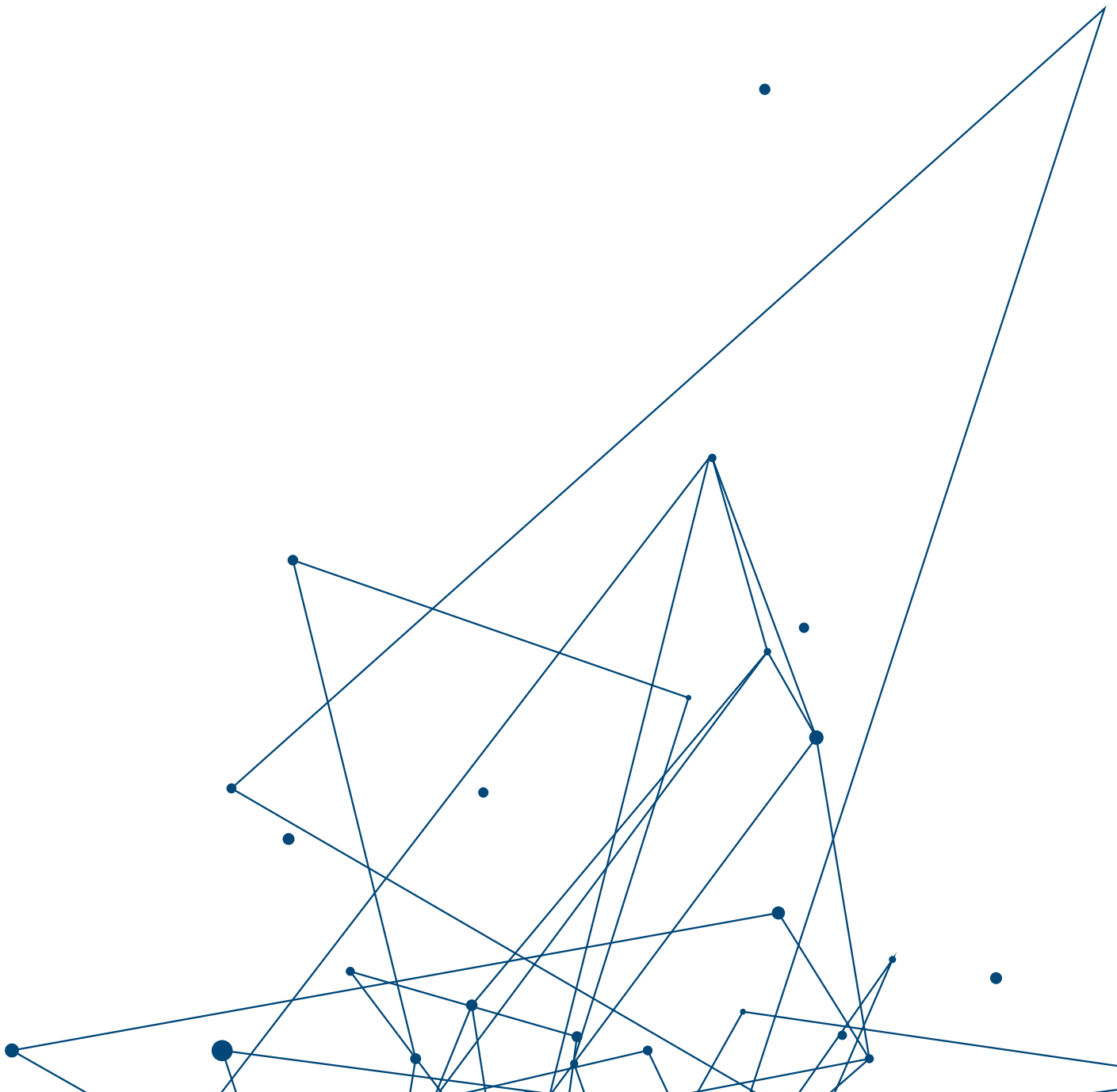


# Ukraine–Turkey Strategic Partnership in Security and Defence

Navigating the Disruption of the European  
Security Order

Maryna Vorotnyuk



Ukraine and Turkey have forged a strategic relationship in the defence and security spheres, with notable cooperation in the defence industry. Ukraine regards Turkey as a significant contributor to European security and an ally in counterbalancing Russia's aggression. Kyiv sees Ankara's role as a potential security guarantor, mediator, and contributor to Ukraine's peace plan. At the same time, a lack of policy alignment and differences in threat perceptions are also apparent. Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy from the West, focus on regional ownership, and non-involvement of external actors in the Black Sea, as well as its strategic partnership with Russia, are seen by Ukraine as the main obstacles to fully leveraging their strategic ties. The Ukraine-Turkey strategic partnership is poised to be the foundation of a future regional order in the Black Sea, with both nations serving as security outposts for Europe, contingent upon more policy convergence between Turkey and Europe and the re-establishment of their defence and security dialogue.

This paper is part of a CATS Network Papers series exploring the role of Turkey in a future European security order, particularly in light of the EU's ongoing challenges, first and foremost the war in Ukraine. As part of this series, CATS has commissioned nine country reports on several EU member states, as well as on Ukraine and Turkey, with the aim of identifying both the opportunities and the challenges for enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the EU within an evolving security order.

*Dr. Maryna Vorotnyuk is Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) in London.*

# Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Ukraine's View on European Security Post-2022 Russian Reinvasion</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Prior to the Storm: Ukraine-Turkey Security Cooperation Before 2022</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1	Pre-Strategic Partnership Era (1990s-2000s)	8
3.2	The Emergence of Strategic Partnership (Since Early 2010s)	10
3.3	Turkey's Balancing Act Revealed	13
<b>4.</b>	<b>Adapting to Change: Post-2022 Security Cooperation between Ukraine and Turkey</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Points of Convergence and Divergence: Comparing Ukraine's and Turkey's Perspectives on European and Regional Security</b>	<b>18</b>
5.1	Turkey's Quest for Regional Ownership and Strategic Autonomy	18
5.2	Lack of Policy Alignment and Differences in Threat Perceptions: Is Turkey Seen as a Full-Fledged Partner?	21
<b>6.</b>	<b>Deciphering Turkey: Ukrainian Stakeholders' Views on Turkey's Security Role</b>	<b>26</b>
6.1	A Key Partner in Defence Industry Collaboration	26
6.2	A Mediator and a Prominent Actor in Ukraine's Peace Plan	27
6.3	A Gatekeeper to the Black Sea	30
6.4	A Key Player in Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Black Sea	31
<b>7.</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>35</b>

1.

# Introduction

Ukraine and Turkey define each other as strategic partners, with security and defence being a key pillar of their relationship. Both partners share the view that Russia's disruption of regional order and stability must be countered, albeit with certain notable caveats. They both face turbulent security environments and are focused on building up resilience and resistance to existential threats. With Ukraine engaged in a war with Russia, and Turkey applying military force against terrorism threats, both nations are concentrating on enhancing their defence capabilities. Consequently, cooperation in defence and security is a natural focus of their partnership.

This report aims to analyse Ukraine-Turkey security and defence cooperation through the lens of Ukraine's strategic interests and needs, as well as its perspective on the current state of European security. It first examines Ukraine's view of the European security order after being shattered by Russia's full-scale invasion, summarizing Kyiv's traditional focus on NATO as the central pillar of European security, while displaying strong support for Europe's strategic autonomy in defence at the same time, especially as the United States appears to be scaling down its support to Ukraine.

The report then evaluates the history and rationale of Ukraine-Turkey security cooperation prior to 2022, tracing the early contours of their strategic partnership, which began to emerge in 2010s, and how this relationship has evolved to meet post-invasion realities since 2022. It further assesses key points of convergence and divergence between Kyiv's and Ankara's threat assessments, particularly regarding Ankara's stance on regional ownership of the Black Sea, its strategic autonomy, and its relations with both Russia and the West, from a Ukrainian perspective. Finally, the report explores the primary roles Turkey occupies in Ukraine's strategic discourse, including, but not limited to, serving as a key partner in defence industry cooperation, acting as a mediator and prominent contributor to Ukraine's peace efforts, functioning as a gatekeeper to the Black Sea through its control of the Straits, and playing a pivotal role in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Black Sea.

2.

# Ukraine's View on European Security Post-2022 Russian Reinvasion

Ukraine's view on European security is based on the premise that the international security order was shaken in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas, ultimately collapsing after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia is regarded as a strategic adversary waging total war against Ukraine and posing the primary threat to European security.<sup>1</sup>

Ukraine advocates for the restoration of a rules-based international order, emphasising the strategic defeat of Russia and the establishment of a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine as the cornerstone of a new regional security framework in Europe. While pursuing the goal of eventual membership in the European Union (EU) and NATO, the government of Ukraine has called for security guarantees from its allies. This vision is encapsulated in the "Kyiv Security Compact" proposal, introduced in September 2022 by Ukrainian leadership. The proposal outlines the need for long-term security commitments from Ukraine's partners – including both military and non-military assistance – to bolster Ukraine's ability to defend itself effectively.<sup>2</sup>

In line with this vision, and building on the first of its kind G7 Declaration of Support for Ukraine from July 2023 – which outlined "specific, bilateral, long-term security commitments and arrangements" with Ukraine<sup>3</sup> – Kyiv has, as of January 2025, signed 28 bilateral security agreements with its partners. These include agreements with key allies such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the United States, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, "Black Sea as a Battlefield: Ukraine's Perspectives and Strategies in the Region", in *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region*, eds. Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius and Stefan Meister (Springer, Cham 2024a): 111–128, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Andrii Yermak, *The Kyiv Security Compact: International Security Guarantees for Ukraine* (Kyiv: Office of the President of Ukraine, 13 September 2022), [https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/01/15/89/41fdoec2d72259a561313370cee1be6e\\_1663050954.pdf](https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/01/15/89/41fdoec2d72259a561313370cee1be6e_1663050954.pdf) (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Council of the European Union, *G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine* (Vilnius, 12 July 2023), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/12/g7-joint-declaration-of-support-for-ukraine/> (accessed 15 January 2025).

the EU, all of which encompass similar security commitments.<sup>4</sup> In the event of any negotiated settlement with Russia, Ukrainian officials stress the need for its allies to provide additional security guarantees to Ukraine, ensuring that Russia cannot resume hostilities.<sup>5</sup>

To address Black Sea security specifically, Ukraine has sought to sign regional security agreements with Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, aiming to establish a regional security order that limits Russia's capacity to destabilize the area while ensuring Ukraine's sovereignty in the near term.<sup>6</sup> According to Ukrainian diplomats and experts, these regional security frameworks are valuable and should be explored as complementary to Ukraine's NATO membership rather than as alternatives.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, the only viable security framework in the Black Sea, from Kyiv's vantage point, is for NATO to extend collective defence measures across the entire region by integrating Ukraine and Georgia as members.

Ukraine's foreign policy and security elites underscore the necessity for a more robust and resilient Europe and EU. They acknowledge the essential assistance, including military support, provided to Ukraine by the EU through the European Peace Facility and other mechanisms. Considering the risks of fragmentation within the Transatlantic order due to changes in US political leadership, the focus is on the EU maintaining its unwavering stance in supporting Ukraine independently of American leadership. Consequently, Ukraine advocates for the EU to "become more cohesive, decisive, and effective both internally and externally [...]. Whether this is called achieving European sovereignty, strategic autonomy, or a combination of the two under the name 'strategic sovereignty' is a secondary issue."<sup>8</sup> As a result, in Ukraine, there is strong backing for enhancing defence capabilities in Europe. The consensus is that European states were insufficiently prepared for Russia's aggressive stance and revisionism, having neglected to upgrade their defence measures to effectively contain and deter Russian actions.

---

<sup>4</sup> List includes agreements with the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Denmark, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Finland, Latvia, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Japan, the United States, the EU, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Luxembourg, Romania, Czechia, Slovenia, Ireland, Greece, and Albania.

<sup>5</sup> "Ukraine Needs Security Guarantees Before Talks with Russia, Zelenskyy Says", *RBC Ukraine* (online), 16 January 2025, <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/ukraine-needs-security-guarantees-before-1737026329.html> (accessed 16 January 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2024a: 117.

<sup>7</sup> Kornely Kakachia, Anar Valiyev, Hanna Shelest, Bidzina Lebanidze, Maksym Khylyko, Ahmad Alili and Salome Kandelaki, *Black Sea Security After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Views from Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan*, Policy Paper Issue #31 (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, September 2022): 22, <https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Policy-Paper-31-ENG-Web.pdf> (accessed 9 January 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Maryna Yaroshevych, *Yevropeys'kyi Suverenitet, Yevropeys'ka Stratehichna Avtonomiya Chy Yevropeys'kyi Status Quo – Shcho Ye Vyhrashnym Dlya Ukrayiny? [European Sovereignty, European Strategic Autonomy or European Status Quo – What Is Beneficial for Ukraine?]* (Kyiv: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], December 2021), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/18799.pdf> (accessed 13 January 2025).

While supporting Europe's broader efforts to strengthen its strategic autonomy, not just in defence, Ukraine's traditional stance – like that of its neighbours on NATO's eastern flank – has been to support the central role of NATO and the United States in European defence. United States disengaging from Europe or certain European countries adopting policies that could undermine NATO's standing has been considered as detrimental for European security. With the United States as the primary provider of military assistance to Ukraine, Kyiv advocated for both a stronger, more resilient EU, which it aspires to join, and continued transatlantic unity.

However, as the initial contours of US foreign policy under the Trump administration began to take shape – with perceptions of US disengagement from European security matters solidifying, coupled with President Donald Trump's perceived weakness towards Russia – Ukrainian leadership seems to have reassessed its position to put more of a focus on European capabilities. As a result, it began expressing support for the creation of European armed forces.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the war and Ukraine's dependence on its partners for weapon supplies, Ukraine views itself not merely as a security recipient but as a provider – a partner and a future EU member already contributing to Europe's strategic autonomy. There is a political consensus in Ukraine that it can significantly enhance the EU's ability to act independently by boosting economic growth, improving food and energy security, enhancing digital and innovation capabilities, providing critical materials, and strengthening the European defence industry.<sup>10</sup>

According to the Minister of Economy, Ukraine's integration with the EU will have added value to Europe by strengthening its strategic autonomy:

We have deposits of critical materials that are lacking in the EU and a growing defence-industrial complex. We have the potential and ambition to replace part of the EU's imports with goods produced in Ukraine, thereby strengthening European strategic autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Posaner, "Zelenskyy: 'The Time Has Come' for a European Army", *Politico* (online), 15 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-time-has-come-european-army-munich-security-conference/> (accessed 26 February 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Dmytro Livch, Yuliya Shaipova and Oleksandr Kostriba, "Posylyty YeEs: Chomu Chlenstvo Ukrayiny Potribne Samomu Yevrosoyuzu" [Strengthening the EU: Why Ukraine's Membership Is Needed by the EU Itself], *Yevropeys'ka Pravda* (online), 27 September 2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2022/09/27/7147575/> (accessed 13 January 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, Yuliya Svyrydenko: *Ukrayina Zdatna Posylyty Yevropeys'ku Stratehichnu Avtonomiyu* [Yuliya Svyrydenko: Ukraine Is Capable of Strengthening European Strategic Autonomy] (Kyiv, 07 November 2024), <https://me.gov.ua/News/Detail/b17ea47c-f64b-4044-881c-89e6688be99f?isSpecial=true> (accessed 13 January 2025).

3.

# Prior to the Storm: Ukraine–Turkey Security Cooperation Before 2022

3.1

## Pre–Strategic Partnership Era (1990s– 2000s)

Since Ukraine–Turkey relations were established in 1992, the prevailing sentiment has been that “the Black Sea unites, rather than divides, these two nations”.<sup>12</sup> The relationship has remained devoid of major conflicts or competition, with political discourse consistently emphasizing its “friendly” and “good-neighbourly” nature.<sup>13</sup>

However, the reality has been that the “strategic partnership” between Ukraine and Turkey – a term routinely used by the officials of both states since at least the early 2000s – was largely rhetorical, marked by dialogue but lacking in systematic cooperation. It was evident that focus on bilateral trade overshadowed other aspects of the strategic partnership, which was partly reflecting the post–Cold War spirit in the Black Sea region. Still, the full potential for economic collaboration was yet to be realized.<sup>14</sup>

For instance, the long–anticipated Free Trade Agreement had been under consideration since the late 1990s and was the subject of formal negotiations since

---

<sup>12</sup> “Ukrayina i Turechchyna Domovylys’ pro Spivpratsyu v Oboronniy Sferi” [Ukraine and Turkey Agreed on Cooperation in the Defence Sector], *Gazeta.ua* (online), 13 May 2016, [https://gazeta.ua/articles/life/\\_ukrayina-i-turechchina-domovilis-pro-spivpracyu-v-oboronnij-sferi/697663](https://gazeta.ua/articles/life/_ukrayina-i-turechchina-domovilis-pro-spivpracyu-v-oboronnij-sferi/697663) (accessed 15 January 2025); Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, *Hennadiy Zubko: Dlya Ukrayiny Vazhlyvi Turets’ki Investytsiyi, Zona Vil’noyi Torhivli, Unyknennya Podviynoho Opodatkuvannya* [Hennadiy Zubko: For Ukraine, Turkish Investments, Free Trade Zone, and Avoidance of Double Taxation are Important] (Kyiv, 13 May 2016), <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/249029409> (accessed 15 January 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2024a: 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



2007, but it was signed only in February 2022.<sup>15</sup> It was signed with the expectation that the free trade regime would boost bilateral trade to \$10 billion, with pre-war 2021 bilateral trade reaching a record level of \$7.5 billion.<sup>16</sup> In 2001, the bilateral trade turnover reached the \$1 billion mark, and in 2008, it experienced record growth, reaching \$6.58 billion. However, this growth slowed in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis, the onset of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

At this stage, Ukraine's foreign policy was bipolar, oscillating between Russia and the West, while the potential for collaboration with Turkey was infrequently addressed and mostly declarative. As a result, the Black Sea dimension of Ukraine's diplomacy remained largely unexplored.<sup>18</sup> Political and diplomatic exchanges between Ukraine and Turkey were frequently fragmented and inconsistent, with minimal engagement between the two societies. This resulted in these neighbouring nations remaining largely unfamiliar to one another. Consequently, limited interaction hindered the development of a dedicated security dialogue.

With minimal knowledge about modern Turkey, certain political groups and experts in Ukraine occasionally voiced concerns that Turkey might harbour territorial ambitions towards Ukraine, particularly regarding Crimea. These concerns were often directed at Turkey's support for the Crimean Tatars, the proliferation of religious organizations in Crimea, the rise in religious education among Muslims, and the increasing presence of Turkish businesses in the area. Such a dynamic contributed to negative perceptions of the Crimean Tatar community and Turkey's role in Crimea. These attitudes were largely rooted in Cold War-era stereotypes and the region's information landscape, where pro-Russian and anti-Tatar sentiments tended to dominate.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Query, "Erdogan Visits Kyiv, Signs Long-Anticipated Free Trade Agreement", *The Kyiv Independent* (online), 03 February 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/erdogan-visits-kyiv-signs-long-anticipated-free-trade-agreement/> (accessed 16 January 2025).

<sup>16</sup> Office of the President of Ukraine, *The Agreement on a Free Trade Area Between Ukraine and Turkey Is the Result of Three Decades of Cooperation and Friendship Between the Two Countries – Volodymyr Zelenskyy* (Kyiv, 03 February 2022), <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ugoda-pro-zonu-vilnoyi-torgivli-mizh-ukrayinoyu-i-turechchin-72705> (accessed 16 January 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Andrii Boiar and Volodymyr Lazhnik, "Dynamika ta Suchasnyj Stan Tovarnoi Torhivli mizh Ukrainou ta Turechchynou" [Dynamics and Current State of Commodity Trade Between Ukraine and Turkey], *Problemy Suchasnykh Transformatsii. Seriya: Ekonomika ta Upravlinnia* [Problems of Modern Transformations. Series: Economics and Management], no. 10 (2023), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376697115\\_Dynamika\\_ta\\_suchasnij\\_stan\\_tovarnoi\\_torgivli\\_mizh\\_Ukrainou\\_ta\\_Tureccinou/fulltext/658434403c472d2e8e7767cd/Dynamika-ta-suchasnij-stan-tovarnoi-torgivli-mizh-Ukrainou-ta-Tureccinou.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376697115_Dynamika_ta_suchasnij_stan_tovarnoi_torgivli_mizh_Ukrainou_ta_Tureccinou/fulltext/658434403c472d2e8e7767cd/Dynamika-ta-suchasnij-stan-tovarnoi-torgivli-mizh-Ukrainou-ta-Tureccinou.pdf) (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, *Foreign Policy Audit: Ukraine – Turkey* (Kyiv: Institute of World Policy [IWP], 2016a): 4, [https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Aud\\_Ukr\\_Turk\\_01\\_32\\_eng-2.pdf](https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Aud_Ukr_Turk_01_32_eng-2.pdf) (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, *Компас 2020 – Turechyna: Regionalny Gravets z Globalnymy Ambitsiyamy* [Compass 2020 – Turkey: Regional Player with Global Ambitions] (Kyiv: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], 2010): 9, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/07747.pdf> (accessed 10 January 2025).

## 3.2

# The Emergence of Strategic Partnership (Since Early 2010s)

In the 2010s, relations between Ukraine and Turkey began to change, with the first outlines of a strategic partnership taking shape, especially following the pivotal events of 2014. Relations between Ukraine and Turkey have been strengthened through the High-Level Strategic Council, which was established in 2011 and has facilitated discussions at the presidential level across various sectors of mutual interest, such as increased trade turnover, the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (2022), energy cooperation, investments, and other areas of interest.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Turkish perspective, this period marked the formal establishment of the strategic partnership.<sup>21</sup> Ankara has established similar high-level formats with countries such as Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Greece. Keen to enhance economic cooperation with Turkey, Ukraine also saw the value in formalizing relationships at the highest level.

The Council, co-chaired by the presidents of both nations, has been recognized as “a very effective format, which envisions not much publicity, but significant results”, according to a Ukrainian diplomat who served as an official member of the Council.<sup>22</sup> This institutionalization was further strengthened in 2020 with the introduction of the “Quadriga” format alongside the High-Level Strategic Council. The format includes the foreign and defence ministers from both countries and is meant to facilitate regular discussions and enable the coordination of Kyiv’s and Ankara’s actions on regional security issues.<sup>23</sup>

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in Donbas highlighted for Ukraine the significant benefits of cooperating with Turkey, leading to more attention being assigned towards developing the strategic partnership. Following this, perceptions about Turkey’s involvement in Ukraine’s foreign policy underwent a significant transformation: It was no longer seen only as a vital trade and economic

---

<sup>20</sup> Office of the President of Ukraine, *The Eighth Meeting of the High Level Strategic Council Was Held Under the Chairmanship of the Presidents of Ukraine and Turkey* (Kyiv, 03 February 2020), <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/pid-golovuvannyam-prezidentiv-ukrayini-j-turechchini-vidbulo-59561> (accessed 15 January 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relations Between Türkiye and Ukraine*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-ukraine.en.mfa> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>22</sup> Interview conducted by the author with an Ukrainian diplomat, 21 October 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Yevgeniya Gaber, “Turkey”, in *Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2020*, eds. Nadiia Bureiko, Hennadiy Maksak and Hanna Shelest (Kyiv: Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], 2021): 144, [https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UPFP-31\\_03\\_ENG-FIN1.pdf](https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UPFP-31_03_ENG-FIN1.pdf) (accessed 10 January 2025).

partner. After 2014, it emerged as a crucial player in Black Sea security, and its strategic weight for Ukraine increased.<sup>24</sup>

The focus has shifted towards deeper practical collaboration, with security cooperation now taking precedence. Although economic ties remained important, defence collaboration – such as in the defence industry and joint military exercises – became a key priority. Turkey’s potential role in reconstruction and infrastructure development, including in Donbas, has been widely discussed. The overarching principle of the strategic partnership has become the “pragmatization” – meaning significant increase – in bilateral contacts and an expansion of collaborative efforts across various sectors.<sup>25</sup>

After the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine in 2014, Turkey expressed and maintained its strong stance on not recognizing the annexation of Crimea, providing humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons in Ukraine, and was one of Ukraine’s largest international donors of technical assistance.<sup>26</sup> Turkey provided assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine – particularly concerning the rehabilitation of Ukrainian servicemen and their families – support in the professional training of Ukrainian military personnel in Turkish educational institutions, as well as material and technical assistance to strengthen Ukraine’s defence capabilities.<sup>27</sup>

The surge in cooperation within the defence industry can be attributed to the active involvement of Ukraine and Turkey’s armed forces in military operations. Ukraine’s Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) – renamed the Joint Forces Operation in 2018 – in the east of the country, and Turkey’s multiple operations in Syria since 2016, have been galvanizing factors. Ukraine sought a partner to aid in developing its defence industry, which could help in fighting the war against Russia. Meanwhile, Turkey, which was facing sanctions from its Western partners due to its operations in Syria and the purchase of Russian S-400 systems, needed alternative sources for

---

<sup>24</sup> Yevgeniya Gaber, “Turkey”, in *Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2019*, eds. Nadiia Bureiko, Hennadiy Maksak, and Hanna Shelest (Kyiv: Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], 2020a): 177, [https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/UkrainianPrism.ForeignPolicy19\\_eng.pdf](https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/UkrainianPrism.ForeignPolicy19_eng.pdf) (accessed 11 January 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, “Turkey”, in *Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2018*, eds. Nadiia Bureiko, Mariia Koval, Hennadiy Maksak and Hanna Shelest (Kyiv: Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], 2019): 117, [https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/A5-prizma2018\\_eng\\_web-2.pdf](https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/A5-prizma2018_eng_web-2.pdf) (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, “Dovidka pro Mizhnarodnu Tekhnichnu Dopomohu Ukraini” [Information on International Technical Assistance to Ukraine], Press release (Kyiv, 14 July 2016), <https://me.gov.ua/Documents/Detail?lang=uk-UA&id=e485115d-5f7c-480d-ab90-563def7e4053&title=DovidkaProMizhnarodnuTekhnichnu> (accessed 13 January 2025).

<sup>27</sup> “Ministr Oborony Ukrayiny i Ministr Finansiv ta Kaznachejstva Turetskoyi Respubliky Pidpysaly Uhodu pro Spivrobitnytstvo u Sferi Oborony” [Minister of Defence of Ukraine and Minister of Finance and Treasury of the Republic of Turkey Signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement], *ArmyInform* (online), 03 February 2020a, <https://armyinform.com.ua/2020/02/03/ministr-oborony-ukrayiny-i-ministr-finansiv-ta-kaznachejstva-tureczkoyi-respubliky-pidpysaly-ugodu-pro-spivrobitnytstvo-u-sferi-oborony/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

technologies and components. This made Ukraine a natural partner, particularly in the areas of aviation engines and radar systems.<sup>28</sup>

Amid the deteriorating security situation in the Black Sea in the 2018–2021 period and Turkey's readiness to supply weapons to Ukraine (with Ukraine receiving its first Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) complex in July 2021),<sup>29</sup> Turkey's role for Ukraine was further heightened. More than 20 joint defence and industrial cooperation projects were underway in 2018. For instance, Ukraine's state-run design bureau Luch collaborated with Turkey's Aselsan to develop the first Ukrainian-Turkish anti-tank missile launching system, "SERDAR",<sup>30</sup> while the state-owned enterprise SpetsTechnoExport signed a memorandum with Aselsan for the production of radio communication equipment in Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Ukrainian companies also secured a \$40 million contract to repair and upgrade Turkish Mi-17 helicopters.<sup>32</sup> In early 2019, Ankara and Kyiv signed a memorandum regarding the supply of UAVs to Ukraine and the establishment of a joint venture.<sup>33</sup>

In 2019, the creation of a joint venture in the field of high-precision weapons and aerospace technologies between Ukrspesexport and the Turkish company Baykar Defence was announced.<sup>34</sup> In 2020, Ukraine and Turkey strengthened their defence ties by signing a framework agreement on military-financial cooperation, which included provisions for military assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> According to it, Turkey committed to finance the purchase of goods and services for

---

<sup>28</sup> Sıtkı Egeli, Serhat Güvenç, Çağlar Kurç and Arda Mevlütoğlu, *From Client to Competitor: The Rise of Türkiye's Defence Industry* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], May 2024): 22, [https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content---migration/files/research-papers/2024/05-new/iiss\\_from-client-to-competitor-the-rise-of-turkiyes-defence-industry\\_010520242.pdf](https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content---migration/files/research-papers/2024/05-new/iiss_from-client-to-competitor-the-rise-of-turkiyes-defence-industry_010520242.pdf) (accessed 13 January 2025).

<sup>29</sup> "Ukrainian Military Gets First Turkish Bayraktar UAV Complex", *Ukrinform* (online), 15 July 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-defense/3281272-ukrainian-military-gets-first-turkish-bayraktar-uav-complex.html> (accessed 15 January 2025).

<sup>30</sup> "Ukrainian-Turkish Remote Weapon Station Passed Trials for a Foreign Customer", *Armada International* (online), 05 June 2019, <https://www.armadainternational.com/2019/06/ukrainian-turkish-remote-weapon-station-passed-trials-for-a-foreign-customer/> (accessed 12 January 2025).

<sup>31</sup> "Ukroboronprom, Aselsan Sign Memorandum on Joint Production of Radio Communication Equipment", *Ukrinform* (online), 10 October 2018, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-economy/2555531-ukroboronprom-aselsan-sign-memorandum-on-joint-production-of-radio-communication-equipment.html> (accessed 12 January 2025).

<sup>32</sup> "Defence Blog: Ukraine Wins \$40 Mln Tender for Repair of Turkish Mi-17 Helicopters", *UNIAN* (online), 05 September 2018, <https://www.unian.info/economics/10250460-defence-blog-ukraine-wins-40-mln-tender-for-repair-of-turkish-mi-17-helicopters.html> (accessed 13 January 2025).

<sup>33</sup> "Ukraine Receives Turkish Armed UAV, Plans Unmanned Systems JV with Ankara", *Defense Mirror* (online), 08 March 2019, [https://www.defensemirror.com/news/24421/Ukraine\\_Receives\\_Turkish\\_Armed\\_UAV\\_Plans\\_Unmanned\\_Systems\\_JV\\_with\\_Ankara](https://www.defensemirror.com/news/24421/Ukraine_Receives_Turkish_Armed_UAV_Plans_Unmanned_Systems_JV_with_Ankara) (accessed 12 January 2025).

<sup>34</sup> National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, "Ukraine and Turkey Set Up a Joint Venture in Precision Weapons and Aerospace Technologies", Press release (Kyiv, 09 August 2019), <https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Diialnist/3345.html> (accessed 12 January 2025).

<sup>35</sup> "Ukraine, Turkey Sign Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Defense Sector", *UNIAN* (online), 04 February 2020, [https://www.unian.info/politics/10858136-ukraine-turkey-sign-framework-agreement-on-cooperation-in-defense-sector.html#goog\\_rewarded](https://www.unian.info/politics/10858136-ukraine-turkey-sign-framework-agreement-on-cooperation-in-defense-sector.html#goog_rewarded) (accessed 24 June 2025).

the needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the amount of around \$35 million.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the two governments signed a Military Agreement that established the legal foundation for expanding bilateral cooperation in 21 different areas within the defence sector.<sup>37</sup>

In 2021, prior to the invasion, the Ukrainian president maintained the most intensive contacts with his Turkish counterparts, as well as those from the United Kingdom and the United States. Ukraine's foreign minister described the relationship between Ukraine and Turkey as having reached its highest point in history. Terms such as "golden era" and "security alliance" were commonly used to characterize the deepening cooperation between the two nations.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.3

## Turkey's Balancing Act Revealed

Still, since the beginning of the 2014 war, Turkey's stance has shown a notable duality, often described as the so-called balancing act. Ankara asserted its right to remain neutral in the West/NATO–Russia confrontation after 2014, positioning itself as a "bridge" for communication between the two sides. The lack in complementarity on policies concerning Russia has swiftly become obvious.

While it has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, it has also refrained from directly challenging Russia. For example, Turkey has consistently backed United Nations (UN) resolutions that called for the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty. Turkey co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution in December 2018 that condemned Russia's militarization of Crimea and the Sea of Azov. However, its response to the Russian attack near the Kerch Strait on 25 November of the same year was restrained. Turkey called for de-escalation, urging calm and dialogue, but it notably avoided directly naming Russia as the aggressor.<sup>39</sup> This response was consistent with Turkey's approach of maintaining a careful balance between Ukraine and Russia.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, "Turechchyna Profinansuye Zakupivlyu Tovariv ta Poslugh dlya Zabezpechennya Potreb Zbrojnykh Syl Ukrayiny na Sumu ponad 200 Mil'yoniv Turets'kykh Lir" [Turkey Will Finance the Purchase of Goods and Services to Meet the Needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the Amount of over 200 Million Turkish Lira], Press release (Kyiv, 25 June 2020), <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/turechchina-profinansuye-zakupivlyu-tovariv-ta-poslug-dlya-zabezpechennya-potreb-zbrojnih-sil-ukrayini-na-sumu-ponad-200-miljoniv-tureckih-lir> (accessed 13 January 2025).

<sup>37</sup> Yevgeniya Gaber, 2021: 144;  
Yevgeniya Gaber, "Turechyna" [Turkey], in *Ukrayins'ka pryzma: Zovnishnya polityka 2021 [Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2021]*, eds. Nadiia Bureiko, Hennadiy Maksak and Hanna Shelest (Kyiv: Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], 2022):150, [UPFP-21-vers8PRESS.pdf](#) (accessed 25 June 2025).

<sup>39</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2019: 119.

Despite significant political interest in Turkey post-2014, the initial expectation of Ukrainian political elites – that it would counterbalance Russia in the region – was proven to be largely unfounded. After Turkey downed a Russian jet in November 2015 near the Syrian border, and with the following deterioration of Russian–Turkish relations, there was even more interest within the Ukrainian political landscape to have Turkey as a potential ally against Russian aggression.<sup>40</sup> But Turkey continued to strengthen its economic and political ties with Russia after their relationship recovered in 2016.

The two partners' foreign policies appeared to have lacked true alignment on several fronts. This was true with regard to energy security – Ukraine supported the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) to reduce its reliance on Russian gas, and it viewed the TurkStream gas pipeline, promoted by Russia and Turkey, as a threat.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Kyiv's plan to build a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal on Ukraine's Black Sea coast – a priority in the 2015 governmental Action Plan to diversify natural gas supplies – never materialized. This project required Turkey's agreement to allow LNG tankers to pass through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. However, Ankara objected, citing environmental concerns, but it was reportedly due to objections from Russia.<sup>42</sup>

It also did not go unnoticed that Turkey purchased Russian S-400 air defence systems, did not join the Western sanctions against Russia after 2014, and helped to facilitate Russia's economy. In Ukraine, the dualism of Turkey's foreign policy – balancing relations with both Russia and the West – has been long seen as a key obstacle to deepening the strategic dialogue between the two countries.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, "Turkey", in *Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2015*, eds. Nadiia Bureiko, Mariia Koval, Hennadiy Maksak and Hanna Shelest (Kyiv: Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], 2016b): 48, <https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/A5-prizma-eu.pdf> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>41</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2019: 119.

<sup>42</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2016a: 14.

<sup>43</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2019: 116.



4.

# Adapting to Change: Post-2022 Security Cooperation between Ukraine and Turkey

Since Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the strategic partnership between Ukraine and Turkey has revolved around defence cooperation, ensuring freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, Turkey's role in Ukraine's peace plan, mediating the release of prisoners of war, and the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Turkey's military assistance to Ukraine has been substantial. Although it may not have been the leading provider in terms of aid volume, its supply of combat drones was particularly timely, arriving before the 2022 invasion, when no other Western partners were willing to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine.<sup>44</sup> At the outset of the war, Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones made a notable impact on the battlefield, becoming a powerful symbol of resistance within Ukrainian society. Despite ongoing hostilities, construction of the Baykar Makina factory in Ukraine began in 2023, with completion expected in 2025.<sup>45</sup>

Without much publicity, Turkey has also provided laser-guided missiles, protective gear, Kirpi armoured vehicles, and Canik M2 heavy machine guns.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Turkey has continued to build two Ada-class corvettes for the Ukrainian navy.<sup>47</sup> Collaborative defence projects have persisted as well – Ukrainian companies are now

---

<sup>44</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2024a: 120–121.

<sup>45</sup> Can Sezer, “Turkish Drone Maker Baykar to Invest \$300 Mln to Develop Jet Engine, CEO Says”, *Reuters* (online), 24 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkish-drone-maker-baykar-invest-300-mln-develop-jet-engine-ceo-says-2024-10-24/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>46</sup> Ragip Soylu, “Turkey Supplies Ukraine with Hundreds of Heavy Machine Guns”, *Middle East Eye* (online), 02 October 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-ukraine-supplies-hundreds-heavy-machine-guns> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>47</sup> Yusuf Çetiner, “Turkey Has Launched Its Second Ada-Class Corvette, the Hetman Ivan Vyhovskiy, for the Ukrainian Navy”, *Overt Defense* (online), 12 August 2024, <https://www.overtdefense.com/2024/08/12/turkey-has-launched-its-second-ada-class-corvette-the-hetman-ivan-vyhovskiy-for-the-ukrainian-navy/> (accessed 12 January 2025).

supplying engines for Turkey's KAAN fighter jet; Kızılelma, Akıncı, and Anka III combat drones; and the Atak II helicopter.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Turkey's general diplomatic and military support, its backing for Ukraine's vision of a future regional security order – centred on security assurances from key partners, particularly in the Black Sea – has yet to materialize. Unlike the more than 30 Western countries that signed the G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine in July 2023, Turkey did not, nor did it conclude a bilateral agreement on security guarantees with Ukraine.

Despite the absence of a formal security guarantees/assurances agreement between Ukraine and Turkey, a former Ukrainian official noted that the two countries have established a sufficiently robust legislative framework in the security sector. This foundation enables them to pursue comprehensive security cooperation effectively.<sup>49</sup>

On the diplomatic front, Turkey played a pivotal role in facilitating negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv. It hosted talks between Ukrainian and Russian delegations in Antalya (March 2022) and Istanbul (April 2022 and May 2025). In collaboration with the UN, Ankara successfully mediated the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which operated for a year before Russia withdrew in July 2023.

In addition, Turkey has consistently offered diplomatic support to Ukraine across various platforms. Turkey's backing of Ukraine at the UN and other international forums, its participation in initiatives such as the Ramstein format – a framework for coordinating global military support for Ukraine – and the Crimean Platform, which is an international effort led by Ukraine to coordinate the de-occupation of Crimea, are highly valued. Both countries share a vision for reforming the UN to address its dysfunctionality. Furthermore, as a key security player within NATO, Turkey's endorsement of Ukraine's NATO aspirations is seen as particularly significant.<sup>50</sup> On a separate track, Turkey is a significant partner in Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery efforts. The continued presence and even expansion of Turkish businesses in Ukraine, despite the war, is highly valued (notable investments include \$500 million from Onur Construction and \$100 million from Baykar Makina). The focus on reconstruction is viewed as the primary driver for increasing Turkish business activity in Ukraine.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> “Vasyl Bodnar, Posol Ukrayiny v Turechchyni: Uchast Turechchyny u Formuli Myru Znachno Posylyla Pytannya Prodovalchoyi Bezpeky ta Povernennya Polonenykh” [Vasyl Bodnar, Ambassador of Ukraine to Turkey: Turkey's Participation in the Peace Formula Has Significantly Strengthened the Issues of Food Security and the Return of Prisoners], *Ukrinform* (online), 12 January 2024a, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/3812439-vasil-bodnar-posol-ukraini-v-tureccini.html> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>49</sup> Interview conducted by the author, 21 October 2024.

<sup>50</sup> *Ukrinform*, 2024a.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



In January 2024, Turkey hosted the Ukraine Reconstruction Forum, during which the two states established the Reconstruction Task Force. This task force aims to involve Turkish companies in key cooperation areas, including the restoration of road and water transport infrastructure, the protection of critical infrastructure, housing reconstruction, and aviation.<sup>52</sup> According to the Deputy Prime Minister for Reconstruction of Ukraine, Ukraine values the deep technical expertise and experience of the Turkish state and business entities in infrastructure reconstruction, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their experience of collaboration with international financial institutions.<sup>53</sup> Ukraine, in particular, is counting on Turkey's assistance in demining territories contaminated with explosive devices as a result of Russian aggression.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> "Ukraine, Turkey Set Up Joint Working Group on Reconstruction", *Ukrinform* (online), 31 January 2024b, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-vidbudova/3820951-ukraine-turkey-set-up-joint-working-group-on-reconstruction.html> (accessed 12 January 2025).

<sup>53</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Oleksandr Kubrakov: Zaluchennya Biznesu do Vidnovlennya Ukrayiny – Odnia z Strategichnykh Zadach Spivpratsi z Turechchynoyu" [Oleksandr Kubrakov: Engaging Business in Ukraine's Reconstruction Is One of the Strategic Goals of Cooperation with Turkey]: 3, Press release (Kyiv, 01 January 2024), <https://turkiye.mfa.gov.ua/news/oleksandr-kubakov-zaluchennya-biznesu-do-vidnovlennya-ukrayini-odna-zi-strategichnih-zadach-spivpraci-z-turechchynoyu> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>54</sup> "Ukrayina Zaklykaye Turechchynu Doluchytysya do Rozminuvannya Terytorij" [Ukraine Calls on Turkey to Join Efforts in Demining Territories], *ArmyInform* (online), 28 November 2023a, <https://armyinform.com.ua/2023/11/28/ukrayina-zaklykaye-turechchynu-doluchytysya-do-rozminuvannya-terytorij/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

5.

# Points of Convergence and Divergence: Comparing Ukraine's and Turkey's Perspectives on European and Regional Security

Ukraine's perspective on the security order generally aligns with Turkey's vision of the need to stabilize the security environment through NATO's enhanced defence and deterrence posture, as well as individual states' security choices to strengthen their defence capabilities. However, there are some areas where these visions are not entirely compatible.

5.1

## Turkey's Quest for Regional Ownership and Strategic Autonomy

Ukraine and Turkey do not see eye to eye on Turkey's vision of regional ownership in the Black Sea. From Ukraine's perspective, such an approach led to the transformation of the region into a "Russian lake". Ukrainian stakeholders believe that NATO has been dangerously absent from the Black Sea, and there has been no consistent effort from the members of the collective West to counterbalance Russia's coercive tactics in the region. Turkey, with its cautious approach and reluctance to confront Russia directly, has not provided an adequate counterweight to Russia's geopolitical ambitions, per this vision.

Ukraine sees itself as a conduit for Euro-Atlantic interests in the Black Sea region and views the current disruption of the regional security order as a historic opportunity to rebuild it on a foundation that prevents Russian dominance and represents all regional powers in a fair manner. Accordingly, Kyiv's vision for the new regional order involves Turkey – as well as Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Moldova – being firmly integrated into Western security structures and contributing to a security landscape free from Russian coercion.

The fundamental formulas for regional security being pursued by both nations seem to diverge – Ukraine desires a stronger NATO presence in the Black Sea, whereas Turkey prefers less involvement from non-littoral NATO states, asserting that the presence of external powers is unwarranted.<sup>55</sup>

Neither does Ankara's concept of "strategic autonomy" from the West resonate in Ukraine, where alignment with the West has driven societal transformation and represents values Ukrainian citizens are willing to defend. The perception is that Turkey's "strategic autonomy" should focus on decreasing reliance on Russia and mitigating the vulnerabilities that Russia is exploiting across societal, economic, and security domains.<sup>56</sup> Turkey's aspiration to join BRICS would not find support in Ukraine, primarily due to Russia's dominant position within the group and the strong anti-Western and anti-systemic sentiments displayed by some of its members.

Concerning strategic autonomy, Ukrainian strategic thinking aligns with Turkey's emphasis on resilience and self-sufficiency. Like Turkey, Ukraine aims to shield itself from existential threats – namely Russia's malign influence and direct military actions. However, the ultimate objectives of this effort – safeguarding democracy and joining Western political and security structures such as NATO and the EU – have remained unquestioned. In Ukraine, the advantages of aligning with the West are considered so substantial that any discussion of potential downsides or searches for alternative scenarios, unlike in Turkey, would be irrelevant in domestic debates. Despite efforts to diversify the pool of its allies – including reaching out to the Global South – Ukraine views European and Transatlantic integration as both foreign policy and a civilizational choice.

Currently, the strategic identities of Ukraine and Turkey show significant differences. The notion of balancing foreign policy is negatively charged in Ukraine, evoking memories of the time when the country was seen, both internally and externally, as a "buffer zone" between Russia and the West. With the shift in the foreign policy

---

<sup>55</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2024a, 117.

<sup>56</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, *Turkey and the West's Black Sea Interests Converge More Often Than Is Acknowledged: Opening Up Opportunities for Cooperation* (Washington D.C.: Atlantic Council, 16 October 2024b), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/turkey-and-the-wests-black-sea-interests-converge-more-often-than-is-acknowledged-opening-up-opportunities-for-cooperation/> (accessed 16 January 2025).

narrative, hedging or pro-Russian policies have been delegitimized in the Ukrainian political mainstream.<sup>57</sup>

Current public perceptions and official discourse in Ukraine see independence, survival, and development as being exclusively linked to membership in the EU and NATO – a sharp departure from the pre-2014 period of fluctuating foreign policy and indecisiveness. In contrast, Turkey's strategic identity remains more diverse, with its balancing policy being regarded as a natural response to the strategic environment in which it finds itself.

Ukraine's self-image was actually somewhat akin to Turkey's and, much like Turkey's, has been shaped over time due to its position at the intersection of different regions. Before 2014, Ukrainian strategic thinking was largely defined by the idea that steering clear of geopolitical conflicts and acting as a "bridge" between competing security systems could be beneficial. Since the early 1990s, concepts of neutrality, non-alignment, multi-vectorism, Eurasianism, and Euro-Atlanticism have chaotically permeated its strategic landscape. From the early 2000s until 2014, with NATO membership emerging as a consideration, Ukrainian society grappled with competing narratives, shifting between neutrality and a pro-Western orientation – a debate that echoed Ukraine's deeper identity struggles, fears, and vulnerabilities as an emergent democracy.<sup>58</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, Ukraine pursued a multi-vector foreign policy. The main foreign policy narrative in the 1990s and during President Viktor Yanukovich's tenure (2010–2014) was aimed at establishing a balanced approach to foreign relations, thereby providing greater flexibility for Ukraine, but in practice it led to an overreliance on the Russian vector.<sup>59</sup>

Ukraine sought closer ties with the EU and NATO, but NATO membership remained a divisive issue within Ukrainian society prior to 2014. The maintenance of a non-bloc status (1990s–2004, 2010–2014) allowed Ukrainian leaders to balance Russian assertiveness while avoiding Western pressures for democratization, political reforms, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. During this period, the idea of serving as a "bridge between civilizations" gained traction, particularly among pro-Russian factions within Ukraine and advocates of Eurasianism promoted by

---

<sup>57</sup> Per Ekman, "Painful Moments and Realignment: Explaining Ukraine's Foreign Policy, 2014–2022", *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 3 (2023): 240, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/10758216.2023.2253358?needAccess=true> (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>58</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, "The Concept of Non-Alignment in Ukrainian Strategic Thinking", *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2020b): 110, [https://cspjournal.az/uploads/files/Vol\\_1\\_Is\\_1\\_Summer2020/9\\_%20Maryna%20Vorotnyuk.pdf](https://cspjournal.az/uploads/files/Vol_1_Is_1_Summer2020/9_%20Maryna%20Vorotnyuk.pdf) (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>59</sup> Steven Pifer, *Ukraine: Finding a Balance?* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 04 October 2010), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/ukraine-finding-a-balance/> (accessed 16 January 2025).

Russia. This concept served as a counterpoint to Euro-Atlantic integration, emphasizing Ukraine's historical connections to Russia and the post-Soviet space.

However, following the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 – and even more so after Russia's major escalation in 2022 of the Russia-Ukraine war – the notion of neutrality and a “bridge” was completely discredited.<sup>60</sup> The experiences from the Euromaidan and war with Russia led to the framing of foreign policy choices in existential terms, discarding the option of maintaining pragmatic relationship with Russia.<sup>61</sup>

Kyiv views Turkey's hedging as indicative of its perceived frequent misalignment with the geopolitical West and its institutions, as well as a normative shift away from the West due to increasing autocratisation over the last decade. Although there is no indication that Ankara seeks to leave NATO or abandon its strategic priority of joining the EU, its position within the collective West is seen as distinct.

Both Ankara's strategic alignment with the West and this distinct stance within the Alliance are acknowledged. According to Yevgeniya Gaber,

[t]he perception of Turkey in Ukraine's security community has evolved significantly, moving beyond simplistic black-and-white thinking to reflect a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Ankara's strategic balancing between Russia, the West, and the rest. [...] Turkey's interests align closely with Ukraine's. However, its foreign policy remains driven by a complex mix of national priorities, economic considerations, and a desire to shape regional dynamics from the Black Sea and Caucasus to the Middle East and Africa, which often requires a distinct stance within the Alliance.<sup>62</sup>

## 5.2

# Lack of Policy Alignment and Differences in Threat Perceptions: Is Turkey Seen as a Full-Fledged Partner?

Aware of Turkey's vital contributions to Ukraine's military resistance and resilience as described above, Ukrainian experts, business leaders, and political figures acknowledge Turkey as a key defence and security partner. However, opinion-makers in Ukraine hold somewhat differing views on whether this relationship amounts to a

---

<sup>60</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2020b: 109.

<sup>61</sup> Ekman, 2023: 233.

<sup>62</sup> Comments of Yevgeniya Gaber, Professor of National Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies to the author, 16 January 2025.

full-fledged strategic partnership, with some arguing that important components of strategic partnership are lacking. This is largely due to what Ukrainian constituencies perceive as diverging political paths of the two states, with authoritarian trends in Turkey often being cited, along with Ankara's limited alignment with the West, its close relations with Russia, and significant differences in perspectives on Russia's war.<sup>63</sup>

There is a consensus that Ukraine and Turkey share several strategic objectives that are typical of strategic partnerships. According to a senior Ukrainian diplomat, these shared goals encompass security in the Black Sea, defence cooperation, and the situation of the Crimean Tatars. However, according to him, the partnership is hindered by a lack of "compatibility in visions of domestic development", which means that Turkey's authoritarian tendencies and centralized "vertical of power" do not align with the democratic values that Ukraine aspires to uphold as part of its EU accession process. Nonetheless, the countries cannot achieve their common strategic aim of preventing Russian dominance in the Black Sea without each other.<sup>64</sup>

Among the problematic issues marring a true partnership between the states, Ukrainian counterparts note the issues concerning the transit of Western-made military and dual-use goods and technologies to Russia via third intermediary countries; Turkey increasing its imports of sanctioned Russian oil and contributing towards the operations of the Russian shadow fleet; as well as Turkish ports being used as a destination for the Ukrainian grain stolen by Russia.<sup>65</sup>

The differing threat perceptions have not escaped the attention of the Ukrainian public and decision-makers. Turkey's tendency to view Russia more as a competitor than an outright threat – along with its perception of the war as a regional conflict that impacts its interests but is less pressing than the challenges Turkey faces in the Middle East – as well as the view that Russia should be contained but not defeated ("Ukraine should win, but Russia should not lose either") highlight stances that distinguish Turkey from Ukraine's closest supporters. Ankara's objection to the US decision in November 2024 to allow Kyiv to use long-range weapons to strike inside Russia and describing it as escalatory underscores the differing approaches to what is needed to bring the war to an end.<sup>66</sup>

Following the onset of the full-scale invasion, Turkey's public debate, including in mainstream media, has been heavily influenced by the Eurasianist school of thought. This perspective depicts Ukraine as being manipulated by American and Western

---

<sup>63</sup> Interviews conducted by the author with Ukrainian diplomats and experts, October 2024.

<sup>64</sup> Interview conducted by the author, 21 October 2024.

<sup>65</sup> From interviews conducted by the author in October 2024.

<sup>66</sup> "Erdogan Opposes Ukraine Use of U.S. Long-range Missiles, Urges Restraint", *Reuters* (online), 20 November 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/erdogan-opposes-ukraine-use-us-long-range-missiles-urges-restraint-2024-11-20/> (accessed 27 January 2025).

interests, framing the war as an inevitable consequence of provoking Russia.<sup>67</sup> This portrayal starkly contrasts with how the Ukrainian public and decision-makers view the conflict – as an unjust and unprovoked war of survival. The idea that Kyiv is simply a puppet of the West and that its pursuit of European and Euro-Atlantic integration is externally driven, rather than an indigenous effort, is rejected in Ukraine as a denial of the Ukrainian people's agency.

Ukraine's limited presence in the Turkish media – with anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives dominating both traditional and social platforms – exacerbates the situation. Besides, Ukraine has struggled to expand its narratives in Turkish media and has often responded late or insufficiently to incorrect statements by Turkish experts and journalists. Interviews with Ukraine's officials have been virtually absent in Turkish mass media.<sup>68</sup>

Despite concerns over Turkey's friendly ties with Russia, the Ukrainian president and government have refrained from openly criticizing their Turkish counterparts, choosing instead to focus on issues of common interest. Nevertheless, due to Turkey's special rapport with Russia, it is widely perceived as a “hybrid partner” – one that cooperates with Russia while also supporting Ukraine<sup>69</sup> – or as a “partner, but not an ally”.<sup>70</sup> Ukrainian stakeholders do not doubt Turkey's interest in supporting Ukraine, though an active diplomat has referred to the “obvious transactional” nature of the Turkish government's policy, suggesting it is “using the situation to earn economic dividends”.<sup>71</sup>

The majority of Ukrainian stakeholders understand the specifics of Turkey's sensitive positions, but they also believe that Turkey should offer more comprehensive support for Ukraine:

---

<sup>67</sup> Tacan Ildem, *A Balancing Act: Turkey's Misunderstood Position on Ukraine* (London: European Leadership Network, 09 November 2022), <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/a-balancing-act-turkeys-misunderstood-position-on-ukraine/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>68</sup> Yevgeniya Gaber, “Turkey”, in *Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2023*, eds. Nadiia Bureiko, Hennadiy Maksak and Hanna Shelest (Kyiv: Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung [FES], 2024): 165–166, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/21178.pdf> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>69</sup> Ne Lyshe YeEs i NATO: Mali Soyuzy v Zovnishniy Politytsi Ukrayiny” [Not Only the EU and NATO: Small Alliances in Ukraine's Foreign Policy], *ArmyInform* (online), 12 April 2023b, <https://armyinform.com.ua/2023/04/12/ne-lyshe-yes-i-nato-mali-soyuzy-v-zovnishnij-polityczi-ukrayiny/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>70</sup> “Traditsiyi Osmans'koyi Dyplomatiyi. Chomu Turechchyna dlya Ukrayiny Partner, ale ne Soyuznyk” [Traditions of Ottoman Diplomacy. Why Turkey Is a Partner for Ukraine, but Not an Ally], *BBC News Ukraine* (online), 27 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-62682378> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>71</sup> Comments to the author, 21 October 2024.



If we compare this with the policies of other NATO member states, it is not what one would expect from a NATO ally. We would expect a more profound level of support from Turkey. Ukraine has, of course, accepted Turkey's position, but the question remains: How long can Turkey maintain this [balancing policy]?<sup>72</sup>

Ukrainian stakeholders view Turkey's security policy as being primarily driven by the desire to secure short-term economic benefits from cooperation with Russia. As stated by then-Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in an interview to Ukrainian media:

The ancient traditions of Ottoman diplomacy remain intact. To briefly describe Turkey and its current foreign policy: It involves cooperation in the military-technical sphere with Ukraine and cooperation in the trade-economic sphere with Russia. In other words, by helping us resist Russia on the front lines – this is objectively what Turkey is doing – they are making money from Russia.<sup>73</sup>

Nariman Dzhelyal, the deputy chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People held in Russian captivity, released with Turkey's facilitation, and appointed an Ambassador to Turkey in the end of 2024, noted the following:

Turkey, like others, is a pragmatic state that wants to pursue its interests and is ready to reciprocate if offered something beneficial. If Ukraine does this today, Turkey will continue to be our partner. And we, as representatives of the Crimean Tatar people, are ready to act as a bridge or 'substance' that can unite our countries.<sup>74</sup>

Given the complexities described, public perceptions in Ukraine about Turkey are sometimes mixed. On one hand, there are instances where Turkey is viewed very positively, with Turkish drones becoming legendary in Ukrainian public discourse. On the other hand, the understanding of Turkey's role is quite fragmented. According to a Ukrainian journalist, one reason that Turkish-Ukrainian relations do not receive full attention in Ukraine may be the Turkish government's low profile and limited communication regarding its military assistance to Ukraine (beyond UAVs). Turkey's depiction in Ukrainian media mainly focuses on its mediation roles, the grain deal, and efforts to secure the release of Azov battalion commanders from Russian captivity.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Interview of the author with senior Ukrainian diplomat, 21 October 2024.

<sup>73</sup> BBC News Ukraine, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> "Dzhelal Poyasnyv, Chomu Turechchyna Zaklykaye do Prypynennya Vohnu ta Myrnykh Perehovoriv" [Dzhelal Explained Why Turkey Calls for a Ceasefire and Peace Talks], *Ukrinform* (online), 16 October 2024c, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/3916869-dzelal-poasniv-comu-tureccina-zaklikae-do-privinenna-vohnu-ta-mirnih-peregovoriv.html> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>75</sup> Author's interview with Yehor Brailian, journalist, 11 October 2024.



Simultaneously, Turkey's perceived role in "enabling" Russia likely contributes to the higher number of respondents in public opinion polls who hold "mainly negative" and "entirely negative" views of Turkey, compared to other Ukrainian partners. Specifically, 29.6 per cent of respondents hold negative views, while 55.1 per cent hold "entirely" and "mainly positive" views.<sup>76</sup>

Overall, Turkey is seen as a vital yet complex partner, whose positions and policies must be understood. Highlighting the importance of Turkish expertise, key ministerial roles in Ukraine are currently held by individuals with connections to Turkey. Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiha has previously served as Ukraine's Ambassador to Turkey, while Defence Minister Rustem Umerov – a Crimean Tatar and former head of the Ukraine-Turkey Friendship Group in Parliament – was appointed reportedly to leverage his ties to Turkey and the Islamic world to broaden international support beyond the West.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Razumkov Centre, *Pidtrymka Hromadianamy Vstupu Ukrainy do Yevropeiskoho Soiuzu ta NATO, Stavlennia do Inozemnykh Derzhav, Stavlennia do Myrnykh Perehovoriv* [Public Support for Ukraine's Accession to the European Union and NATO, Attitudes Toward Foreign Countries, and Views on Peace Negotiations] (Kyiv, September 2024), <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/pidtrymka-gromadianamy-vstupu-ukrainy-do-yevropeiskoho-soiuzu-ta-nato-stavlennia-do-inozemnykh-derzhav-stavlennia-do-myrnykh-peregovoriv-veresen-2024r> (accessed 24 June 2025).

<sup>77</sup> "Who Is Ukraine's Designated Defense Minister, Rustem Umerov?", *Deutsche Welle (DW)* (online), 04 September 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/who-is-ukraines-designated-defense-minister-rustem-umerov/a-66721184> (accessed 10 January 2025).

6.

# Deciphering Turkey: Ukrainian Stakeholders' Views on Turkey's Security Role

6.1

## A Key Partner in Defence Industry Collaboration

Cooperation in the defence industry has been seen as a well-developed, win-win arrangement that extends beyond merely the sale and purchase of weapons to include joint production as well.<sup>78</sup> According to the then-Ambassador to Turkey, Ukrainian-Turkish defence industry cooperation is “mutually beneficial and complementary”:

We are not competitor countries. We have enormous potential for joint work in third-country markets. We have started creating joint high-tech productions. Today [in 2020], more than 30 important projects are at various stages of implementation, covering areas such as aviation and space, ground systems, fleet and shipbuilding, engine construction, special equipment and instrumentation, and communication systems.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> “Andriy Sybiha, Posol Ukrainy v Turechchini: Slogan, Zapponovany Volodymyrom Zelenskym: ‘Zrostaemo Razom’, Absolyutno Pidtrymany Turets’koyu Storonoju” [Andriy Sybiha, Ambassador of Ukraine to Turkey: Slogan Proposed by Volodymyr Zelenskyy “Let’s Grow Together” Fully Supported by the Turkish Side], *Ukrinform* (online), 02 February 2020, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/2867435-andrij-sibiga-posol-ukraini-v-tureccini.html> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>79</sup> “AKINCI: Udarnyy Turets’ky Bezpilotnyk z Ukrainy’kymy Dvyhunamy – Mizhnarodne Vyznannya Vitchyznyanoho OPK” [AKINCI: Turkish Strike Drone with Ukrainian Engines – International Recognition of the Domestic Defense Industry], *ArmyInform* (online), 28 May 2020b, <https://armyinform.com.ua/2020/05/28/akinci-udarnyj-tureczkyj-bezpilotnyk-z-ukrayinskymy-dvygunamy-mizhnarodne-vyznannya-vitchyznyanogo-opk/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

Turkey's rapidly developing defence industry has been seen as a model that is "entirely applicable" to Ukraine. This model includes "effective state policies and successful reforms", as well as a "productive collaboration between the state and private businesses", enabling Turkey to meet a significant portion of its own military-defence needs, become one of the top arms exporters, and develop unique high-tech technologies.<sup>80</sup>

Although Ukraine is critical of Turkey's policies that bolster Russia's economic survival, it views cooperation in the defence sector as Turkey's significant contribution to its war effort, which has led to a restrained Ukrainian critique of Turkey's actions

## 6.2

# A Mediator and a Prominent Actor in Ukraine's Peace Plan

Turkey's mediation efforts are widely recognized in Ukraine, especially for facilitating prisoner exchanges with Russia. There was no expectation that Ankara could provide significant aid during the 2022 Antalya and Istanbul negotiations, given the conditions of open hostilities and Russia's use of talks as a smokescreen for military advances. Similarly, Turkey's success with the Black Sea Grain Initiative was hindered by the corridor's limitations to grain and Russia's consistent obstruction of the already limited initiative.

However, the mediation efforts of Turkey that are particularly valued in Ukraine are those facilitating prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and Russia. Turkey has enhanced its role in this area, continuing its involvement from before 2022 (it assisted in, among other things, the release of Crimean Tatar dissidents in 2017) and successfully facilitated the return of more than 200 Ukrainian prisoners in 2022, for instance.

Several respondents contacted for this research highly praised Turkey's role in the release of the commanders of the Azov Regiment. These commanders were required by Russia to stay in Turkey following their release from Russian captivity in 2022 until the war's conclusion, but Turkey freed them, despite Russia's backlash.<sup>81</sup> In Ukraine, this was seen as evidence of Ankara's bold manoeuvring against Russia when it

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "Zelensky Brings Home 5 Azovstal Commanders, Russia Furious", *Kyiv Post* (online), 08 July 2023, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/19245> (accessed 10 January 2025).

chooses to, and an opportunity for Turkey to challenge Russia more openly and assertively in the future as well.

Kyiv's diplomatic efforts are focused on securing Turkey's support for its vision of ending Russia's war through a just and lasting peace. Turkey's endorsement of President Volodymyr Zelensky's peace plan (Peace Formula) and participation in the Peace Summit – organized by Ukraine in June 2024 in Switzerland to rally global support – has been viewed as essential due to Turkey's current influence in security matters and its diplomatic outreach to the countries in the Global South, including China and Brazil.<sup>82</sup> Because of Ankara's proven track record in facilitating the Black Sea Grain Initiative and its longstanding commitment to international food security – including through its own humanitarian aid to the Global South – Turkey is also expected to play a leading role in the peace plan's food security component.<sup>83</sup>

Securing Turkey's alignment with Ukraine's vision for peace, while preventing any initiatives that might favour Russian interests, would mark a significant diplomatic achievement for Ukraine. As Foreign Minister Sybiha noted, Ukraine aims to prevent competition among peace initiatives and avoid dividing international support into rival blocs – a goal for which Turkey's role is considered pivotal.<sup>84</sup>

The issue of a future negotiated settlement with Russia highlights a significant discrepancy between the parties' perceptions of the current situation in Ukraine and Russia's intentions. Ukraine maintains that Russia's strategic goals to dominate Ukraine remain unchanged, leaving no room for negotiations. In contrast, Turkey believes that “the Ukraine–Russia war can be ended through dialogue” and has expressed its readiness “to take all kinds of facilitating steps”, including reviving the Black Sea Grain Initiative and mediating a ceasefire.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Turkey, “Andriy Yermak: Spravedlyvyy Myr dlya Ukrayiny: Rol Turechchyny ta Hlobal'nyy Samit Myru” [Andriy Yermak: Fair Peace for Ukraine: The Role of Turkey and the Global Peace Summit], Press release (Ankara, 05 June 2024), <https://turkiye.mfa.gov.ua/news/andrij-yermak-spravedlivij-mir-dlya-ukrayini-rol-turechchini-ta-globalnij-samit-miru> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>83</sup> Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Turkey, “Posylennya Torgovel'no-Ekonomichnoyi Spivpratsi ta Vidbudova Ukrayiny: Volodymyr Zelens'kyy Zustrivsyia z Prezydentom Turechchyny” [Strengthening Trade and Economic Cooperation and Rebuilding Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelenskyy Met with the President of Turkey] Press release (Ankara, 26 September 2024), <https://turkiye.mfa.gov.ua/news/posilennya-torgovelnno-ekonomichnoyi-spivpraci-ta-vidbudova-ukrayini-volodimir-zelenskij-zustrivsyia-z-prezydentom-turechchini> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>84</sup> “Ukraine's Foreign Minister Discusses Victory Plan and POW Exchanges with Turkish Counterpart”, *Ukrainska Pravda* (online), 21 October 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/10/21/7480670/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>85</sup> The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, “Statement Regarding President Erdoğan's Meeting with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine”, Press release (25 September 2024), <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/statement-regarding-president-erdogans-meeting-with-president-zelenskyy-of-ukraine-24-9-24> (accessed 10 January 2025).

From Ukraine's perspective, the 2022 Istanbul negotiations were viewed as a diplomatic debacle, nearly resulting in a capitulation to Russia's demands under military duress. Conversely, Turkish rhetoric highlights the 2022 Istanbul negotiations as "the success of the active role displayed by Türkiye". According to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the negotiations collapsed because certain lobbies – allegedly the United States and the United Kingdom – did not want these efforts to succeed.<sup>86</sup> This divergence reflects the broader contrast in how each country envisions pathways to ending the war.

On May 15–16, 2025, Turkey hosted the first direct talks between Ukraine and Russia since 2022 in Istanbul. Apart from the agreement for each side to exchange 1,000 prisoners of war, the talks did not produce a breakthrough regarding a ceasefire. The Kremlin has viewed these negotiations as a continuation of the 2022 Istanbul talks, maintaining its demands for Ukraine's demilitarization, neutrality, and recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea and the entirety of the four regions, parts of which it currently controls. Ukraine rejects such preconditions, demands a new framework, and views the negotiations as shaped by current political and military realities, as well as its experience with Russian crimes since 2022.

The negotiations in Istanbul were proposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin in an apparent attempt to invoke the precedent of 2022 and frame the talks in a manner unfavourable to Ukraine. However, Ukraine is opposed to this parallel. In interviews the author held with former decision-makers from Ukraine in October 2024, Turkey has been described as a partner with whom Ukraine maintains an exceptionally extensive network of contacts and connections and a useful mediator. However, two former diplomats have expressed concerns about using Turkey as a venue for future negotiations with Russia due to the undesirable "Istanbul 1 – Istanbul 2" connection.<sup>87</sup> The perceived "toxic parallel" between these past and possible future negotiations in Istanbul was acknowledged as a potential obstacle by another former high-ranking Ukrainian foreign policy official in comments to the author of this research.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, while Turkey's role as a mediator has been appreciated in Ukraine, it is also understood that Russia is using the same venue for the talks as a means of narrative control — to "renew" negotiations from a position of intimidation and strength

---

<sup>86</sup> The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, "President Erdoğan Meets with Think Tank Representatives in the U.S.," Press release (23 September 2024), <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-meets-with-think-tank-representatives-in-the-us> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>87</sup> Interview conducted by the author, 21 October 2024.

<sup>88</sup> Comments to the author, 08 October 2024.

## 6.3

# A Gatekeeper to the Black Sea

In February 2022, Turkey invoked the Montreux Convention, barring Russian warships from accessing the Black Sea via the Straits, which effectively blocked Russia from redeploying naval forces from other fleets or returning vessels stationed in Sevastopol. The landing operation by Russia next to Odesa thus was effectively curtailed, tantamount to “saving Ukraine”, and Russia did not achieve its strategic goals.<sup>89</sup>

However, Turkey’s restrictions also apply to Ukrainian and non-littoral states’ military vessels. As a result, Ukraine cannot currently bring the mine-sweepers it purchased from the United Kingdom into the Black Sea. The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications announced that “the mine-hunting ships donated to Ukraine by the United Kingdom will not be allowed to pass through the Turkish Straits to the Black Sea as long as the war continues.”<sup>90</sup> At the same time, the Commander of the Ukrainian Navy noted that no request for passage was made to Turkey, understanding its position.<sup>91</sup>

This situation is generally not perceived in Ukraine as Turkey harming its naval standing. Military experts suggest that Ukraine does not currently need large naval platforms, which could be targeted by Russian forces. These would be more important after the active phase of the war, while for now Ukraine should focus on smaller boats.<sup>92</sup>

The Montreux Convention’s restrictions are widely acknowledged, including by Ukrainian counterparts, for maintaining a balanced power dynamic in the Black Sea – an arrangement beneficial to Ukraine’s current strategic interests.<sup>93</sup> According to the Ukrainian Ambassador to Turkey:

---

<sup>89</sup> Interview conducted by the author with Andriy Klymenko, maritime expert, Institute for Black Sea Strategic Studies, Ukraine, 24 October 2024.

<sup>90</sup> The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, “Statement Regarding Disinformation About UK Mine Hunting Ships”, Press release (02 January 2024), <http://bit.ly/4jW5aZI> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>91</sup> “Komanduvach VMS Rozyasnyv Vidmovu Turechchyny Propuskaty Viyskovi Korabli dlya Ukrayiny” [The Commander of the Navy Explained Turkey’s Refusal to Allow Military Ships for Ukraine], *ArmyInform* (online), 11 January 2024, <https://armyinform.com.ua/2024/01/11/yakes-neporozuminnya-stalosya-v-informacziynomu-poli-komanduvach-vms-rozyasnyv-vidmovu-turechchyny-propuskaty-viyskovi-korabli-dlya-ukrayiny/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>92</sup> Interview conducted by the author with Andriy Ryzhenko, deputy chief of staff, Ukrainian Navy (2004–2020), 24 October 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, *Political and Diplomatic Dialogue: Challenges and Opportunities for Black Sea Cooperation Between Turkey and the West in the Post-2022 Environment* (Washington D.C.: Atlantic Council, 13 September 2024c), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/part-1-political-and-diplomatic-dialogue-challenges-and-opportunities-for-black-sea-cooperation-between-turkey-and-the-west-in-the-post-2022-environment/> (accessed 10 January 2025).

The operation of this Convention indeed benefits Ukraine, as it prevents additional Russian ships from entering or leaving the Black Sea. The existing fleet of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which we are gradually diminishing, also illustrates how the convention works in our favour. It seems more realistic for our military vessels to enter after the war, to avoid setting a precedent for the aggressor country to demand the same.<sup>94</sup>

At the same time, in terms of the application of the Convention, there is an expectation that Turkey could do more in terms of preventing Russia's use of commercial ships to carry weapons through the Straits, as well as preventing transportation of Ukrainian grain and other commodities stolen by Russia from the occupied Ukrainian territories.

## 6.4

# A Key Player in Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Black Sea

As a naval power with a significant standing in the Black Sea, Turkey is a crucial partner for Ukraine in ensuring freedom of navigation in the region. In the early weeks of the war, Ukraine faced a de facto maritime blockade imposed by Russia until it managed to radically shift the balance in its favour by conducting asymmetric strikes against Russian positions in Crimea and targeting the Russian Black Sea Fleet during its 2023 counteroffensive.

With the Black Sea turned into a battleground, Turkey's facilitation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative was vital for Ukraine, which heavily relies on sea exports for its economy. This agreement, jointly brokered by the UN and Turkey, operated from August 2022 until July 2023, when Russia withdrew from the initiative. It enabled the secure passage of Ukrainian grain exports through designated Black Sea routes, allowing millions of tonnes of grain to reach global markets.

After the initiative was halted due to Russia's withdrawal and Turkey's inability to negotiate its return and using its renewed control over the north-eastern part of the Black Sea, Ukraine established a "humanitarian corridor" for exporting goods from its ports. This corridor facilitated the export of not only agricultural products but also other commodities.

---

<sup>94</sup> Ukrinform, 2024a.

Although Ukraine views this corridor as a “viable alternative to the Black Sea Grain Initiative” and more efficient – thanks to the expanded range of export items and the safer route through the territorial waters of Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey – it still attaches great importance to “Turkish involvement in future agreements to ensure freedom of navigation and security in the Black Sea”.<sup>95</sup>

Ukraine is also focused on initiatives to clear the Black Sea – the most heavily mined body of water in the world – through collaborative efforts with its allies. To ensure freedom of navigation and address the threat posed by drifting sea mines, which are responsible for various incidents in the territorial waters of Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania, Turkey became part of a trilateral demining task force. Established in January 2024, the Mine Countermeasures Black Sea Task Force brings together the efforts of these three countries.

Ukraine has expressed interest in joining the task force.<sup>96</sup> However, Turkey reportedly declined its request to extend operations into its exclusive economic zone as long as active hostilities continue.<sup>97</sup> In line with its vision of regional ownership, Turkey opposed deploying this operation under NATO auspices or involving military vessels from other nations, which, according to Ankara’s statements, could increase tensions in the Black Sea.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Interview of the author with Andriy Ryzhenko, deputy chief of staff, Ukrainian Navy (2004–2020), 24 October 2024.

<sup>98</sup> “Ukraine Counts on Cooperation with Turkey in Demining the Black Sea”, *Militarnyi* (online), 28 November 2023, <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/ukraine-counts-on-cooperation-with-turkey-in-demining-the-black-sea/> (accessed 12 January 2025)



# Conclusion

Turkey's position at the south-eastern flank of the European security complex – with its access to the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, and the Black Sea – makes it an indispensable actor in the European security architecture. The strategic importance of the Black Sea has increased, along with the EU's vital interests in the region. Turkey's unparalleled regional clout and outreach to all Black Sea regional players are crucial in mitigating security volatility here.

The Turkey-Ukraine strategic partnership is poised to become the backbone of a future regional order, as Ukraine is emerging as a pivotal regional power and an indispensable force in European security. Granted its official EU candidate status in June 2022, Ukraine is competing to be fully integrated into European defence matters and views itself as a crucial security provider in Europe.

As a result, Kyiv welcomes the enhancement of the EU's strategic autonomy across all areas, supports Brussels in taking a more active role in its eastern neighbourhood, and advocates for the strengthening of the European component of NATO. Ukraine would appreciate initiatives that bolster regional security – including defence industry cooperation; military training and capacity-building; critical infrastructure protection; and hybrid threat mitigation – in collaboration with Turkey and the EU.

Ukraine envisions Turkey to be firmly anchored in the West, providing a credible deterrent against Russia. In the context of a disrupted security order in Europe, a structured foreign and security dialogue between Turkey and the EU is essential,<sup>99</sup> and Ukraine would welcome Turkey and the EU finding common ground on contested issues. It considers Turkey's success in re-establishing its security dialogue with the EU and bridging the gap in EU-Turkey foreign policy alignment as beneficial to all the parties. Everything that helps stabilize the Black Sea region and solidify a common front against Russian aggression and other security threats is in Ukraine's vital interests.

Given the pressing urgency to enhance defence capabilities in Europe, Turkey's thriving defence industry offers significant opportunities to address Europe's

<sup>99</sup> Galip Dalay, *Trump's Inauguration: The EU and Turkey Must Finally Get Serious About Security Cooperation* (London: Chatham House, 06 January 2025), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/01/trumps-inauguration-eu-and-turkey-must-finally-get-serious-about-security-cooperation> (accessed 17 January 2025).

vulnerabilities in this sphere. It is crucial to promote the understanding that “Turkey and Ukraine can rejuvenate European military resilience” and that their partnership benefits the Western defence industry.<sup>100</sup> The idea of closer cooperation between Brussels and Ankara in supporting Ukraine – including through the third-party funding of projects in Ukraine involving Turkey – deserves closer attention.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, extending Ukrainian-Turkish cooperation to interested third parties in Europe should be explored.

Despite Turkey’s potential to help the EU address pressing security risks, there are objective limitations to tapping into this potential. The Russia-West confrontation is likely to remain a systemic factor for European security in the foreseeable future, and Turkey’s role as part of the West will be crucial in determining the efficiency of the European response. Aligning more closely on the topic of Russia and other contentious issues is a crucial task, but it is easier said than done. Turkey maintains its distinct threat assessment and autonomous approach, which diverges from the formal position of the EU. Additionally, unless some of the most pressing problems between the EU and Turkey are resolved – including over democratic regression in Turkey – there will be no opportunity to include Turkey in defence and security matters at the EU level.

However, there is an opportunity, in that Turkey and the West share similar security threats, and their interests in the Black Sea region are not fundamentally different.<sup>102</sup> Should a more cooperative mode of EU-Turkey relations emerge and Turkey addresses its partners’ concerns about its democracy, it is possible to increase the number of areas for policy convergence. Navigating the disrupted security space in the Black Sea in synergy with Ukraine and Turkey – two key regional players striving to restore regional order – would transform the EU (and Europe at large) into a more fit-for-purpose defence actor.

---

<sup>100</sup> Can Kasapoglu, *Turkish-Ukrainian Defense Partnership in a New Geopolitical Realm* (Washington D.C.: Atlantic Council, 22 June 2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/turkish-ukrainian-defense-partnership-in-a-new-geopolitical-realm/> (accessed 12 January 2025).

<sup>101</sup> Alper Coşkun, Alexander Gabuev, Marc Pierini, Francesco Siccardi, and Temur Umarov, *Understanding Türkiye’s Entanglement with Russia* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 October 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/understanding-turkiyes-entanglement-with-russia?lang=en> (accessed 13 January 2025).

<sup>102</sup> Maryna Vorotnyuk, 2024b.

# Abbreviations

ATO	<i>Anti-Terrorist Operation</i>
BRICS	<i>Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa</i>
LNG	<i>Liquefied Natural Gas</i>
TANAP	<i>Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline</i>
UAV	<i>Unmanned Aerial Vehicle</i>

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CATS Network. All CATS Network publications undergo an internal peer review process to uphold quality and accuracy.

The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the Federal Foreign Office. CATS is the curator of CATS Network, an international network of think tanks and research institutions working on Turkey.

STIFTUNG  
MERCATOR



Federal Foreign Office



This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs  
Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4, 10719 Berlin  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[www.cats-network.eu](http://www.cats-network.eu)