



POLICY COMPASS

Turkey's Geopolitical Expansion: Strategic Ambitions, Balancing Acts, and Multipolar Realities

By

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Executive Summary

1. Turkey's Strategic Identity, Doctrines and Ambitions

- ✦ Located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Turkey balances Western alliances (e.g., NATO) with independent foreign policy ambitions, given its unique position and regional influence.
- ✦ The Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland) doctrine emphasizes maritime power and territorial claims, while neo-Ottomanism seeks to revive Turkey's historical influence over regions of the former Ottoman Empire.
- ✦ Both doctrines guide Turkey's regional expansion and military presence.

3. Regional Theatres of Influence

- ✦ Turkey's Influence spans across the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria, North Africa, the Balkans, Africa, and the Caucasus, with the country playing a key role in the Ukraine-Russia conflict to safeguard its Black Sea interests. Turkey maintains a strategic presence in key maritime and land areas to assert power.

4. Technology and Defense: The Case of Italy

- ✦ Turkey has recently made a joint venture with Leonardo to enhance defense technology. It has also made acquisitions like Piaggio Aerospace support Turkey's domestic defense capabilities.

5. Global Multilateral Engagements and Strategic Balancing

- ✦ Turkey always tries to stay on multiple fronts. It does participate in NATO while engaging with organizations like SCO and BRICS+. The cooperation with China and Russia on the "space race" reflects Turkey's multipolar approach.
- ✦ Turkey clearly tries to balance its Western alliances with deeper ties to non-Western powers.

6. Energy, Trade, and Economic Strategy

- ✦ Turkey navigates complex economic and energy relationships to enhance geopolitical leverage: it has strong energy ties with Russia (e.g., TurkStream pipeline), while having economic agreements with the EU, including the Customs Union, to maintain strategic autonomy.

7. Risks and Strategic Constraints

- ✦ Economic vulnerabilities and regional tensions may hinder Turkey's geopolitical ambitions. It risks having diplomatic frictions with Western allies, especially over differing political priorities.
- ✦ Turkey is undergoing a period of internal political instability, exemplified by the arrest of opposition leader Ekrem İmamoğlu, poses a domestic challenge.
- ✦ However, internal instability is unlikely to disrupt foreign policy due to Erdogan's alignment with Turkey's strategic needs.

8. Conclusion: A Precarious yet Determined Balancing Act

- ✦ Turkey's ability to maintain geopolitical stability relies on managing both internal and external pressures.

Key Picture: Turkey's international relations (2018)



Source: [GIS](#)

1. Introduction: Turkey's Strategic Identity

Turkey occupies a unique geopolitical position, straddling Europe and Asia, and bordering key regions such as the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea. This geography has historically granted it significant strategic leverage, allowing it to act as a regional power with global aspirations. Over the past two decades, Ankara has sought to consolidate this position through an increasingly independent foreign policy that, while still engaging with NATO and the West, has pivoted toward multipolarity. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been the principal architect of this approach, seeking to elevate Turkey's status as a global player through military interventions, economic expansion, and strategic diplomatic manoeuvres.

Turkey's geopolitical identity is also defined by its economic and energy dependencies, as well as by its historical and ideological links to the regions it seeks to influence.

While its NATO membership and EU Customs Union reflect its Western ties, Ankara has actively engaged with emerging powers such as Russia and China, challenging traditional Western dominance in key sectors. This strategic balancing act has allowed Turkey to assert itself in regional conflicts while maintaining room for negotiation with multiple actors.

2. Strategic Doctrines and Ambitions

Turkey's foreign policy is driven by key strategic doctrines, the most prominent of which is **Mavi Vatan**¹ (Blue Homeland, **Figure 1**). This maritime doctrine aims to assert Turkish sovereignty over vast portions of the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean, particularly in response to Greek and Cypriot claims. The doctrine has justified an expansionist naval policy, leading to tensions with NATO allies such as France and the U.S. Turkey has backed its claims with naval deployments, drilling operations, and strategic alliances with Libya, challenging Western-backed maritime agreements.

Figure 1: The Vision of the “Mavi Vatan” Turkey



Mavi Vatan map by Cihat Yaycı

Another key component of Turkey's geopolitical strategy is its **neo-Ottomanist vision**, which seeks to expand Ankara's influence in former Ottoman territories, particularly in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. This vision is reflected in Turkey's military interventions in Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan, as well as its economic and political engagement in Albania, Bosnia, and Somalia. While this policy has expanded Turkey's regional reach, it has also led to confrontations with regional rivals such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

3. Regional Theatres of Influence

Turkey's influence extends across multiple strategic regions, where it employs a combination of military, economic, and diplomatic tools. In **Libya**, Ankara has provided military and political backing to the Tripoli-based government, securing energy and maritime interests while countering rival factions backed by Egypt and the UAE. In exchange, Libya is providing Turkey with bases and signed the Turkey-Libya Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreement², allowing Istanbul to extend its claims on a large swath of Mediterranean waters, well above Greece and Cyprus (**Figure 2**).

In **Ukraine**, Turkey has supplied drones and diplomatic support while maintaining economic and energy ties with Russia, carefully navigating the conflict to preserve its Black Sea influence. Also, Turkey almost managed to broker a deal in 2022 between Russia and Ukraine that could have almost brought to an end the war, only few months into it³.

On the other side of the strait, tensions with **Greece** remain high, particularly regarding maritime disputes and military posturing in the Aegean. Relations with **Israel** have oscillated between cooperation and diplomatic crises, often reflecting broader regional dynamics. In the Balkans, Turkey has invested in **Albania** and **Bosnia**, reinforcing its historical and cultural ties, even providing Turkish language training to Albanian military personnel⁴. Across Africa, Turkey has expanded its presence through economic aid, military cooperation, and infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, in the Caucasus, Ankara has strengthened ties with **Azerbaijan**, with Turkish tech and support providing a crucial role in Baku's victory in the recent war against Erevan, thus strengthening the position in the region⁵.

Figure 2: Turkey's Maritime Influence

Map by Mesut Hakki Casin

Last but not least, Turkey has played a crucial role in the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime in **Syria** by providing strategic support to rebel groups through its intelligence apparatus. This support included training, funding, and military supplies, enhancing the effectiveness of rebel operations. In November 2024, a coalition of rebels, led by the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and supported by the Syrian National Army (SNA), launched an offensive that rapidly captured key cities such as Aleppo and Hama.

This success facilitated their entry into Damascus and the subsequent flight of Assad to Moscow. The rebels' swift advance was attributed to factors including effective coordination among rebel groups, logistical and strategic support from Turkey, and the relative weakness of loyalist forces, which were depleted by years of conflict and the involvement of allies like Iran and Hezbollah. Assad's fall marked a significant reduction in Iranian influence in the region, with Turkey emerging as a dominant actor in the new Syrian landscape.⁶

4. Technology and Defense: The case of Italy

Turkey has deepened its defense and technological cooperation with Italy, leveraging joint ventures and acquisitions to strengthen its military capabilities.

One of the most significant partnerships is with **Leonardo**⁷, with whom Turkey collaborates on helicopter systems, avionics, and electronic warfare technology. This partnership aligns with Turkey's long-term goal of developing indigenous defense technologies while maintaining access to Western expertise.

Ankara's **acquisition of Piaggio Aerospace**⁸ further underscores its strategy of leveraging European assets for military applications. The acquisition enhances Turkey's UAV and reconnaissance capabilities, reinforcing its ambitions of becoming a global drone exporter. These collaborations highlight Turkey's ability to engage selectively with European partners while maintaining strategic autonomy.

5. Global Multilateral Engagements and Strategic Balancing

Turkey's foreign policy reflects an intricate balancing act between Western alliances and emerging multipolar institutions. While it remains a NATO member, Ankara has also obtained **observer status in the Shanghai**

Cooperation Organization (SCO)⁹, signaling its willingness to engage with China and Russia on security issues. Additionally, Turkey has **applied to join BRICS+**, further distancing itself from Western economic frameworks.

In the space sector, Turkey has opted to collaborate with China and Russia in the **International Lunar Research Station (ILRS)**¹⁰ rather than joining the U.S.-led Artemis program. These strategic decisions reflect Ankara's broader shift toward a multipolar world order where it seeks to diversify its alliances and reduce dependence on Western institutions.

6. Energy, Trade, and Economic Strategy

Energy is a cornerstone of Turkey's geopolitical strategy. Ankara has secured its role as a critical energy hub through the **TurkStream pipeline**, which delivers Russian gas to Europe via Turkey. This partnership with Russia provides Ankara with economic leverage while reinforcing its role as an intermediary between Moscow and the West.

Despite its deep energy ties with Russia, Turkey remains cautious about an overly dominant Russian presence in the Black Sea. Ankara does not favor a scenario where Moscow extends its control over large portions of Ukraine, as this would threaten Turkey's own regional influence. This dual approach allows Turkey to extract economic benefits from Russia while maintaining its strategic independence.

7. Risks and Strategic Constraints

Despite its growing influence, Turkey faces several risks, including economic vulnerabilities, diplomatic tensions, and regional conflicts. The country's **inflation crisis and currency devaluation**¹¹ have placed significant strain on its economy, potentially limiting its ability to sustain military and foreign policy expenditures.

Additionally, Turkey's aggressive stance in the Eastern Mediterranean has strained its relationships with NATO allies, particularly Greece and France. If Turkey continues on its current trajectory, it risks alienating Western partners and facing increased economic and military pressure.

Also, the **recent arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu**¹², Istanbul's opposition mayor, marks a significant escalation in Turkey's domestic political tensions. As one of Erdoğan's most prominent challengers, İmamoğlu's detention signals the ruling party's increasing authoritarianism ahead of upcoming elections.

This development has drawn strong criticism from the EU and the U.S., raising concerns about Turkey's democratic backsliding. Internal political instability could weaken Turkey's ability to execute its foreign policy objectives, forcing it to divert attention from external ambitions to domestic crises. However, one should not mistake Turkey's international posture for a project dependent solely on Erdoğan. He can shape the execution, but the strategic framework is deeply rooted in the country's geopolitical needs and won't change probably even if Erdoğan was to be replaced.

8. Conclusion: A Precarious yet Determined Balancing Act

Turkey's geopolitical strategy is characterized by a complex balancing act that seeks to navigate the tensions between its Western alliances and its aspirations for regional and global influence. The country's ability to sustain its ambitious geopolitical expansion is contingent upon several key factors.

Internally, Turkey faces significant challenges such as political instability, economic vulnerabilities, and potential social unrest. The arrest of opposition figures like Ekrem İmamoğlu highlights the deepening political divisions within the country, but it also underscores the strength of President Erdoğan's grip on power. While domestic instability might pose a challenge, Erdoğan's leadership is aligned with Turkey's broader strategic goals, and it's unlikely that internal tensions will derail its foreign policy objectives in the short term. However, prolonged domestic instability could impact Turkey's capacity to maintain its regional influence if economic or political crises intensify.

On the international stage, Turkey is caught between conflicting demands and interests from different global powers. Its dual engagement in NATO and its growing ties with non-Western countries like Russia and China place it in a delicate position. While Turkey's pragmatism in balancing these relationships has allowed it to increase its global influence, it also risks alienating key allies, particularly the European Union and the United States. The challenge for Turkey will be to manage these tensions without jeopardizing its strategic autonomy or triggering diplomatic isolation.

Despite these challenges, Turkey is positioned to capitalize on emerging opportunities in a multipolar world. In a rapidly changing world order, Erdogan's and his ruling class ability to profit from external situations has proved notable: when the war in Libya erupted, he capitalized in Tripoli's lack of Italian support to step in, he is navigating so far with some success the Ukraine war, his support proved pivotal for Azerbaijan to win the war with Armenia and Turkey's backed insurgent's overtopped Assad's regime. As the global order shifts, Turkey's geopolitical and economic positioning provides it with the potential to play a pivotal role in various strategic arenas, from energy and defense to trade and technology. Its ability to leverage partnerships with both Western and non-Western powers enables it to maintain a degree of strategic flexibility that many other countries lack.

Turkey's success in maintaining its balancing act will depend largely on its ability to adapt to a rapidly changing global order. The country must continue to balance its competing interests, forging alliances where possible and mitigating risks where necessary. Turkey's geopolitical future will require a careful and pragmatic approach, with an emphasis on seizing opportunities without overextending its resources or capabilities.

In conclusion, while Turkey faces significant risks, both domestic and international, its geopolitical ambitions remain steadfast. The country's ability to navigate these challenges will define its role in a multipolar world, and its strategic balancing act will remain a crucial aspect of its foreign policy moving forward.

NOTES:

¹ <https://mavivatan.net/mavi-vatan-kavrami-ve-onemi/>

² <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/analysis-strategic-legal-aspects-of-turkey-libya-deal/1673079>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/22/boris-johnson-ukraine-2022-peace-talks-russia>

⁴ <https://tika.gov.tr/en/tika-supports-turkish-language-training-for-military-personnel-in-albania/>

⁵ <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-847635>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-syria-rebels-stars-aligned-assads-ouster-2024-12-08/>

⁷ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/leonardo-baykar-deal-important-step-towards-innovation-italian-defense-minister/3502283#:~:text=Baykar%20Technologies%20and%20Leonardo%20signed,assume%20an%20increasingly%20pivotal%20role.>

⁸ <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/12/turkeys-baykar-acquires-italian-firm-piaggio-aerospace/>

⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-erdogan-nato-shanghai-cooperation-organisation>

¹⁰ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202404/1310311.shtml>

¹¹ <https://think.ing.com/articles/monitoring-turkey-revised-up-cuts-to-continue/#:~:text=Sovereign%20credit%20views-Turkey's%20economy%20at%20a%20glance,2026%20forecast%20unchanged%20at%2012%25.>

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yren8mxxp80>