part of Turkey's broader grand strategy aimed at positioning the country as a major geopolitical actor. Participation in the Drone Coalition also provides Ankara with an opportunity to integrate into the emerging continental military-industrial framework, which may increasingly operate without the United States' traditional central role. Moreover, Ankara possesses a strategic advantage in research and development (R&D), technological innovation, and large-scale industrial production of advanced defense technologies.

Coalition of the willing and Turkey

Turkey, from the outset of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, has participated in all major international formats established by Ukraine's allies, including the meetings at Ramstein Air Base, which subsequently evolved into the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. Moreover, Turkey also participates in the Coalition of the Willing, a coalition of more than thirty states aimed at preparing for a potential peacekeeping mission in Ukraine after the war. Within this framework, the United Kingdom and France serve as the principal coordinating states, and the coalition was formally announced by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer in London in March 2025. However, Turkey did not sign the coalition's founding document, reflecting Ankara's intention to preserve strategic flexibility and maintain the existing geostrategic balance, while avoiding binding military commitments toward Ukrainian forces. Consequently, should Ankara decide to deploy troops, such a move would likely be undertaken on a unilateral basis, without formal legal obligations arising from multilateral agreements.

Additionally, it should be emphasized that these two initiatives, together with several other European security frameworks introduced in recent years, have a far broader scope. They are not aimed solely at defending Europe against the Russian threat; rather, they are grounded in deeper geostrategic premises that seek to prepare Europe's military, industrial, technological, and demographic capacities for continental independence in an era of large-scale geopolitical structures. In this context, the debate has moved beyond the notion of strategic autonomy toward concepts of European continental sovereignty and self-sufficiency or, in geoeconomic terms, toward a form of geoeconomic autarky. Increasingly, each structure seeks to construct its own degree of technological and economic insulation, or at least a higher level of resilience to external shocks originating beyond its systemic boundaries. For Europe, Ukraine is of critical importance, as its battlefield experience, technological innovation, and moral resilience constitute key assets in this

transformation. In other words, Ukraine acts as a central enabler of Europe's emerging strategic reconfiguration.

Turkey between NATO, USA and the European independence

Since joining NATO, Turkey has generally been viewed as a reliable ally of the United States and the broader Alliance. At the same time, Ankara's strategic culture and regional priorities have repeatedly driven it toward a more autonomous posture. In particular, U.S. policy in the Middle East, especially the deployment patterns and operational footprint of American forces near Turkey's border in Syria and Iraq, has been perceived in Ankara as insufficiently responsive to Turkish security concerns. Against this backdrop, Turkey has periodically leveraged its relationship with Russia to expand its room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the West, particularly Washington. While relations with the Biden administration were strained by disagreements over Middle Eastern policy, the subsequent U.S. administration has signalled an interest in rebuilding cooperation with Ankara. This dynamic may be understood as a form of "geopolitical outsourcing": a pragmatic strategy whereby a leading power delegates selected regional security responsibilities to a capable partner. Such arrangements allow the leading power to reduce its direct operational burden while maintaining influence over regional security outcomes and shaping the broader continental security architecture in line with its longer-term strategic objectives. At the same time, the deterioration of the European security environment has increased Turkey's perceived value within NATO, prompting European allies to pursue closer engagement with Ankara as the Russian threat has risen on the European security agenda, particularly since early 2025. One indicator of this reassessment is the appointment of Turkish Brigadier General Eray Üngüder as Director of Cooperative Security at NATO's International Military Staff, a position responsible for cooperation with partner countries and organizations, military policy development, and initiatives aimed at supporting stability beyond NATO's borders. In parallel, reports indicate that NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has urged EU leaders to deepen cooperation with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, setting aside political disputes to strengthen security cooperation. This reflects broader discussions in European capitals about expanding defense collaboration with Turkey and other non-EU partners to bolster Europe's overall defense capacity amid uncertainty regarding long-term U.S. commitments.¹¹ These developments coincided with preparations for the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Antalya in May 2025 and were further underscored by indications that a future NATO summit may be held in Turkey. Within this context,

¹¹ "NATO urges EU and Turkey to deepen ties", *Financial Times*, 10 March 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/42f838af-9aaa-4d43-b60f-3ceedd35821c> (access: 20.03.2026).

Ankara's approach within the Alliance appears oriented toward sustaining close military-strategic cooperation with key partners such as the United Kingdom, and increasingly Italy and Poland, while simultaneously preserving strategic autonomy.

Turkey and the eastern flank of NATO

Turkey's strategic thinking has long been shaped by the historical understanding that the security of the Black Sea – and Turkey's own security more broadly – is closely linked to developments in Eastern Europe.

For Ankara, the existence of strong and independent states such as Poland and Ukraine is therefore of major strategic importance. As long as Eastern Europe is composed of sovereign states outside Russia's sphere of domination, Turkey can maintain a greater degree of security along its northern flank. Thus, it is not coincidental that security cooperation between Poland and Turkey has intensified in recent years. A key step toward institutionalizing this relationship – although bilateral ties were formally designated as “strategic” in 2009 – came in 2016 with the launch of annual Trilogue meetings among representatives of Turkey, Poland, and Romania to discuss regional security developments.¹² Relations between Poland and Turkey have endured numerous political shifts among Europe's major powers and within the European Union. Yet for decades they lacked a clearly defined strategic framework.¹³

Warsaw largely refrained from directly criticizing of the Turkish government, maintaining a pragmatic but limited level of engagement. The first breakthrough came in May 2021, when Polish President Andrzej Duda visited Ankara and signed several military cooperation agreements, including a contract for the purchase of 24 Turkish tactical combat drones armed with anti-tank missiles.¹⁴ A more decisive step followed in December 2025, when Poland and Turkey concluded a comprehensive security cooperation agreement in Ankara. Earlier that year, the Polish prime minister, Donald Tusk stated before parliament that “I am going to speak in Ankara over the greater engagement of Turkey and everything is indicating that it ready for such role

¹² “Poland-Romania-Türkiye trilateral format as a bridge between NATO's eastern and southern flanks”, Institute of New Europe, 28 November 2025, <https://ine.org.pl/en/poland-romania-turkiye-trilateral-format-as-a-bridge-between-natos-eastern-and-southern-flanks> (access: 20.03.2026).

¹³ T. Waldwyn, “Türkiye's defence-industrial relationships with other European states”, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, September 2024, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/09/trk4/iiss_turkiyes-defence-industrial-relationships-with-other-european-states_11092024.pdf (access: 20.03.2026).

¹⁴ Ministry of National Defence, “Bayraktar TB2 tactical UAVs will serve in the Polish Armed Forces”, 24 May 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/bayraktar-tb2-tactical-uavs-will-serve-in-the-polish-armed-forces> (access: 20.03.2026).

as stabilization of the situation in the region”.¹⁵ According to Poland’s defense minister, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, the agreement covers intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, operational cooperation between the armed forces, and cooperation in the defence industry. Warsaw has also advocated greater Turkish participation in EU defense funding mechanisms, including the SAFE programme, of which Poland is currently the largest beneficiary.¹⁶

Following the agreement, reports indicated that ASELSAN signed a \$410 million contract for the direct sale of electronic-warfare systems to Poland, marking a significant expansion of bilateral defense-industrial cooperation.¹⁷ Warsaw’s broader objective is to anchor Turkey more firmly within Western security structures by increasing mutual dependencies between Turkish and European defense sectors, thereby reducing Ankara’s strategic autonomy in relation to vis-à-vis authoritarian partners. At the same time, Turkey has expanded its industrial footprint in Central Europe. A notable example is the joint venture between ASELSAN and Excalibur International in the Czech Republic aimed at localizing the production of the Korkut self-propelled anti-aircraft system. These developments occur amid an increase in Russian drone activity and airspace violations affecting Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states.¹⁸ As NATO reinforces its eastern flank, Turkey has emerged as significant contributor to regional security. Its involvement includes the provision of air-defense systems, upgrades to F-16 aircraft, and participation in the “Eastern Watch” initiative. Ankara has also accelerated the deployment of fighter jets and counter-drone capabilities, highlighting its expanding role within the European and NATO security architecture. In this context, Turkey plans to deploy fighter jets to Estonia and Romania as part of NATO’s enhanced air-policing mission along the Alliance’s eastern flank. According to Reuters, citing the Turkish Ministry of Defence, Ankara will conduct a four-month air patrol mission in Estonia from August to November 2026. Turkish aircraft will subsequently be deployed to Romania from December 2026 through March 2027.¹⁹

¹⁵ „Informacja Prezesa Rady Ministrów w sprawie sytuacji międzynarodowej i bezpieczeństwa Polski”, 30. posiedzenie Sejmu RP, 5 March 2025, live broadcast, YouTube, channel: Janusz Jaskółka, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czoFWY3stAM> (access: 20.03.2026).

¹⁶ “Poland and Turkey sign memorandum on security cooperation – defence ministry”, PAP Biznes, 15 December 2025, <https://biznes.pap.pl/wiadomosci/firmy/poland-and-turkey-sign-memorandum-security-cooperation-defence-ministry> (access: 20.03.2026).

¹⁷ “Türkiye’s Aselsan signs \$410M defense deal with Poland”, *The Caspian Post*, 19 December 2025, <https://caspianpost.com/politics/turkiye-s-aselsan-signs-410m-defense-deal-with-poland> (access: 20.03.2026).

¹⁸ „НАТО просить Туреччину раніше надати F-16 для патрулювання повітряного простору Балтики”, *Українська правда*, 12 January 2026, www.pravda.com.ua/news/2026/01/12/8015785 (access: 20.03.2026).

¹⁹ „Туреччина патрулюватиме повітряний простір Естонії та Румунії в рамках місії НАТО”, *Європейська правда*, 15 January 2026, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2026/01/15/7229133/> (access: 20.03.2026).

Poland's broader strategic objective is to anchor Turkey more firmly in the West. By expanding cooperation between Turkish and European defense industries, Warsaw seeks to increase interdependence between the two and thereby reduce Ankara's room for strategic maneuver vis-à-vis its authoritarian partners. Turkey has actively promoted its defense-industrial capabilities in Czechia. For example, on February 4, 2025 ASELSAN (Ankara) and Excalibur International (Prague) announced the establishment of a joint venture within the European Union.²⁰ These developments occur against the backdrop of the ongoing militarization of NATO's eastern flank. The emerging security configuration increasingly resembles an Iron Curtain – like defensive belt stretching from Norway to Turkey, and, in an idealized scenario, even toward the Chinese border. In strategic terms, some analysts have drawn parallels with Cold War era Western strategy, when the United States and the United Kingdom pursued a two-tier Eurasian containment framework against the Soviet Union. This strategy combined deterrence along the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe with the so-called Northern Tier in Southwest Asia, which extended from Turkey to Pakistan. In both configurations, Turkey occupied a pivotal geopolitical position, effectively constraining Soviet southward expansion. In the twenty-first century, Turkey's strategic importance has arguably increased, as it now operates with a degree of strategic autonomy unprecedented in earlier periods. As European officials have suggested, the strengthening of the NATO's eastern flank aims to create a continuous and highly fortified defensive line along Russia's western borders – from Norway in the north to Turkey in the south – thereby raising the costs of any potential Russian military incursion and reinforcing deterrence.

The USA–Turkish relations: From subordination to geopolitical outsourcing

Relations between the United States and Turkey have been periodically strained throughout Turkey's membership in NATO. These tensions are partly rooted in Ankara's self-perception as an autonomous power that seeks recognition as a strategic partner rather than a subordinate ally within Western security structures. With the change of administration in Washington, Turkish expectations for a potential strategic recalibration have increased. The personal rapport and partially convergent of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Donald Trump have further reinforced this perception, a view also reflected in Turkish policy debates. Analysts associated with the Turkish think tank SETA have argued that as the United States retreats from the role of "global security

²⁰ Centre for Advanced Thought in Security (CATS), *CATS Network Paper* No. 16 [Policy paper], 11 June 2025, CATS Network, https://www.catsnetwork.eu/assets/cats/CATS_Network_Paper_Briefs/CATS_Network_Paper_No._16_11.06.2025.pdf (access: 20.03.2026).

guarantor,” the strategic importance of regional powers such as Turkey increases. Nevertheless, Turkish public opinion remains markedly skeptical. According to a survey conducted in January 2025 by MetroPOLL Research, 52.5% of respondents saw the U.S. as the country’s greatest external threat, followed by Israel at 19.2%.

Despite these perceptions, practical developments suggested a gradual normalization of relations. In March, 2025 Ankara was invited to participate in the Red Flag military exercises, marking a symbolic reversal after Turkey’s earlier exclusion following its acquisition of the Russian S-400 air-defense system. Politically, Washington took steps to facilitate Turkish-Russian energy cooperation, while Ankara publicly welcomed Trump’s tariff policies as a potential opportunity for Turkey’s economy and logistics sector. At the same time, however, U.S. critics continued to portray Turkey as strategically drifting toward Russia, China, and Iran. Unfortunately, such opinions aren’t simply imagination, for example Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and a political ally of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, proposed that “Turkey-Russia-China [TRC] alliance” to counter what he described as the “United States-Israel evil coalition”.²¹

A more tangible shift followed Washington’s approval of new arms sales to Turkey, including 60 AIM-9X Sidewinder Block II missiles and 53 AIM-120C-8 air-to-air missiles, with a total value exceeding \$300 million. Following talks with the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Ankara, Thomas Barrack, President Erdoğan announced that CAATSA sanctions were being eased. These developments strengthened expectations that bilateral relations were entering a more pragmatic, interest-based phase of rapprochement.

Donald Trump also employed an unconventional mechanism in defining Barrack’s mandate. In addition to serving as the U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Barrack was appointed Special Envoy for Syria. With a background in business and a long-standing personal relationship with the U.S. president, Barrack’s position carries considerable political weight. His frequent travel across Iraq, Syria, Israel, Azerbaijan, Jordan, and Lebanon reflects a broad diplomatic mandate aimed at shaping an emerging Middle Eastern security architecture aligned with White House priorities. This agenda encompasses several interrelated issues, including the Kurdish question, the influence of Hezbollah, Turkish-Israeli relations, and the Islamic radicalism. Although he has facilitated negotiations among Damascus, Ankara, and Syrian Kurdish actors, the most significant unresolved challenge remains the intensifying

²¹ “Far-right Erdoğan ally calls for Turkey-Russia-China alliance against US-Israel ‘coalition of evil’”, Turkish Minute, 19 September 2025, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2025/09/19/far-right-erdogan-ally-calls-for-turkey-russia-china-alliance-against-us-israel-coalition-of-evil/> (access: 20.03.2026).

confrontation between Turkey and Israel, highlighted by continued mutual accusations of imperial ambitions in the Levant.

The peak of rapprochement reportedly occurred in September, when Erdoğan and Trump met in Washington. Turkey and the United States signed an agreement on strategic cooperation in peaceful nuclear energy, while Turkish Airlines announced a major contract to purchase 225 Boeing aircraft. Reports also emerged about potential Turkish purchases the acquisition of 40 F-35 fighter jets and 40 F-16 Viper multirole combat aircraft, and additional munitions, although the details remain vague. Available indications suggest Turkey may prioritize its domestically produced fifth-generation fighter, Kaan, while seeking foreign engines and keeping open the possibility of returning to the F-35 program. Such a move faces resistance from Cyprus, Greece, and Israel, which have strengthened their coordination in the Eastern Mediterranean in response to what they perceive as expanding Turkish influence.

Turkey is negotiating with the United States on a potential partnership to develop a large rare-earth deposit in western Anatolia (Beylikova, near Eskişehir), reportedly containing cerium, praseodymium, and neodymium, although the raw material quality remains uncertain. A potential agreement could complicate Turkey's earlier negotiations with China. Talks that began after an October 2024 memorandum reportedly stalled because Beijing insisted on domestic processing and refused technology transfer. Negotiations with Russia also ended without results, as Ankara has continued to insist on sovereign control over both extraction and processing.

Finally, as I stated at the very beginning that the scope of the article intentionally avoids the other theaters of Turkish foreign policy activities, but allow to me in one paragraph outline some important aspects regarding the US-Israeli war against Iran.

First, the United States entered into the war with one geostrategic dilemma that is the how to ally Turkish and Israeli geopolitical ambitions for the regional domination. Since 2023 both states see the future of the region as confrontation if not over the possibility of the direct military hostilities. Already the zone of the confrontation is much more beyond the Palestinian issue it now included Syria, Lebanon, Somalia, Eastern Mediterranean and even Iran. For example, the former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said at a conference of American-Jewish organizations in Jerusalem: "Turkey is the new Iran. Erdoğan is sophisticated, dangerous, and seeks to encircle Israel. We cannot turn a blind eye to this again".

Turkey understands that collapse of the Iranian state will create regional chaos that is going to be favouring to Israel. This, creates bigger problem for

the USA in the light of the Turkish and Azeris fatigueness to join to the war gives to Iran greater chances for the longer resistance against the aggression.

Second, as soon as we can predict that the events in the Middle East are evolving much beyond the 1991 or 2003 years in the historical scale. We can predict that for the European Union and the NATO the role of Turkey in upcoming years is going only to increase. The NATO already increases its military presence to properly face the rocket and drone threats from Iran.

Third, the war complicates the United States' broader grand-strategic vision toward the Muslim world, particularly insofar as the creation of the Board of Peace has a specific aim: the reconciliation of Muslims and Jews around a shared future for the Greater Middle East. For example, the inauguration event in Washington included representatives of leading Muslim countries as well as Israel. Beyond this immediate objective lies a broader issue: the potential coordination of processes that could eventually generate a grand-level geopolitical and civilizational structure within the Muslim world, thereby complicating the wider geopolitical architecture of Eurasia. Thus prevent the rise of the true Eurasian hegemon that can compete with the USA as we were witnessing through the history. So, the war against Iran threatens this subtle architecture because already now Indonesia decided to postpone its participation in the the Board of Peace.

Despite any calculations, one issue appears certain: in 2026 we are likely to see the construction of a post-Iranian regional order. Even if Iran continues to resist, sustained coalition bombardment could devastate the country's civilian and industrial infrastructure. However, three major determinants will shape the outcome: (1) who will fill the resulting geopolitical vacuum – Israel or Turkey; (2) whether Russia and China will provide greater assistance to Iran in order to prolong and deepen the conflict between the United States and Iran; and (3) the scale of this war's spillover effects across other regions of Eurasia. Finally, (4) is the question about the future of the regional internationally recognized borders of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and many other countries because the dissolution of Iran opens greater scale of unfolding perspectives. If such scenario on agenda, Turkey is going to be first country that rise up against it.

* * *

This article has examined several key dimensions of Turkey's role in the rapidly evolving security environment on the European continent. In particular, Turkey's readiness to assume a more prominent role within the emerging European security architecture and to contribute to the development of a more autonomous European military-industrial base was analyzed. Nonetheless, it was observed that Ankara continues to avoid taking sides in the geopolitical

confrontation in Eastern Europe between Europe and Russia, as well as in the widening strategic rift between Europe and the United States.

From a theoretical perspective, Turkish strategic conduct in the Greater Middle East and Europe might be interpreted through the lens of “swing state” or “middle power” theories. However, these conceptual frameworks appear insufficient to fully capture the scope and ambition of Turkey’s regional and global conduct. It can be observed Turkey is gradually constructing a doctrinal, conceptual, military-technological, and economic center of gravity which – provided it is not disrupted by internal or external factors – may compel surrounding great powers to recognize Turkey as a peer actor at both the regional and global levels. Considerable attention in this article has also been devoted to Ukraine, as the Russo-Ukrainian War constitutes the principal catalyst for many of the political, military, and economic dynamics analyzed throughout the study.

The continuation of the war in Eastern Europe and the deepening of divisions within the Euro-Atlantic community are likely to further increase Turkey’s role in European security. In particular, the gradual shift within Europe from the concept of “strategic autonomy” toward a broader vision of European independence – where Europe, conceived as a community of democratic powers, emerges as a more autonomous megastructure within an evolving global security architecture, creates additional space for Turkey’s engagement.

This dynamic was articulated by Radosław Sikorski, Polish Foreign Minister, who stated: “Europe must be at the negotiating table because the stakes are incredibly high. This isn’t just about Ukraine’s future. This isn’t just about the security of the eastern flank. This is about Europe’s place in the future distribution of global power. In other words, who will be the third pillar of the global balance of power – China, the United States, Russia, or the European Union?”.²² However, without Turkey or, more critically, in a scenario in which Turkey evolves into a competitor rather than a partner, Europe risks strategic isolation in the Atlantic space, across Eurasia, and, most dangerously, in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean, in particular, holds existential importance for Europe’s future, especially from a geoeconomic perspective.

²² „Monachium. Sikorski: to Europa płaci teraz za wojnę i zasługuje na miejsce przy stole rozmów”, PAP, 14 February 2026, https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/monachium-sikorski-europa-placi-teraz-za-wojne-i-zasluguje-na-miejsce-przy-stole-rozmow?utm_source=chatgpt.com (access: 22.03.2026).

The role of Turkey in European security: In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

This chapter argues that developments in 2025 created an unprecedented degree of strategic maneuvering space for Ankara. A recalibration of U.S. policy, uncertainty regarding U.S.–EU cohesion, and heightened security risks in the Black Sea have collectively enhanced Turkey’s strategic utility for both the United States and its European allies. The chapter examines Turkey’s mediation efforts in the Russo–Ukrainian war, its maritime posture in the Black Sea under the Montreux Convention, and its expanding defense-industrial cooperation, particularly in unmanned aerial systems with Ukrainian and European partners. It further argues that Ankara recognizes the emergence of a continental-scale European military-industrial complex as a precondition for a more autonomous Europe and is seeking to position itself as an integral component of this process. Special attention is devoted to NATO’s eastern flank, with particular emphasis on military cooperation between Turkey and Poland. The chapter concludes that Europe’s shift from “strategic autonomy” toward a more comprehensive model of continental self-reliance renders Turkey increasingly indispensable, while also positioning it as a potential competitor, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: Turkey, European security, Russo–Ukrainian war, Black Sea, NATO, European security architecture, NATO eastern flank, defense industry, drone warfare, Eurasian geopolitics

Słowa kluczowe: Turcja, bezpieczeństwo europejskie, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, Morze Czarne, NATO, architektura bezpieczeństwa europejskiego, wschodnia flanka NATO, przemysł obronny, wojna dronowa, geopolityka Eurazji