



## Türkiye Eyes Role in European Security Architecture

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Changes in U.S. policy following Donald Trump's return to the presidency have led to an improvement in Turkish-American relations. The improvement in bilateral relations is evident in Syria, where Türkiye has come to be seen as a potential close ally of the U.S. in the Middle East. Turkish decision-makers perceive the prospect of a reduction in U.S. military involvement in Europe as an opportunity to strengthen their position as Europe's security partner.

U.S.-Turkish relations had been tense over the past five years. The Biden administration openly criticised the decline of democracy in Türkiye, negatively assessed Türkiye's withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence (the so-called Istanbul Convention), and decided not to invite Türkiye to the Summit for Democracy in 2023. In addition, in 2021 in a speech, Biden became the first U.S. president to formally recognise the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire in 1915. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye delayed the ratification of NATO's expansion to include Sweden and Finland, which was a priority for Biden in strengthening European security. However, with the start of Trump's second term as president, there was a change in the U.S. approach to Türkiye.

**A New Direction.** Trump's victory in the November 2024 presidential election was welcomed by Turkish decision-makers, as it heralded a rejection of the U.S. focus on human rights standards and democratic principles in favour of transactionalism in bilateral relations. Unlike Biden, the Trump repeatedly expressed admiration for Erdoğan during the election campaign and did not criticise the Turkish leader for human rights violations or breaches of the rule of law. Both Trump and Erdoğan prefer a [transactional approach](#) to foreign policy and engage in personal diplomacy, which prioritises personal relationships between leaders.

Although Trump's announcements of protectionist trade policies caused concern among the Turkish political class, Türkiye ultimately was placed in the group of countries subject to the base 15% tariff, the lowest of the additional

fees. This has given Türkiye a relatively favourable outlook, compared, for example, to India, for maintaining exports to the U.S. of goods such as textiles and clothing, automotive equipment, machinery and household appliances, as well as agricultural and processed products. Turkish interests also align with Trump's desire to quickly end the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This strengthens Türkiye's role as the host of the [Istanbul format](#). In July, the third round of negotiations on a ceasefire took place there.

**Cooperation within NATO and European Security.** Trump's approach to the North Atlantic Alliance is based on forcing European allies to rapidly and decisively increase their defence spending, with the prospect of reducing the U.S. military presence in Europe. In view of this prospect, there is lively debate in Türkiye about the country taking on some of the responsibility for European security, including as part of the "European pillar of NATO". In February this year, during a press conference attended by İgli Hasani, the head of Turkish diplomacy, Hakan Fidan, argued that the formation of a new European security architecture would not be possible without Türkiye's participation.

Türkiye argues that closer cooperation with key European NATO members to strengthen European security would be very beneficial for Europe because Türkiye is a stabilising force in the Black Sea region, has the second-largest army in NATO, and regularly participates in Alliance missions and operations (including NATO air policing). In addition, it has a dynamically developing defence industry base based on innovation and domestic resources, and Turkish defence companies such as Aselsan and Baykar are present on global markets. Individual European countries are increasingly

cooperating with Türkiye in the defence industry, including Poland through the purchase of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicles in 2021, and Italy, as evidenced by the agreement concluded this year between Baykar and the Italian arms company Leonardo for the joint production of drones.

However, among the major European countries, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, there is a prevailing lack of trust in Türkiye among EU Member States. This is primarily due to the fact that European leaders are critical of Türkiye's human rights violations and democratic regression. In addition, the direction of Turkish foreign policy often conflicts with the interests of Western countries, including in the eastern Mediterranean and in relations with Russia, which Türkiye is trying not to antagonise.

**A United Front in Syria.** Since the outbreak of civil war in 2011, Syria has been an additional source of tension between Türkiye and the U.S. due to conflicting interests. This was due to U.S. support for Kurdish fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the fight against the so-called Islamic State, which Turkish decision-makers consider to be an offshoot of the terrorist organisation, the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK). The rise to power of Ahmed al-Sharaa, who is sympathetic to the Turkish authorities, in [Syria](#) in December last year changed the regional dynamics [in Türkiye's favour](#). Trump's decision to lift sanctions on Syria was largely the result of pressure from Erdoğan and the Saudi crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman. The leaders of these countries pointed out that al-Sharaa's rule was an opportunity to stabilise the country and limit Iran's influence. The convergence of Turkish and American interests was reflected in a press release published by the U.S. State Department in May this year, which emphasised that the U.S. and Türkiye share a vision of a stable and territorially intact Syria, which will enable Syrian refugees to return to their country of origin.

The change in the U.S. perception of Türkiye's role in the region from adversary to potential ally was also evident during the visit to Syria in July this year by Tom Barrack, the U.S. special envoy for Syria and U.S. ambassador to Türkiye. At that time, he rejected the possibility of U.S. support for the creation of a federation in Syria and also pressed the SDF to join state structures.

However, conditions for Turkish-American cooperation in Syria have deteriorated as a result of Israel's destabilising

military actions in Syria, which have drawn criticism from the Turkish authorities. Following Israel's airstrike on Damascus in July this year, Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan announced that Türkiye may even intervene militarily if there are further attempts to "divide Syria".

**Prospects for Bilateral Relations.** The promise made by the U.S. president to quickly end the Russian-Ukrainian war has allowed Türkiye to strengthen the role of mediator it played in the early stages of the Russian invasion in 2022. Following the summit in Alaska between Trump and Russian leader Vladimir Putin on 15 August, it can be expected that Erdoğan will seek to have the working meetings of the delegations take place in Istanbul, especially since, according to media reports, the location of the summit in Budapest could be a public relations issue given the failed 1995 Budapest Memorandum. The convergence of U.S. and Turkish interests in Syria has led to an improvement in bilateral relations. In the long term, Trump is not expected to criticise the ongoing process of democratic regression in Türkiye.

The prospect of a reduction in U.S. military involvement in Europe in the long term will force non-European countries to play a greater role in strengthening the defence and military capabilities of European NATO allies. Turkish decision-makers are convinced that Türkiye should play an active role in the emergence of a new European security order, a key element of which will be the European pillar of NATO. However, the challenge to strengthening security cooperation with Türkiye is that it remains subject to CAATSA sanctions from Trump's first term in office for purchasing the S-400 air and missile defence system from Russia. Furthermore, it does not participate in EU sanctions imposed on Russia in connection with its invasion of Ukraine. These actions weaken solidarity within the Alliance, strengthen Russia's position, and reinforce the perception of Türkiye in the West as an adversary.

However, in an unstable security environment, it is in the EU's interest to strengthen dialogue with Türkiye, at least on the future of security in Ukraine and the Black Sea basin. Poland may consider joining the Black Sea mine clearance initiative carried out by Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria. An important area of Polish diplomatic activity is to persuade Türkiye to play a greater role in deterring Russia on NATO's Eastern Flank. To this end, both the Trilogue format and Türkiye's accession as a strategic partner to the Three Seas Initiative in April this year should be used.