



How Türkiye Navigates Conflict and Power Politics: The War In Ukraine

Dr. Vasileios P. Karakasis

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Address: 2 Andrea Zakou, Office 301, 2404 Engomi, Nicosia, Cyprus.

Tel. +357 22 664470 ■ Email: info@ispd.org.cy ■ www.ispd.org.cy

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Dr. Vasileios P. Karakasis

Research Fellow

About the author

Dr. Vasileios P. Karakasis is a lecturer and researcher in European Studies at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, following a seven-year tenure as a lecturer at Leiden University. He holds a PhD in Governance and Global Affairs from Leiden University. In his dissertation he assessed the impact of gas discoveries within the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Republic of Cyprus on the complication of the Cyprus conflict. He has published articles in peer-reviewed journals on tensions between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea and Greece's bargaining strategy during the economic crisis. His research interests revolve around the European Union's European Neighborhood Policy and EU energy security issues, particularly emphasizing external governance.

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The War In Ukraine

Introduction

In August 2024, the transit of twenty-six passengers through Ankara Esenboğa Airport marked international headlines. American journalists, a former U.S. Marine, and several Russian political dissidents were exchanged with Moscow for eight prisoners convicted in the West¹. This extended prisoner swap, reportedly coordinated by Türkiye's National Intelligence Agency (MIT)², positioned Ankara's sustained diplomatic efforts as a linchpin in this historic exchange and manifested its critical mediating role in the Russian-Ukrainian war³.

Sharing maritime borders with both countries and leveraging its unique geopolitical position, Ankara has employed a form of shuttle diplomacy⁴ to facilitate dialogue and broker agreements among two warring sides with limited communication between them.

From the onset of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, Ankara has carved out a balancing act

Turkish President Erdoğan personally engaged with both Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Zelensky, maintaining open communication channels with both parties. From the onset of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, Ankara has carved out a

¹ Tucker E., Litvinova D. and Lee M. (2024, August 2). 3 newly freed Americans are back on US soil after a landmark prisoner exchange with Russia. Retrieved from Associated Press.

<https://apnews.com/article/russia-gershkovich-whelan-d803e266cb4e60135ec5d668d684529f>

² Hürriyet Daily News (2024, August 1) "Türkiye coordinates historic prisoner exchange between US, Russia". <https://www.hurriyetcailynews.com/us-and-russia-reportedly-agree-on-historic-prisoner-swap-amid-election-year-stakes-199108>

³ Outzen R. (2024, August 2). Turkey's linchpin role in the Russia prisoner swap offers a lesson. Retrieved from Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/turkeys-linchpin-role-in-the-russia-prisoner-swap-offers-a-lesson/>

⁴ Shuttle diplomacy refers to a negotiation method in which a mediator travels back and forth between warring parties who are unwilling to engage in direct communication or fear that such interaction might be counterproductive. The essence of shuttle diplomacy lies in the use of a third party to relay information between the parties, providing a reliable channel of communication that is less vulnerable to the performative aspects of face-to-face or media-based exchanges. For more details see Brahm. E & Burgess H. (2003, November). Shuttle Diplomacy. Retrieved from Beyond Intractability.

https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/shuttle_diplomacy

balancing act; on the one hand condemning Russia's invasion and supporting militarily Ukraine's sovereignty; and on other refraining from following the West in imposing sanctions on Moscow enabling the latter to gain crucial access to global trade and markets⁵. Just two weeks into the war and on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum⁶, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu hosted the first high-level meeting between Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministers. Ukraine requested a 24-hour ceasefire to allow humanitarian aid and evacuations, particularly in Mariupol; the talks, nonetheless, reached an impasse and Russian airstrikes on the city continued.

In this report, we examine two of Türkiye's mediation efforts in the war—the Istanbul Communique and the Black Sea Grain Initiative—analyze the strategic rationale behind its balancing act and assess its future prospects.

Some background information

Despite the failed negotiations in Antalya, Türkiye had emerged as a key venue for dialogue, a development potentially attributed to its balanced relations with both Russia and Ukraine. On one side, Russia was the main natural gas supplier for Türkiye via the TurkStream pipeline; both countries have been engaged in bilateral trade in sectors such as construction, tourism, and agriculture. Türkiye is Russia's largest trade partner in the MENA region. Notably, despite being a NATO member, Türkiye purchased the Russian S-400 missile defense system⁷—an unprecedented move within the alliance that signaled its strategic autonomy and triggered the US reaction by expelling Ankara from the 5th generation F-35 fighter program, an essential acquisition to renew its air force and maintain air superiority over its rivals in the region. Despite diverging interests of the two

⁵ Coskun A. (2025, February 20). If Russia and Ukraine make peace, Turkey can help sustain it. Retrieved from GIS Reports. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkey-russia-ukraine/>

⁶ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022, March 10). Türkiye-Russia-Ukraine Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting, 10 March 2022. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-rusya-ukrayna-uclu-disisleri-bakanlari-toplantisi--10-mart-2022.en.mfa>

⁷ Gumrukcu, T & Toksabay E. (2017, December 29). Turkey, Russia sign deal on supply of S-400 missiles. Retrieved from Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles/turkey-russia-sign-deal-on-supply-of-s-400-missiles-idUSKBN1EN0T5/>

countries in Syria and Libya where they supported opposing sides, they coordinated efforts in other conflict zones, most recently in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Erdoğan and Putin have allegedly maintained a close personal rapport, which facilitated direct communication, a crucial element amid a period of turbulence and uncertainty.

On the other side, Türkiye had supplied Ukraine with Bayraktar TB2 drones⁸, which were notably effective during the early stages of the war. Additionally, Ankara consistently advocated Ukraine's territorial integrity and refused to recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea⁹. Finally, in line with the Montreux Convention of 1936, Türkiye had closed off the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian warships limiting Russia's ability to move ships from its other fleets to the Black Sea¹⁰.

The Istanbul Negotiations

Given those parameters, the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Mariupol¹¹ combined with the unexpectedly slow pace of Russian advances at that time, opened the "window" to explore alternatives to prolonged warfare. For some analysts, it appeared as a critical juncture for the termination of the war. By late March 2022, Türkiye convened negotiations in Istanbul, resulting in the Istanbul Communique, initially perceived as a breakthrough. Though the strategic merit of the terms stipulated in the Communique was

 The Ukrainian delegation declared its intention to assign Türkiye a guarantor role¹ in any future post-war security architecture for Ukraine.

⁸ Reuters (2022, April 8). Russia complains to Turkey over drones sales to Ukraine

⁹ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025, March 16) No: 55, 16 March 2025, Regarding the Eleventh Anniversary of the Illegal Annexation of Crimea. https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-55_-kirim-in-yasa-disi-ilhakinin-on-birinci-yil-donumu-hk.en.mfa

¹⁰ Mongilio H. (2022, February 28). Turkey closes Bosphorus, Dardanelles Straits to Warships. Retrieved from US Naval Institute. <https://news.usni.org/2022/02/28/turkey-closes-bosphorus-dardanelles-straits-to-warships.org/2022/02/28/turkey-closes-bosphorus-dardanelles-straits-to-warships>

¹¹ Civilians sheltering in basements without access to running water, electricity, heating, or medical care

questionable for Ukraine¹², the Ukrainian delegation declared its intention to assign Türkiye a guarantor role¹³ in any future post-war security architecture for Ukraine.

The Istanbul Communiqué, shared with *The New York Times* by a Ukrainian negotiator¹⁴, proposed granting Ukraine “permanent neutrality”. It outlined a mechanism in which other states—including the permanent members of the UN Security Council with Russia among them—would intervene militarily if Ukraine were attacked again, a concept the Ukrainian side framed as analogous to NATO’s Article 5. Russia would be treated as a neutral security “guarantor state,” in line with the Minsk II Accords, which did not recognize Russia as a belligerent¹⁵. Ukraine would not be allowed to host foreign military exercises in its territory, airspace, waters, or exclusive economic zone without prior consent from the guarantor powers, including China and Russia. The status of Crimea was to be resolved over 10 to 15 years, during which Ukraine would refrain from attempting to retake the peninsula by force¹⁶. Finally, Kyiv would also have been forced to grant Russian the status of official state language¹⁷.

A combination of inherent flaws in the deal and external developments led to the failure of the Communiqué. The proposal hinged on binding security guarantees from third-party states, such as the US, UK, and Türkiye without the latter making any concrete

¹² Dickinson P. (2024, November 5). Putin’s 2022 ‘peace proposal’ was a blueprint for the destruction of Ukraine. Retrieved from Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-2022-peace-proposal-was-a-blueprint-for-the-destruction-of-ukraine/>

¹³ Kazanci H. & Turan I. (2022, March 29-30). Ukraine wants countries, including Türkiye, as security guarantors. Retrieved from Anadolu Agency. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/ukraine-wants-countries-including-turkiye-as-security-guarantors/2549218>

¹⁴ Troianovski A., Entous, A & Schwirtz M. (2024, June 15). Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever. But in 2022 They Were Talking. Retrieved from New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/06/15/world/europe/ukraine-russia-ceasefire-deal.html>

¹⁵ Institute for the Study of War (2025, February 24). Fact Sheet: Istanbul Protocol Draft Document of April 15, 2022. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/fact-sheet-istanbul-protocol-draft-document-april-15-2022>

¹⁶ Institute for the Study of War (2025, February 24).

¹⁷ Dickinson P. (2024, November 5). Putin’s 2022 ‘peace proposal’ was a blueprint for the destruction of Ukraine

commitments; such an omission would undermine the credibility of Ukraine's neutrality. It is also doubtful whether the Russian delegation was genuinely committed to reaching a settlement and honoring it¹⁸ or merely utilized the talks as a pause or "window" to regroup and relaunch the then stalled offensives. Moreover, in the weeks that followed

Their dominance in Türkiye's grain supply chain explains why the latter's active involvement in restoring maritime grain shipments from both countries was more than urgent.

the failed talks, Western-supplied arms began flowing into Ukraine, and its forces launched counteroffensives, which in turn, shifted to some extent the military balance in Kyiv's favor. This likely strengthened Ukraine's resolve to prioritize a military over a diplomatic solution. That shift should also be understood in light of the national mood at the time: the discovery of atrocities committed by

Russian forces in Bucha inflamed public discourse in Kyiv, rendering negotiations politically untenable.

The Black Sea Grain Deal

Both Russia and Ukraine are among the world's most significant producers of agricultural commodities. Both are net exporters and key suppliers of foodstuffs and fertilizers to global markets, where exportable supplies are often concentrated in just a few countries¹⁹. As a result, such high concentrations heighten the vulnerability of the food markets to shocks and volatility, vividly illustrated by the disruption caused by the Russian invasion. Although much of Ukraine's grain infrastructure remained moderately intact, maritime access was effectively blocked by sea mines and Russian naval dominance in the

¹⁸ Umland A. (2024, August 13). "Opinion: Were the Istanbul peace talks a missed opportunity for Ukraine". Retrieved from Kyiv Independent: <https://kyivindependent.com/opinion-were-the-istanbul-peace-talks-a-missed-opportunity-for-ukraine/>

¹⁹ Food Agriculture Organization (2022, June 10). The Importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for Global Agricultural Markets and the Risks associated with the war in Ukraine. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/bd0267ca-75a6-44d6-a387-7ebeb150630d/content>

Black Sea (especially after the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea), with several ports²⁰ and grain terminals²¹ being either occupied or destroyed²². Russia and Ukraine collectively account for 98-99% of Turkey's imported milling wheat and 95% of its corn and barley imports²³. Their dominance in Türkiye's grain supply chain explains why the latter's active involvement in restoring maritime grain shipments from both countries was more than urgent.

Amid accusations by the World Food Program (WFP) chief²⁴ that Russia was "weaponizing" food exports²⁵, and with food prices surging alongside the threat of famine in lower-income countries, Ankara began hosting talks in April 2022 to address the disruption of maritime grain shipments from Ukraine and Russia. Backed by the UN, these efforts culminated in the July 2022 launch of the *Black Sea Grain Initiative*. According to this agreement, Türkiye -leveraging its location and controlling access to and from the Black Sea via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits- would oversee inspections of merchant vessels navigating demined corridors in the Black Sea, ensuring safe passage for grain exports from Ukrainian ports²⁶. A Joint Coordination Centre (JCC) was established in Istanbul on July 27, 2022²⁷, comprising representatives from Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, and

²⁰ Berdyansk, Kherson, Mariupol, and Skadovsk

²¹ Such as the one in Mykolaiv

²² OECD (2022, July 11) Dealing with the War's Impacts on Ukraine's Ports: How to Get More Grain to the World. Retrieved from International Transport Forum of OECD. <https://www.itf-oecd.org/sites/default/files/ukraine-black-sea-ports.pdf>

²³ Miller Magazine (2025, February 19). Turkish flour millers face rising competition from Russia and Egypt. <https://millermagazine.com/blog/turkish-flour-millers-face-rising-competition-from-russia-and-egypt-6068>

²⁴ De Oliveira A. O (2022, May 28). Fact check: Are food supplies being weaponized?. Retrieved from Deutsche Welle. <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-is-hunger-being-used-as-a-weapon-in-the-ukraine-war/a-61955916>

²⁵ "Many countries depend on our supplies for their food security...It turns out that our food is our quiet weapon...Quiet but ominous." This is what former Russian president and senior security official Dmitry Medvedev wrote on his Telegram channel on April 1, confirming those statements. De Oliveira A. O (2022, May 28). Fact check: Are food supplies being weaponized?.

²⁶ Such as Odessa, Chornomorsk, and Yuzhny/Pivdennyi

²⁷ United Nations. (n.d). Black Sea Grain Initiative | Joint Coordination Centre | United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative>

the UN. The JCC would monitor ship movements, enforce safety protocols, and inspect vessels for unauthorized cargo.

In line with Ankara's shuttle diplomacy, the initiative consisted of two parallel agreements: Ukraine signed one with Turkey and the UN, while Russia signed an equivalent deal with the same parties, thereby circumventing direct negotiations between the two belligerents. During its operational period (July 2022–July 2023), the initiative enabled the export of over 33 million metric tons of grain from Ukraine, helping to stabilize global food prices and prevent acute shortages in vulnerable regions such as Africa and the Middle East²⁸, while keeping Ukraine's agricultural economy afloat in the midst of war.

Several international leaders and organizations publicly acknowledged President Erdoğan and Türkiye's pivotal role in mediating the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Indicatively, UN Secretary-General expressed profound gratitude, characterizing it as a beacon of hope and relief for the world²⁹. Similarly, on the margins of a G-20 meeting in New Delhi, former US President Biden expressed his appreciation to President Erdoğan for his efforts to keep the Black Sea Grain Initiative alive, agreeing on its critical role to improve global food security³⁰.

Nonetheless, these aspirations would not materialize. More than a year after its operation, Russia announced its withdrawal from the agreement, invoking stalled

²⁸ Wintour P. (2023, July 20). What was the Black Sea grain deal and why did it collapse?. Retrieved from The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/20/what-was-the-black-sea-grain-deal-and-why-did-it-collapse>

²⁹ UN (2022, July 22). Black Sea Grain Initiative 'a Beacon of Hope, Relief' for World, Says Secretary General, as War Continues in Ukraine. https://press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21381.doc.htm?utm_source

³⁰ The White House (2022, November 15). Readout of President Biden's Meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Türkiye. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/15/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkiye/>

progress on its demands³¹. Although these initiatives have not yielded tangible results, Ankara's crucial mediating role has been widely recognized.

Deciphering the strategic rationale behind the balancing act

While Ankara's motivations remain somewhat opaque, we assume that a range of geostrategic and economic considerations underlie its involvement.

- *Black Sea as a "Russian lake"*

One of Russia's apparent military objectives was to secure control over Ukraine's Black Sea coastline, effectively cutting off the country's maritime access. With the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia's coastline expanded to cover 25% of the sea's total shorefront, nearly matching that of Türkiye. This enabled Moscow to enhance its naval capabilities, project power southward, and shift the strategic balance in its favor, emerging as the dominant maritime power in the region at Türkiye's expense. The shifting balance has likely revived long-standing Turkish concerns about the Black Sea turning into a "Russian lake."³² These concerns were explicitly voiced by President Erdoğan almost a decade ago, on the margins of the Balkan Security Conference in Istanbul, where he

³¹ Namely, the reopening of the Tolyatti-Pivdennyi ammonia pipeline- the world's longest ammonia pipeline, stretching approximately 2500 kilometers and linking Togliatti in Russia to the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Odesa, idle since February 2022 in the aftermath of the Russian invasion in Ukraine- and the reinstatement of Russian agricultural banks' access the SWIFT banking system to finance food and fertilizers transactions. See for more information Glauber J., McNamara B. and Olivetti E. (2023, July 20). Russia terminates the Black Sea Grain Initiative: What's next for Ukraine and the world?. Retrieved from IFPRI. <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/russia-terminates-black-sea-grain-initiative-whats-next-ukraine-and-world/>

³² Gavin G. (2023, August 30). Russia and Turkey vie over Black Sea, as Erdoğan prepares to visit Putin. Retrieved from Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/black-sea-russia-turkey-ukraine-war/> and Kucera J. (2016, May 12). Erdogan, In Plea To NATO, Says Black Sea Has Become "Russian Lake". Retrieved from Eurasianet. <https://eurasianet.org/erdogan-plea-nato-says-black-sea-has-become-russian-lake>

endorsed Romanian calls for a permanent NATO fleet in the Black Sea to counter Russia³³—marking a departure from Türkiye’s traditional policy of limiting NATO presence in the sea in accordance with the 1936 Montreux Convention³⁴.

- *Energy dependence on Russian gas as a curse and a blessing*

Energy geopolitics is also shaping Ankara’s moves on the chessboard. Despite its post-2022 diversification efforts, its economy remains heavily reliant on Russian gas. Long-term infrastructure ties—such as TurkStream (31 bcm/year), which supplies both the domestic and European markets, and Blue Stream (16 bcm/year)³⁵, which serves Türkiye directly—manifest the depth of this dependence. Following the collapse of the Nord Stream and Yamal-Europe pipeline, and the shutdown of Russian gas transit through Ukraine in January 2025, TurkStream has become Russia’s primary westward conduit³⁶ and the only operational pipeline delivering Russian gas directly to European markets³⁷. This development, combined with Türkiye’s sophisticated pipeline network, shown in Figure 1 below,

In effect, while reliance on Moscow limits Ankara’s freedom of maneuver, it simultaneously strengthens its leverage vis-à-vis the European energy market

³³ Chiriac M. (2016, February 2). Romania Calls for Permanent NATO Black Sea Force. Retrieved from Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/02/02/romania-calls-for-permanent-nato-black-sea-force-02-01-2016-1/>

³⁴ Demirtas S. (2014, April 7). Turkey under NATO and Russia Pressure. Retrieved from Hurriyet Daily News. <https://www.hurriyetsdailynews.com/opinion/serkan-demirtas/turkey-under-nato-and-russia-pressure-over-black-sea-64579>

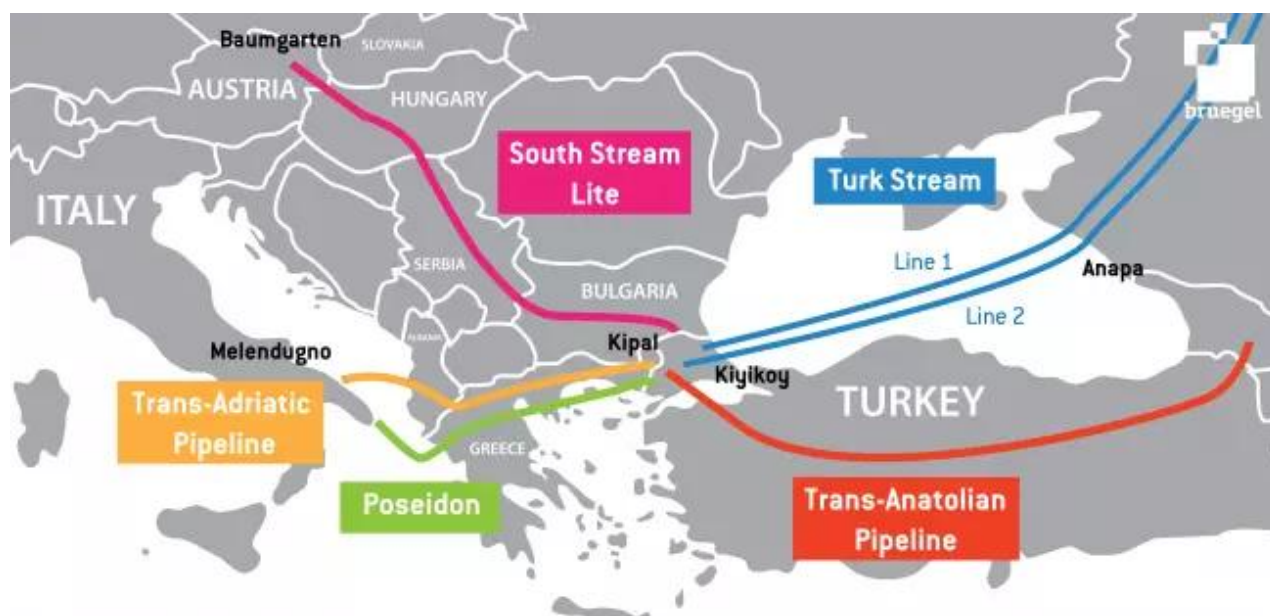
³⁵ It is important to note, however, that according to the Turkish Minister of Energy, the longstanding contract between the state-owned company BOTAŞ and Russia’s Gazprom—allowing the import of 16 bcm per year via the Blue Stream pipeline—is one of the key agreements set to expire in 2025. Additionally, BOTAŞ imports 5.75 bcm per year of Russian gas through the TurkStream pipeline under annual, quarterly, and monthly spot deals, which are also set to expire at the end of 2025. For more details see O’ Byrne D. (2024, October 11). Turkey nearing 'critical' phase in gas supply arrangements: minister. Retrieved from S&P Global. <https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/natural-gas/101124-turkey-nearing-critical-phase-in-gas-supply-arrangements-minister>

³⁶ Francesco Sassi (2025, January 14). The “Failed” Attack Against on TurkStream Fuels Energy War Propaganda. Retrieved from Eklpix Research. <https://research.eklipx.io/article/1368>

³⁷ Intellinews (2025, January 13). TurkStream is now the only route for Russian gas to Europe. <https://www.intellinews.com/turkstream-is-now-the-only-route-for-russian-gas-to-europe-361174/>

(including TANAP that channels Azeri gas to European markets) and its control of the Straits, enhances Ankara's geopolitical significance while further entrenching its energy security within Moscow's strategic orbit. At the same time, it enables Ankara to bolster its role as a gas transit state, as demonstrated during its 2024 mediation in Slovakia's gas crisis³⁸. In effect, while reliance on Moscow limits Ankara's freedom of maneuver, it simultaneously strengthens its leverage vis-à-vis the European energy market—rendering the balancing act not only a necessity but also a diplomatic asset. This interdependence, nonetheless, is further complicated by Russia's build-own-operate model at the Akkuyu nuclear plant³⁹, which raises security concerns over Russian control of critical infrastructure near NATO assets.

Figure 1: The pipeline network of Turkey



Source: Tagliapietra, Simon. "Beyond Nord Stream 2: a look at Russia's Turk Stream project." Bruegel Institute, July 4, 2018. <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/beyond-nord-stream-2-look-russias-turk-stream-project>.

³⁸ Kenez L. (2025, January 22). Turkey to position itself as potential Russian gas transit hub for Europe despite sanctions. Retrieved from Nordic Monitor. <https://nordicmonitor.com/2025/01/turkey-to-position-itself-as-potential-russian-gas-transit-hub-for-europe-despite-sanctions/>

³⁹ and the prospect to build a four-reactor plant in Sinop on the Black Sea coast, just across from Ukraine's Russian-occupied Crimean peninsula

- *De-coding a fragmented world order*

This balancing act may mirror Türkiye's reading of a fragmented, re-emerging global order—one that is increasingly multipolar and less Western-centric, with bloc dynamics and great-power rivalries reasserting themselves⁴⁰. In such world, Türkiye navigates between alliance obligations -that dictate compliance- and pragmatic deal-making, which occasionally entails crossing established lines. Despite global polarization, few states maintain influence across divides with Türkiye being one of them. On the one hand, it

Despite global polarization, few states maintain influence across divides with Türkiye being one of them.

remains a committed NATO member, having surpassed the 2 % GDP defense spending threshold and providing substantial military support to Ukraine. Simultaneously, as a non-Western power, Türkiye appeals to states critical or suspicious of U.S. and EU-led initiatives⁴¹, broadening the potential base for peace efforts beyond traditional alliances. This dual positioning enables Türkiye's frequent

diplomatic interventions—including in the Caucasus, Bosnia Herzegovina, Libya, and, less successfully, the Gaza crisis—underscoring its pursuit of stability in the European neighborhood through cross-cutting engagement⁴². Through this approach, Türkiye positions itself as an indispensable interlocutor in emerging security frameworks.

● Momentum may be shifting in Türkiye's favor. Ankara is likely capitalizing on growing European concerns over a diminished U.S. security presence, seeking to assert itself as a key geopolitical actor filling in the vacuum that emerges from this development

⁴⁰ Galip Dalay (2022, May 20). Deciphering Turkey's Geopolitical Balancing and Anti-Westernism in Its Relations with Russia". Retrieved from Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C35/>

⁴¹ Haznedaroglu T. K (2025, March 1) Key mediator: Türkiye's diplomacy at heart of Russia-Ukraine talks. Retrieved from Daily Sabah. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/key-mediator-turkeyes-diplomacy-at-heart-of-russia-ukraine-talks>

⁴² Outzen R. (2024, August 2). Turkey's linchpin role in the Russia prisoner swap offers a lesson. Retrieved from Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/turkeys-linchpin-role-in-the-russia-prisoner-swap-offers-a-lesson/>

Future Prospects

This point gains traction in debates about the future of European security architecture⁴³. On one hand, Ankara encounters consistent Western criticism for its balancing posture toward Russia. Its initial resistance to Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, and its continued possession of the Russian-made S-400 missile system, reinforce doubts about its long-term alignment with the West. On the other hand, President Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan have argued that Europe must integrate Türkiye into a "sustainable and deterrent" security framework⁴⁴, calling for a recalibration of the EU's strategic compass. Rather than offering Türkiye selective, 'à la carte' involvement, they note that a more coherent and inclusive partnership⁴⁵ would align better with long-term strategic interests, as noted by a Türkiye's official in conversation with Reuters⁴⁶.

Momentum may be shifting in Türkiye's favor. Ankara is likely capitalizing on growing European concerns over a diminished U.S. security presence, seeking to assert itself as a key geopolitical actor filling in the vacuum that emerges from this development. The election of Donald Trump has revived EU debates on strategic autonomy (illustrated through its newly established ReArm Europe) and the bloc's capacity to act independently in defense. EU leaders, unsettled by Trump's potential rapprochement with Russia, are urgently seeking alternatives to U.S. guarantees—particularly for Ukraine. This creates a window for Türkiye to engage more substantively in Europe's security framework, despite ongoing concerns over its democratic backsliding, tensions with Greece and Cyprus, and its stalled EU accession process. The broader shift toward reducing dependency on

⁴³ Yesiltas M. (2025, March 1). Shaping Europe's security architecture: With or without Türkiye. Retrieved from Daily Sabah. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/shaping-europes-security-architecture-with-or-without-turkiye>

⁴⁴Gumrukcu T. (2025, March 13). Turkey could be vital partner as Europe, Ukraine seek new security framework. Retrieved from Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/turkey-could-be-vital-partner-europe-ukraine-seek-new-security-framework-2025-03-13/>

⁴⁵ such as through its participation in the European Peace Facility for instance

⁴⁶ Gumrukcu T. (2025, March 13). Turkey could be vital partner as Europe,

External powers may position Türkiye as a valuable—but complex—partner in Europe’s evolving defense landscape.
