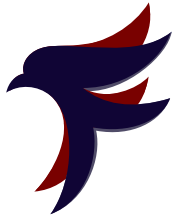


TURKEY'S EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY IN THE BLACK SEA

ANTONIA COLIBASANU





FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EURASIA PROGRAM

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About the Author

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Eurasia Program

The Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute was founded in 2015 with the aim of examining the political, security, economic, and social trends shaping Europe and Eurasia. Our research agenda covers the increasingly tense competition roiling the region from several angles. It has a multi-year focus on the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and Central Asia, emphasizing how geography, economics, ideology, and history continue to shape politics and security in these regions. The program also publishes analyses of Russian foreign policy, including Russia's role in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Russia Political Economy Project, along with the Bear Market Brief, analyzes the linkages between Russia's economy, society, and its political system. The Eurasia Program's thematic initiatives also include the Democracy at Risk rubric, which examines the trends of democratization and authoritarian pushback in the region.

Executive Summary

Turkey's strategic position between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia places it at a pivotal crossroads in Eurasian geopolitics, particularly as regional conflicts reshape power dynamics and international alliances.

Turkey's strategic significance has long been underscored by its control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which grant exclusive access to the Black Sea from the Mediterranean. This geographical position, combined with deep historical and cultural ties to Ukraine's Crimea, positions Turkey as a key player in Black Sea security.

Recent years witnessed significant changes in the Eurasian security framework. Russia's belligerent posture in Ukraine and questions over the United States' changes in its enduring commitment to European security have renewed demands for a more autonomous and more powerful European defense mechanism.

Most recently, in practical terms, the importance of Black Sea maritime security for Turkey's strategy is reflected in its recent collaboration with NATO allies Romania and Bulgaria to establish a Mine Countermeasures (MCM) Task Force in the Black Sea. This task force, activated in 2024, underscores Turkey's commitment to ensuring safe navigation in the Black Sea amid rising security risks due to the Ukraine conflict.

However, Turkey's position as a major security player in the Black Sea is further complicated by its relationship with Russia. Although Turkey has refrained from fully following the West in imposing sanctions against Russia and it shares cooperation with Russia in several sectors, including that of energy, their relations have been strained by competition for influence in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus.

The report outlines several potential scenarios for Turkey's strategic alignment in the Black Sea, depending on how regional conflicts evolve:

- 1. Pro-Western Alignment:** In this scenario, Turkey aligns closely with NATO and the EU, decisively opposing Russian influence in the Black Sea and strengthening its military and economic ties with Western allies.
- 2. Pro-Russia Tilt:** Should Russia achieve dominance in the region, Turkey may deepen its ties with Moscow, potentially at the expense of NATO presence in the Black Sea.
- 3. Regional Leadership & Strategic Diversification:** Turkey asserts itself as a regional leader by reducing its reliance on both NATO and Russia, fostering stronger economic and security relations with Black Sea and Central Asian countries.
- 4. Balanced Neutrality:** Turkey strives to maintain a neutral stance, balancing relations between NATO and regional powers, avoiding deep involvement in the ongoing conflicts, and focusing on mediating disputes.

Currently, Turkey's cautious approach suggests it may continue with "Balanced Neutrality," allowing it to serve as a mediator without alienating either NATO or Russia. This strategy, however, carries risks, as Turkey's ambivalence may create perceptions of unreliability among allies and hinder its influence in regional affairs.

Turkey's strategic approach to the Black Sea reflects a balancing act between military ambitions, economic constraints, and complex regional dynamics. As Turkey seeks to position itself as an autonomous regional power, it must navigate its role in a changing Eurasian security landscape shaped by the ongoing war in Ukraine and tensions in the Middle East. Turkey's pursuit of diversified alliances, particularly its engagement with China and partnerships in the Middle Corridor, underscores its commitment to maximizing its strategic location between Europe and Asia.

Ultimately, Turkey's success in the Black Sea and broader Eurasian region will depend on its ability to reconcile domestic economic priorities with regional security objectives. While its autonomous foreign policy enhances its diplomatic leverage, Turkey must navigate the inherent risks and long-term challenges that shape the region. By strengthening its energy, trade, and security initiatives, Turkey is positioning itself as a key intermediary in Eurasia, a strategy that, if carefully managed, could secure its role as a powerful regional player in the shifting geopolitical order.

Introduction

Several major developments are now affecting the Eurasian security paradigm. First, Russia’s full-fledged invasion of Ukraine defied the 1990s consensus that fighting in Europe had ended and peace was the new normal. On the contrary, war has returned to the continent. Second, there are obvious signs from across the Atlantic that the American commitment to European security cannot be taken for granted, particularly given that other global concerns may put Washington’s energy and resource bandwidth to the test. This comes at a time when tensions in the Middle East are rising, with a new regional war changing power dynamics in the area.

The cumulative effect of these issues has renewed debate about strengthening the European military pillar of transatlantic security and the NATO alliance so that it can stand firmer beside the United States, which, together with Canada, constitutes the North American pillar. Turkey, as a NATO ally and a formal EU candidate (although a distant one) with interests in the continent’s security architecture, is critical to this argument. Turkey plays a critical role in the geopolitics of the Black Sea area, connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Ankara has increased its geographical, economic, and military influence in the Black Sea, particularly in light of the continuing war in Ukraine and the intensifying conflict in the Middle East. These crises, which are unfolding on Turkey’s northern and southern flanks, present Turkey as a major connector between volatile regions. As the two conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East are increasingly interconnected, Turkey’s strategic ambitions to become a regional force are dependent on its ability to handle these the challenges at its borders while maintaining its core stable.

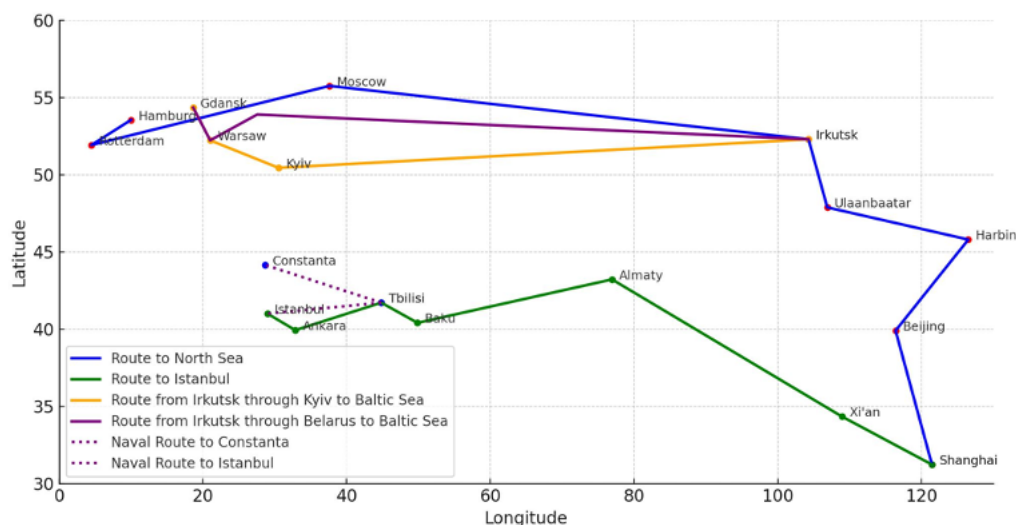
This report examines Turkey’s evolving geopolitical strategy in the Black Sea, focusing on its historical ties, regional security dynamics, and economic interests, particularly those related to energy security and international routes facilitating growth in trade and investment. It first looks at the way Turkey’s role has evolved in the Black Sea, noting the importance of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits and the Crimean Peninsula as key geostrategic elements. It also discusses the way the Cold War and the post-Cold War specific environments have shaped Turkey’s relations with major powers like Russia, the United States, and the European Union. The report discusses at length how, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey’s role has become more complex in the Black Sea.

Ankara has increased its geographical, economic, and military influence in the Black Sea, particularly in light of the continuing war in Ukraine and the intensifying conflict in the Middle East.

Turkey has pursued an independent foreign policy—although it remained a full NATO member—reducing its reliance on the West and seeking to position itself as a connector and a regional economic transit hub between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

This shift has been driven primarily by both security concerns and economic interests, particularly in the energy sector. The report investigates Turkey’s “strategic depth” and “blue homeland” concepts as foundational to the country’s geostrategic theoretical pillars, using them to explain how Ankara

RAILWAY AND NAVAL ROUTES: FROM CHINA TO THE EUROPEAN SEAS NORTHERN CORRIDOR VS. MIDDLE CORRIDOR



Source: Route simulation generated using Google Maps

seeks to cautiously manage its connector role between the two regional conflicts.

As a key part of Turkey's strategy, the report investigates how the Turkish economy serves the country's geoeconomic posture, focusing on two areas: energy security and Turkish interest in leveraging its posture on the Middle Corridor. Energy security is a major focus of Turkey's regional strategy, especially with the discovery of gas reserves in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey aims to become an energy hub, facilitating the transit of gas from Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and Russia to European markets through key pipelines like the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP). Turkey has also pursued agreements to diversify its energy sources, signing major deals for liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports and expanding its gas storage and infrastructure capabilities to support domestic needs.

Turkey's participation in regional maritime security efforts shown by the formation of a Mine Countermeasures (MCM) Task

Force alongside Romania and Bulgaria demonstrates its dedication to preserving stability in the Black Sea. In addition to its obligations to other NATO members in the region, this action underscores Turkey's long-term objective of preserving a free and open Black Sea for international commerce, ensuring the effective use of the increasingly significant Middle Corridor for both Europe and China in light of the challenges currently presented by the Northern Corridor, which traverses Russia and Ukraine.

Turkey's geopolitical game also includes its relations with Russia, where cooperation in energy matters is tempered by competition for influence in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. Turkey's participation in negotiations like the 2022 to 2023 Grain Deal between Russia and Ukraine reflects its strategic interest in maintaining open communication channels with Moscow, while its NATO membership underscores its broader security alignment with the West.

Turkey has considerable internal challenges,

including economic instability, post-pandemic recovery, and rebuilding after the 2023 earthquake. These challenges constrain its ability to fully capitalize on its geopolitical prospects. Turkey's capacity to sustain investor trust and promote foreign direct investment (FDI) will be essential to advancing its objectives. In summary, Turkey is strategically positioned to assume a pivotal role in the development of the Black Sea area, capitalizing on its geographic location, energy resources, and diplomatic relationships. However, the success of its geopolitical strategy will depend on its capacity to reconcile domestic economic recovery with regional security issues and international partnerships.

Crimea and the Straits: The Turkish Geopolitical Pillars in the Black Sea

The current conflict is the most recent in a long line of battles in the Black Sea, a crossroads whose shores have compelled various countries to want to conquer the sea and its approaches. Plutarch and Thucydides documented Greek ships battling there over 2,400 years ago,¹ while Turkish and Russian fleets clashed periodically for decades in the 18th and 19th Centuries. The Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, or “the Straits,” have always played a decisive role, considering that they are the sole Mediterranean Sea access to the Black Sea. But their status has been tied to that of Crimea—a peninsula that strategically dominates the northeastern Black Sea.

The peninsula has a long and complex history with the Ottoman Empire, hosting many Turkish cultural and historical sites.² At the same time, according to the latest census, more than 5 million Turkish citizens have Crimean Tatar roots.³ Crimea has also played an important role in the formation and evolution of the Russian empire. Founded in 1443 and based in Bakhchysaray, the Crimean Khanate made occasional inroads into emergent Muscovy but, considering the dissolution of its parent state—the Golden Horde in the 15th century—ceased to be a threat to Russia. Instead, it became an Ottoman vassal in 1475. Then, Crimea was under Turkish rule until the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed in 1774 at the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768 to 1774, which terminated the Ottoman sovereignty over the Black Sea. At the time, Catherine the Great granted Crimea a Russian protectorate status.

At the same time, Russia extended its frontiers in the Black Sea, taking the port of Azov, the fortresses of Kerch and Yenikale on the eastern end of the Crimean Peninsula, a part of the province of Kuban, and the estuary formed by the Dnieper and Bug rivers, including the Kinburn fortress from the Ottomans.⁴ The treaty's economic sections granted Russia the ability to establish consulates across the Ottoman Empire, to freely travel Ottoman seas via the Straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, and to enjoy trade advantages throughout Ottoman territory. The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca effectively ended the de facto established Turkish lake for three centuries.

However, the “ancient rule” of closing the Straits to all vessels persisted until the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, a year after the Soviet Union was founded. Turkey kept managing the Straits, even if it had effectively lost control over the northern coast of the Black Sea. It was only after 1918, when the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between Soviet Russia and the Central powers resulted in an offensive that forced the Russian Red



Capitulation of Erzurum (1829) in Russo-Turkish War, by January Suchodolski. (Wikimedia Commons)

Army to retreat from Ukraine, that Turkey hoped to gain back its influence over Crimea and the northern shore of the Black Sea. At the time, Crimea had fallen out of Russian control because of widespread instability caused by the Bolshevik revolution in the Russian empire, of which Ukraine was a province—which was, in its turn, seeking independence. As a result, during the violent battles in Ukraine between 1918 and 1920, Turkey supported the Ukrainian push for independence, primarily in the hope that rivalry among the various Slavic factions would result in weak or no Russian or Ukrainian control over Crimea, so that it would eventually fall back under Turkish influence.

However, the odds were stacked against Turkey's ambitions. The peninsula subsequently became an independent administrative unit of Russia in 1921, and it remained under Moscow's jurisdiction until 1941, when the Germans occupied Crimea due to its strategic location. Following the end of World War II, in 1954 Moscow handed over the peninsula to the Ukrainian Soviet

Republic, which was part of the Soviet Union.⁵ Because the transfer followed all legal standards at the time, the Russian assertion that Crimea has always belonged to Russia is rejected not just by Ukraine and the West, but also by Turkey. This explains why the Annexation of Crimea in 2014 is a sensitive topic for bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia.⁶ Ankara, while maintaining an influence over the peninsula, given the Tatars still living there, often declares that Crimea should be returned to Ukraine,⁷ a claim that is clearly rejected in Moscow.⁸

With Crimea becoming part of Russia in 1921 and then part of the USSR in 1922, when the Union was formed, Moscow had a stake in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. The agreement granted all vessels, including battleships, freedom of passage during peacetime. It also established an International Straits Commission to oversee demilitarization and other treaty stipulations. Consequently, Turkey became increasingly worried that the Lausanne Treaty's demilitarization provision violated its right to self-defense. Moreover, by 1931, the German remilitarization and

Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, now Ethiopia, weakened the League of Nations' collective security mechanism.

Considering all this, at a conference in Montreux (Switzerland), Turkey reopened the Straits issue. At the conference, Soviet Russia attempted to restrict the Black Sea to everyone except coastal nations. Romania and Bulgaria were Soviet allies, whereas Ukraine and Georgia were Soviet states. The United Kingdom and others planned to restrict Soviet vessels' ability to enter and depart the Mediterranean and flee to the Black Sea. The United Kingdom wanted to monitor Turkey's Straits closure. Russia and Turkey rejected these beliefs, while the United States held an isolationist stance and did not take part at the conference. The 1936 Montreux Convention⁹ authorized Turkey to remilitarize and govern the Straits, which were under its control. However, the ship transit deal also assured Soviet domination in the Black Sea, considering that non-riparian warships are subject to limitations in terms of number of ships, size of armament, and aggregate tonnage.

Although the overall outcome was positive for the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin was dissatisfied with the result and during the 1945 Potsdam Conference asked for the Montreux Convention to be modified. While no decision was taken on the matter at the time, further Soviet pressure on Turkey to cede land and agree to joint control of the Straits became the main reason Turkey joined NATO in 1952.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian influence in the Black Sea started to diminish. Russia and Ukraine split the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), and in an agreement with Ukraine's Kremlin-backed President Viktor Yanukovich, Moscow extended its lease on the Crimean military station until at least 2042.¹⁰ Having Crimea ensured Russia would have a way out to the Mediterranean, into the world's oceans. But the pro-Western

revolution that deposed Mr. Yanukovich infuriated Russia,¹¹ which later invaded and rapidly seized the peninsula in 2014. The period between 2014-2022 serves as a good pointer to how Russia prepared for the 2022 invasion and is telling with regard to Russia's goals in the Black Sea.

During the last year, Kyiv has scored major successes against Russia in the maritime domain, especially since Fall 2023.

Russia effectively created a cost-effective and strong naval force in the Black Sea, gaining control of the area while presenting an immediate threat to Ukraine and NATO member nations. This paved the way for the BSF and occupying troops in Crimea to join the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the spring of 2021, Russia began a realistic evaluation of its troops in Crimea, preparing them for a large-scale campaign against Ukraine. It carried out full drills involving all components of the occupation group, including aircraft, ground troops, artillery, and the BSF's surface and underwater units. By that time, Russia had already militarized the peninsula, having covered all three domains of the armed forces: naval, air, and land. At the same time, during these years and particularly after February 2022, Russia has employed hybrid tactics like jamming GPS communications for commercial ships in territorial waters, posing a threat to international freedom of navigation.¹²

During the last year, Kyiv has scored major successes against Russia in the maritime domain, especially since Fall 2023. This has contributed to the narrative that the tide of the war is turning, with some even positing

that Kyiv is “winning the battle of the Black Sea.”¹³ However, while Russia’s presence in Crimea has decreased and Ukraine’s armed forces continue to target its military facilities, Russia still retains control over the peninsula¹⁴ and has intensified attacks on Odessa,¹⁵ Ukraine’s most important Black Sea port, following Kyiv’s resumption of grain exports via the newly established corridor through the Danube and along the coastlines of Romania and Bulgaria.¹⁶ At the same time, Russia’s military blockades of Ukraine Black Sea ports have prompted requests for enhanced maritime security and even led to discussions about the potential change of the fundamental agreement governing ship transit through the Straits – the Montreux Convention. This is a red line for Ankara, which not only wants to maintain but also grow its influence in the Black Sea, making use of the Russian war in Ukraine.

Turkey between Two Major Regional Wars—A Neutral or an Active Partner for the West?

Understanding Turkey’s perception of the post-Cold War period is critical for understanding its strategy, what obstacles it sees, and what opportunities there are for Turkey in the Black Sea and beyond. Given the geographical position of Turkey, which has land borders with eight countries (Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria), acting as a land bridge between Europe and Asia, it is the center of a geopolitical crossroads.

Its posture in the Black Sea is dependent on what is going on in the Eastern Mediterranean and vice versa. While Turkey would have preferred to remain neutral after the end of the World War II, the aggressive Soviet posture had it align with the West, entering NATO and building its military power relying on American defense equipment. However, Turkey saw the limits of its reliance on NATO and, more specifically on the United States during the 1960s, when Washington didn’t allow it to intervene in the Cyprus crisis. Instead, in a letter signed by the then US president Lyndon B. Johnson, Washington reminded Ankara that Turkey cannot use US-supplied military weapons without American authorization and that it should not expect US support over non-NATO contingencies.¹⁷ Therefore, with the end of the Cold War bipolar order, Turkey pursued its interest in diminishing its reliance on the West, advancing a strategy meant to establish itself as a hub between Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa.

In the 1990s, various factors influenced Turkish foreign and defense policy in the Black Sea. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of a new European security architecture, EU membership emerged as the first major subject in Turkish foreign policy after the Cold War. Turkey had applied to join the European economic community in 1987 and signed the customs union with the European Union in 1995, becoming a candidate country in 1999. This happened while the other Eastern European countries, former satellite states of the USSR, were also applying to join the European Union. At the same time, Ankara attempted to improve relations with Russia, therefore boosting bilateral commercial connections. Turkey has also begun to pursue a multidimensional political and economic strategy in countries surrounding Russia, reflecting Ankara’s desire to restrict Moscow’s influence in its neighborhood, particularly in the Black Sea region. Meanwhile, on its southern border, unlike its Western Allies,



President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev met with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul on a February, 2023 visit. (president.az)

Turkey was facing new security challenges in the Middle East. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), capitalizing on Iraq's power vacuum after the 1991 Gulf War, has emerged as an internal political and security challenge for Ankara. The more complex post-Cold War environment, along with socioeconomic challenges, has pushed internal politics and economic policies, resulting in changes in Turkey's foreign policy, which has influenced its military strategy.

For instance, during the second half of the 1990s, Israel gained prominence in Turkey's international relations and weapons agreements. This was possible due to several different factors working concurrently. Israel provided high-tech defense items that met NATO criteria, making it a legitimate alternative source for Turkish defense cooperation. Secondly, unlike many European governments and the United States, Israel was willing to sell military equipment to Turkey without setting any political conditions, making it an appealing option, considering one of the most important goals of the Turkish

defense policy was, at the time, to modernize its military. At the same time, Israeli and Turkish understandings of the Eastern Mediterranean regional threats overlapped, in an area where NATO wasn't willing to engage at the time. However, the strong bilateral ties did not translate into Turkey taking an anti-Palestinian stance—historically, Turkey supported the Palestinian cause.

This is why, since the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan invited the Hamas group's then-leader Khaled Mashal to Ankara, ties between the two nations have deteriorated. Turkey's condemnation of the first 2008 Israel-Gaza conflict made matters worse. Given the current Gaza conflict, they are likely to further degrade. Bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey are cutting into Ankara's strategy in the Black Sea given both the US ties to Israel and Israel's interests in the region: its relations with Russia and its interests in the South Caucasus.

While Turkey has halted all trade with Israel in May 2024, citing the "humanitarian tragedy"¹⁸

in the Gaza strip, Ankara has continued to allow energy flows to Israel,¹⁹ even if infrastructure projects that would grow Turkey into a regional energy hub have stagnated before the new crisis started in the Middle East.²⁰ On the one hand, this reflects Ankara's need to keep all revenue streams open at a time when the Turkish economy is struggling to cope with post-pandemic effects and sustain reconstruction efforts following the 2023 earthquake. On the other hand, it refers to Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan—Israel's energy provider—which not only relies on the Turkish energy network to sell its product but has also developed its own autonomous foreign policy, much like Ankara's.

Over the last two decades, Azerbaijan has concluded significant energy and security agreements with Israel. To avoid alienating Turkey and the Islamic world, in October 2023, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry published a statement “condemning civilian casualties in Gaza.” However, Azerbaijan has strengthened its relationship with Israel since. Official data shows that Azerbaijan shipped 1,021,917 tons of crude oil to Israel from January to April 2024, up 28 percent from 2023.²¹ However, the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel is founded not just on economic and energy deals, but also on common geopolitical concerns, particularly over Iranian influence in their neighborhood, a common fear for Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Israel.

At the same time, Turkey and Azerbaijan share a deep, strategic connection—one that is unlikely to be spoiled by protests inside Turkey against the decision to keep the Azeri energy flowing into Israel. After all, since the early 1990s, the slogan “one nation, two countries”²² has become the defining motto for the two countries' coordination on regional affairs, especially in regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkish help was critical to the success of Azerbaijan's counteroffensive against Armenia's self-proclaimed breakaway state of Artsakh

in September 2023 and in all previous counteroffensive stages that Baku took since 2020. As a result of Azerbaijan's win, Russia, Armenia's longtime defender, has lost influence in the region, prompting Armenia to consider ways to reduce its reliance on Russia and instead open up to the West. This is adding nuances for Ankara's foreign policy in the region, especially since it sought to benefit from Russia's weakening in the South Caucasus.

Russia's emphasis on the need to win the conflict in Ukraine, Moscow has instead strengthened ties with Azerbaijan.

However, with Russia's emphasis on the need to win the conflict in Ukraine, Moscow has instead strengthened ties with Azerbaijan. This is especially relevant regarding the mechanisms for selling gas to Europe. There are concerns that some of the Azeri gas supplied to Europe may actually be repackaged Russian gas, considering the bilateral agreement established between Russia and Azerbaijan in November 2022 stating that Russia will export gas to Azerbaijan, a country that is also an energy exporter.²³ For Baku, this is, however, profitable business. Recent reports²⁴ regarding Azerbaijan's involvement in sustaining Ukrainian gas transit from Russia to European nations reliant on Russian gas have substantiated Baku's aim to act as a “middleman” or facilitator in energy negotiations, resembling Turkey's role in facilitating negotiations between Russia and the West in allowing Ukrainian grain to get to global markets, or the so-called Grain Deal. In many ways, Azerbaijan has followed Turkey's example in balancing regional powers against



(Republic of Turkey Ministry of Defense)

each other and pursuing a multidimensional strategy, keeping its core secured.

In the South Caucasus, Turkey's strategy needs to address its relationship to Russia and Iran both, considering the 765-kilometer border that Iran shares with Azerbaijan and Turkish national security concerns about Iran's regional expansionism, which Azerbaijan shares. At the moment, Turkey finds itself in a position where it must refrain from criticizing a fellow Muslim nation, especially one that has skillfully cultivated an image among the regional populace as a champion of the Palestinians. Turkey has masked its apprehensions regarding Iran through superficial diplomatic declarations,²⁵ as evidenced during the January 24 joint press conference between the Turkish and Iranian presidents, where they mutually denounced Israel's actions, endorsed Palestinian statehood, and stated their shared aspiration to avert the escalation of the Gaza conflict into a broader regional war.

Nonetheless, the truth is that the war has already evolved into a regional conflict. While Ankara has openly criticized the United States and the United Kingdom for their airstrikes in Yemen aimed at the Houthis, it harbors significant concerns regarding Tehran's influence in inciting its Yemeni proxy to interfere with international shipping in the Red Sea. The chaos in the region seemed to advantage Iran for much of the 2024, as its strategy is fundamentally based on destabilizing the existing security framework. However, the recent dismantling of Hezbollah's leadership and military capabilities by Israel has significantly transformed the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. Following decades of assertive maneuvers, Iran has encountered a significant reversal in its regional strategy at the beginning of October 2024. Tehran is not only experiencing a setback in the region, but its domestic political stability is also precarious due to its direct confrontation with Israel. The recent developments present a significant opportunity for the United States—and Turkey—to mitigate the considerable

influence that Iran has amassed over the last forty years.

However, political rhetoric and statements coming from Erdogan against Israel have further questioned regional stability, leaving many to wonder whether Turkey may consider military action in what appears to be an escalating conflict in the Middle East.²⁶ In fact, political posturing helps the president keep his supporters happy by addressing the Palestinian issue—which has, in time, become an electoral topic inside Turkey,²⁷ instrumentalizing foreign policy for domestic political goals. At the same time, Turkey understands that while a weakened Iran and Hezbollah gives it the opportunity to grow its regional influence, it could also embolden Syrian rebel groups, risking a further deterioration at its border, at a time when Russia is focused on the war in Ukraine—and weakened by it. All this makes Ankara take a cautious stance, seeming to understand, for the moment, that any and all moves could cause both damage and opportunities.

This attitude may be seen to be in line with the Turkish imperative to achieve “strategic depth,” as shown in the 2001 publication by former Foreign Minister and Justice and Development Party leader Ahmet Davutoglu (with that very same title—Strategic Depth). Davutoglu states that Turkey embodies a distinctive psychological and physical “strategic depth” informed by its historical context and geographic location. It exerts authority over the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles, thereby regulating entry into the Mediterranean from the Black Sea and the reverse. The essence of the nation resides at its western boundary, near the Sea of Marmara, signifying that this central region is shielded by nearly a thousand miles of land from possible dangers to the east.

Safeguarding the core from the west, north, and south necessitates advancing as far along the northern coastline of the Sea of Marmara as feasible, alongside maintaining

a strong naval presence in the Black Sea and Aegean. Considering its pivotal position, sharing land borders with eight nations, Ankara, considering Davutoglu’s theory, has an imperative to wield its influence in a comprehensive manner to mold the surrounding world, all the while leveraging the rich historical legacy of the illustrious Ottoman Empire. This vision marked a significant departure from Turkey’s previous status as a mere outpost of the NATO alliance, which, during the early 2000s, resonated with a public narrative advocating for “zero problems with neighbors.”

Rhetoric coming from Erdogan against Israel have questioned regional stability, leaving many to wonder whether Turkey may consider military action in the escalating conflict in the Middle East.

Moreover, since the unsuccessful coup attempt in 2016 orchestrated by minor factions within the military, but which Erdogan suggested that a Western entity—namely the United States—was at play, it seemed that Turkey has been going further away from NATO. The death of Fethullah Gülen in October 2024 is expected to have symbolic and strategic implications for US-Turkey relations. Turkey’s government, headed by Erdoğan, has long sought Gülen’s extradition, accusing him of organizing the failed 2016 attempt. The United States, however, has continually declined to extradite him, alleging insufficient evidence. Ankara has long regarded extradition as a crucial issue in repairing bilateral relations. Gülen’s death



Defense ministers of Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria sign the “Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group” agreement in İstanbul on January 11, 2024. (msb.gov.tr)

does not resolve larger concerns that have strained ties, including as differences over Syria, US assistance for Kurdish forces, and Turkey’s human rights record. However, with this old source of conflict perhaps defused, both nations may concentrate more on other key aspects of their strategic and military relationship, such as NATO and regional security. This shift may provide a brief thaw, but the fundamental challenges of US-Turkish relations remain complex.

Turkey has grown increasingly independent from the United States in its foreign policy, often taking a more assertive role in the Middle East and broader regions. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has pursued a “multifaceted” foreign policy, balancing relationships with powers like Russia and China while simultaneously asserting its influence in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus. Instead of relying on US support Turkey has sought to take the initiative in these regions, using its geographical location to become a more self-sufficient power broker, particularly

in the military and economic realms. This move mirrors a larger trend, in which Turkey’s internal political narrative depicts it as a strong, independent regional leader, unafraid to confront both old friends and rivals equally.

As another foreign policy concept pointed out, *Mavi Vatan* or the Blue Homeland (a concept developed by Former Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz), Turkey must push outwards. It has achieved self-sufficiency in weaponry and has successfully developed a defense industry that is capable of marketing arms on the global stage. At the same time, according to this concept, Turkey should assert its dominance over the three seas that encircle it: the Black Sea, the Aegean, and the eastern Mediterranean, all while being cautious not to enter into conflict with any major powers and instead utilizing the tension between them. However, this is easier said than done. In the Mediterranean, Turkey’s expanding influence has frequently led to growing friction with France, a key player in both NATO and the European Union. Libya

became a major flashpoint after the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011. Initially aligned in supporting NATO's intervention, by the late 2010s their interests diverged. Turkey backed the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, while France supported Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, viewing him as a defense against Islamist forces. This proxy conflict deepened the rift between the two nations.

In the Mediterranean, Turkey's expanding influence has frequently led to friction with France, a key player in both NATO and the European Union.

In Syria, France has supported Kurdish forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces, in their fight against ISIS. However, these groups are closely aligned with the PKK, which Turkey considers a terrorist organization. Beyond Syria, France and Turkey have diverging interests in North Africa, the Sahel, and even the South Caucasus, where France has supported Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and insists on Turkey recognizing the Armenian genocide.

These frictions have created significant challenges within NATO. The competing interests of these NATO members add pressure on the alliance, which relies on cohesion and unanimity for its decision-making. The growing rifts make it increasingly difficult for NATO to maintain smooth coordination, especially when individual member states are pursuing diverging national interests in critical regions like the Middle East and the South Caucasus.

Turkish Geoeconomic Game—and Its Limits

The concept of Blue Homeland encompasses wider dimensions of naval strategy, also referring to areas pertaining to energy security, especially when it comes to the discovery of underwater gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. While Erdogan's statement in 2016 saying that "Turkey cannot disregard its kinsmen in Western Thrace (Greece) Cyprus, Crimea, and anywhere else"²⁸ was discussed as defining the neo-Ottoman strategy Ankara embraced, it was also associated with Turkey's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, considering that since 2011, the reserves of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean have further complicated an already intricate potential source of conflict between Greece and Turkey.²⁹

Cyprus, which has Greece as a guardian, occupies a pivotal position along a geostrategic corridor: the primary maritime routes of the eastern Mediterranean, near the recently discovered gas reserves. As a sovereign entity, Cyprus possesses drilling rights along its coastal waters in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Turkey has not signed the UNCLOS, which provides a framework for defining exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Yet Turkey acknowledges the existence of the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus," established following its military intervention in Cyprus in 1974. It stands as the sole nation globally to assert such a position. Thus, based on this premise and its assertion that the waters surrounding the northern coastline fall within Turkey's continental shelf, Ankara contends it possesses the legal authority to conduct operations in that area. In 2020, Turkey stepped up its actions in the region by negotiating a contentious maritime pact with Libya, claiming rights to vast parts of the



Abdülhamid Han Drillship (Facebook | T.C. Enerji ve Tabii Kaynaklar Bakanlığı)

Eastern Mediterranean while disregarding Greek and Cypriot claims. This decision exacerbated tensions, as Turkey conducted gas drilling in disputed seas, provoking complaints from Greece, Cyprus, and other regional entities. Turkey has claimed that the islands should not produce substantial EEZs, prioritizing “fairness” above rigorous enforcement of UNCLOS. However, this stance has been criticized for weakening international maritime law.³⁰ Consequently, since 2020, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece have significantly escalated, primarily revolving around conflicting claims over maritime boundaries and energy resources. At the time, Cyprus formally sought the intervention of the European Union, which characterized Turkey’s actions as “illegal.” Turkey’s open use of military force has sparked opposition other countries in the Mediterranean. including Israel, Egypt, Greece, Italy, and France, who have formed a loose coalition to oppose its claim to the gas reserves.³¹

Besides what appears to be a troublesome Turkish relationship with neighboring countries and some of its NATO allies, this also poses an interesting problem that refers to the Black Sea in particular. The fact that Turkey is not a signatory of the UNCLOS poses some interesting questions with regards to the Black Sea, particularly in the current context. The UNCLOS is typically interpreted as not extending its applicability to the Black Sea, thereby excluding Russia’s activities in that region from the purview of international legal frameworks. However, former US NAVFOR Commander Admiral James Foggo has characterized the Sea of Azov as an inland, semi-enclosed body of water, thereby subject to the provisions of Article 123 of the UNCLOS,³² extending this to the Black Sea proper. This requires collaboration among neighboring states in the fulfillment of their respective rights and responsibilities. He has articulated that Article 19 of UNCLOS permits the innocent passage of foreign vessels, including military ships, through the territorial waters of another

state, provided that such passage does not compromise the peace, good order, or security of the coastal state.

These interpretations, besides the gray zones of the international law applicable to the Black Sea indicate not only that Russia has violated international law by conducting offensive military operations in the Black Sea, but also give a framework for understanding Turkey's decisions and its openness to discuss the Black Sea with Russia. This gives another reason besides the Montreux Treaty that explains why Ankara closed the Black Sea Straits to foreign naval forces in 2022, while also providing another reason for Ankara's posturing as a broker in negotiations between the West and Russia. In the Grain Deal and other matters, Ankara always tries to keep open channels for discussing Black Sea matters with Moscow.

Considering the Black Sea is also home to underwater energy reserves, and, in 2020, Turkey made a major natural gas discovery in the Sakarya gas field,³³ Ankara's energy security strategy in the area is also undergoing a shift. Should the potential of the field be confirmed, it could cover about 30 percent of Turkey's domestic consumption. However, the development of the energy field needs to consider Turkey's interest in developing itself into a gas hub: a strategy Ankara has pursued since the 1980s, considering its goal of lowering dependency on the USSR and later Russia, while growing its pipeline infrastructure to make use of and profit from being a transit country between gas suppliers and their consumers.³⁴

Moreover, the tensions following Turkey's downing of a Russian SU-24 jet along the Syrian-Turkish border in 2015 have forced a reevaluation of the country's still substantial reliance on Russian gas (over 50 percent of its total gas imports), leading to growing investments in Turkey's LNG import infrastructure. Consequently, the transmission capacity of Turkey's natural gas networks has

increased, with the current daily gas entry capacity exceeding 400,000 cubic meters per day. At the same time, Turkey has been actively working to increase its natural gas storage capacity to at least 20 percent of its annual consumption.

Ankara prides itself on the fact that it currently has strong natural gas trade links with both Russia and the European Union.

Therefore, Turkey's current energy strategy highlights a focus on diversification of energy supplies and decentralization.³⁵ Continuing the idea of building up the energy hub between Asia and Europe, Ankara prides itself on the fact that it currently has strong natural gas trade links with both Russia and the European Union. It underlines its role for serving as a foundation for transporting piped Azeri gas through both the TANAP and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline and frequently talks about its deep political and cultural ties not only with Azerbaijan but also with Turkmenistan.

Since 2022, Turkey, through the Boru Hatları ile Petrol Taşıma Anonim Şirketi (BOTAŞ), which translates to Pipeline and Petroleum Transportation Corporation in English, has pursued a strategy aimed at growing its importance for the broader Black Sea region energy security. There are two important dimensions for the agreements Turkey's state-owned energy company BOTAŞ has signed since Russia invaded Ukraine. First, there is a clear focus on growing the LNG portfolio. In September 2024, BOTAŞ signed a ten-year agreement with Shell to receive up to 4 billion cubic meters of LNG annually starting in 2027. The same month,



Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources

BOTAŞ signed a similar agreement with TotalEnergies,³⁶ for 1.6 billion cubic meters annually starting in 2027. In May 2024, BOTAŞ signed a partnership agreement with the American firm ExxonMobil, planning to receive 2.5 million metric tons of LNG annually, also for a ten-year period.³⁷ This comes on top of a 2023 agreement with OMAN LNG to receive 1 million metric tons of LNG annually starting in 2025. Second, there is a focus for enhancing the Turkish role in providing natural gas for the region, with BOTAŞ expanding its export activities, with agreements to supply countries like Hungary³⁸ and Moldova.³⁹ In 2023, Turkey and Bulgaria, through Bulgargaz, established a comprehensive thirteen-year agreement for the annual transmission of up to 1.5 billion cubic meters, allowing Bulgaria to access Turkey's LNG terminals, particularly the new Floating Storage and Regasification Unit Saros terminal with gas being transported via Turkey's network to the Turkish-Bulgarian border.⁴⁰

At the same time, Turkey has also intensified its discussions with Romania. In March 2022, at the 27th Session of the Turkish-Romanian Joint Economic Commission, the two nations formulated a roadmap to enhance their partnership, emphasizing energy cooperation. This session marked a significant moment after a ten-year hiatus in discussions, signaling a renewed commitment to bilateral ties. Romania's strategy involves the enhancement of the Southern Gas Corridor, while also seeking Turkey's support in securing the Black Sea given the development of the Neptune Deep offshore gas field in its EEZ. Recently, Romania's OMV Petrom and Romgaz announced a final investment decision for the Neptune Deep project, which involves substantial investments of up to €4 billion and aims to produce around 8 billion cubic meters of gas annually starting in 2027.⁴¹ Just like Turkey, Romania wants to develop the Southern Gas Corridor for its own and the region's increased access to the LNG coming through Southern terminals, including Turkey's, while also hoping that the corridor will help

bring its own Black Sea gas reserves to the market. While Turkey aims for the formation of a strategic alliance that may facilitate the reactivation of the Trans-Balkan Pipeline with a reverse gas flow, thereby reinforcing the alliance in a complex interdependent framework, Romania also hopes Turkey will help secure its production platform in the Black Sea so that Romanian gas is exported to the region. Bucharest is betting on the long-term interest for Ankara to develop its own production in Turkish territorial waters.⁴² In essence, while direct discussions between Turkey and Romania regarding Neptune Deep are not well-documented, developments related to the energy fields in the Black Sea indicate that both countries are aligning their energy strategies and seeking collaborative opportunities in the Black Sea.

Turkey's focus on growing its role in the Black Sea and European energy security ties back to its own economic challenges.

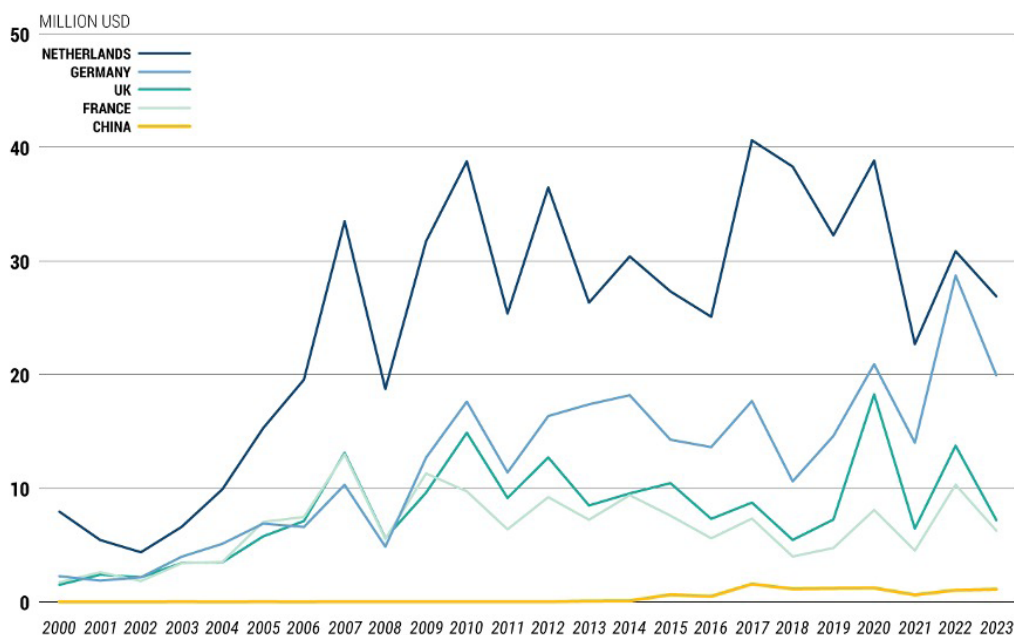
In fact, the formation in 2024 of a MCM Task Force comprising Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria represents a strategic effort to improve maritime security in the Black Sea, particularly considering the threats from drifting sea mines due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. On January 11, 2024, Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a task force, which was officially activated in July 2024. This cooperation aims to ensure safe navigation in the region and serves as a potential mechanism for securing economic interests. The MCM task force invites participation from additional NATO allies and seeks to enhance defense

collaboration in the Black Sea region, which could make this initiative be the first step for a more cohesive regional security strategy, enhancing collaboration among member states and mitigating potential threats. The activities of the task force may result in heightened shipping traffic and economic exchanges among the participating countries, as well as with other nations in the Black Sea, considering their collective economic interests in the region.

At the same time, Turkey's focus on growing its role in the Black Sea and European energy security ties back to its own economic challenges. Ankara's key economic priorities include stabilizing the economy, reducing inflation, and attracting FDI to support growth after a period of unconventional economic policy and while the country is trying to address the cost of reconstruction from the February 2023 earthquake. Turkey is also trying to diversify its industrial base, improve its export capacity, and balance fiscal policy to manage debt levels. To address all these challenges, Turkey may need to improve investor confidence, offer more business-friendly policies, and strengthen trade ties with other countries to create a more attractive environment for FDI. Although Ankara has shifted back to orthodox economic policies since 2024, rebuilding investor trust will take time. Therefore, while it is cautiously managing its position with regards to the two regional conflicts, it is seeking to take advantage of its geography in the Black Sea, transforming the challenges that the war in Ukraine poses into an opportunity.

The Middle Corridor, which runs from Europe through the Black Sea, the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan and Georgia), across the Caspian Sea, and into Central Asia and China, is currently offering an alternative to the traditional Northern Corridor through Russia, making it an appealing option, considering the logistical problems caused to international shipping by the war. Turkey's

CHINA'S SLOW START TO FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT TO TURKEY



Source: Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey

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interest in the Middle Corridor is driven by its strategic position as a bridge between Europe and Asia. For Turkey's energy strategy, the growing importance of the Middle Corridor is a positive element. By strengthening its connections to energy suppliers in Central Asia and the Caspian region, Turkey can secure diversified energy sources, reducing its reliance on Russian energy. Additionally, Turkey can play a pivotal role in the transit of energy resources to Europe, further solidifying its position as an energy bridge between East and West.

To boost Turkey's worldwide trade and investment, the Middle Corridor means increased investment in infrastructure such as railways, ports, and energy pipelines. These not only provide a solid base for international investment in Turkey, but also allow Turkish enterprises to grow into Central Asia and China. Furthermore, the corridor is consistent with Turkey's "Asia Anew" strategy, which aims to revitalize its economic and political ties with Asian nations. By strengthening its role in the Middle Corridor, Turkey can position itself as a key transit country,

bolstering its diplomatic leverage with both European and Asian powers.

Turkey's engagement in what appears to be an urgent diplomatic effort sustaining its strategy is therefore not surprising. On August 11, Turkish Defense Minister Yasar Guler⁴³ said in an interview that Turkey's NATO membership did not inhibit its ability to cultivate ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This occurred around one month after Erdogan explicitly stated Turkey's desire to join the SCO, and after Turkey's ambassador to Beijing clarified that participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS will enhance rather than contradict its affiliation with Western organizations.⁴⁴

The SCO is a political, economic, and security alliance established in 2001 by China and Russia, which has subsequently grown to include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Belarus. It symbolizes an increase of collaboration and confidence among member nations, the preservation of regional security and stability,

the fight against terrorism and extremism, and the advancement of economic growth. Although it is not a military entity and thus not a direct competitor to NATO, many perceive it as an organization that legitimizes illiberal norms and creates exceptions to established international standards, offering a refuge for nations seeking to evade the oversight of Western-dominated institutions. Turkey's interest in accession is not new—yet, it has recently shown a heightened sense of urgency. The BRICS consists of states aiming to challenge the political and economic dominance of wealthy nations in North America and Western Europe. For many in the West, it is seen as a direct threat to its own global paradigm.

Turkey has fostered a prudent relationship with Russia, while its connections with China have just started to expand. Bilateral trade has grown during the last five years, and official visits have proliferated.⁴⁵ In 2024, Turkey's ministers of foreign affairs, energy and natural resources, and industry and technology have all visited Beijing. Despite recent assertions indicating enhanced security collaboration between the two nations, Sino-Turkish relations are fundamentally grounded on mutual economic interests.

Turkey's interest in China is clear: It needs investment in critical industries to bolster its energy security and maintain its technological advancement. It needs foreign investment to mitigate inflation (now over 60 percent), stabilize its currency, and finance continuing rebuilding efforts after last year's catastrophic earthquake. Significantly, Ankara recognizes that China must resolve some economic challenges, which may be alleviated by the establishment of new trade channels and markets. It evidently perceives that they are optimally equipped to assist one another.

The Turkish government has asked China to boost investment across several sectors,

including solar and nuclear energy, advanced infrastructure, and artificial intelligence. The newly established Sinovac vaccination facility exemplifies how the two nations might enhance relations in certain sectors. However, a somewhat more consequential instance—the agreement between Chinese automobile manufacturer BYD and Turkey to establish a manufacturing facility in Manisa province—illustrates how the two might use their relationship for greater benefit. The deal followed a series of EU initiatives aimed at reducing imports of Chinese electric cars into the union.⁴⁶ There was an increase in customs taxes particularly imposed on China's BYD electric vehicles producer.⁴⁷

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China's disadvantage was Turkey's advantage. After the European Union implemented its protectionist policies, Ankara levied a supplementary 40 percent duty on car imports from China, eventually exempting Chinese firms who invest in Turkey. The exception was customized to meet BYD's requirements but may also appeal to other manufacturers. Through Turkey, China stands to gain even more advantages.⁴⁸ Turkey and the European Union maintain a customs union that stipulates that products manufactured in Turkey are free from customs tariffs when supplied to the European Union. Furthermore, enterprises established in Turkey are not required to adhere to EU legislation concerning labor or manufacturing standards. Provided that the finished items comply with European

consumer requirements, they may be sold in the EU market. This results in reduced manufacturing costs for those investors into Turkey seeking a way to access the European Union market.

All this clarifies the presence of Erdogan, Industry Minister Mehmet Fatih Kacir, and BYD Chairman Wang Chuanfu at the agreement's signing ceremony in Istanbul on July 8, occurring within four days of Erdogan's participation in a SCO meeting in Kazakhstan, when he conferred with Chinese President Xi Jinping.⁴⁹ In addition to the immediate commercial advantages that Turkey's proximity to Europe provides Chinese investors, there is also the consideration of long-term strategy. China saw its expanding economic influence in Turkey as integral to its increasing use of the Middle Corridor, which is a component of the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly since the conflict in Ukraine limits the Northern Corridor and the Gaza war jeopardizes passage across the Red Sea. Considering China's critical need to market its products, the establishment of new trade channels and markets signifies more than just financial gain.

Turkey might be similarly characterized. For Ankara, financial gain is advantageous, but the enhancement of its geopolitical position is more favorable. As Russia weakens due to the Ukraine conflict, Turkey sees China as the only credible competitor to Western (namely American) hegemony. While it may maintain a strong partnership with Washington, it seeks to cultivate its own strategy for regional security. The developing relationship with China is unequivocally important to that plan.

Considering that one of Turkey's strong points on growing its posture on the global value chain is its strategic location, according to the World Bank,⁵⁰ Ankara regards the Black Sea region to be a critical area for its stability and future development. At the moment, trade and investment barriers limit its ability to fully capitalize on regional opportunities,

prompting Ankara to position itself as a somewhat neutral negotiator, all while ensuring that it strengthens its ties with the West and capitalizes on available business opportunities in the energy sector and elsewhere. However, tackling its domestic socioeconomic issues is a requirement, a constraint, and a goal in Ankara's quest to expand its influence in the Black Sea area.

Conclusion: Turkey's Options

The geopolitical positioning of Turkey in the Black Sea region has long been shaped by the strategic significance of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, its historical ties to Crimea, and its role as a key player in regional security and energy dynamics. Throughout its modern history, Turkey has had to balance its relations between powerful actors like Russia, the United States, and the European Union while also pursuing its own interests.

In the post-Cold War era, Turkey has sought to diminish its dependence on the West and forge a more independent foreign policy. This shift is illustrated by Turkey's attempt to position itself as a bridge between Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa, pursuing multidimensional strategies that cater to its security and economic needs. At the same time, Turkey's relationship with Russia has been complex, marked by both cooperation, particularly in energy projects, and competition for influence in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus.

One of Turkey's key strategies has been to deepen its strategic depth, a concept proposed by Davutoglu, while also push outwards to re-establish a "blue homeland" for itself to rule, as Gurdeniz has advised. The nation's heartland is located at its western



The 101st Republic day, October 29, 2024. (Recep Tayyip Erdogan/Facebook)

extreme, near the Sea of Marmara, providing over a thousand miles of territory as a buffer against possible eastern attacks. Securing the core from the west, north, and south necessitates advancing extensively along the northern coastline of the Sea of Marmara and maintaining a naval presence in the Black Sea and the Aegean.

However, this is only the military dimension of Turkey's strategy. Its socioeconomics force Ankara to focus on what makes most sense for keeping the country stable politically. During the last two decades this translated into growing the country's energy security while making sure that Ankara seeks any and all opportunity to diversify and grow its trade and investment portfolio. Focusing on energy security, Turkey has reshaped its outlook, given the discovery of natural gas reserves in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. By pursuing infrastructure projects that allow it to act as a gas hub between suppliers and consumers, Turkey has aimed to reduce

its dependence on Russian gas, secure its energy future, and enhance its regional standing.

At the same time, Turkey's strategic importance is further highlighted by its involvement in regional security matters. The establishment of a MCM Task Force with Romania and Bulgaria in 2024 is a testament to Turkey's efforts to ensure maritime security in the Black Sea, particularly considering the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. This initiative reflects Turkey's growing role in NATO's Black Sea strategy and its willingness to collaborate with regional allies to mitigate threats. At the same time, its growing relationship to China is meant to help Turkey leverage its negotiating power with the West (and the United States in particular), while growing its posture in Eurasia.

However, Turkey's ambitions are not without constraints. The country's domestic economic challenges, exacerbated by the need for

post-earthquake reconstruction and high inflation, have placed significant pressure on its ability to fully capitalize on its geopolitical opportunities. Moreover, its delicate balancing act between competing regional interests, particularly in the energy sector, requires careful diplomacy to avoid alienating key partners like Russia, Azerbaijan, and the West.

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At the same time, the Middle Corridor presents Turkey with an opportunity to enhance its position as a regional logistics center and diversify trade routes in response to changing global supply chains. Nevertheless, many challenges impede its full exploitation. The infrastructure throughout the corridor, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus, is poor, which restricts efficiency and elevates transportation costs. Turkey must significantly spend in updating these connections or collaborate with other regional entities to improve connectivity. Secondly, geopolitical tensions, particularly between Armenia and Azerbaijan, may undermine the stability and security of the corridor, hindering its functioning. Moreover, competition from maritime routes and Russia's dominance over other land routes across Eurasia, like the Northern Corridor, presents a threat to

Turkey's ambitions. Finally, Turkey's tenuous ties with several bordering nations, especially Iran, and the conflict in the Middle East further complicate Turkish environment. More importantly, Turkey needs to commit to ongoing infrastructural investment, apart from cautious regional diplomacy.

While the word "cautious" seems to define Turkish strategic posturing, despite the rhetoric sustained, in part for internal political reasons, by Erdogan, Ankara seems to have several options with regards to its future as a regional power at the Black Sea. Considering the two concepts that are currently framing the Turkish foreign policy—"strategic depth" and "blue homeland," there are three major scenarios that should be considered with regards to the Turkish position in the Black Sea region, all dependent on the way the two conflicts—in Ukraine and in the Middle East evolve.

The first scenario is the "Pro-Western Alignment of Turkey." In this scenario, Turkey would adopt a decisive stance in favor of NATO and Western partners, establishing itself as an essential ally in curbing Russian dominance in the Black Sea area. Ankara would do so if the West wins the war against Russia beyond Ukraine and if it sees in the West the only good option for pursuing stability and maintaining secure borders. This scenario entails enhanced military and diplomatic collaboration with NATO, aiding Ukraine in countering Russian aggression, and seeking stronger economic relations with the European Union and the United States. Turkey would implement economic sanctions on Russia, aligning itself with Western diplomatic efforts to isolate Moscow. Additionally, under this scenario, Turkey would need to play a delicate balancing act in the Middle East, advocating for a solution to the Israel-Gaza conflict that aligns with Western interests, while maintaining diplomatic and economic ties with Israel, ensuring that its strategic interests in the region are preserved.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg meets with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at the 2022 Antalya Diplomacy Forum. (NATO)

However, a strengthened Turkey as a NATO member would translate into a retaliation from Russia which would translate into a loss of business ties (energy supplies, tourism) and the potential for further destabilization in Syria due to Russia's actions against Turkish interests. Moreover, the current regime could also face domestic political opposition to full alignment with Western policies. Turkey could choose a full pro-Western alignment if Russia and its allies (including China) will be weakened so much as there is no use for Ankara to maintain its multidimensional strategic approach—in other words, there would be no other option than the West for Turkey to work with.

The second (and opposite to the first) scenario for Turkey in the Black Sea is the “Pro-Russia Tilt.” In this scenario, Turkey would cultivate stronger relations with Russia, reducing NATO's presence in the Black Sea. This may include enhancing military,

economic, and energy collaboration with Moscow, while striving to reduce Western influence in the area. This could only happen in the event where Russia defeats the West, beyond winning the war in Ukraine or if the West is perceived so weakened by Turkey that maintaining working with the West would pose a security threat in the Black Sea. Should Russia be able to take Ukraine's Black Sea coast, and the war settles into “frozen conflict” status, then Russia would de facto control the Northern side of the Black Sea, similar to the way in which Turkey controls its southern side. Russia would weaken the Ukrainian economy—taking not only part of the agricultural land, but its opening to the sealines, while also becoming significantly close to the energy project Romania is developing in the Black Sea. Given that the West would appear weak and given its strong historical ties and current economic ties, Bulgaria could become a de facto ally for Russia in the Black Sea. For Turkey, this would be a similar situation to that of the Cold



Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir attend the 2024 BRICS Summit. (kremlin.ru)

War, when the USSR dominated the northern side of the Black Sea and was pushing south.


The only difference would be the fact that the Western Alliance would not be perceived—as it was in the 1950s—to be powerful enough to provide shelter, nor would Turkey need shelter, considering the military capabilities it currently possesses are far greater, in real terms, than what it possessed at the beginning of the Cold War. Such a scenario would also translate, beyond the Black Sea region, in Turkey aligning with Russia on key issues in the Middle East, including the Israel-Gaza conflict. Besides from siding with an authoritarian regime, something that will translate into Western criticism, this would also include Turkey risking an isolation from NATO and EU markets and investments. All of this would only be conceivable for Ankara if the West would lose its current standing, something that is possible but unlikely without major missteps by Western powers.

The third scenario, which involves both a weakened West and a weakened Russia by the two regional conflicts is one where Turkey pursues “Regional Leadership &

Strategic Diversification.” This scenario entails Ankara affirming its position as a regional leader in the Black Sea and beyond via the promotion of regional collaboration and the diversification of its alliances. Turkey would seek to reduce its dependence on NATO and Russia while enhancing economic and security relationships with nations in the Black Sea region, Central Asia, and the Middle East. While this would make Turkey the dominant regional power with influence over both the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, it would also translate into Ankara needing to manage complex, diverse, and sometimes conflicting partnerships. It would also need to face potential tensions with regional rivals (Greece, Cyprus) and global powers (Russia, United States). While not an impossible task, such a leadership role needs to be fed by a solid and stable internal socio-economic and political foundation, something that Ankara finds difficult to achieve, considering the challenges it currently faces.

The fourth scenario is also the most realistic, which is continuing to sustain a “Balanced Neutrality,” at least until the current conflicts have clearer resolutions. Under this

scenario, Turkey would take a neutral stance, attempting to balance relations between NATO and regional powers, among which Russia is one. This strategy would enable Turkey to serve as a mediator in the Ukraine crisis and other regional disputes, therefore avoiding direct engagement with either party and still acting as a NATO member. This translates into limited NATO involvement in the Black Sea while upholding Montreux Convention restrictions, something that Ankara has already pursued, considering the Mine Countermeasures Task Force. The main challenge for Turkey in pursuing this foreign policy option is the risk of being seen as indecisive or unreliable by its NATO and other regional partners. In pursuing new relationships, such as bilateral relations with Beijing, such ambivalence may be understood as untrustworthy. At the same time, avoiding hard decisions translates into limited influence over regional affairs. This is, however, a price that Ankara seems to be willing to accept, at least for now.

particularly in the wake of the war in Ukraine, it will need to maintain its position as both a key energy player and a security actor in the Black Sea region. Reaching out to pursue a key role on the Middle Corridor and growing its ties with China is one way for Ankara to leverage its geographic position in growing its diplomatic posture. However, while Turkey needs to enhance its geopolitical posture to navigate the complexities of Eurasia, it also recognizes the inherent limits and long-term patterns that shape regional dynamics and influence its strategic options. 

While evolving, Turkey's geopolitical game in the Black Sea is multifaceted, driven by its historical role, strategic location, and economic aspirations.

While evolving, Turkey's geopolitical game in the Black Sea is multifaceted, driven by its historical role, strategic location, and economic aspirations. The country continues to navigate complex regional dynamics and pursue a growingly autonomous foreign policy. While still a member of NATO, its success will depend on how effectively it can balance its domestic needs with its regional ambitions. As Turkey seeks to capitalize on the shifting geopolitical landscape,

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