Osservatorio TURCHIA CeSPI

Approfondimento n. 41/February 2026

Türkiye and Russia in a Multipolar World: Asymmetric Interdependence and Arenas of Rivalry

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With the support of:

Fondazione CSF

Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo

TÜRKIYE AND RUSSIA IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD:

ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE AND ARENAS OF RIVALRY

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Abstract

The article explores the development of Turkish–Russian relations from both historical and modern viewpoints, showcasing them as a significant example of asymmetric interdependence within a rising multipolar world. It starts with the long history of rivalry between the Ottoman and Russian Empires, then examines the strategic warming of ties after the First World War and during the Cold War, when Ankara balanced between Moscow and the West. The focus then shifts to the 21st century, when economic and energy cooperation became crucial. Trade expanded rapidly. Russia grew in importance as a supplier of raw materials and tourists' destination for Türkiye. Key projects such as Blue Stream, TurkStream, and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant deepened this cooperation. The period was also marked by a more personalised "leader-to-leader" dynamic between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin.

The article also demonstrates that interdependence does not eliminate conflicting interests. Türkiye adopts a strategy of balancing between Russia and the West. Relying on NATO security guarantees while strengthening cooperation with Moscow and positioning itself as a mediator, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine and the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Major areas of strategic rivalry include Syria, the South Caucasus, and Libya, where Ankara and Moscow combine tactical coordination with long-term competition for regional influence. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its increasing international isolation have partly altered the imbalance of the relationship by boosting Türkiye's significance as an energy, trade, and transit partner for Moscow, thereby enhancing Ankara's bargaining leverage. The article concludes that Turkish–Russian relations are likely to remain a flexible form of asymmetric interdependence, with both sides aiming to maximise gains and minimise the risks of open confrontation.

Introduction

Turkish–Russian relations have deep historical roots. Over nearly 250 years, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire fought twelve wars, with at least eight ending in Russian victory. Although there were moments of cooperation, they remained relatively infrequent, as the relationship was mainly driven by rivalry and strategic competition. Key areas of contest included the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region. The geopolitical landscape changed significantly after the end of World War I. The Ottoman Empire found itself among the defeated, losing considerable territory, while the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia. Both states faced internal conflict: the Ottoman Empire during its War of Independence (1919–1922), and Russia in its civil war (1917–1922). The Turkish National Movement needed financial aid, including arms supplies, while the Bolsheviks sought international recognition.

In 1920, Mustafa Kemal and Georgy Chicherin exchanged letters indicating their intention to cooperate between the Ankara government and Bolshevik Russia. That same year, the Kemalist forces received their first shipments of weapons, ammunition, and gold from Moscow. The rapprochement culminated in the signing of the Turkish–Soviet Treaty of Friendship on 16 March 1921.

The Republic of Türkiye was proclaimed on 29 October 1923, with Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) serving as its first president. Turkish–Soviet relations remained amicable until the mid-1930s. During this period, Ankara gradually strengthened its ties with Western powers, particularly the United Kingdom and France. Meanwhile, the first signs of conflict with the Soviet Union emerged, and these tensions would escalate over the subsequent decades. During World War II and shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union pushed for revisions to the Montreux Convention (1936), which governs the status of the Black Sea straits, seeking joint control with Türkiye[1]. The onset of the Cold War led to a global division into two rival blocs, with Türkiye eventually aligning with the Western alliance and becoming a NATO member in 1952. Although on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain, Turkish–Soviet trade and cultural exchanges continued. Until 1963, Türkiye's foreign policy was firmly aligned with the West, especially with the United States and NATO. After signing the Association Agreement with the European Economic Community in 1963, Ankara remained in the Western sphere, though it increasingly engaged with Eastern Bloc countries in pragmatic ways, particularly economically. This trend was accentuated by growing tensions with the United States. Firstly, the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) left a lasting impression on bilateral relations, and soon after, the more serious Cyprus crisis further deteriorated relations[2]. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent a notable letter to Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, warning that Türkiye's potential intervention in Cyprus might not automatically trigger NATO's defence commitments if it provoked a Soviet response. In Türkiye, the letter was viewed as damaging U.S. credibility and motivated stronger contacts with Moscow. A symbolic manifestation of this shift was Prime Minister Suat Hayri Ürgüplü's visit to Moscow in 1965 – the first at that level since 1932 – followed by Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel's trip in 1967. During this time, Turkish–Soviet trade increased tenfold, although it still represented only a small fraction of Türkiye's total foreign trade. Thus, despite some effort at détente, the West remained economically vital for Ankara.

In the following decades, Turkish–Soviet relations remained characterised by cautious economic cooperation and profound strategic distrust. In the 1970s, the USSR supported the Cypriot Greeks and Syria, while Türkiye continued to be a key NATO member. Nonetheless, Ankara benefitted from Soviet loans and technology, including the construction of industrial facilities such as the metallurgical complex in Iskenderun, demonstrating pragmatism on both sides. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Türkiye was among the first states to recognise the newly independent post-Soviet republics and actively developed relations with the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Relations with Russia during this period were ambivalent: on one hand, trade and energy cooperation expanded – especially following the signing of the Blue Stream project in 1997 – while on the other hand, significant tensions arose. Ankara supported the independence of Turkic-speaking states and maintained contacts with Chechnya, which Moscow perceived as interference in its internal affairs. Russia, for its part, supported the PKK and supplied arms to Armenia, further deepening mutual distrust. Despite these disputes, the 1990s laid the groundwork for later interdependence:

[1] More: K. W. Olszowska, *Turkish-American and Turkish-Soviet relations in the years 1945-1952. Selected aspects,* „Saeculum Christianum. Pismo Historyczne" No. 31(1) /2024, p. 262-276.
[2] D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja*, 2000, p. 209.

rapidly increasing trade, substantial tourism flows from Russia to Türkiye, the arrival of Russian contract workers, and the initiation of the first major energy projects.

1. Foundations of Interdependence

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye and Russia have gradually intensified their cooperation, mainly based on a pragmatic, economy-focused approach. The early twenty-first century marked a period of transformation for both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Türkiye. In 2000, Vladimir Putin became president of Russia, aiming to quickly rebuild the country's economy after the 1998 financial crisis and to curb potential rivals by progressively side-lining oligarchs and regional governors[3]. Two years later, in 2002, Türkiye's parliamentary elections were won by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and in March 2003, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan assumed the role of prime minister. It is worth noting that Türkiye had also faced a severe economic crisis (in 2000–2001), and in subsequent years – similar to Russia – focused on expanding economic cooperation as a means of stabilising and rebuilding its economy.

1.1 Trade Relations

The economy became the main pillar of Turkish–Russian relations in the early twenty-first century. At the start of the decade, bilateral trade remained relatively modest, rising from USD 4.5 billion in 2000 to approximately USD 5 billion in 2002. A period of rapid growth began after 2003, when trade turnover started to increase almost exponentially, reaching USD 10.9 billion in 2004, USD 21 billion in 2006, and a record USD 37.8 billion in 2008. The global financial crisis, however, caused a sharp decline: in 2009, bilateral trade fell to USD 22.7 billion. Recovery began the following year, and trade volumes resumed their upward trend, reaching USD 26.2 billion in 2010, USD 29.9 billion in 2011, and USD 33.9 billion in 2012[4]. In that year, Russia recorded a significant positive trade balance, around USD 14.5 billion. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw not only rapid growth in trade, but also an increase in investments. Between 2007 and 2012, Turkish investments in Russia totalled approximately USD 6.5 billion. It is worth emphasising that, as the trade balance was clearly tilted in favour of Russia, investment patterns also showed notable asymmetry. Russian investments in Türkiye focused mainly on sectors like energy, metallurgy, banking, and the automotive industry, whereas Turkish investments in Russia were mainly in construction, alcoholic beverages, and chemicals. During this period, Russian companies acquired stakes in major Turkish firms – including DenizBank and the mobile operator Turkcell – and signed agreements for strategic projects such as the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant.

The data indicate that bilateral trade volumes remained largely steady until the 2015 crisis. The asymmetry inherent in Turkish–Russian relations became fully apparent following the shoot-down of a Russian Su-24M bomber by a Turkish F-16 on 24 November 2015. Russian aircraft

[3] R. Sakwa, *Russian politics and society*. Routledge 2020.
[4] А.В. Сулейманов *Торгово-экономическое сотрудничество России и Турции*, Вестник РУДН, серия Экономика, 2013, № 2, p. 40.

had already crossed into Turkish airspace on several occasions, and Ankara had issued prior warnings. Nonetheless, the incident was contentious: available evidence suggests that the aircraft was shot down over Syrian territory and had been in Turkish airspace for only seventeen seconds. In the aftermath, several agreements and contracts between the two nations were suspended. Diplomatic relations hit their lowest point for eight months, Russia imposed an embargo on a wide range of Turkish goods, and overall trade volumes decreased by approximately 50 percent compared with previous years. The crisis officially concluded in June 2016, when, according to the Turkish side, President Erdoğan expressed regret, while Moscow portrayed his message as an apology. However, trade volumes remained low throughout 2016 and did not recover to pre-crisis levels until 2018.

Turkey–Russia Trade (2013–2024)

Year	Exports to Russia (USD)	Imports from Russia (USD)	Total Volume (USD)
2013	6,964,200,000	25,064,210,000	32,028,410,000
2014	5,945,710,000	25,293,390,000	31,239,100,000
2015	3,589,460,000	20,399,800,000	23,989,260,000
2016	1,792,916,121	15,467,236,736	17,260,152,857
2017	2,869,847,400	20,097,026,964	22,966,874,364
2018	6,680,777,245	26,625,286,056	33,306,063,301
2019	4,152,137,036	23,115,236,226	27,267,373,262
2020	4,506,813,414	17,829,236,218	22,336,049,632
2021	5,774,391,900	28,959,361,179	34,733,753,079
2022	9,342,795,599	58,848,948,371	68,191,743,970
2023	10,906,585,102	45,599,586,714	56,506,171,816
2024	8,561,685,561	44,018,356,667	52,580,042,228

Own calculations based on: https://comtradeplus.un.org/

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and the start of full-scale war transformed Moscow's relations with most Western countries. Türkiye adopted a balancing approach: on the one hand, it emphasised Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty (including Crimea); on the other, it did not join EU sanctions and positioned itself as a potential mediator. Türkiye's

refusal to impose sanctions – and in some cases its facilitation of sanctions evasion[5] – led to a significant increase in bilateral trade, which doubled and reached a record USD 68 billion in 2022. In subsequent years, the total trade volume declined, although it remains exceptionally high by historical standards. The reduction is partly due to concerns over secondary sanctions. Turkish banks notably tightened restrictions on account openings and payment processing for Russian companies and individuals. Türkiye reportedly also imposed a ban on the direct export of "battlefield goods," including microchips, which caused Turkish exports to Russia to fall by roughly a quarter in 2024 – although some of these goods may have been rerouted through intermediaries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan[6].

1.2 Tourism Sector

The tourism sector – one of the largest components of Türkiye's economy – serves as another key area of interaction between the two countries. In the early 2000s, Türkiye welcomed approximately 700,000 Russian tourists each year. This figure steadily grew: in 2003–2004, it exceeded 1.2 million, and by 2005, it reached around 1.7-1.8 million. A significant increase was recorded in 2007, nearing 2.5 million visitors, and in 2008, the number of Russian tourists surpassed 3 million. In subsequent years, these numbers remained consistently high. To facilitate travel, Türkiye and Russia signed and ratified a visa-waiver agreement in 2010[7]. By 2011, the number of Russian visitors exceeded 3.5 million, and in 2013–2014, it reached 4.2-4.4 million. The peak occurred in 2015, when Russian tourist arrivals exceeded 4.5 million. Following the downing of the Russian Su-24M, Moscow used tourism as a tool of political pressure. Consequently, the number of Russian tourists dropped sharply to about 800,000 in 2016[8]. The trend reversed again in 2019, when Türkiye received 7.1 million Russian visitors. However, in 2021, the figure fell sharply to 1.6 million, as tourism was once more used as leverage – this time in response to the Turkish president's meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart. Yet another reversal occurred after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, approximately 5.2 million Russian tourists visited Türkiye; in 2023, the number rose to 6 million; and in 2024, Russians became the largest group of foreign visitors, totalling 6.7 million.

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[5] B. Pierzchała, *Finding our bearings: tracking circumvention of EU dual-use sanctions on Russia*, https://osw.waw.pl/sanctions/ (access: 14.02.2026).

[6] R. Connolly, *Russia's relations with Turkey will face challenges*, https://www.oxan.com/insights/russias-relations-with-turkey-will-face-challenges/ (access: 6.12.2025)

[7] Iktisadi Kalkınma Vakfı, (2011). Rusya ve Türk˙iye Kar¸silikli Olarak V˙izey˙i Kaldirdi. Iktisadi Kalkınma Vakfı E-Bülten 2011, https://www.ikv.org.tr/images/upload/data/files/rusya_ve_turkiye_karsilikli_olarak_vizeyi_kaldirdi.pdf (access: 6.12.2025)

[8] A. Arslan, *Russian Tourism to Turkey: Analysis of Web Search Enquiries*, [in:] Migration, Politics, Violence and Women's Studies, ed. L. Aydemir, Hamburg 2018, Vol. 149, pp. 240.

1.3 Energy Cooperation

From the very beginning of the twenty-first century, energy cooperation has become the central pillar of the bilateral relationship. Between 2000 and 2012, products from the fuel and energy sector accounted for as much as 70 percent of the total trade turnover between Russia and Türkiye. Russian enterprises consistently showed interest in constructing gas pipelines, developing gas distribution networks, exploring oil and gas deposits, and participating, through equity involvement, in extraction projects. The agreement to construct the first pipeline transporting Russian gas to Türkiye was signed as early as 1997, and the Blue Stream pipeline, designed to supply the Turkish domestic market, became operational in 2003. Interestingly, as late as 2008, Russian experts noted that Türkiye remained sceptical regarding the proposed Blue Stream-2 expansion, "fearing an increasing dependence on Russian gas[9]." Nonetheless, Türkiye needed energy supplies and was structurally dependent on them. By 2021, natural gas was the most widely used fossil fuel in Türkiye, accounting for approximately 30.2% of total national energy consumption[10]. Türkiye imported natural gas primarily from Russia (around 40%), Iran (around 17%), and Azerbaijan (around 16%).

Alongside deepening gas cooperation, Ankara decided in 2010 to sign an agreement on constructing the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. In 2015, the Russian state corporation Rosatom received the contract to build the facility. Construction was suspended following the downing of the Russian Su-24M and work only resumed after the normalization of relations. The loading of nuclear fuel into the first reactor began in 2023, but the reactor's launch was postponed to 2026 due to financial difficulties. Once operational, the plant will allow Türkiye to re-export significantly larger volumes of natural gas, thereby reducing its domestic reliance on gas-fired electricity. However, owing to the ownership structure of the Akkuyu facility, the plant remains effectively under Russian control, further deepening Türkiye's strategic dependence on Moscow in the nuclear energy sector.

Russia also supplies gas to Türkiye via the TurkStream pipeline, which delivers energy not only to the Turkish domestic market but also to Southeastern Europe through Bulgaria[11]. After Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine broke out, global natural gas markets faced severe disruption. Nonetheless, Türkiye managed to secure stable supplies due to existing long-term contracts and its favourable political relations with the Russian Federation. On one hand, a weakened Russia became more inclined to renegotiate contract terms; on the other, Türkiye had a strategic interest in diversifying its energy sources. Moreover, the European Union's increasing demand for non-Russian gas has strengthened Türkiye's position as an emerging regional energy hub.

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[9] П.Е. Калугин, *Современное состояние и возможные пути развития российско-турецкого сотрудничества в сфере энергетики,* Известия ИГЭА, 2008, № 6, p. 99.

[10] *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* 2022, p. 9, https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2022-full-report.pdf (access: 6.12.2025)

[11] H. Kazancı, *Türkiye's strategic role as energy hub highlighted amid energy crisis in Europe*, "Energy Terminal Anadolu Ajansı" 28.01.2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-diplomacy/turkiyes-strategic-role-as-energy-hub-highlighted-amid-energy-crisis-in-europe/47135 (access: 6.12.2025)

Türkiye has worked to diversify its supplier base to reduce dependence on Russian gas and has begun domestic production within its exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea. Meanwhile, Ankara has sought to capitalise on European states' interest in connecting to TurkStream, following Ukraine's decision not to renew its transit agreement with Russia as of 1 January 2025. After the expiration of the Russia–Ukraine transit agreement, TurkStream became the only pipeline through which Russia could deliver gas to Europe. In early 2025, TurkStream supplied Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary, yet by October 2024 several Balkan states had already expressed interest in connecting to the pipeline. According to Turkish sources, Ankara is considering increasing its capacity to support Slovakia in securing its gas supplies[12].

Despite U.S. pressure on Türkiye to reduce or cease its purchases of Russian gas and to sign a series of LNG agreements, such an outcome seems unlikely. On 4 December 2025, Türkiye extended its gas supply contracts with Gazprom by one additional year. According to the Turkish energy minister Alparslan Bayraktar, Ankara intends to prioritise short-term agreements[13]. This marks a significant shift: Türkiye is currently one of the largest remaining export markets for Russian gas, and short-term contracts enable Ankara to maintain leverage over Moscow for as long as Russia remains under Western sanctions. At the same time, the Russian side seeks to maintain Türkiye's interest in Russian gas, despite numerous alternative suppliers, by sustaining Ankara's ambitions to become a regional gas hub.

The development of Turkish–Russian relations has not been driven solely by economic factors, although these clearly underpin their mutual dependence. Throughout the entire period of cooperation, it was political dynamics that shaped the framework for the growth of economic ties—both their swift expansion and their sudden interruptions. Maintaining dialogue despite numerous crises, conflicting strategic interests, and recurring tensions was made possible mainly by the rapidly evolving personal relationship between President Putin and President Erdoğan. Both leaders employ a highly centralised decision-making style, which facilitated the emergence of a coherent "leader-to-leader" model of cooperation. It was this direct political channel—rather than any autonomous economic logic—that proved vital in keeping the relationship relatively stable for nearly three decades, despite repeated crises and profound strategic divergences.

2. Balancing and Rivalry

The greatest challenge in analysing Turkish–Russian relations lies in fitting them into established international relations frameworks, as they often resist traditional categorisation. They also demand careful selection of the most relevant analytical dimensions. Beyond the economic cooperation that has clearly built a dense network of interdependencies, two additional factors decisively influence the relationship: Türkiye's long-standing strategy of

[12] B. Z. Özdemir, *Enerji Güvenliğinde Türkiye Alternatif ve Güvenilir Bir Kaynak*, "SETA" 24.01.2025, https://www.setav.org/enerji-guvenliginde-turkiye-alternatif-ve-guvenilir-bir-kaynak (access: 6.12.2025)
[13] *Turkiye quietly renews Russian gas deals despite Western pressure*, „The new Voice of Ukraine", 1.12.2025, https://english.nv.ua/business/turkiye-keeps-russian-gas-flowing-50565845.html (access: 6.12.2025)

balancing between East and West, and the areas of geopolitical rivalry between Ankara and Moscow.

Over the past decade, Türkiye has been consistently redefining its foreign policy, shifting away from a clear Euro-Atlantic focus towards a more independent, adaptable, and multi-vector approach, one that aligns with the principles of an emerging multipolar world. Ankara aims to act as a regional power with global influence, carefully balancing between competing centres of power. This shift, especially Türkiye's promotion of a polycentric international order, brings its interests closer to those of Russia.

2.1 Balancing

Since the proclamation of the Republic, Türkiye has followed a foreign policy centred on balancing and maintaining neutrality whenever possible. This was not always achievable. During the Cold War, if Ankara wished to retain full sovereignty over the Black Sea straits, it had to seek protection from the United States. However, whenever tensions in U.S.–Turkish relations escalated, Ankara would engage in political dialogue with Moscow. A similar pattern continues today: Türkiye's relations with Russia have been heavily influenced by its relationship with the United States. A key turning point occurred in 2003, when the Turkish parliament refused permission for the U.S. to use Turkish territory for the invasion of Iraq. Balancing gained even greater strategic importance as economic cooperation with Russia deepened.

Examples of this balancing strategy include:

In 2008, following the outbreak of the Russo–Georgian War, Türkiye emphasised its commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. At the same time, despite appeals from President Mikheil Saakashvili, Ankara refused to provide military assistance. Citing the Montreux Convention (1936), Türkiye also denied passage into the Black Sea to U.S. Navy hospital ships, each with a displacement of approximately 69,000 tons, far exceeding the Convention's limits for non–Black Sea states (a combined maximum of 30,000 tons and strict restrictions on the types of vessels allowed). This demonstrated how Türkiye, even at that time, pursued a balancing strategy designed to avoid antagonising Moscow: offering humanitarian and diplomatic support (for instance through its proposal to establish the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, involving Türkiye, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia), while firmly distancing itself from any form of military involvement.

This approach did not suggest that Türkiye distanced itself from NATO or subordinated its foreign policy to cooperation with Russia. A notable example of Ankara's balancing act was its decision to permit the deployment of a U.S. radar system in Kürecik (Malatya province), a key part of NATO's missile defence architecture. Ankara insisted that the installation "was not directed against any specific country." Yet, both Tehran and Moscow openly criticised the decision, perceiving the radar as a threat to their deterrence capabilities[14].

[14] S. Egeli, S. Güvenç, *NATO'nun Füze Savunma Sistemi ve Türkiye*, Ortado˘gu Analiz, 4(40), 2021, pp. 19–30.

Arms procurement became, for many years, a major "bone of contention" between Türkiye and the United States, while also serving as a symbol of the deepening relationship between Türkiye and Russia. In 2017, a contract was signed for the sale of the Russian S-400 air defence system to Türkiye. The Russian side calculated that the acquisition of this system by a NATO member state would sow discord among allies within the Alliance and, consequently, weaken it. On the other hand, Türkiye proceeded with the purchase after unsuccessful negotiations with Western states and sought, through this move, to demonstrate that in a multipolar world it possesses alternatives beyond the procurement of Western weaponry. As a consequence of this acquisition, Türkiye's relations with Western states, particularly the United States, deteriorated significantly. Ankara was removed from the F-35 multirole fighter jet programme and was also subjected to U.S. CAATSA sanctions.

As a consequence of the sanctions and Türkiye's concern that activating the Russian equipment would trigger additional restrictive measures, the S-400 systems have not been activated to date. At the same time, Ankara began exploring options for acquiring U.S. military equipment, particularly upgraded F-16 fighter jets and F-35 aircraft. These procurement efforts became all the more urgent following Israeli strikes in the region (including on the territory of Iraq, Syria, and Qatar), which prompted Türkiye to recognise the extent to which it needed to modernise its air force capabilities. In this context, the continued presence of the Russian S-400 systems in the Turkish armed forces' inventory became a significant obstacle. Numerous unconfirmed reports emerged regarding how this issue might be resolved – ranging from proposals to transfer the systems to the United States, to the new government in Damascus, or to Ukraine – but none of these scenarios materialised. In December 2025, a conversation reportedly took place between the presidents of Türkiye and Russia concerning the possible return of the S-400 systems, which would potentially open the way for Türkiye to proceed with the purchase of F-35 fighter jets[15].

These examples clearly demonstrate that Türkiye adopted a pragmatic strategy aimed at safeguarding its own security through cooperation with NATO, while also striving to maintain and deepen relations with Russia, especially given economic interdependencies. Türkiye's response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 followed a similar logic: Ankara consistently upheld Ukraine's territorial integrity but refrained from joining EU and U.S. sanctions. However, its close collaboration with Ukraine, particularly in the military sphere, including the sale of weapons, prompted a direct response from Moscow in 2021, in the form of restrictions on Russian tourist flows to Türkiye.

Türkiye also adopted a balancing stance after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In line with its rights under the Montreux Convention, Ankara acted swiftly to close the Black Sea straits to warships from countries involved in the conflict that were not part of Black Sea fleets. This move restricted Russia's ability to strengthen its naval presence in the region, such as by blocking the transfer of vessels from the Baltic Fleet. Simultaneously—reaffirming its position from the 2008 conflict—Türkiye refused requests from Romania and

[15] *Erdogan Asks Putin to Take Back Missiles to Win US Favor,* Bloomberg, December 17, 2025, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-12-17/erdogan-asks-putin-to-take-back-missiles-in-bid-to-win-us-favor?embedded-checkout=true (access: 14.02.2026).

Bulgaria for a greater NATO naval presence in the Black Sea. Ankara justified its stance by emphasising the importance of strictly adhering to the Montreux Convention and expressed concern that increasing NATO's presence could upset the strategic balance in the area. After Ukrainian attacks destroyed a large part of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, Türkiye now possesses the strongest navy in the Black Sea.

Although maintaining formal neutrality, Türkiye provided Ukraine with tangible support. Key to this aid were deliveries and sales of military equipment, including Bayraktar TB2 drones, which were crucial in the early months of the conflict. Türkiye also supplied other weapon systems, such as Kirpi armoured vehicles, protective gear, ammunition, and spare parts for post-Soviet platforms. Humanitarian assistance complemented military cooperation: the Turkish Red Crescent delivered food, generators, and medical supplies, while thousands of Ukrainians sought refuge in Türkiye.

Diplomatically, Ankara consistently aimed to act as a mediator. On 10 March 2022, Türkiye hosted the first meeting between the Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministers at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. A few weeks later, on 29 March 2022, Istanbul hosted negotiations, the only talks of such advanced nature since the war began. Although they did not produce a breakthrough, they showed that both sides regarded Türkiye as an acceptable intermediary. Türkiye's most significant diplomatic achievement was the Black Sea Grain Initiative, signed on 22 July 2022. The agreement, concluded separately between Türkiye and the UN with Ukraine, and Türkiye and the UN with Russia, remained in force for a year, enabling the export of more than 33 million tonnes of Ukrainian grain. Its implementation was controversial, with Russia accused of transporting stolen grain through Crimean ports. After several extensions, Russia refused to renew the deal in July 2023, forcing Ukraine to rely on alternative export routes, both overland and via maritime corridors in Romanian and Bulgarian waters.

The issue of grain trade through the Black Sea straits remains highly controversial. Following Russia's withdrawal from the agreement, President Erdoğan was unable to persuade President Putin to conclude a new arrangement. The Ukrainian side established an alternative maritime route; at the same time, reports have continued to surface regarding the transport of looted Ukrainian grain by Russian vessels through the straits and the use by Russia[16] of the so-called "shadow fleet"—that is, vessels, primarily tankers, employed to circumvent international sanctions imposed on Russia. This fleet consists largely of ageing ships sailing under flags of states in whose case it is difficult to enforce regulations concerning ownership, registration, insurance, or technical standards. The Ukrainian side has sought to counter Russia's shadow fleet, inter alia, through the use of naval drones. In December 2025, Türkiye announced that Ukraine had deployed its naval drones within Turkish territorial waters. The Ukrainian ambassador and the chargé d'affairs of the Russian Federation were subsequently summoned to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This demonstrates that Türkiye is also bearing an increasingly high cost of the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian war. Particularly noteworthy is that only a few days later, reports emerged that several crashed Russian drones had been found on Turkish territory. No official information was released as to whether they had arrived there

[16] Yörük Işık publishes posts reporting on ships passing through the straits carrying Ukrainian grain looted by Russia, https://x.com/YorukIsik/status/2020345014564581644?s=20 (access: 14.02.2026).

accidentally—for instance, due to signal jamming—or whether they had been conducting reconnaissance missions. Nevertheless, this indicates that such drones are capable of reaching Turkish territory and, on more than one occasion, remaining undetected for extended periods of time. This, in turn, points to a certain vulnerability in the security architecture of the entire NATO Alliance.

Turkish media have signalled that in recent weeks (February 2026) Russian tankers and vessels belonging to Russia's so-called shadow fleet have been using Turkish territorial waters, navigating through them rather than sailing in the open sea, in order to avoid Ukrainian attacks[17]. Of course, not all vessels have opted for this route; nevertheless, this is a noteworthy trend, as it may be linked to the recent Turkish–Russian discussions concerning the possible return of the S-400 systems and could constitute a form of informal concession on the part of Ankara aimed at resolving its longstanding problem with Russian military equipment, as described above.

Beyond the grain initiative, Türkiye facilitated several rounds of technical talks between Ukrainian and Russian delegations and played a key role in at least three major prisoner exchanges, including the symbolic release of the Azovstal defenders in September 2022. Ankara repeatedly declared its readiness to host further peace negotiations, emphasising that dialogue would be possible only with the consent of both parties.

At the same time, Türkiye's neutrality brought it significant economic advantages. Ankara did not participate in Western sanctions on Russia, and bilateral trade surged in 2022–2023. Türkiye became a key conduit for Russian trade and capital flows, a relocation hub for Russian companies, and an important transit point for dual-use goods and technology. Revenues from tourism and imports of discounted Russian oil and gas—partially paid for in rubles—also increased. As a result, Türkiye strengthened its position as Russia's main economic and political "window" to the West, while simultaneously maintaining dialogue with Ukraine and offering both overt and covert support to Kyiv. Notably, given Russia's economic reliance on Türkiye, Moscow was far less able than in the past to use coercive tools (such as sanctions or suspending tourist flights) against Ankara.

2.2 Rivalry

The final essential aspect to grasp about Turkish–Russian relations pertains to the differing interests of the two nations across various regions, notably the Middle East, the South Caucasus, the Balkans, and parts of Africa. It is in these theatres that the rivalry between Türkiye and Russia becomes most evident.

The most visible arena of Turkish–Russian rivalry has been Syria. After the Arab Spring erupted, Türkiye firmly backed the opposition against Bashar al-Assad, while Russia became the main supporter of the regime's survival. In the autumn of 2015, Russia launched a direct

[17] *Russian oil tankers hug Turkish coast to evade Ukrainian drone strikes*, „Türkiye Today" 2.02.2026, https://www.turkiyetoday.com/region/russian-oil-tankers-hug-turkish-coast-to-evade-ukrainian-drone-strikes-3213932?s=1 (access: 14.02.2026).

military intervention in Syria and began systematic airstrikes against rebel formations supported by Ankara. Post-2016, tensions shifted when Ankara launched a series of military operations targeting not only ISIS and the Kurdish YPG but also — indirectly — the Assad regime, which was under Russian protection. Operation Euphrates Shield (2016–2017) established a Turkish-controlled security corridor along the border, while Operation Peace Spring (2019) created another buffer zone extending 30 kilometres into Syrian territory. Russia tolerated some of Türkiye's actions insofar as they pressured the United States and its Kurdish allies. However, whenever Turkish and Russian interests directly clashed, escalation ensued.

Following the normalisation of relations after Türkiye's downing of the Russian Su-24 and the success of Euphrates Shield, Ankara and Moscow began developing new mechanisms for coordination in Syria. In December 2016, during a trilateral meeting of the Russian, Turkish, and Iranian foreign ministers in Moscow, the creation of a new negotiation format was announced. The first official round of talks under this Astana format took place in January 2017 in Astana, initiating regular Turkish–Russian (and Iranian) cooperation on issues concerning northern Syria.

The most serious crisis happened in February 2020, when an attack by Syrian, and, likely, Russian, forces killed 34 Turkish soldiers[18]. Ankara officially blamed Assad, avoiding a direct confrontation with Moscow, but responded with Operation Spring Shield, causing significant casualties for Syrian forces[19]. Russia ended Türkiye's operations only through negotiations, which required Ankara to accept a reduction of its controlled territory to northern Idlib, and, from 15 March 2020, to start joint Russian–Turkish patrols in the security corridor. This was symbolic: Türkiye managed to stop Assad's offensive but had to agree to Russia's terms for stabilisation.

Over the following years, relations remained delicately balanced. Ankara and Moscow engaged in limited tactical cooperation while remaining strategic rivals. Initial discussions between the Syrian and Turkish foreign ministers began, and Ankara signalled its willingness to explore a political settlement with Damascus. The unexpected collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, however, fundamentally changed the landscape. Türkiye became a key partner for Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Shara, especially in stabilising the north and rebuilding institutions. Nonetheless, this did not make Russia irrelevant: Shara met with Vladimir Putin in Moscow in October 2025, and his future course will depend, among other factors, on whether the West provides military assistance. Without such support, Syria may once again turn towards Russia, restoring the balance that existed before 2025. A similar pattern is visible in Libya. In 2011, as a result of the events of the Arab Spring, the regime of Muammar Gaddafi collapsed. In the aftermath of internal chaos and domestic rivalry, two centres of power emerged: eastern Libya, with its capital in Benghazi, came under the control of the Russian-backed Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar. Northwestern Libya was controlled by the UN-recognised (and also recognised by Türkiye) Government of National Accord based in Tripoli.

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[18] *34 askerin şehit edildiği yerin görüntüleri ortaya çıktı*, „Independent Türkçe", 29.02.2020, https://linkd.pl/pup92 (access: 6.12.2025)

[19] K. W. Olszowska, K. Wasilewski, *Podsumowanie roku 2020 w Turcji*, [in:] *Polityka w cieniu COVID-19. Raporty polityczne ze świata 2020*, Kraków 2020, p. 225.

At present, Libya has also ceased to be a direct arena of Turkish–Russian rivalry, as relations between President Erdoğan and General Haftar have evolved. In April 2025, Haftar's son, Saddam Haftar, visited Ankara. In August 2025, Ibrahim Kalın, head of Turkish intelligence, travelled to Benghazi. Türkiye has thereby gained an opportunity to position itself as a mediator between the main political factions in Libya. This would be advantageous for Ankara, as it could enable it to maintain its military presence and bases in the country, as well as the contracts concluded with the government in Tripoli concerning the exploration and extraction of offshore resources. Should this materialise, Ankara would strengthen its position in the context of competition in the Mediterranean vis-à-vis Greece and Egypt. At the same time, these developments coincided with an improvement in relations between Türkiye and Egypt (in February 2026, a military cooperation agreement was signed), between Türkiye and Greece (in February 2026, the Greek Prime Minister travelled to Ankara), and with Russia's continued engagement in the war in Ukraine and, consequently, its limited capacity to maintain a stronger presence and exert pressure on Haftar in Libya. These factors may contribute to the stabilisation of the situation in Libya and to the conclusion of a durable agreement. If this were to occur, this region would no longer constitute such an open arena of Turkish–Russian rivalry. However, this will also depend on the outcome of the Russian–Ukrainian war: if Russia were to emerge from it without significant weakening, it would likely return with greater engagement to its spheres of influence—particularly given that, following the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria, a substantial portion of Russian equipment and personnel was redeployed precisely to Libya.

Another highly significant arena of rivalry is the South Caucasus. Following Armenia's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war and its de facto withdrawal from the CSTO, Yerevan initiated a reorientation towards the West and improved relations with Türkiye, while simultaneously engaging in peace negotiations with Azerbaijan. On 8 August 2025, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a declaration in Washington, committing themselves to continuing efforts towards a durable peace agreement and the normalisation of bilateral relations. A key initiative was the planned establishment of a transport corridor, the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP), intended to connect Azerbaijan with the Nakhchivan exclave, passing through Armenian territory. The plan envisages further expansion of this transport route so that it would extend through Türkiye to Europe. This would facilitate the transport of raw materials from Azerbaijan as well as goods from Central Asia. At the same time, in recent months numerous talks have taken place between the Turkish President and the Armenian Prime Minister, with the objective of reopening the border between the two states and initiating trade cooperation. The situation, however, remains fragile: a potential electoral defeat of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in 2026 could halt the normalisation process and reopen space for renewed Russian influence. This is particularly relevant given that, within Armenia, Russian instruments of pressure remain strong, including economic and military leverage, as well as the pro-Russian orientation of segments of the Armenian elite. At this stage, Türkiye has achieved the majority of its objectives in the South Caucasus; however, the durability of these gains depends on the outcome of elections in Armenia and, similarly to most arenas of rivalry with Russia, on the outcome of the war being waged on Ukrainian territory.

While the situation in Syria currently appears stable in terms of the change of power, and developments in Libya likewise seem to have entered a phase of stabilisation, the South Caucasus, particularly Armenia, remains contingent upon the outcome of this year's parliamentary elections. It is also the region to which Russia is most likely to return swiftly once the war in Ukraine concludes. What is evolving differently, however, is the situation in the Black Sea, which at present appears to be the most significant arena for Türkiye itself. Since the outbreak of the full-scale war, Ankara has feared that, in a worst-case scenario, Russia might seize Ukrainian Black Sea ports, thereby appropriating the associated trade benefits and substantially strengthening its position in the basin. At present, given the destruction inflicted upon the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the expansion of Turkish naval capabilities, it is Türkiye that has gained a marked advantage. It is also cooperating with other NATO Black Sea states, Bulgaria and Romania, inter alia, in countering drifting naval mines.

As previously noted, maritime trade in a war-affected basin remains highly problematic, and Türkiye has itself indirectly experienced violations of its space by drones. At this juncture, it is Türkiye that ensures passage through the straits and provides a degree of security in the Black Sea, which has increased its significance in the context of competition with Russia. In order to preserve its balancing position, Ankara declares that it will adhere strictly to the provisions of the Montreux Convention, meaning that naval forces of non–Black Sea NATO states will not be permitted to operate in the basin beyond the terms stipulated therein. At the same time, there are views suggesting that Türkiye could play a significant role in establishing and coordinating a so-called air shield over the Black Sea[20]. Ankara may indeed be interested in such an initiative, particularly given that within the framework of NATO cooperation it is already deploying its F-16 aircraft to Romania in support of airspace patrol missions. However, once again, while a Russia weakened by the war in Ukraine may not oppose an enhanced Turkish role in the region, following the end of the conflict Moscow could revert to a more assertive competitive posture, especially if it were to emerge from the war having secured territorial gains at Ukraine's expense in the Black Sea region, thereby shifting the regional balance of power in favour of the Kremlin.

These examples demonstrate the adaptable yet competitive character of Turkish–Russian relations. Each conflict area permits both sides to blend tactical cooperation with strategic competition. From 2016 to 2023, Russia maintained the lead due to its military strength and Türkiye's domestic weaknesses. However, after 2024–2025, Russia's decline and wider geopolitical changes have allowed Ankara to take the initiative, though none of these spheres is likely to offer Türkiye lasting dominance.

[20] *Türkiye could lead Black Sea 'air shield,' but S-400 deal remains 'toxic': Expert,* „Türkiye Today" 10.02.2026, https://www.turkiyetoday.com/world/turkiye-could-lead-black-sea-air-shield-but-s-400-deal-remains-toxic-expert-3214331?s=1 (access: 14.02.2026).

Conclusion

Turkish–Russian relations in the twenty-first century exemplify a significant case of asymmetric interdependence in current international affairs. On one side, a longstanding historical rivalry – from the Russo-Ottoman wars, through the Cold War, to ongoing competition for influence in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Africa – remains a fundamental part of both nations' strategic memory. Conversely, since the early 2000s, Ankara and Moscow have developed a complex network of economic, energy, tourism, and investment connections that render open confrontation costly and strategically irrational for both parties.

The asymmetry of this interdependence arises from the fact that, in key areas, mainly energy and security, Russia has traditionally held greater influence. Gas supplies, the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, the significance of Russian tourists, and capital flows all provided Moscow with tools of coercion, with the most notable example being the 2015 crisis after the downing of the Su-24. At that time, Russia dictated the terms of normalisation, employing economic sanctions and restrictions on tourist flows. However, even then, Türkiye gradually began to expand its room for manoeuvre, both by diversifying energy sources and by shaping its image as an indispensable partner for the West, the Middle East, and the Caucasus.

With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's increasing international isolation, the dynamics of this imbalance have begun to change. By choosing not to join Western sanctions, Türkiye has become a vital route for Russia to access markets, technology, and financial services, while also utilising this position to expand its own economic influence. The extension of short-term gas contracts, fluctuations in trade volume, and selective restrictions on the export of "battlefield goods" show that Ankara now increasingly uses interdependence as a tool of leverage over Moscow, rather than merely as a vulnerability. Laden with sanctions and the costs of war, Russia today has considerably fewer options to exert pressure on Türkiye than it did a decade ago.

The arenas of rivalry discussed in this study – Syria, the South Caucasus, and Libya – demonstrate that interdependence does not eradicate conflicting interests but instead transforms them into managed competition. In Syria, Russia and Türkiye moved from near-direct confrontation (Idlib 2020) to the Astana format and tactical coordination, despite supporting opposing sides. In the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan's successes and Armenia's westward reorientation have reduced Russia's traditional influence in favour of Türkiye. In Libya, a possible Turkish accommodation with Khalifa Haftar may, after years of backing rival factions, strengthen Türkiye's position in the eastern Mediterranean, partly at Moscow's expense.

A key element of the relationship has been the leader-to-leader model of governance. Personal communication channels between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Vladimir Putin have repeatedly facilitated rapid crisis de-escalation, bypassed institutional constraints, and negotiated ad hoc "packages" covering energy, military, trade, and regional issues simultaneously. However, this personalisation of foreign policy makes Turkish–Russian relations opaque, susceptible to sudden shifts, and heavily reliant on domestic political dynamics in both countries.

Looking ahead, the most likely scenario is the continuation of this model: neither a solid alliance nor an outright rupture, but a fluctuating, asymmetric interdependence where both sides aim to maximise benefits and minimise costs. Türkiye will keep using its relationship with Russia to enhance its leverage over the West, while Russia will rely on Türkiye to offset the effects of isolation and maintain influence in the Black Sea region, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Whether the burden of asymmetry weighs more on Ankara or Moscow will depend not only on the changing balance of power but also on Türkiye's ability to diversify its energy supplies, economic partnerships, and ways of anchoring itself within the Euro-Atlantic system, all while pursuing its goal to act as an independent, multidimensional global player.

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