

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN TURKISH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON UKRAINE

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Russia remains Türkiye's strategic partner – despite the war against Ukraine and the West's response, Türkiye does not consider Russia a long-term threat. Ankara's political discourse on Russia's aggression against Ukraine is fundamentally different from the perception of the nature of this war by Ukraine's other allies. The policy of balancing will remain the cornerstone of Türkiye's policy in the Black Sea region as well as relations between Russia and the West in general. There had been expectations that Türkiye would become more actively involved in NATO's policy of deterring Russia, but these were not realised. Despite the fact that within the framework of NATO, Türkiye has adopted all decisions and policies aimed at strengthening the Alliance's capabilities in the Black Sea, some government decisions (such as hindering the process of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, creating a Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group without Ukraine and not under NATO control) worked in favour of Russian interests. Türkiye's attempts to pursue an autonomous policy in the Black Sea indicate that the problem of coordinating security steps at the regional level to deter Russia remains relevant for Ukraine in the medium term.

Russian-Turkish relations are a key element of the regional security architecture in the Black Sea region. The dichotomy of the Türkiye's policy towards the Black Sea is demonstrated by the fact that Republic of Türkiye, despite Russian revisionism and attempts to destroy the regional order, is building a strategic partnership with both Ukraine and Russia. Despite Türkiye's membership in NATO and the open confrontation between Russia and the transatlantic community after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia and Türkiye continue to develop and consolidate a multidimensional strategic partnership based on the progress of the Russian-Turkish regional condominium. Türkiye's narrative, which emphasises regional ownership of the Black Sea and that a major role for NATO (and the United States in particular) is unwarranted, is largely in line with the vision propagated by

Russia. Türkiye-Russia relations also reflect well-established long-term mutual interests on both sides, particularly in the areas of energy and trade.

Although the common ground between Ankara and Moscow is the position on limiting the role of external forces in the Black Sea, both countries are also competing for regional influence. Beyond the Black Sea, there have been diametrically opposed Russian and Turkish policies in Syria and Libya. These conflicts never led to open confrontation between the two actors, as both countries were willing to compartmentalise their relations and respect each other's «red lines».

Russian-Turkish relations are often described as transactional and compartmentalised. In recent decades, Russian-Turkish relations have deepened to a state of recognised strategic partnership, which simultaneously coexists with competitiveness between the two actors. As a result, their bilateral relations are often referred to as [«cooperative rivalry»](#), [«competitive cooperation»](#) or [«adversarial collaboration»](#), reflecting the hybrid nature of the Russian-Turkish tandem.

Türkiye's reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine: a balancing act

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has put Türkiye in a difficult position to determine the future trajectory of its relations with Russia. Ankara's reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 included support for Ukraine, in particular, the closure of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to the belligerents – Ukraine and Russia, as well as countries that do not have access to the Black Sea, in accordance with the Montreux Convention of 1936. This has prevented Russia from strengthening its Black Sea Fleet at the expense of its other fleets, which is an essential contribution to Ukraine's defence capabilities. It is considered that this decision preserved the balance in the Black Sea and was in the interests particularly of Ukraine.

However, Russia's full-scale aggression did not affect the nature of Russian-Turkish cooperation. Türkiye distanced itself from the measures taken by its Western allies, did not join international sanctions against Russia, and did not close its airspace to Russian aircraft. Moreover, after the outbreak of the war, Presidents V.Putin and R.T.Erdoğan declared an agreement to continue and deepen their strategic cooperation.

After the start of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, Türkiye faced growing pressure from its Western partners who emphasised the need to move away from the previous approach of flexible balancing and move towards closer cooperation in support of the Alliance's efforts to contain Russia. A number of Turkish experts [stressed](#) that Türkiye's policy towards Russia should be revised, and that the balancing act could be harmful to Turkish national interests. The crisis in relations between Russia and the West could be an opportunity for Türkiye to renew its Euro-Atlantic orientation and reclaim its central security role in the Alliance after years of alienation.

However, the last two years have shown that balancing remains Türkiye's main strategy, and its special role in the region in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine is seen by Turkish politicians as a bargaining chip in relations with the West. Ankara believes that it has been able to increase its influence precisely by continuing its balancing policy and that abandoning this policy will not bring significant dividends.

At the same time, it is often emphasised that Türkiye's policy does not imply equidistance between the two conflicting parties. The Turkish position is often characterised as pro-Ukrainian – Türkiye supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine as a fundamental prerequisite for stability in the region, and Türkiye was one of the first Ukrainian allies to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine. A more correct way to describe Ankara's position is that Türkiye is trying to pursue a pro-Ukrainian policy that [is not openly anti-Russian](#).

Ukraine is Türkiye's strategic partner in deterring Russian expansionism in the Black Sea region. Türkiye's relations with Ukraine are aimed at saving the remnants of the disturbed balance in the Black Sea and curbing Russia's revisionist ambitions. The most desirable scenario for Türkiye is one in which Russia is «bleeding in Ukraine» and is in no position to interfere with Türkiye's regional ambitions. But Türkiye's position is to prevent both a Russian defeat and a Russian victory. Such a fundamental difference in the perception of strategic interests in the Black Sea cannot but affect Ukrainian-Turkish cooperation – Türkiye is reluctant to support Ukrainian initiatives aimed at isolating Russia.

Türkiye sees no direct threat to its interests from Russia's actions. On the contrary, the war has provided Ankara with an opportunity to strengthen its international position and mediate between Russia and Ukraine, just as it has traditionally positioned itself as a mediator between Russia and the West. Since 2014, Türkiye has claimed to be a «bridge» between Russia and the transatlantic community, arguing that its relations with Russia and the Western alliance are not incompatible.

After Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, several rounds of negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv were held in Türkiye. Ankara also helped Kyiv with the return of Ukrainian prisoners from Russia. Ankara and the UN mediated the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which operated for one year until Russia withdrew from it in July 2023. While some of Türkiye's initiatives, such as the grain deal and facilitating the prisoner exchange, were effective, its efforts to promote a peaceful settlement in the initial stages of the war failed as Moscow continued its invasion and viewed negotiations as an additional means of coercion.

Interdependence and convergence between Russia and Türkiye

Turkish-Russian relations are based on interdependence between the two countries, which is structural and long-term. Over the past decades, in an effort to develop strategic autonomy from the West, Türkiye has deepened its systemic dependence on Russia. While Türkiye is

often described as disproportionately dependent on Russia, in reality, the Russia also relies heavily on Türkiye, especially in light of its increasing international isolation.

Political affinity

The Türkiye and Russia are tied by a commitment to a condominium approach that dictates coordination of actions to maintain regional order – as opposed to a multilateral approach (multilateralism) led by the West. Both states are [fixated](#) on self-sufficiency, sovereignty and a privileged role in their post-imperial spaces. Political orders in each country are also built on the personalities of strong leaders. Russian-Turkish political relations are based on the [personal diplomacy](#) of the two presidents and the closeness between the two authoritarian leaders, as well as somewhat similar strategic cultures.

The Turkish and Russian political elites – and society at large – also have a similar understanding of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Despite Türkiye's condemnation of Russia's aggression and Ankara's refusal to recognise the territories occupied by Russia, its official political discourse on the war against Ukraine strikingly echoes the Russian narrative. The public discourse in Türkiye sees Russia's aggression as the result of a competition between great powers and Russia's response to Western expansionism, rather than as an unjust and unprovoked war against Ukraine. According to a [survey](#) conducted in September 2022, only 21% of Turkish respondents believed that Russia was primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine, while 46% stated that Ukraine and Russia were equally responsible. In this case, Ukraine is a hostage to the traditional and deep-rooted anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism of Turkish society.

Economic and security aspects

Since 2014, when international sanctions were imposed on Russia, Türkiye has been purposefully criticising sanctions as a foreign policy tool. Ankara is the only NATO member state that has refrained from imposing them. After Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Türkiye's position has not changed. Türkiye is helping Russia to circumvent international sanctions and weakening the effect of Russia's international isolation. This Turkish position has undoubtedly led to the perception of the Türkiye as [Russia's closest friend and ally](#), along with Belarus, China, Venezuela and Syria.

In the energy sector, Türkiye is heavily dependent on Russia and has never tried to systematically break this dependence. In 2021, Türkiye [imported](#) about 45% of its natural gas from Russia. As an energy transit country, Türkiye plays a dual role: it transports Russian gas to Europe through the Russian TurkStream gas pipeline, but also transits Azerbaijani gas to Europe through the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline and supports the Southern Gas Corridor as an alternative gas supply route. Thus, Türkiye simultaneously participates in and competes with Russia's energy projects.

Russia is also building Türkiye's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, which is called the largest project in the history of Russian-Turkish relations and the world's first power plant project implemented under the build-own-operate model (Rosatom's [share is](#) 99.2%).

One of the most significant deals concluded by Russia and Türkiye was the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system. The acquisition of this system has had a radical impact on Türkiye's relations with the United States and other allies. The United States imposed sanctions on Türkiye under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and excluded Ankara from the F-35 fighter aircraft programme. Ankara is hesitant to activate the system because of the risk of further sanctions.

Competition and sources of tension between Türkiye and Russia

Although on many levels, Russian and Turkish interests are identical (mostly with regard to preventing a greater Western role in the Black Sea), Russian-Turkish relations are also characterised by numerous conflict issues. Over the past decade, Russia and Türkiye have been on the verge of escalating or even radically deteriorating relations several times. As a result of the incident in 2015, when Turkish aircraft shot down a Russian Su-24 over the Turkish-Syrian border, relations between the two countries were briefly strained, but later improved. In February 2020, 34 Turkish servicemen were killed in the shelling of Idlib, Syria, by Russian airstrikes. Despite the fact that this was the largest loss of military personnel during an operation abroad in the last fifty years, the Turkish government refrained from openly identifying Moscow as the attacker and tried to downplay the significance of the incident. Although the likelihood of similar incidents in the future remains, both sides have traditionally demonstrated flexibility in resolving conflicts.

Türkiye's membership in NATO

Structural rivalry between Russia and Türkiye, caused by their membership in rival security alliances and pursuit of competitive geopolitical objectives, remains the main factor of tension between the two actors. Türkiye's membership in NATO has always been and remains the main deterrent to the emergence of an unconditional partnership between Türkiye and Russia. At the same time, Türkiye's membership in NATO is the reason why Russia deliberately cooperates with Türkiye and uses bilateral ties to undermine transatlantic unity.

Despite anti-Western rhetoric, Türkiye's economic and security interests are inseparable from the West. NATO remains a cornerstone of Türkiye's security identity. The country hosts several NATO commands and a base in Incirlik, and is also involved in NATO maritime operations and stabilisation efforts. Since 2014, Türkiye has invested heavily in its armed forces and has strengthened security cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia, including by supporting their NATO membership aspirations. The Turkish side often emphasises that since

2014, Ankara has consistently [supported and implemented](#) all NATO measures and decisions aimed at strengthening NATO's defence and security. Turkish experts often [point out](#) that while Türkiye may have indirectly strengthened Moscow's position by not imposing sanctions, it plays a more significant role at the operational and tactical levels, helping Ukraine's defence efforts and NATO's position in the region.

Hegemonic ambitions in the region

Since the early 1990s, Türkiye has been actively promoting its interests in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, regions that Russia considers part of its sphere of privileged influence. This competition remains a dynamic and potentially conflicting aspect of Turkish-Russian relations. Türkiye is trying to take advantage of Russia's declining influence in these regions in the context of the war in Ukraine and seeks to limit Russian revisionism by [increasing Türkiye's presence](#) in these regions.

In the South Caucasus, Türkiye supports Azerbaijan, the winner of the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and seeks a more even distribution of influence in the region. Russia's influence in the South Caucasus has been significantly undermined by the war in Ukraine and the withdrawal of its security guarantees to Armenia. Türkiye's recent attempts to normalise relations with Armenia and its advocacy of a regional cooperation platform uniting the three South Caucasus states plus Russia, Türkiye and Iran are evidence of Türkiye's desire to move beyond the role of a «small» power in the sub-region.

In recent years, Türkiye has been engaged in an active diplomatic [dialogue with Central Asian states](#), exploring opportunities to deepen ties in the areas of trade, energy and transport, as well as the supply of Turkish defence products. This signals a new strategy for expanding into a region where Türkiye has traditionally been in the shadow of Russia and China.

In Syria, Türkiye and Russia also support different opposing sides, which has led to direct physical clashes between Turkish and Russian troops on the battlefield. Türkiye's closure of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles in 2022 [complicates](#) Russia's power projection in the Eastern Mediterranean and limits its presence in Syria and Libya.

Conclusions

Türkiye's strategic vision for the Black Sea region has not changed dramatically since the start of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. The main principle of Turkish foreign policy – balancing – continues to be the cornerstone of the Turkish approach to the region. Despite the radical changes in the regional security order in the Black Sea caused by Russia's aggression and revisionism, Ankara maintains a condominium approach to Russia and maintains the current delicate balance in their relations. The balancing act pays dividends in the short term, with the Turkish government gaining economic benefits from cooperation with

Russia and international recognition for its position as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia.

There are many areas where the interests of Türkiye, on the one hand, and Ukraine, on the other, coincide, including the restoration of regional security in the Black Sea and the use of the region's transit potential. However, there are serious differences in the perception of the nature of the threats and the desired policies to address them.

Tense relations between Türkiye and the West and Ankara's desire to develop «strategic autonomy» do not allow for effective coordination of efforts even in areas where joint action is in the interests of all actors. Ukraine and Western partners have limited influence on Türkiye's perception and implementation of its national interests in the Black Sea region. Cooperation with Russia is seen by Ankara as deepening Türkiye's strategic autonomy in relations with the West, while closer coordination with Western allies is seen as an encroachment on this autonomy.

Türkiye is a significant strategic partner of Ukraine, and cooperation with it is important both for the future cessation of Russian military aggression and for the broader tasks of stabilising the security situation in the Black Sea and building a new regional order after the war ends. But Turkish strategic interests are not identical to Ukraine's. Ukrainian and Turkish visions of a new security order in the Black Sea differ significantly. Turkish experts mostly recognise the new reality that the idea of «regional ownership» – preventing NATO's greater presence in the Black Sea through the greater presence of external forces, extra-regional powers – has failed. But in the search for other formats of regional cooperation, the idea of a greater NATO presence in the region, which is close to Kyiv, will not be supported by Türkiye, despite the war.

The Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group, which was established in January this year with the participation of Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria, is evidence of Türkiye's promotion of only security initiatives in the Black Sea that are not perceived as challenging Russia. Ankara rejected proposals to establish this group under NATO command, invite experts from other NATO member states, and limit the number of participants to three countries in the region. Türkiye's objection to Ukraine's participation and the extension of the operation beyond the territorial waters of the three participating countries is a sign of Ankara's rather inflexible approach to regional security cooperation.

Ankara disapproves of those security initiatives that could look like an outright confrontation and lead to an escalation with Russia. This also explains Türkiye's approach to providing Ukraine with security guarantees. Ukraine's approach to the regional security system is based on the need to cover the region with bilateral and multilateral agreements on support for Ukraine and security guarantees ([Kyiv Security Compact](#), Rasmussen-Yermak Group).

Türkiye did not join the G7 Joint Declaration on providing Ukraine with security guarantees (July 2023).

Türkiye's attempts to pursue an autonomous policy in the Black Sea suggest that the problems of coordinating security steps and deterring Russia at the regional level remain relevant for Ukraine in the medium term.

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