



BETWEEN MOSCOW AND NATO: TÜRKİYE'S STRATEGIC HEDGING IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

^{1,2*}Ali Serdar Erdurmaz, ³Dina Yulianti

¹Atilim University; Ankara; Türkiye

²Foreign Policy Institute; Ankara; Türkiye

³Department of International Relations; Universitas Padjadjaran; Indonesia

*email: serdarerdurmaz@gmail.com

Abstract

This article investigates the strategic motivations behind the evolving relationship between Türkiye and Russia, analyzing key diplomatic, economic, military, and energy dynamics. Although Türkiye is a NATO member, its increasingly independent foreign policy—driven by national interests and energy dependency—has allowed it to maintain close ties with Moscow despite growing tensions between Russia and the West. Conversely, Russia views Türkiye as a valuable economic partner and a wedge within NATO's cohesion. This study enhances the scholarly discourse by filling several key research gaps. It begins by offering a theoretical perspective based on realism and strategic hedging—an approach that remains underutilized in much of the prior, predominantly descriptive, literature. Furthermore, this study reveals that Türkiye's foreign policy reflects a calculated strategy to navigate structural pressures while preserving autonomy. Empirically, the research examines bilateral interactions in Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Black Sea, highlighting how Türkiye and Russia manage conflictual interests through compartmentalized cooperation. It also addresses underexplored areas such as tourism and nuclear education as informal stabilizers in their relationship. Findings suggest that Türkiye's engagement with Russia is not a deviation from its Western alliances, but part of a broader strategic hedge designed to enhance diplomatic flexibility. Likewise, Russia's outreach to Ankara reinforces its goal of weakening transatlantic unity. Overall, the Türkiye–Russia relationship exemplifies pragmatic statecraft under multipolarity, where rivalry and cooperation coexist in a transactional equilibrium.

Keywords: energy; foreign policy; national interest; NATO; regional conflicts; Russia; strategic hedging; Türkiye

Introduction

NATO and the European Union's perception of the threat was profoundly changed by the Russian military incursion in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russia notified NATO and the European Union of the objectives of its military engagement. Russia can employ military action in Eastern Europe, which could result in a reconfiguration of European borders through political means (Hutagalung 2024). The Russian military operation was met with prompt reactions from the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union. Diplomacy has assumed a central position in vehemently denouncing the Russian endeavors to invade Ukraine, which contravenes established international legal norms. The United States of America and European Union member states implemented sanctions against Russia and provided military and financial assistance to Ukraine. This exemplifies the unity of Western nations in opposition to President Putin's aspiration to incorporate Ukraine (Berman 2024).

As a member of NATO, Türkiye is exempt from sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union due to its non-membership status in the EU (Ellehuus 2019). Moscow, Türkiye's most influential and significant neighbour to the outside, and Ankara also have close economic, energy, and social ties. Conversely, Ankara has encountered many instances where Washington has consistently disregarded Türkiye's interests while pursuing its agenda. The most recent example was when, despite significant opposition from Ankara, the US partnered with the terrorist PYD/YPG faction to fight ISIL (Hatahet 2024). The Turkish public's trust in the potential assistance of NATO and the United States in the event of escalating tensions between Moscow and Ankara has been eroded.

The diplomatic history between Ankara and Washington has led Türkiye to pursue an independent foreign policy that prioritizes protecting its national interests in the region, as dictated by its geographic circumstances. This approach is characterized by assertiveness and a commitment to dignity (Robinson 2023). Many previous studies have discussed the motivations behind the relationship between Russia and Turkey, showing that these motivations are very diverse, ranging from historical ties, geopolitical interests, security issues, economic interdependence, to regional dynamics. Among others, Turkey has used its relationship with Russia to balance its relations with Western powers and pursue a more independent foreign policy (Inat & Duran 2023; Balta 2019). In addition,

Turkey and Russia cooperate through the purchase contract of the Russian S400 missile defense system by Turkey driven by security interests (Martin 2025). Trade relations have also become a cornerstone of bilateral relations (Balta 2016).

This study enhances the scholarly discourse by filling several key research gaps. It begins by offering a theoretical perspective based on realism and strategic hedging—an approach that remains underutilized in much of the prior, predominantly descriptive, literature. Additionally, it discusses an analysis of various aspects of Russia–Türkiye relations in different geopolitical fields, like Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Black Sea, to throw light on the contradictory and issue-based nature of their diplomacy. In this connection, the analysis calls for attention to the less visible spheres of cooperation, such as tourism and anything connected with nuclear education that can be viewed as the informal guarantee factors in the bilateral cooperation. It also looks at how domestic factors influence Turkey's foreign policy, specifically elections and how citizens of Turkey feel about the policy. Finally, the paper locates Türkiye's diplomatic balancing in the new NATO's positioning after 2022, pointing out the ways in which Ankara manages structural pressures to maintain its policy autonomy.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the tradition of neoclassical realism, enriched by insights from strategic hedging theory. Neoclassical realism builds on the central premise of classical realism—that states act primarily to ensure survival in an anarchic international system (Waltz 1979)—but adds the important nuance that domestic factors such as public opinion, perceptions of leadership, and institutional dynamics mediate how systemic pressures are interpreted and acted upon (Rathbun 2008).

In Turkey–Russia relations, neoclassical realism is particularly relevant. Turkey's foreign policy since the early 2000s has been shaped not only by structural changes in the international system—such as the weakening of unipolarity and the erosion of US dominance—but also by domestic political developments: the rise of the AKP, growing skepticism toward NATO, and electoral pressures that encourage expressions of autonomy and strategic assertiveness (Dalay et al. 2022, Cengiz et al. 2024).

Hedging is an action that is commonly used when there is great uncertainty and high risk involved. This is a blended strategy that seeks to mitigate and manage risks

while maximizing rewards in three main ways: active neutrality, inclusive diversification, and learning how to cultivate careful fallbacks. Accordingly, hedging is understood not only as a "middle" position—between competing powers—but also as an "oppositional" stance, in which two or more counterbalancing measures are simultaneously pursued to mitigate uncertainty and develop alternative pathways if needed (Kuik et al. 2012).

Despite its NATO membership, Turkey's strengthening of defense and energy ties with Russia is a clear reflection of this behavior. For example, the purchase of the S-400 missile defense system is not a sign of a total shift toward Moscow, but a calculated strategy to gain concessions from the West and increase diplomatic bargaining power. On the other hand, Russia also has a realist interest in strengthening its position amid global uncertainty, where since 2013 there has been a change in the international order and the deterioration of Türkiye's relations with the European Union and the United States; as well as the deterioration of Russia's relations with NATO over Ukraine. This has prompted Ankara and Moscow to strengthen their bilateral relations (Gafarli & Roknifard 2023).

Thus, this article does not view Russia–Turkey relations as an anomaly or deviation from expected alliance behavior but as a rational outcome of realpolitik calculations in a fluid global order. Therefore, through the synthesis of systemic and domestic level analysis, this model provides for a more nuanced understanding of how two hegemonic rivals that had previously fought a war can engage in what is predominantly a packaged, yet still segmented cooperation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Geopolitical Significance of Türkiye

The following facts highlight the geopolitical significance of Türkiye in the Russia–Ukraine conflict. To begin with, Türkiye is a NATO member and will never wholly renounce its membership in the EU. Second, although he would like to implement a self-determined and assertive strategy in line with the West, Türkiye is conscious that Russia is a strong neighbor and that Ankara must keep good relations with it (Aron 2022). Third, Türkiye's connections with Ukraine have been strengthened (Steven 2022). Fourth, Türkiye is adamant about maintaining a multipolar foreign policy that is in line with its interests and independent of US, EU, and NATO coercion (Galip and Salih 2024).

These guidelines state that Türkiye's diplomatic and military stances toward the parties to this conflict should consider the abovementioned realities. As soon as NATO expanded, Türkiye's defence against the Soviet menace entirely depended on the USA and NATO. However, the 'bargain' to end the Cuban Crisis in 1963 was to remove Jupiter IRBMs from Türkiye (Fuelling 2017). Additionally, Johnson's Letter from 1964 threatened Ankara by stating that NATO would not defend Türkiye in the event of a Soviet attack (Criss 2002). These facts are why Türkiye no longer believes that NATO will support the country. Ankara attempted to develop an independent foreign policy to enhance relations with the USSR and convince its foreign policy to break away from NATO.

While Western nations enjoyed a period of relative peace following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, Türkiye challenged the US invasion of Iraq, the Syrian civil war, the Greek-Greek Cypriot Administration in the Eastern Mediterranean, the US dispute with Iraq over the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Between 1983 and 1993, Turgut Ozal, a conservative/liberal leader who served as prime minister and president, implemented a more aggressive foreign policy to develop a much more modern Türkiye and secure its place in the new global order. He created the foundation for the ideas that still guide Turkish foreign policy today (Laçiner 2009).

Later, Ahmet Davutoglu, first as a consultant and then as a minister of foreign affairs, was the driving force behind "zero problems with the neighbours" and advocated for a more independent, non-NATO, non-Western foreign policy in the area (Tüfekçi 2014). Ankara would pursue proactive, multifaceted international and regional strategies to build positive bilateral ties with its Middle East and African neighbours. He proclaimed that Türkiye was an "order institution country" that would make it a global and regional power while he was Prime Minister. However, the Arab uprising and its consequences in 2011 rendered Türkiye's policies ineffective (Ataman 2023).

The Metropoll polling firm conducted a poll in January 2022. The question was, should Türkiye prioritize the United States and the European Union over Russia and China? 37.5% supported the EU and the US, while 39.4% supported Russia and China (Tremblay 2022). On the one hand, a study conducted by the PEW Research Center on February 9, 2020, received only 21% of positive feedback in Turkish. On the other hand, the Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey asked respondents, "Would the US defend them

from Russian attack than say their own country should." Türkiye's response is 46% for the US and 32% for its own country (Fagan and Poushter 2020). Those signals suggested that Turkish public opinion had lost mainly faith in NATO, the US, and the EU.

Türkiye-Russia Relations Across Conflict and Cooperation

Türkiye has engaged in twelve conflicts with Russia from the 16th to the 20th centuries (SWJ 2024). Given that Türkiye and Russia have a long history of conflict dating back to the Ottoman era and the Soviet expansionism following World War II. Relations between the two nations have always been complex in this sense. Relations between Türkiye and Russia are diverse due to the national interests of both countries; in some contexts, such as Syria, national interests coexist despite divergent end goals. Ankara and Moscow, however, are at odds with one another, just as in the case of Libya. In any event, they find a middle ground between the opposing nations.

Syria

2011 saw the emergence of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, which altered the existing global order, particularly in the MENA and Middle East areas. Arab Spring hope spread from Egypt to Syria, where large-scale protests against autocratic regimes were unsuccessful. Türkiye worked with the US to remove Bashar Assad, especially in Syria. However, the rise of ISIL complicated Washington's plans to use the PYD/YPG to combat ISIL, which led to tensions between Ankara and Washington. Ankara identified PYD/YPG as an affiliate of the PKK, and as such, the USA should no longer maintain any ties with it (MFA Türkiye n.d.). Washington disregarded Türkiye's concerns about this alliance, claiming it would only involve brief contact with ISIL. It paved the way for Ankara to enhance its ties with Russia, which had only recently become interested in Syria in 2015 at the Assad regime's invitation. Moscow, however, has never added the PKK to its list of terrorist organizations on the run and has never acknowledged that the PYD/YPG is connected to the PKK inside of Syria (Eurasian Research Institute 2017).

Despite Washington's opposition, Ankara was increasing its ties to Russia and allying with Iran and Russia in Syria to counter the US's unrelenting military campaign against the Islamic State, even if each nation had its objectives. The shifting of the Turkish axis from the West to Russia was a topic of discussion between the US and the EU. They

also questioned whether Türkiye should continue to be a member of NATO (Bolme 2022).

On November 24, 2015, Türkiye downed a Russian fighter aircraft along the Syrian border, significantly strained relations with Moscow. Putin asserted that the imposition of sanctions on Türkiye caused him to feel as though he had been betrayed (Biryukou 2015). Subsequently, Ankara procured the S-400 Ballistic Missile Defense System from Russia to redress its inadequacy.

Despite strong objections from the United States and other NATO members, it was announced that the deal is incompatible with the NATO defense system umbrella. The imposition of US sanctions on F-35 fighter planes by the US Senate occurred promptly. Because Türkiye maintains close ties with Russia regarding the Syrian civil war, the US's reaction to the Tripartite agreement puts pressure on Ankara through political sanctions. The decision by Türkiye, a member of NATO, to acquire the S-400 ballistic missile defense system from Russia, despite solid opposition from the United States, raises concerns about the potential negative impact on NATO (Mehta 2019).

Eastern Mediterranean

In 2011, we witnessed the revelation of substantial offshore gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean region, located near the coastal areas of Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel, which garnered significant attention from the European Union. Ankara was excluded from the East-Med gas form established by Greece, Greek Cypriots, Egypt, Israel, and France. This exclusion compelled Ankara to consent to the delineation maps of the riparian states' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) formulated in Sevilla (Cetin 2020). Ankara declined to acknowledge the map and expressed its resolve to impede any maritime entitlements in the area, regardless of the expense. As per the earlier resolution, the Turkish administration dispatched research and drilling vessels to the disputed region, safeguarding the Turkish Naval Forces (Alhas 2019).

In 2015, while fostering stronger ties between the Israeli military and Greek Cypriots, Israel signed a military agreement with the latter. In May 2018, the US Senate also approved a bill to advance cooperation in energy and security with Greek Cypriots, Israelis, and Greece. The potential use of the reserves and the Southern Pipeline to transport natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean region to European nations presents

a viable substitute for Russian-sourced natural gas. The occurrence mentioned above compelled Moscow to enhance its bilateral relations with neighbouring countries, including, but not limited to, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Libya (Demirci 2019).

In 2015, to support Bashar Assad, the Russian government's presence in Syria gave them a strategic advantage to influence the power dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean area. The city of Moscow, specifically, supports the Greek Cypriots in opposition to Türkiye. In 2011, the Kremlin publicly supported the Greek Cypriot faction by deploying the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier to the waters off the coast of Cyprus. The actions taken by Moscow were appreciated by Greece and Israel, who viewed them as a protective measure for the Greek Cypriot population. An agreement was signed on February 25, 2015, between President Vladimir Putin and Greek Cypriot Nicos Anastasiades, granting Russian military ships the privilege of entering ports in Cyprus (Reuters 2015).

Libya

The Government of Türkiye signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord of Libya on December 18, 2019, about military cooperation and maritime jurisdiction. Ankara established the border of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with Libya by the terms of the relevant agreements. It was declared to the United Nations (UN 2019).

Subsequently, in response to an invitation extended by the Government of the National Accord (GNA) of Libya, Türkiye dispatched military equipment and armed Turkish drones as a form of military assistance to bolster the GNA's efforts. The contribution in question significantly impacted the outcome of General Haftar's military campaign to seize control of the capital city of the Government of National Accord (GNA), Tripoli (Wintour 2020). The agreements with Libya were subject to criticism by EU member states. They were establishing a situation in Libya that countered external forces, including the Wagner Group of Russia and other foreign supporters of the Libyan National Army, which would prove advantageous. Türkiye has opposed Russia in Libya by supporting the GNA, while Russia reinforces the LNA and General Haftar in Tobruk (Eljarh 2020).

Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict

The ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has resulted in a war between the two nations. Throughout the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the occupied territory, Ankara provided Azerbaijan with significant military support. In 2011, Ankara and Baku entered a formal "The Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support." As per the accord mentioned earlier, Ankara exhibited its diplomatic and military backing by dispatching diverse military apparatus, provisions, and unmanned aerial vehicles to Azerbaijan, ultimately altering the outcome of the conflict in favour of Baku (Abbasov 2011). The work of the six-week war resulting in Azerbaijan's triumph highlights the increasing influence of Ankara in the region (Cutler 2020). The conflict at hand reveals that Russia disregarded the appeals made by Armenia for assistance from Moscow, as it appears that President Putin sought to impart a lesson to Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan (BBC 2020). As a result, President Putin facilitated collaboration between Ankara and Azerbaijan amidst the conflict (Bailey 2000).

Black Sea

Historically, Russia aimed to dominate the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to ensure free naval passage to the Mediterranean. In turn, Western powers considered partnering with Turkey as crucial for curbing Russia's regional expansion (Hale 2023). The Black Sea and Turkish Straits can potentially become sources of tension for the parties involved, including Ankara, during times of conflict. The Montreux Convention of 1936 granted Türkiye authority over regulating access and transit through the straits. Per the Montreux Convention, Türkiye ensures the liberty of navigation for all non-military and commercial ships during peace. However, in a war in which Türkiye is not a participant, warships belonging to belligerent nations are prohibited from utilizing the straits unless enroute to their home bases in the Black Sea (Isler 2022).

Following the Russian attack on Ukraine, the Ukrainian government formally requested Türkiye implement the closure of the straits to Russian vessels. The declaration made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on February 27th deemed the Russian assault on Ukraine as an act of warfare. Ankara adhered to the Montreux Convention with the utmost strictness (BBC 2022). Ankara also issued a declaration to all nations, including those

bordering the Black Sea, prohibiting the passage of warships through Turkish straits (Aljazeera 2022).

Concurrently with this determination, Ankara declined Moscow's solicitation to traverse four maritime vessels through the Straits on the 27th and 28th of February, as they were not officially registered to the Black Sea fleet nor their respective home bases (Tavsan 2022). After the event, as mentioned earlier, the United States Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, expressed his admiration for Türkiye's resolute stance and unwavering backing about defence and territorial sovereignty matters.

Strategic Leverage Between Türkiye and Russia

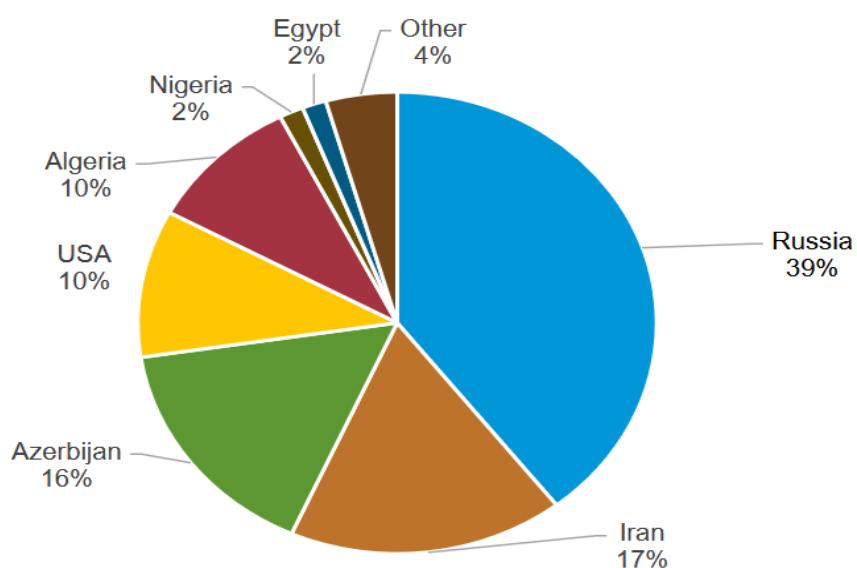
From one perspective, Türkiye relies heavily on Russia as its primary source for meeting its natural gas and oil demands. Conversely, Türkiye is a highly profitable market and central location for Russia to transport its resources to Eastern and Central Europe (Ibadoglu 2022). The Republic of Türkiye plans to construct three nuclear power plants with 12 reactor units. (NPPs). As mentioned above, the state-owned electricity company, EÜAŞ, has procured approximately 50% of the atomic power generated from the facility for 15 years at a predetermined price (PWC 2023).

A contract to install and run Nuclear Energy Central in the Akkuyu region was signed by Ankara and Moscow on May 12th, 2010. Russia will install 4 VVER 1200-type Reactors with a combined output of 4800 MW by the deal (Akkuyu.com 2023). Moscow serves as the primary hub for the installation of financial capital. Moreover, Total Turkish students have pursued nuclear engineering education at universities in Russia has reached 186, with 58 students due to complete their training in 2022 (Daily Sabah 2021).

Türkiye relies on Russia to fulfil its gas and oil requirements. Based on the June 2021 assessments, Türkiye's natural gas imports increased significantly by 104.2% compared to the corresponding month of the previous year. Russia, Türkiye's primary natural gas supplier, secured the top position by providing 2.39 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas. Iran provided 867 million cubic meters (mcm) of supply, while Azerbaijan trailed with 522 mcm (Anadolu Agency 2021). There was a 43% decrease in imports in Azerbaijan during the corresponding period in 2020. In 2020, there was a notable increase of 1,431% in gas imports from Russia and 100% from Iran. Ankara has recently requested a postponement of its natural gas payment until 2024 (Wilks 2022).

Amidst the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, European nations opted to decrease their reliance on Russian oil and gas resources. As a result, the European Union imposed sanctions on the Russian capital. As Türkiye is not a member of the European Union, it does not adhere to the sanctions imposed by the EU. By December 2022, Ankara was supplying far more coal and crude oil than it had been. Representatives from Moscow travelled to Ankara to engage in negotiations regarding Ankara's proposal for a reduction of 25% on the price of natural gas. Moreover, Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged that Türkiye would be a regional trading hub for Russian gas (Hopkins et al. 2022).

Türkiye's natural gas imports by country, 2022

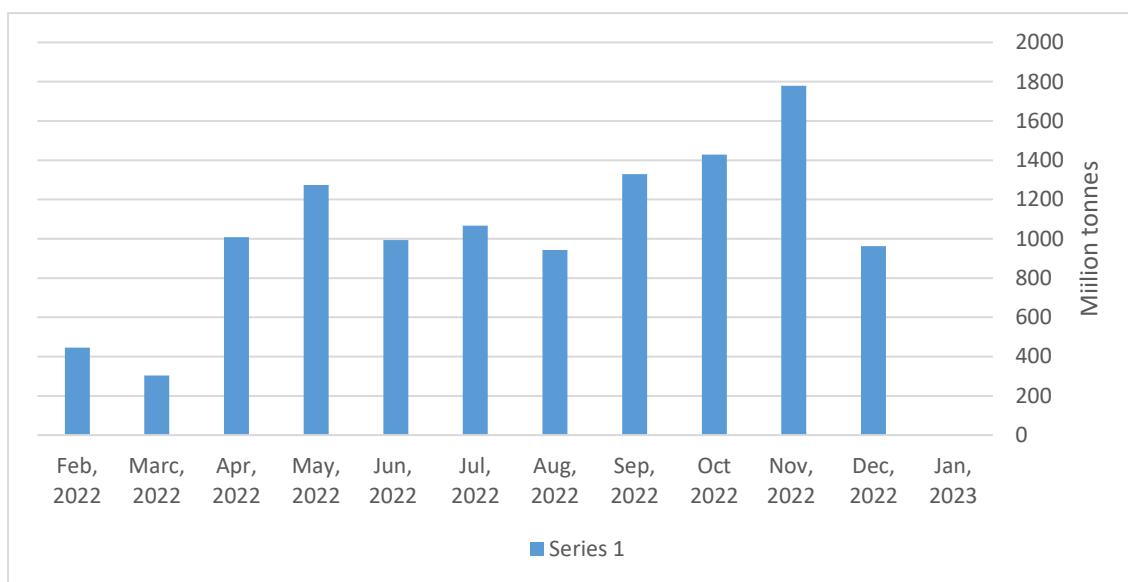


Data source: Republic of Türkiye Energy Market Regulatory Authority

Source: https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Turkiye/turkiye.pdf

Figure 1: Turkiye Natural Gas Imports by Country 2022

Natural gas imports to Türkiye mainly came from four countries: Russia with 39% and Iran with 17% and Azerbaijan with 16% and the United States with 10%. In 2022 Türkiye imported 1.9 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of natural gas but simultaneously exported 20.5 billion cubic feet (Bcf) throughout the year (EIA, 2023).



Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/crude-oil-imports-from-russia>

Figure 2. Türkiye's Crude Oil Import from Russia

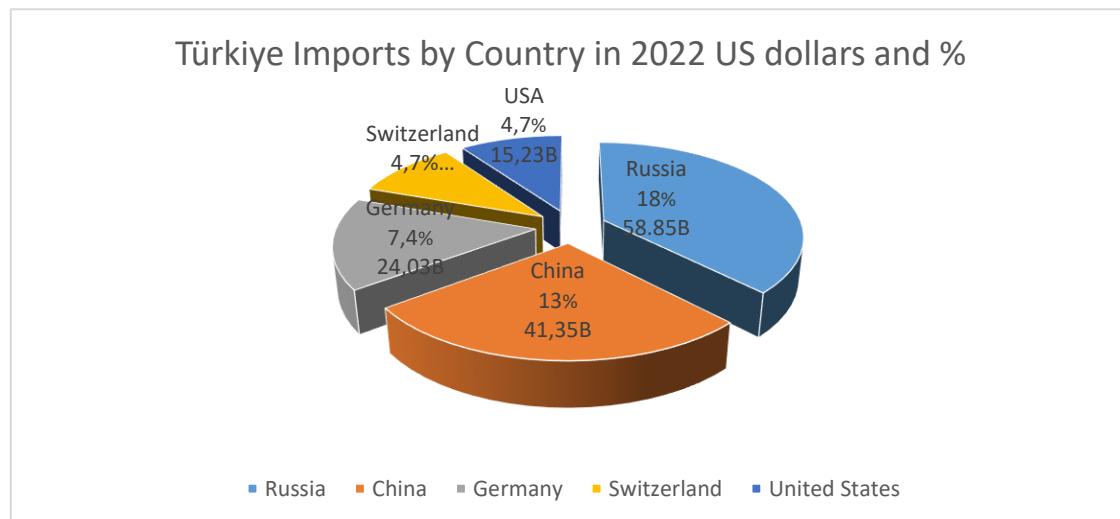
Turkish energy sectors operate as net importers since they receive more crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) together with refined petroleum products than they export. As the largest oil supplier to Türkiye, Russian organizations provide 60% of crude oil imports and 37% of refined oil product imports. Russian energy resources made up 34% of all seaborne imports by Türkiye. The location of Türkiye functions as an important gateway connecting pipelines between Europe and Russia and the Middle East (EIA, 2023).

Economic and trade relations are the main driving forces between Türkiye and Russia. Trade volume between the two states reached 26,309 billion USD in 2019, with Türkiye's exports worth 3,854 billion USD and 22,454 billion USD imports. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that Moscow and Ankara's economic and trade ties drive bilateral relations. The mutual investments have attained a value of 10 billion dollars each, whereas Turkish constructors accomplished multiple projects in 1972, with a cumulative cost of 75.7 billion dollars (MFA Türkiyem 2023; Erai 2022).

Regarding imports, Russia has grabbed the top spot with 58 billion 853 million US dollars, and China is in second place with 41 billion 354 million US dollars between January and December 2022 (Trading Economics 2022). The chart below depicts Türkiye's imports, as per the United Nations COMTRADE database on international

trade. Notably, Russia secured the topmost position with an 18% share (UN Comtrade 2023). At their meeting in Sochi in August 2022, President Erdogan and President Putin agreed to increase trade volume by up to 100 billion USD by 2030 (Ibadoglu 2022).

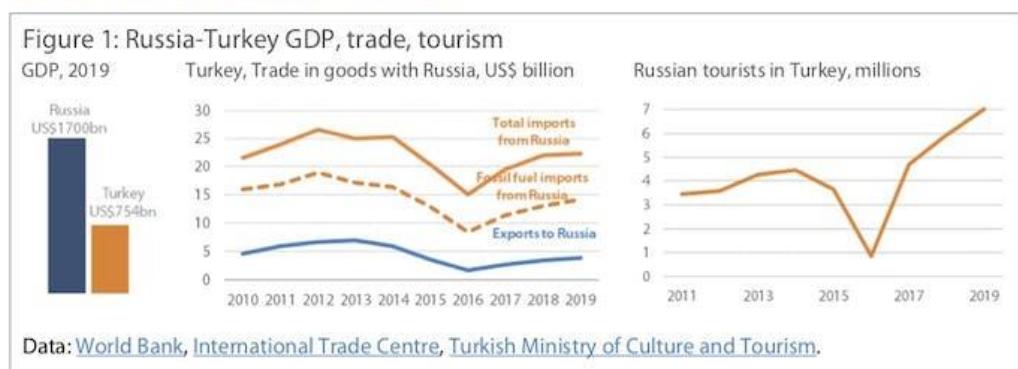
The chart below depicts a notable disparity between Turkish imports and exports to Russia, with the former consistently high from 2014 to 2022. Nevertheless, imports from Russia significantly improved, especially following the conflict with Ukraine. According to Washington, Russia was attempting to take advantage of the sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union.



Source: <https://comtradeplus.un.org/>

Figure 3: Türkiye Imports by Country in 2022 US dollars and %

Russia-Turkey economic relations

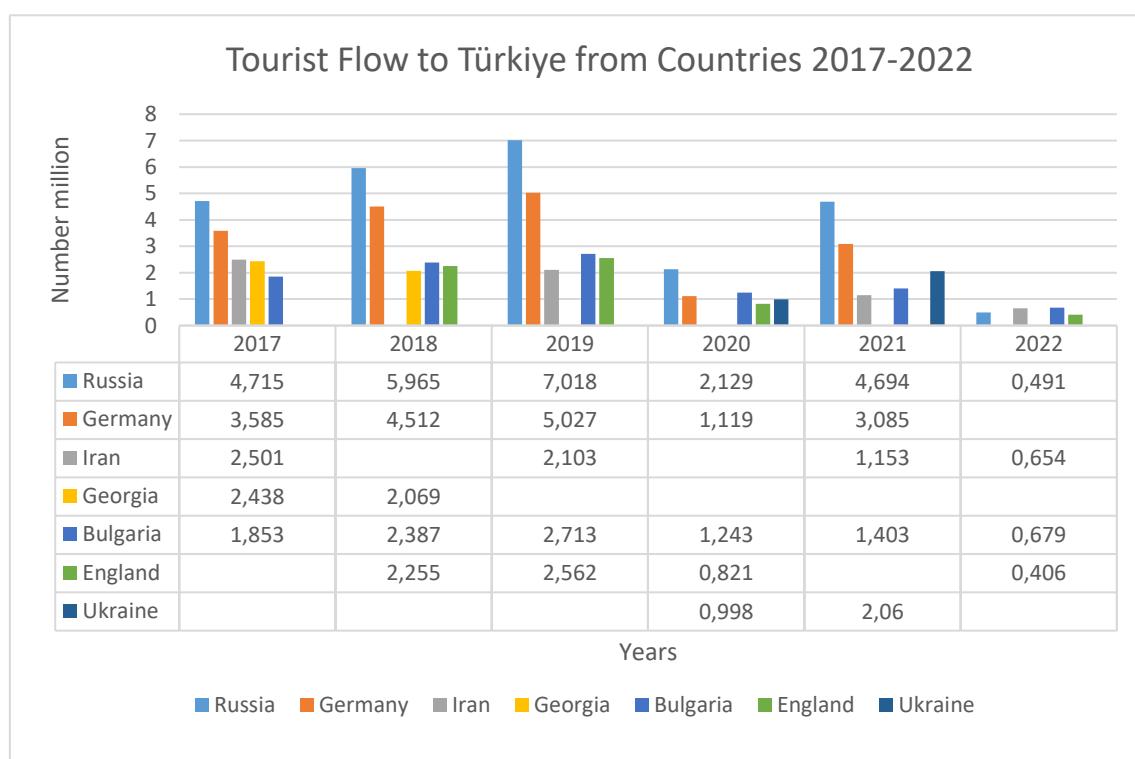


Source of figure: <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-Türkiye-is-the-pivot-point-between-russia-and-the-us-history-shows-us-why-195406>

Figure 4: Russia- Türkiye Economic Relations

Türkiye and Russia share a significant historical relationship as neighboring nations that are inherently interconnected. Despite competing over matters of national interest, such as in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, both countries exhibit a degree of cooperation in economics, trade, energy, and tourism. Russia is the primary trade partner in terms of mutual imports and exports. Ankara should maintain favorable relations with Moscow as it is the primary source of natural gas, oil, and coal imports.

Tourism is an important sector in the economic relations between the two countries. According to Aktop, in 2022, Russia and Germany were tied for second place with 5 million 232 thousand visitors (Tursab 2022). According to data from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, there has been a significant influx of Russian tourists to Türkiye from 2017 to 2022 (Demirkiran et al. 2022). The numerical data suggests that Türkiye anticipates a significant influx of Russian visitors, which is expected to impact the country's economy substantially. Thus, maintaining diplomatic ties with Russia is crucial, especially for the Antalya tourism region, which is home to over 18,000 Russian nationals (Tosun 2021).



(Data source: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2546374>)

Figure 5: Tourist Flow to Türkiye from Countries 2017-2022

Russia-Ukraine War Implication on Russia- Türkiye Relations

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, brought renewed attention to its ties with Turkey. While Ankara condemned the attack and supported Ukraine, it chose not to align with NATO's sanctions against Moscow (Bechev 2023). Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye has experienced a significant impact within the region. Türkiye faces negative consequences in various aspects, such as democracy, security, finance, and economy, due to the ongoing aggression. Ankara has sustained positive diplomatic ties with Moscow. Conversely, the nation has incrementally enhanced its relations with Ukraine across multiple domains, including military, economic, social, and tourism. Both citizens can travel with each other using their ID cards without needing a passport (Anadolu Agency 2021).

Since 2019, Türkiye has deployed TB2 armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Ukraine to utilize them against insurgents operating in the Donbas region. After the military hostilities initiated by Moscow in Ukraine, the Turkish drone TB2 was employed with significant efficacy against the Russian Armed Forces, destroying numerous tanks, armored vehicles, and supply trains. According to Ukrainian officials, the Russian Moskva armed cruiser was damaged by unmanned Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones (Cagaptay and Outzen 2022).

At the onset of the conflict, Türkiye adopted a proactive and unbiased stance despite its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). President Erdogan pursued a diplomatic strategy of balancing by establishing alternative communication channels between the United States and Russia while maintaining positive relations with Russia and fulfilling obligations to NATO (Giannakopoulos 2022). Türkiye has officially stated its opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and has provided military and diplomatic support to Ukraine. President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has declared that the military intervention by Russia in Ukraine is deemed inappropriate. He rejected it in a non-equivalent manner (TCCB 2022). Conversely, Türkiye has declined to endorse the Western-imposed sanctions on Russia and instead persists in procuring Russian oil and natural gas. In addition, unlike its Western counterparts, Türkiye has allowed Russian civilian flights to fly in and out of its airspace because it is a non-EU member and can communicate with Moscow directly (Sena 2022). The provision of TB2 drones by

Türkiye to Ukraine has contributed to restoring its diplomatic ties with NATO, the USA, and the EU.

In 2014, a strategic defence cooperation relationship was established between Ankara and Kyiv. In February 2022, President Erdogan visited Kyiv to highlight the delicate balancing of relations between Moscow and Kyiv. Ankara is aware that in that conflict, it stands to lose more. During the visit, the two nations signed fresh accords on unrestricted commerce to augment bilateral trade to 10 billion. Additionally, they agreed to collaborate on producing drones in Ukraine, utilizing engines manufactured in Ukraine (Bekdil 2022).

Due to the favorable diplomatic ties between President Erdogan and President Putin, Türkiye is among the select nations able to communicate with Russian leadership amidst the ongoing conflict. In addition, Ankara has endeavored to persuade Putin to terminate the competition and engage in negotiations with Ukraine's counterpart. On March 10, 2022, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, Mevlut Cavusoglu, convened a meeting with his Russian and Ukrainian counterparts at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (MFA Türkiye 2022).

Providing drones to Kyiv impacts Türkiye's diplomatic balancing of relations with Moscow. The entity in question has endeavored to establish itself as an intermediary, as evidenced by its recent convening of a gathering in Antalya and Istanbul featuring the foreign ministers of Ukraine and Russia.

Türkiye's primary source of imported grain is Russia, followed by Ukraine. According to the data for the year 2021, Türkiye's wheat imports amounted to 8.1 million tons, with the majority (78%) originating from Russia and a smaller portion (12%) from Ukraine. As a reciprocal measure, Türkiye exports citrus fruits and tomatoes to Russia at a discounted rate of 50% (OEC 2022).

The Ukrainian conflict has demonstrated that Ankara, as a member of NATO, does not align solely with Moscow and instead pursues collaboration and rivalry based on its interests as an autonomous nation. The utilization of TB2 drones has been instrumental in bolstering Ukraine's defence capabilities and facilitating Azerbaijan's triumph over Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of 2020. Türkiye is aware of the outcome of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In either scenario, she intends to hold Türkiye accountable for providing Ukraine with military aid and diplomatic support.

Moreover, the authors want to employ the Russian approach's character to leverage Ankara in diverse domains. As mentioned earlier, evaluating the matter presents a formidable task, particularly in light of the upcoming elections in Türkiye scheduled for May 14th, 2023. The newly elected government is assumed to maintain positive relations with Moscow. However, it is unlikely that a new government, if led by an opposing party, would establish close personal ties between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin. However, the incoming administration will probably prioritize restoring strained relationships with the United States, European Union, and NATO while maintaining positive diplomatic ties with Moscow. In this scenario, President Putin will likely attribute responsibility to Ankara for aligning with the West and opposing Russia in the Ukraine conflict and subsequently employ energy resources as a means of coercion against Ankara.

Throughout history, Türkiye has recognized that Russia has never been a steadfast ally of Türkiye. Russia's foreign policy is characterized by a persistent pursuit of its interests and a focus on asserting its superiority. President Putin has implemented a grand strategy to revive the former Soviet Union, utilizing all available means to achieve its objectives in the global arena. It is suggested that the United States and the European Union collaborate and share the responsibility of alleviating Türkiye's tensions with Moscow, curbing President Putin's ambitions, and establishing a secure and stable environment near Russia. The relationship between Ankara and Moscow is founded upon mutual interest rather than trust and amicable companionship. The Turkish government is aware of the potential for Russia to inflict harm upon Türkiye in the event of a hostile relationship between the two nations (Spicer 2022; Giannakopoulos 2022).

Decoding Foreign Policy Behavior: Türkiye and Russia through the Lens of Strategic Hedging

The previous sections have provided an analysis of the nature of Türkiye–Russia relations in different spheres, such as energy, defense, diplomacy, and issues of regional concern. These empiric findings show that there are both cooperation and rivalry at this level due to shared aim as well as conflicting objectives. In an attempt to provide a better understanding of these dynamics it is now pertinent to explain them from the theoretical perspective described above. The following section will reanalyse the evidence based on

the neoclassical realism and strategic hedging framework and will try to propose a more accurate perspective on the motivations and the actions demonstrated by both Ankara and Moscow.

From the neoclassical realist lens, Türkiye's behavior illustrates how domestic political imperatives—particularly the AKP's need to maintain economic growth and electoral support—drive a foreign policy that simultaneously challenges and accommodates both Western and Russian interests. For instance, Türkiye's decision to purchase the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, in defiance of U.S. and NATO objections, reflects not only strategic calculation but also the domestic imperative to assert independence in foreign affairs. At the same time, Ankara's continued hosting of U.S. military assets shows hedging behavior rather than defection from the Western bloc.

In the Syrian and Libyan War, both Türkiye and Russia have different aims and objectives yet work together in these conflict areas. Whereas both countries converged with regards to liberating their regions from western influence and securing their regions of influence. Another important aspect of the recently developed hedging strategy is also visible in Türkiye's energy diplomacy. With dependence on Russia as the main energy supplier but acquiring energy from many other sources, Ankara guarantees the economic steadiness without being fully vulnerable. From Moscow's point of view, relations with Türkiye are a means to split the NATO alliance. Russia applies such tools as bilateral cooperation in trade and energy sector, and defense relations to disarm the Western sanctions and divide the transatlantic partnership. This behavior may be attributed to the essence of neoclassical realism where power is projected through asymmetric means.

Thus, Türkiye's coordination with NATO and Russia and interactions with other regional actors are best described as an excellent example of strategic hedging in the multipolar world. This will reposition the empirical observations made in the preceding sections from disparate policies into parts of a systemic and evolving foreign policy system. Türkiye's actions in Syria, Libya, Black Sea, therefore, balance power against mutable power distribution and its sustained economic and energy partnership with Russia reaffirms its independence in responding to structural challengers posed by NATO and EU. Based on this understanding, both Türkiye and Russia employ their bilateral partnership as a means of achieving strategic goals while managing a strategic rivalry with elements of cooperation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Türkiye–Russia relationship reflects a sophisticated balancing act shaped by pragmatic national interests, historical grievances, and evolving geopolitical realities. Applying the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, the study demonstrates how Türkiye’s foreign policy is driven not only by systemic pressures, such as NATO dynamics and regional conflicts, but also by domestic political imperatives, including economic priorities and electoral considerations. The concept of strategic hedging can also help to explain Türkiye’s policy of playing one card against another. Despite its NATO membership, Ankara pursues a multi-vector policy and does not shy away from using its relations with Russia to secure additional diplomatic maneuverability in an increasingly unstable world. As Russia’s economic partner and NATO member state, Türkiye fits Russia’s realist purpose as the latter seeks to sow divisions between Western powers. Thus, by relying on neoclassical realism and strategic hedging, the paper explains that this bilateral relationship is not exceptional in any way and presents an inevitable and rational response to a multipolar world. In conclusion, the countries of Türkiye and Russia balance this kind of statecraft, which means they adapt to the structural changes as long as it allows them to maintain their political and diplomatic independence as well as their specific strategic goals.

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