

TÜRKIYE AND THE WORLD INITIATIVE

Understanding Türkiye's Entanglement With Russia

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Summary

During the Cold War, Türkiye presented itself as the steadfast guardian of Europe's southern flank against the Soviet threat. It stood in lockstep with its Western allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and few, if any, questioned Ankara's foreign policy trajectory or its commitment to NATO.

But this once firm conviction has weakened in the past decade. Türkiye's deepening entanglement with Russia and setbacks in its relations with the United States and some of its European allies have muddled the country's image as a staunch member of the Western security architecture.

Ankara's ability to maintain a constructive dialogue with Moscow (alongside Kyiv) even after Russia's attack against Ukraine has been beneficial in some cases, as evidenced by Türkiye's role in the 2022 grain deal and the complex prisoner swap that freed numerous Western hostages including *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich.¹ These ties could also be helpful in the future for peacemaking efforts and post-conflict scenarios in Ukraine.

However, as a longtime NATO member, Türkiye's recent hedging has created an impression of dissent within the Western front against Russian aggression. As the transatlantic allies adapt to Europe's new geopolitical realities, maintaining unity against Russia will be critical. Türkiye will have a pivotal role to play in this long-term effort.

This paper aims to explain the drivers and complexities behind Russian-Turkish convergences while considering their implications for Euro-Atlantic security. It examines the deepening engagement of the two countries in the security and energy domains, analyzes their strengths and weaknesses, and offers ideas on a way forward that would contribute to Euro-Atlantic security by safeguarding both Türkiye's and its NATO allies' long-term interests.

Five Hundred Years of Geopolitical Jockeying

Bilateral relations between Russia and Türkiye have notably evolved over the past decade, stewarded by the two countries' strongman leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who not only jointly set the pace in the relationship but also safeguard it from potential disruptions.² This mutual high-level ownership has acted as a cushion against damaging policy misalignments, such as in Libya and Syria, where Ankara and Moscow ultimately found themselves pursuing different objectives.³ It also allowed the two countries to circumvent the effects of an otherwise deeply rooted dynamic in Russian-Turkish relations: perpetual rivalry and distrust.

Russians and Turks trace the beginnings of their diplomatic relations back to the late fifteenth century. Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Türkiye were imperial nemeses. Their relationship oscillated between peace and war, under a constant state of competition. Russia's southward push in the eighteenth century came almost exclusively at the expense of the then decaying Ottoman Empire, leaving an indelible mark on the Turkish mindset. Russia, as the thinking among the Turkish leadership goes to this day, is an ambitious and disruptive regional rival that requires delicate handling.

Balancing against Russia meant that Turkish policymakers occasionally sought outside (Western) support. In the 1853–1856 Crimean War, for example, the Ottomans allied with leading Western powers. But depending on the circumstances, the opposite—Turkish-Russian alignment—was also plausible. In the fledgling days of the newly founded Turkish Republic and the Soviet Union, the two empowered each other through political and material support against the shared threat of Western imperialism. The tide on this convergence turned in the mid-1940s, when the Soviet Union made maximalist territorial demands and expressed a desire to have a say in governing the Turkish Straits—a historical chapter remorsefully recalled by Russian officials to this day—eventually driving Türkiye toward NATO membership in 1952.⁴ Yet, even their respective allegiance to rival blocs did not prevent Türkiye and the Soviet Union from economic cooperation, which resulted in Soviet support for the development of Türkiye's heavy industry (through the construction of new iron and steel plants and an oil refinery) in the 1960s.⁵

In some ways, history is repeating itself today. The triangular interplay between Russia, Türkiye, and the West is once again in action. The current gravitational pull between Russia and Türkiye has come as both countries—for reasons of their own—experience setbacks in their relations with the West and see political, economic, and security benefits in working together. This has led them to seek and find new opportunities to cooperate bilaterally or, when that is not possible, at least tolerate each other's respective positions. While the practice of closing ranks and intensifying cooperation when faced with more pressing challenges is not altogether new, there are three distinguishing features today.

Geopolitics

Russia has made itself a pariah by bringing war back to the European continent. This puts an additional cost on deepening cooperation with such a country. Pursuing economic, energy, and security interests through intensified engagement with Russia may make sense for Turkish policymakers, but doing so as Russia ravages Ukraine raises a point of principle with respect to Türkiye's actions: it is simply not the right time for business as usual with Moscow.

Contradictions with Alliance Commitments

Türkiye has been a NATO ally for over seven decades. Turkish officials often boast of this legacy and the country's ongoing contributions to the alliance. Meanwhile, NATO documents, undersigned by Türkiye, depict Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security."⁶ Against this backdrop, Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 air and missile defense system and the decision to widen its already extensive energy cooperation with Russia into the nuclear domain are dissonant. The same can be said of Türkiye's recently publicized aspiration to join the so-called BRICS grouping, led by Russia and China. Such inconsistencies are hard to explain, especially as Russia's image of being a disruptive power ossifies.⁷ These actions sow doubt over Türkiye's commitment to the Western security architecture and its overall trajectory.

A Symptom of Something Larger

Türkiye's fraught relations with Western actors and its convenient engagement with Russia come as Erdoğan is set on repositioning the country's place in the world.⁸ Türkiye, like many other middle powers, is in hedging mode. It sees financial, economic, and, to some degree, political benefits in flexible engagement on the international scene, and it is not bothered by being misaligned with its Western allies when its national interests dictate such a course of action. Türkiye's deepening engagement with Russia is part of this larger pattern, which also includes Ankara's aspirations for deeper engagement with China. Hence, while unique in its scope, the Turkish-Russian entanglement is a symptom of a larger novelty in Turkish foreign policy under its current government that has essentially become less Western-centric.

Understanding Türkiye's entanglement with Russia and projecting its evolution requires a deeper analysis of the dynamics at play in this relationship. Is it fair to assume, for instance, that there are some natural boundaries to this opportunistic cooperation between Türkiye and Russia, as history has shown and today's geopolitical realities suggest? Or has the relationship entered a qualitatively new era of sustained and close partnership? More importantly, is there a way to incentivize Türkiye's closer alignment with its NATO allies in a manner that also meets Ankara's interests, and what, if any, are the tools that could facilitate this?

Managed Rivalry Amid Converging Interests

A defining element in contemporary Russian-Turkish relations has been the deliberate choice of both countries to rise above their differences and build synergies. This stands in contrast to the stalemate in Türkiye's relations with its traditional allies and partners in the West, which are littered with policy failures. Nowhere has this dynamic between Russia and Türkiye been more evident than in their collaboration in the security and energy domains.

The Security Dimension

Security is a cornerstone of the Russian-Turkish relationship. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the two countries found themselves in a new setting no longer constrained by confrontation between two opposing military blocs. That led Ankara and Moscow to reconsider their security relationship, learn to manage their ongoing differences, and build convergences. Both countries share an expansive neighborhood: from the Balkans, where both are important external powers, to the Black Sea, South Caucasus, Middle East, and Central Asia. Inevitably, there are many instances where their interests collide in this space, but there are also significant opportunities for collaboration. The end of the Cold War made the latter proposition even more probable—despite also unleashing a new stage of competition.

The past decade saw three additional factors that paved the way for greater convergences between Ankara and Moscow. First, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin cemented their roles as outsized figures in their respective countries with growing authoritarian tendencies, enabling them to make single-handed decisions. Second, the security landscape in the Middle East and North Africa changed drastically after the Arab Spring, accompanied by the United States's diminished ability to shape developments in the region. Finally, Russia entered into a deep confrontation with the West and reenergized its efforts to undermine and weaken U.S.-led alliances, including NATO.

These three trends shaped the security relationship between Moscow and Ankara before Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. From the Kremlin's viewpoint, Türkiye was an indispensable partner in Russia's quest to assert its regional and global interests at the expense of the United States and the West in general. With the growing gap between Ankara and its Western partners on multiple issues including Syria, human rights, support for Turkish dissidents, and its stalled European Union (EU) accession process, Türkiye emerged as a pivotal transatlantic actor conveniently at odds with its allies and traditional partners. At the same time, the country was striving to become more sovereign in its international affairs and less reliant on the United States. Russia seized the opportunity to capitalize on these fissures and, while doing so, aimed at utilizing its growing ties and enhanced energy cooperation with Türkiye to deepen Europe's dependency on Russian gas (transiting Türkiye)—an essential geopolitical leverage for the Kremlin.

These dynamics were exacerbated by a chain of events that only deepened the tacit partnership between Russia and Türkiye. While Türkiye stood firmly against the Russian annexation of Crimea, criticized the Russia-instigated war in eastern Ukraine, and even supplied arms to Ukraine as its Western partners were reluctant to do so, the failed 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye had a centripetal effect between Ankara and Moscow. Although the EU swiftly denounced the July 16, 2016, coup attempt and expressed support for “the democratically elected government, the institutions of the country, and the rule of law,” the perception in Ankara was that Moscow offered more credible political support for Erdoğan and his government, including a personal call from Putin on July 17.⁹ Western calls for restraint rang hollow in the Turkish capital’s corridors while a counternarrative denouncing Europe’s “hostility” emerged.¹⁰

It was in this mindset that, only three weeks after the coup attempt, Erdoğan visited Saint Petersburg. This trip heralded a new era in Türkiye’s relations with Russia, eventually culminating in the delivery of the Russian S-400 air and missile defense system in July 2019—depicted by both sides as the beginning of expanded military-industrial bilateral cooperation. Washington’s ensuing decision in December 2020 to sanction Türkiye and expel it from the F-35 stealth fighter jet production program while denying their sales was a bonus for Russia. This practically upended Ankara’s longstanding plans to modernize an already aging air force, benefitting Russia in terms of the military balance in the Black Sea region and its southern frontier with NATO.

Türkiye and Russia also started to coordinate their actions in northern Syria, where Türkiye happened to be (and remains) in vehement disagreement with its NATO allies, most notably the United States.

In reality, Moscow’s muscular involvement in the Syrian conflict on the side of Bashar Assad’s regime and his Iranian allies was not welcome news for Ankara. It disrupted Türkiye’s plans for regime change—an uncharacteristic and failed foreign policy experiment at the hands of the current Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government. Tensions soared when, at the end of 2015, Türkiye downed a Russian Su-24 fighter jet near the Syrian border after repeated violations of Turkish airspace, an incident characterized by Putin as “a stab in the back.”¹¹ The ensuing crisis in bilateral security relations, accompanied by mutual acrimony and Russian retaliation against Turkish agricultural goods and tourism flows, lasted for about a year. Ultimately, however, despite a number of deadly encounters (three Turkish soldiers were killed in 2017 in a Russian airstrike, and thirty-three more died in 2020 from, according to the Turkish ambassador to the United Nations, an attack involving Russian aircraft flying “in formation” with Syrian jets), Syria gradually evolved into a theater of limited cooperation for the two countries.¹² Moscow and Ankara tacitly recognized their differences and chose to prioritize their shared interests. These common aims included fighting against Islamist radicals, offsetting the growing role of the United States and its Kurdish allies in Syria, and the broader prospect of restricting the regional security role of more distant powers. This marriage of convenience produced concrete results on the ground as well as on the diplomatic front in the form of the Astana process, bringing together Russia, Türkiye, and Iran.¹³

The improved security partnership between Russia and Türkiye in Syria opened the door for a similar model to be applied in other places where Moscow's and Ankara's interests collide. In Libya, Russia and Türkiye found themselves supporting opposite forces in the civil war that followed the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. This confrontation led to direct skirmishes between Türkiye-backed forces and Russian regional partners and proxies such as Wagner Group mercenaries. However, those situations were contained and compartmentalized to prevent the Libyan war from poisoning the broader relationship between Moscow and Ankara. A convenient convergence that helped cement their new closeness emerged during the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Türkiye-backed Azerbaijan recovered large swathes of territory from the Armenia-backed forces of the contested region. Ankara underwrote Baku's swift military victory at the expense of Armenia, Russia's ally in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The Kremlin jumped in to secure an end to hostilities on terms that cemented Azerbaijan's gains and enabled Russia to introduce its peacekeepers, establishing a military footprint in Nagorno-Karabakh while, at the same time, setting up a joint monitoring center with Türkiye to observe the ceasefire.

The security pillar provided a solid basis for the deepening Russian-Turkish relationship, coupled with expanding trade ties that exceeded \$34 billion in 2021—\$28.9 billion in Russian exports to Türkiye (mostly gas, metals, and grain) and \$5.7 billion in imports, dominated by machine tools, agricultural products, and clothes—and strategic investment projects like the Russian-built and -owned Akkuyu nuclear power plant.

That engagement, however, was disrupted by Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022.¹⁴

The war in Ukraine was an unpleasant surprise for Ankara, although Erdoğan knew firsthand of Putin's emotional nature and unpredictability and was cognizant of his obsession with Ukraine. The 2022 invasion presented Türkiye with several tough choices as it tried to balance the competing interests of its various partners and navigate a pragmatic foreign policy course that would put its own interests front and center.

On the one hand, Russia—for reasons previously described—remained an indispensable partner for Türkiye's security and economic prosperity, and Ankara didn't want to antagonize Moscow.

On the other hand, the relationship with Ukraine had acquired a strategic character. Türkiye already had a flourishing economic relationship with Ukraine focused on grain trade. Right before the war, the two countries signed an ambitious free trade agreement, cementing a shared appetite to deepen their partnership.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Ukraine had emerged as a critical partner in developing Türkiye's burgeoning domestic military-industrial complex, where Ankara had a special interest in Soviet-era legacy industrial expertise, particularly in engine technologies.¹⁶ Bilateral defense industry cooperation was booming as Ankara supplied the Ukrainian armed forces with Bayraktar drones (soon to be produced in Ukraine) and began building four of its indigenous Ada-class corvettes for the Ukrainian navy—the first of which is now completed and undergoing sea trials.¹⁷

With the onset of the war, Türkiye was quickly subjected to mounting pressure from the West. As a NATO member, it was already involved in the development of collective defense plans in response to Russia's aggression since 2014, although its underplayed deployments in NATO's deterrence and defense measures on the eastern flank stood in contrast to the country's considerable conventional capabilities.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Washington and its partners began to urge Ankara to curtail its economic ties with Moscow as Türkiye quickly became a conduit for Russian trade amid expanding Western sanctions.

Erdoğan's initial response was to try to hedge his bets and maximize the short-term benefits coming Türkiye's way due to its unique geopolitical position without burning bridges with either Kyiv or Moscow. While condemning Russia's annexation of the Donbas and unlawful aggression against Ukraine, Türkiye refused to join sanctions against Russia. This essentially worked well for both Ankara and Moscow.

In Türkiye's case, Russian-sourced cash flows helped avert a financial crisis during a particularly difficult time of economic downturn and diminished external funding. In the first year of the war, Türkiye became the preferred destination for Russians choosing to relocate, with more than 150,000 residence permits issued to Russian nationals.¹⁹ Newcomers also channeled their money toward the purchase of property in Istanbul and on Türkiye's Mediterranean coast, although this was a mixed blessing as increased demand drove up property prices amid already soaring inflation figures.²⁰

Sustaining functioning relations with Moscow also served a domestic political purpose. For Erdoğan, it was a manifestation of his ability to pursue a more autonomous and assertive foreign policy. A corollary of this was the image of Türkiye rebalancing its foreign policy priorities and sustaining its global relevance at a time when it was frustrated with some of its Western allies and partners. The intended target audiences of this depiction were both international and domestic. Türkiye's cooperation with Russia boosted the narrative around Ankara's ability to stand up to the West, an often-touted assertion for self-aggrandizement on the Turkish domestic political scene that, over the years, has become one of Erdoğan's hallmarks.

Russia also benefitted from sustained ties with Türkiye. The trade turnover between the two countries nearly doubled in 2022 to more than \$60 billion, making Türkiye Russia's second-biggest trading partner after China and a gateway for Russians to the broader world outside of the Western sanctions coalition.²¹ Moscow accrued benefits in the context of crude oil exports and the sale of refined products. Meanwhile, the Vertical Gas Corridor, an extension of the Turk Stream gas pipeline linking Russia and Türkiye, enabled Russia to sustain a demand-driven role in gas supplies to Southeastern Europe by servicing Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia.²²

After initial hesitation, Türkiye branded Russia's aggression against Ukraine an act of war and, under the provisions of the Montreux Convention, proceeded to suspend the transit of military vessels through the Turkish Straits. Non-littoral NATO allies have since not

deployed naval assets in the Black Sea, while Russia has also been unable to bolster its presence by redeploying naval assets from its Baltic and Pacific fleets.²³ That decision has shaped the strategic landscape of the Black Sea to this day.²⁴

Finally, Türkiye successfully offered its good offices for war-related negotiations between Russia, Ukraine, and the West. In March and April 2022, Ankara hosted rounds of face-to-face talks between Russian and Ukrainian delegations.²⁵ Those talks remain the closest Moscow and Kyiv have come to meaningful diplomacy aimed at ending the war. Türkiye facilitated the effort through back-door diplomacy and, on some occasions, attempted to mediate, such as during a meeting of the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers.²⁶ Then, in November 2022, Ankara hosted William Burns and Sergei Naryshkin, the respective heads of the U.S. and Russian foreign intelligence agencies, for a confidential discussion about the risks of nuclear escalation.²⁷ Türkiye—alongside Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar—also instrumentalized its ties to help Russia and Ukraine exchange prisoners of war and soldiers' bodies.

A widely acclaimed grain deal brokered by Türkiye and the United Nations allowed the free transit of Ukrainian and Russian grain to the global markets for one year from July 2022.²⁸ The agreement was vital both for Erdoğan's domestic image and his global leadership ambitions. It was extensively promoted by government controlled outlets and brandished as an achievement only he could have realized.²⁹ After the deal collapsed, Türkiye helped revive an alternative path, this time running along the western shore of the Black Sea, enabling Ukraine to restore its agricultural exports to nearly pre-war levels.

The Energy Dimension

A striking manifestation of Türkiye's entanglement with Russia can also be seen in the energy domain, where the war in Ukraine brought significant challenges along with some important opportunities for Ankara and Moscow.

Türkiye is not endowed with enough natural resources to meet its energy needs and is, therefore, traditionally reliant on imports. Consequently, Ankara has built a wide network of suppliers to meet its coal, natural gas, and oil needs and sustain its economy. Russia plays a central role in this arrangement. But if energy has traditionally been one of the main axes of cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, its importance has increased exponentially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the course of the last two years, Türkiye has become the world's third-largest consumer of Russian fossil fuels.³⁰

Natural gas is a case in point. The first natural gas pipeline between Russia and Türkiye was established as early as 1988 (the now defunct so-called West Line). Two additional pipelines were built later: Blue Stream in 2003 and TurkStream in 2020. The latter consists of two lines of equal capacity, one of which carries gas to Europe via Turkish territory. These pipelines positioned Russia to become Türkiye's top provider of natural gas. In 2022, Moscow catered to almost 40 percent of Ankara's natural gas needs.³¹

Russian oil and coal sales to Türkiye are also strong: between 2021 and 2022, Türkiye doubled its imports from Russia in both categories, jumping from 10.7 to 19.3 million tons in oil products and from 5.2 to 11.3 million tons in coal.³² Oil trade between the two countries hit an all-time record in November 2023 and is set to increase further following a \$1.5 billion deal between Russian oil producer Lukoil and Türkiye's STAR refinery.³³ Of course, Türkiye's "very light regulatory approach" to oil trade with Russia is not isolated.³⁴ China and India have also become top buyers of Moscow's oil products, taking advantage of the low prices and large quantities available on the market following Europe's successive bans against the Kremlin.³⁵ The difference, however, lies in the fact that Türkiye is a longstanding member of the Western security architecture.

Türkiye's rising demand for energy and Russia's need to sell its abundant hydrocarbons despite Western sanctions and derisking policies have essentially shaped a deeper relationship of interdependence between Moscow and Ankara. Continued access to the Turkish energy market has become more important for Russia, while diversification away from this source entails practical and cost-related challenges for Türkiye. The intersection of these two complementary dynamics underpins the logic of enhanced energy cooperation between Russia and Türkiye.

Three additional aspects of this relationship merit attention. First, the current interdependence between Russia and Türkiye is widening into the nuclear domain. Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation (Rosatom) is building Türkiye's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, on the country's Mediterranean coast. As part of this project, scores of Turkish nuclear engineers and technicians are being trained in Russia. When completed, Russia will, in effect, have control over a strategic piece of infrastructure on NATO territory, raising numerous concerns including around security.³⁶ Moreover, talks are underway for the construction of a second nuclear power plant on Türkiye's Black Sea coast, although Ankara is also discussing this with South Korea. Türkiye is separately negotiating with China on a third nuclear power plant envisaged in Thrace, in the country's northwest.³⁷

Second, both governments are acutely aware of the political utility of energy cooperation. Energy politics have long been a lifeline for Putin. In Türkiye, this rather new consideration was on display in the spring of 2023 during Erdoğan's reelection campaign when, amid soaring energy prices and spiralling inflation, he embraced "energy independence" as a campaign slogan.³⁸ This was the caption of two government-sponsored megaprojects specifically inaugurated at that juncture—Türkiye's first onshore natural gas port on the Black Sea coast and the Russian-built and -owned Akkuyu nuclear power plant. Meanwhile, during the same period, Russia made advance transfers to Türkiye to finance the Akkuyu project and agreed to discounted and ruble-based payments for its gas and oil deliveries.³⁹ It also granted Ankara a yearlong deferral on an outstanding natural gas payment of \$600 million. These steps were how the Kremlin used the energy card to bolster the Turkish government's resilience as the latter struggled with a depleted treasury amid rising election-related public spending.

Finally, Ankara's calculations in maintaining a steady energy partnership with Moscow entail a wider geopolitical component. Russia's invasion of Ukraine put Europe on a quest for non-Russian sources of gas and forced the Kremlin to look for new buyers. With Gazprom's transit agreement with Ukraine ending in 2024, the pipelines that go through Türkiye are set to be Russia's last functioning export route to the EU. This gives Ankara important leverage over Russia and could be a relevant factor in Türkiye's aspirations to become a regional energy hub for buying, processing, and selling oil and natural gas from its energy-rich neighbors. While current realities diminish Russia's potential role in this design, Türkiye will presumably factor that possibility into its long-term projections, adding a premium to its current energy cooperation with Russia.

Asymmetrical Leverage

By adopting a pragmatic and self-interested posture amid Russia's war against Ukraine, Ankara was able to gain significant leverage vis-à-vis all parties, including Washington and Moscow. The benefits continue to come Türkiye's way as byproducts of an ongoing war that remains highly unpredictable. Few anticipated, for example, that Finland and Sweden would react to Russia's aggression by joining NATO—by far the strongest manifestation of the changing security paradigm in Europe. By instrumentalizing its veto power on that process, especially in relation to Sweden, Türkiye managed to extract concessions not only from Helsinki and Stockholm but also from Washington

The war has also dramatically shifted the balance of power in Türkiye's bilateral entanglement with Russia. Before the war, Moscow enjoyed more leverage. Since February 24, 2022, however, Ankara has somewhat gained the upper hand. Russia arguably needs cooperation with Türkiye more than the other way around; Moscow currently lacks any good alternatives and is therefore more pliant in the face of Turkish demands.

This explains why, during a critical election period in 2023, Putin promptly met Erdoğan's requests for the previously described substantial financial facilitations. The dynamic was on display during Azerbaijan's military operation against the remaining forces of the Armenia-backed self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. Of course, Moscow's desire to punish Armenia's prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, for his Western overtures was a determining factor in its decision to forfeit the status quo it had traditionally upheld and allow Azerbaijani forces to restore full control over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding, this was also the Kremlin's way of meeting the long-held expectations of Azerbaijan while pleasing its closest ally, Türkiye, thereby investing in a critical relationship in which it had lost its previous advantage.

It goes without saying that this logic only works so long as it doesn't clash with Putin's most immediate military goals and existential interests. For example, Erdoğan convinced Putin to return to the grain deal twice despite Ukrainian attacks on the Kerch bridge connecting Crimea to Russia. But when, in spring 2023, the Kremlin decided that strangling Kyiv's export revenue was more important than staying in the deal, Russia walked out for good. It turned down Ankara's repeated pleas to return to the deal once again. In this instance, Turkish leverage fell short.

There is also the issue of Putin's emotionality regarding certain bilateral issues and its potential to have adverse implications. Erdoğan's decision to release commanders of Ukraine's Azov Brigade, who were supposed to stay in Türkiye until the end of the war, struck a wrong chord with Putin.⁴¹ He silently suspended his visits to Türkiye and cooled his personal ties with Erdoğan. That said, Moscow's reliance on Ankara remains relevant, as does Ankara's upper hand in the relationship.

Going Forward

Putin's fateful war in Ukraine will have a lasting impact on Moscow's ability to be a powerful player both globally and in its immediate neighborhood. This dynamic gives Türkiye important openings and opportunities to boost its ties with the West—and to help Ukraine.

To be sure, Russia is unlikely to be erased as a powerful or at least consequential player from the Eurasian map. With the war in Ukraine becoming increasingly complicated and costly for Kyiv, a scenario in which Russia is militarily defeated seems remote. That leaves the West and Türkiye facing the bleak, medium- to long-term prospect of having to deal with a disruptive and unpredictable Russia, a nuclear power with a vast toolkit to stir trouble that is intent on reconstituting its military capabilities, undermining Ukraine, and punishing U.S. allies.

For these reasons, any leadership in Ankara will be inclined to carefully steer an unconflictual relationship with Russia. By the same token, Russia will always be Russia for Türkiye. In other words, Türkiye's historical experiences and its NATO credentials mean it will always approach its exposure to Russia with a perpetual sense of caution. Recently revealed documents on the Russian navy's predetermined targets for nuclear strikes, entailing a lower than previously believed threshold and including a handful of locations in Türkiye, will confirm Ankara's deep instincts.⁴² This implies that even as Turkish policymakers continue their balancing act and pursue a more independent and self-driven foreign policy that involves engagement with Russia, they will keep their guard. This, in turn, suggests there are opportunities to offset Türkiye's entanglement with Russia and incentivize a better policy alignment with its transatlantic partners.

Three current indicators support this assertion. A gentle realignment between Ankara and Washington (and the West in general) is already in motion. With the debacle over Sweden's (and previously Finland's) NATO accession having been overcome and the F-16 deal with Washington proceeding, albeit slowly, there is certain momentum. Despite fresh cleavages with the United States and several European countries over the war in Gaza and continuing differences on other issues like Syria, Türkiye's leadership is staying the course on restoring the country's political, economic, and security ties with its Western partners. This is mostly the function of realizing its need to break out of self-inflicted isolation from the West and address the current dire economic circumstances that Türkiye finds itself in.

Another indicator is that in every operational theater where they have encountered each other, Türkiye and Russia have pursued diverging—and mostly mutually exclusive—end goals. This is true from Syria to Libya and the South Caucasus. The same dynamic is silently spreading on the African continent, too, where both countries are striving for greater influence. Ankara and Moscow's ability to mask and manage their differences as they prioritize offsetting other shared challenges (like adverse U.S./Western policies in Syria) is a credit to both. Yet, this practical approach is simply a means to an end, which they both consistently define differently. Hence, their cooperation in the security domain is tactically smart and relevant but void of strategic endurance.

Finally, while Türkiye is out on a limb in its current overreliance on fossil fuel supplies from Russia, it is attempting to do so in a calculated fashion. This is corroborated by Türkiye's ongoing efforts to attain flexibility by diversifying its supply sources and expanding its gas storage capacity, as well as its interest in developing private business partnerships with Western actors on small modular reactors (SMRs).⁴³ Ankara's calculation rests on three assumptions: (1) that it can stay on good enough terms with Russia to preclude any arbitrary disruption of energy flows; (2) that Russia can hardly afford to lose the Turkish market under the current circumstances dictated by war and Western sanctions; and (3) that since Russia is building and will own and operate the Akkuyu nuclear power plant and only collect its expenses and revenue in the long term, Türkiye actually carries a smaller proportion of the risk.

Against this complex background in Türkiye's problematic entanglement with Russia, we offer three recommendations for transatlantic policymakers designed to incentivize Ankara's policy alignments and thereby boost the resilience of the Western security architecture: enhanced political engagement, defense industry cooperation, and climate and energy dialogue.

Enhanced Political Engagement

The political foundations of the relationship between Türkiye and the United States and its Western partners need to be revitalized through enhanced dialogue. While this may be difficult, it would be both timely and well worth the effort.

Russia successfully capitalized on the absence of meaningful dialogue between Türkiye and its Western partners in the recent past, but there has been a certain lull in the Russian-Turkish engagement since the start of the war in Ukraine. A carefully articulated Western engagement strategy at this juncture could be impactful and help rebuild a much-needed culture of collaboration. This would also make Western pleas for Türkiye to improve its rule of law and governance standards, which need to be sustained and are necessary for the country's investment climate, more palatable.

Naturally, for this idea to work, Ankara would have to be equally willing to engage. This currently seems to be the case. Türkiye welcomed the EU's first invitation in five years for Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to participate in the Gymnich meeting—an informal ministerial gathering. Türkiye's foreign ministry spokesperson stated that this engagement with the EU should go beyond the Gymnich format and involve “cooperation and dialogue in all fields in a sustainable, predictable and systemic way.”⁴⁴ This is a good sign. It also allows the EU to take the challenge to Türkiye and test its commitment, an approach that seems to have traction even among traditionally skeptical quarters like the Cypriot policymakers.⁴⁵ On the U.S. side, the bilateral U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism provides a similar opportunity for Washington, especially in view of the recently agreed comprehensive agenda for dialogue.⁴⁶ The overriding goal in these engagements should be to focus on coordinated actions that produce tangible results, however small they may be, and to nudge Türkiye back into the fold.

Ideally, these separate lines of effort (involving the EU and the United States) could run in a mutually reinforcing manner by addressing similar aspects of Euro-Atlantic security where all sides have shared interests. Brussels and Washington could coordinate such a strategy. Topics that come to mind are the war in Ukraine and post-conflict contingency planning (including reconstruction efforts), integrated deterrence needs in today's geopolitical landscape, and how to boost security, connectivity, and resilience in the wider Black Sea region.

A complementary idea could be to create an informal Euro-Atlantic security dialogue quartet, including the EU, the United States, Türkiye, and the UK, to consolidate discussions on critical security and defense matters. The difficult topic of Russia sanctions could also be debated here, at least for coordination purposes. More ambitiously and given Türkiye's interest in purchasing Russian energy supplies at the lowest possible cost, the idea of imposing a gas price cap on Gazprom could also make for an interesting debate in such a format.

Increased Defense Industry Cooperation

There is an emerging consensus among the transatlantic community on the need to strengthen the European pillar of the Western security architecture.⁴⁷ Central to this idea is the notion of building stronger European defense capabilities, including reliable and scalable supply chains, the importance of which has become more evident with the war in

Ukraine.⁴⁸ As a militarily capable NATO ally with a thriving defense industry and strong manufacturing capacity, Türkiye can contribute to this effort.⁴⁹ However, existing policy misalignments between Türkiye and some of its allies and EU member states present a problem in building seamless synergies. Türkiye is subject to U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and is unable, in some instances, to satisfy its defense needs from its European allies.⁵⁰ It also lacks a role in supporting EU efforts to supply Ukraine with its defense needs.⁵¹

Today's geopolitical realities warrant a realistic and mutually beneficial path to breaking out of this conundrum. The priority should be to ensure that Türkiye and its Western allies and partners are able to effectively reinforce each other's security.

This will require work on all sides. Türkiye should lead by example and display, in words and deeds, its unwavering commitment to the collective security of the transatlantic family. Its current political leadership should stop flirting with controversial ideas for a NATO ally, like joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and confirm the country's alliance commitments through strong contributions to deterrence and defense measures on the eastern flank. Ankara also needs to signal its readiness to wash its hands of its flagship problem, the Russian-built S-400s. Whether through a sale to a third party or another palatable model for Ankara and Washington that can be worked out behind the scenes, it is time to close this chapter.⁵²

The United States can follow suit by officially declaring its readiness to end CAATSA sanctions and begin technical talks with Ankara (and the related matter of resolving the S-400 problem) in earnest. It should concurrently push forward on the sale and delivery of F-16 fighter jets to Türkiye, while giving positive consideration to Ankara's desire to offset the fighter agreement with a local production element—a tested model with proven success.⁵³ This momentum should open the path to talks on the sale of F-35 stealth fighter jets to Türkiye and be instrumentalized in developing a new and more advanced level of bilateral defense cooperation that aims at achieving complementarity in niche capabilities where Türkiye has made significant advances, like automated weapons systems and different types of emerging and disruptive technologies.⁵⁴

In Europe, any progress on releasing military sales that Türkiye is interested in, like the Eurofighters held up by Germany, would go a long way. So would progress in collaborative efforts involving Türkiye, such as the European Sky Shield Initiative, which is aimed at boosting the continent's missile defense capabilities.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding existing challenges in Türkiye's bilateral relations with several EU members, as well as problems associated with its backsliding on essential criteria expected from EU candidate countries, developments in these areas, coupled with enhanced dialogue on common security challenges, could help rebuild some degree of trust between Ankara and Brussels.

Given its urgency and relevance for European security, designing a realistic way to achieve closer cooperation between Brussels and Ankara in supporting Ukraine would be invaluable. The use of EU funds for the purchase of Turkish defense industry items or Türkiye-led

projects in Ukraine may currently not be possible, but creative solutions—like U.S. or other third-party funding for EU-branded and Türkiye-led or -involved projects—could be contemplated. The image of the EU and Türkiye working together in Ukraine would be a powerful one, not only vis-à-vis Moscow but also for skeptics in both Türkiye and the EU.

Climate and Energy Dialogue

Türkiye will remain reliant on Russian energy, at least to some degree, for the foreseeable future. A realistic way of curbing Ankara's energy entanglement with Russia and thereby boosting the resilience of transatlantic security could be to encourage Ankara to invest more in renewable energies. While the impact of such a policy shift would entail long timelines, Türkiye's indigenous capacity and interest in increasing the proportion of renewables in its energy mix make this an avenue to pursue.

The benefits of this policy shift would be obvious to the EU. If the union is to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels, it will need to rely on its neighbors to increase their supply of green energy. Türkiye is well positioned to play an important role in this scenario. This change of tack would have some indirect benefits for policymakers in Washington, too—for instance, by reducing regional tensions related to the transportation of natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean. After all, it was the United States that terminated the eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline project, a major infrastructure connecting Israel and Greece and excluding Türkiye that Washington stopped supporting in 2022 in favor of a shift “to electricity interconnectors that can support both gas and renewable energy sources.”⁵⁶

However, if climate and energy relations become progressively more important in Türkiye's relations with its Western partners, more robust platforms to discuss these matters with European and U.S. counterparts are needed. The first U.S.- Türkiye Energy and Climate Dialogue met in May 2024. But the EU is yet to resume its EU-Türkiye High-Level Energy Dialogue, which kicked off in 2016 but was suspended in 2019 because of tensions between Ankara and Brussels.⁵⁷ Reopening this channel of dialogue is high on the list of priorities for moving relations forward.

These platforms could catalyze collaborative efforts with support from private businesses and be a useful model of engagement between Türkiye and its European and U.S. partners. They could be used to work toward the long-term objective of accelerating decarbonization. For the United States, this could include the aforementioned cooperation on SMRs. For the EU, this could include the development of new infrastructure to facilitate energy trade, from the creation of new energy interconnectors to regulatory convergence and a study to explore Türkiye's potential as a green hydrogen producer.

In the short term, a deepening dialogue on these issues between Türkiye and its Western allies would also be a useful forum to discuss Ankara's ambition to become a regional gas hub—something that will feature prominently in energy-related talks with its European

counterparts.⁵⁸ Instead of remaining a divisive issue, this file could potentially be utilized to bring Türkiye into the fold. Türkiye will need to be transparent and assuage concerns over the origins of the natural gas that is being imported into the European market, while Europe will be better served by meaningfully engaging Türkiye to gradually build a positive agenda in mutually beneficial energy cooperation.

Finally, another idea could be incentivizing Ankara to implement the oil price cap and a potential natural gas price cap for Russian-origin hydrocarbons. This will allow Ankara to import and even resell Russian oil and gas at a hefty profit, but it will also drive the price down and help decrease the revenue stream for Putin's war machine. This arrangement could be one of the topics for discussion in the previously proposed Türkiye-U.S.-EU-UK quartet format.

Conclusion

Russia will remain Türkiye's consequential neighbor for the foreseeable future, and Turkish policymakers, without exception, can be expected to embrace a pragmatic approach to managing a complex relationship with Moscow.⁵⁹ Sometimes, this will equate to hedging. Yet, the war in Ukraine has also introduced some important convergences between Türkiye and the West. The policy recommendations in this paper could build momentum to capitalize on these alignments and strengthen Türkiye's role as a security provider against Russia.

The fact remains that dealing with a resentful Russia will be a serious challenge for transatlantic security long after the war in Ukraine is finally over. Having Ankara on speaking terms with the hard man in the Kremlin—while still being part of the Western security architecture—will be an asset in managing this problem for years to come.

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This paper is part of a series of four publications in a project run by the Carnegie Endowment's Türkiye and the World Initiative, analyzing the forces at play in the Euro-Atlantic area since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The project examines the European Union's geopolitical evolution, Türkiye's relations with Russia and China, and European and Turkish aspirations for strategic autonomy, and draws conclusions for the United States and the transatlantic partnership.



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