



## On Ankara's Strategic Activism: A Reappraisal of the Turkey–United States Alliance

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the Turkey–United States relations on the eve of the changing international system, giving emphasis on the Ukraine War and the results of Russia's strategic behavior. Starting from core assumptions of Alliance Theory, this study aims to reappraise the framework in which Ankara–Washington relations evolve in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the newly arisen balance of power. Essentially, the current paper focuses on Turkey's role with regard to regional crises – including the Ukraine War – and consequently examines the prospects, as well as any opportunities and challenges the new situation poses to Ankara's geostrategy. It aims to give emphasis on Turkey's strategic behavior in parallel with the bloody evolutions in Ukraine and Russia's operational as well as diplomatic maneuvers, since Turkish strategy seems to be in transition especially in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquake in its southern and central regions and northern and western Syria.

**Keywords:** Turkey's Foreign Policy, Ukraine War, US Strategy, Alliance Theory, Geopolitics, Greater Middle East, Strategic Commitment.

## Introduction

The overall geopolitical importance of Turkey has set the limits of the US–Turkey strategic partnership, diachronically and hence, it could not be read one-dimensionally, since these limits are influenced by the evolutions in global level, as well as the challenges Russia's invasion in Ukraine poses. Besides, it is broadly accepted that Turkey's geopolitical positioning represents a mixed blessing, in a way that it is evaluated as an asset for gains in the diplomatic arena and, at the same time, as a cause for pressure on Ankara's strategic autonomy and a stake towards its ambition to get more powerful, changing its status both in its periphery and globally. Turkey is geopolitically important since it is a borderland state with a transregional role, a historical, cultural, strategic “bridge” between East and West, with a crucial role in relation to European security, the center of “security geometries” or new alliances in critical regions and thus, it is also geostrategically important facilitating Great Powers' influence implementation and power projection in the Greater Middle East.

Therefore, for many years, “Turkey's leaders liked to present their country to the Western powers as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East and Central Asia, but there was a risk that Western Europe might prefer to see it as a barrier against a hostile ‘other’, left outside European structures. In the absence of closer ties with Western Europe, this line of argument suggested that Turks would look elsewhere for new areas of opportunity, such as those in the newly independent states of Central Asia and the Black Sea, although the bilateral relationship with the US would continue, and even strengthen” (Hale W., 2003, 193).

In theoretical terms, the US–Turkey dipole sets multiple challenges to the analysis. On the one hand, convergence of interests and threat co-perception represent the two core assumptions

committing allies strategically to each other (see indicatively: Walt S., 1987; Snyder G., 1997). On the other hand, the ongoing evolutions signify Turkey's exceptional geopolitical positioning and they seem to verify the country's distinctive importance in the margins of how West implements its long-term strategy vis-à-vis Russia and the rest continental Eurasian powers in centuries. Besides, Turkey has always played a pivotal role in the Eurasian fermentations and especially, it has been defined as an important determinant factor when examining the framework in which the West approaches – apart from the Middle East and North Africa – the Black Sea region, the Caucasus, the Caspian region and profoundly, Russia.

On this line of thought, Turkey's strategic ambitions are discussed vis-à-vis the US relevant prioritizations in the Eurasian perimeter. Under the lens of the current evolutions – especially the Ukraine War – this debate becomes even more important, representing the crux of the matter with regard to peace and stability in the Greater Middle East. Besides, according to Stephen Larrabee and Ian Lesser, “under Atatürk – and for several decades after his death – Turkey eschewed involvement in the Middle East, but in recent years Turkey has been heavily engaged in the region” (Larrabee S. and Lesser I., 2003, 3–4).

### Turkey's Broad Strategic Ambitions

The Turkish ambition towards geopolitical upgrade is summarized through the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's words on how Turkey envisions its strategic role at the core of Eurasian landmass: “The residents of this particular region do not have the luxury of just sitting back and being spectators of the world stage. Either we will be the subject of world politics, or the object. A Turkish Commonwealth would enable us to play a more active and efficient role in international forums, protect the interests of our people, and contribute to peace and stability in our region” (Katik M., 2016).

Turkey's crucial geopolitical positioning is underlined in terms of changing correlations in the Arctic. As it has been noted: "Turkey's role as a power of containment of the Soviet/Russian descent on the Eastern Mediterranean is gradually being replaced with the new role of a 'battering ram' against Mackinder's Eurasian geographical core" (Troulis M., Sarlis M. and Domatioti, X., 2022, 203). According to Ioannis Th. Mazis: "The Zone of the Arctic Circle [...] is beginning to create a new commercial route for the transportation of Russian products [...] Turkey does not have the same strategic importance [...] This means that Turkey is obliged to invent, create and claim a new 'geopolitical uniqueness', which will be able to offer her the equivalent "geostrategic uniqueness". It is for this reason that Turkey discovered neo-Ottomanism [...] This is the only way for Turkey to rise as an absolutely 'necessary' ally of the Special Relationship and to hope that it can become the new hegemonic regional power with regards to the oil and gas deposits of the Middle East" (Mazis I. Th. and Mpafouta V., 2014, 16–17).

To this end, Turkey has prioritized the implementation of a multidimensional foreign policy so as to become an equal partner of the Great Powers and in this way, to increase its strategic gains. Besides, "Turkey follows an integrated policy which collects all foreign policy areas and issues into a single picture of policy formulation" (Aras B., 2009, 8). Nevertheless, Turkey's strategic behavior is not exclusively related with a critique to the country's one-sided diachronic dependence on the US and the NATO, but it encapsulates all those structural factors pushing the political elite to look for a geopolitical upgrade profoundly at the expense of other US allies in the periphery and even through a closer relationship with antagonist, towards the West, powers of the Greater Middle East.

According to Ahmet Davutoğlu, "one of the most important factors of instability in the post-Cold War era is this geopolitical and geo-strategic vacuum. The end of bipolarity in the system of alliances has diminished inter-Super Power tension, but brought about a huge vacuum in the geo-strategically very important zone where the Heartland and Rimland intersect. A vast percentage of the military and political crises in the post-Cold War era are in this zone where the passes from the Heartland to the Rimland (e.g. The Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia) and the choke points of the coasts of the Rimland (e.g. The Persian Gulf and Bab el-Mandeb/Red Sea) are located" (Davutoğlu A., 1998, 6).

Since the end of the Cold War, "the foreign relations of Turkey, and the Ottoman Empire before her, have been in the large part, governed since the eighteenth century by the attempts of the Russians to gain control of the Straits, and the efforts of Britain and France (and lately the United States) to stop them" (Aydin M., 2004, 6). It is more than obvious that this is the crux of the matter when analyzing the Turkey-US tensions often approaching a rupture; i.e. that Turkey has expressed its will to be an autonomous strategic actor, not necessarily and one-sidedly serving the western interests at all fronts. Besides, Turkey's tensions with Israel during the last 14 years – in the aftermath of the Davos meeting and the Erdoğan-Peres heated exchange – have been indicative considering this point of view, since Israel symbolizes the western geostrategic presence in the region and the overall hatred of the Muslim World against the West.

The afore-mentioned strategic logic and Ankara's consequent new prioritizations have been perceived as achievable during the last

decade by the Turkish elite with a specific mainly systemic-level reasoning. Firstly, the post-Cold War strategic environment diminished Turkey's major threat as this was posed by the USSR, an evolution opening a "window of opportunity" for the expansion of Turkish influence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the post-soviet republics. Secondly, the collapse of Yugoslavia in the Balkans and the strategic decline of Iraq in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Gulf War, also, allowed Turkey to dynamically intervene in the relevant regions on behalf of Turkish, Turkic or Muslim minorities. Thirdly, the so-called "Arab Spring" let Syria at a status of a weakened actor not able to defend decisively its northern territories, an evolution permitting Erdoğan to handle the Kurdish separatism more effectively (Sarlis M., 2023). Fourthly, the Turkish GDP approached a sixfold rise in 30 years; from 150 billion dollars in 1990 to more than 800 billion dollars in 2022, while in 2013 it had advanced nearly to 1 trillion dollars (Trading Economics, 2023). Fifthly, Greece faced a colossal economic crisis after 2010 which limited decisively its military expenditure while, at the same time, Turkey developed its defense industry to an extent that Turkey's arms exports comprise 1.1 percent of all global arms exports. Essentially, Turkey grew its arms exports by 69 percent in just four years; from 2018 to 2022 (Buyuk H. F., 2023).

### A New Strategic Conception in Turkey

The above-mentioned remarks were identified with a change of strategic perception, regarding balance of power, in between Turkish decision-makers and came to adjust to a new conception regarding Ankara's geopolitical role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence, Turkey considered it was a suitable historical phase to acquire broader gains and greater US commitments to its strategic ambitions, exploiting Washington's need to buckpass some of its operational burden in the Greater Middle East to pivotal allies, since the US have set as a clear priority the balancing of China's rise in Australasia and the Pacific (see indicatively: Troulis M., 2019).

Struggling to avoid the stalemate of an overexpansion, the US make efforts to find willing and capable enough allies to act for the sake of western interests in Europe and the Greater Middle East, where the US projection of power has decreased during the last 20 years; "the focus has been increasingly on the Asia-Pacific region. This emphasis is reflected in the Defense Department's January 2012 'strategic guidance' document, which states that, 'US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia'. The White House has been trying to pivot the US strategic gaze from Europe (and the Middle East) to China and Asia, in an effort for the US to become the central power broker in China's external relations in Asia [...] Leon Panetta [the US former Secretary of Defense] said the US would deploy 60 percent of its naval assets in the Asia-Pacific and 40 percent in the Atlantic – from the previous 50:50 division" (Ifantis K., 2023, 4–5).

This buckpassing priority, bringing back to minds the Nixon Doctrine of the Cold War era, was seen as another window of opportunity for Turkey at the level of international balance of interests. The same determinant factors seem to explain the current changes in Turkey's tactics, since the earthquake of February 2023, the continuing fall of lira and Ankara's ongoing disappointments with regard to the modernization of its air force with new F16 fighters – following the country's exclusion from the F35 program

due to its insistence in purchasing the Russia-made S400 missile systems – have provoked a reconsideration of its stance at least for now. To put it bluntly, Turkey struggles to gain time in order to try to restore its relations with western powers and especially the US, since it looks for a new broadened geopolitical positioning but, at the same time, it is located at Nicholas Spykman's Eurasian perimeter where Anglo-Saxon strategic sensitivities are exceptional and diachronically profound.

### The Ukraine War

The US strategic prioritizations vis-à-vis Turkey have become urgent in the aftermath of Russia's invasion in Ukraine and thus, the war explains a rapid transition in Turkey's tactics. The public rhetoric is merely anti-western and anti-NATO concerning Turkey's neighbourhood, but the tactics, in terms of foreign policy maneuvers, reveal Ankara's steady direction. The transition is related with Ankara's ongoing practices, regardless of the maximalist rhetoric of the previous months when Erdoğan was declaring, for instance, that "Putin doesn't agree to open this grain corridor through others. But with me, when I call... straight away he opened the grain corridor" (Wilks A., 2022). Nevertheless, promoting cooperative relations with Russia, it was not the wisest policy for Ankara, having found it very difficult to adjust to the new anti-Russian strategic environment. It took about a year for Erdoğan to understand that there is no place for "multi-level" diplomatic tactics at the current turn of history. There is zero tolerance for maneuvers of such scale especially from geopolitically crucial countries, such as Turkey, since the antagonist relationship between the broadly named "West" and Moscow has been modified into a Cold War-like attrition.

On this line of thought, almost a year and a half after the beginning of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the situation has reached to stagnation. Russia seems incapable to implement its strategic aims on the field, while Ukraine has prioritized the Russian troops' withdrawal from all over the annexed area, including Crimea. Maximalism and harsh rhetoric have led to a bloodshed, which is unprecedented considering at least the last two decades' history of the European continent. In this geostrategic gamble, Turkey has been struggling to find opportunities and respond to challenges identified with its own ambitious prioritizations.

The evolutions in Ukraine simulate a war of attrition with a main goal; the "derussification" of Europe in terms of economic, energy and trade ties, as well as arms deliveries. Similarly, it is deduced that the US have gained the resurrection of NATO – the Alliance that the French President Emmanuel Macron called "brain dead" in 2019 – and additionally, Germany's active comeback to the European geostrategic gamble for the first time after the World War II, surprisingly without any French reaction. Furthermore, consistent efforts have been made towards internal destabilization of Russia, while a certain pressure has been put on China to clarify its international stance as well as on NATO partners with close multi-level relations with Moscow.

### Concluding remarks: Witnessing a Changing International System

The change in the international system towards multi-polarity signifies a transition of US operational commitments towards Australasia and the Pacific, Washington's priority to buckpass some burden to pivotal allies trying to avoid overexpansion and Turkey's will to exploit this situation in order to increase its

relative gains for supporting the US strategic aims. Besides, in Kenneth Waltz's words, "changes in the structure of the system are distinct from changes at the unit level. Thus, changes in polarity also affect how states provide for their security" (2000, 5), while according to Robert Gilpin, "[the international system] stimulates, and may compel, a state to increase its power; at the least, it necessitates that the prudent state prevent relative increases in the power of competitor states" (1981, 87–88).

The Ukraine War has been identified with new opportunities and challenges, while it has put further pressure on strategic actors with multi-level geopolitical prioritizations. This kind of pressure is even more effective on Turkey, due to the currency devaluation of the last years, the newer economic blast after the earthquake in last February and more significantly, due to the country's positioning; both institutionally as a NATO member as well as geopolitically at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, at the backyard of the Russian geostrategic factor.

In conclusion, the Turkey–United States relations are increasingly characterized by reluctance, but they are also driven by the high importance for each other. In the margins of the new international system, Turkey has been under the pressure of the US willingness to manage the situation within the Greater Middle East and the post-Soviet Republics, while Washington faces Turkish ambitions for a broadened regional role. The result of this ongoing "open negotiation" is going to determine the fate of the historical partnership of these two Cold War allies.

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