

A Man with Cards: Will Türkiye's Multi-Alignment Policy Bring Results?

“Only Türkiye can save Europe from the deadlock it has fallen into, on matters including economy and defense,” [declared](#) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the foreign ambassadors based in Ankara on 24 February. It is already well known that the Turkish president has a unique talent for exploiting any opportunity presented to him, whether in domestic or foreign politics, making him a formidable political animal. In current turbulent times when traditional geopolitical schemes are being disrupted, Türkiye can emerge as an even stronger geopolitical actor as it holds “many cards” that are envied by all. Nevertheless, Ankara needs to increase trust and inspire confidence in its European partners and allies, things that have been sorely lacking in recent years.

What Cards?

Türkiye is indispensable for multiple reasons. Its unique geography places it at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, bordering key countries like Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the South Caucasus, and giving it significant influence in the Middle East and beyond. It controls vital maritime chokepoints—the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles—which can be closed to foreign warships under the [Montreux Convention](#). Although not rich in fossil fuels, Türkiye is a crucial transit hub for gas and oil from the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and potentially Iran. It also plays a central role in migration, hosting over three million Syrians and managing flows to Europe under a [2016 EU deal](#). Demographically, Türkiye's 85 million citizens and its influential



THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010–12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at SciencesPo in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).



diaspora in Europe further enhance its strategic importance.

On the defense side, Türkiye is a key NATO member, with the Alliance's second-largest army after the U.S., extensive combat experience, and major NATO infrastructure like Incirlik and Izmir bases. It hosts U.S. nuclear weapons and wields veto power over new NATO accessions, as seen with Finland and Sweden. Türkiye's defense industry has rapidly advanced, reaching 80% self-sufficiency and producing everything from rifles to Bayraktar drones and the upcoming TAI Kaan fighter jet. Defense exports [hit](#) USD 7.1 billion in 2024 with growing partnerships in Europe and beyond. Its global diplomatic reach, leadership in the Muslim world, and cultural soft power further amplify Türkiye's strategic influence.

Türkiye's Multifaceted Trans-actionalism: Playing on Several Tables

Türkiye remains a key NATO member but its internal and external policies have shifted significantly over the past two decades. Once a Western outpost during the Cold War, it now seeks strategic autonomy and a leading regional role. Ankara aligns with the West when beneficial but does not hesitate to oppose it when necessary. In Ukraine, Türkiye has backed territorial integrity, supplied TB2 drones via a joint venture, and [invoked](#) the Montreux Convention in 2022 to block additional Russian warships from entering the Black Sea, thus helping Ukraine secure naval victories. Türkiye supports Ukraine's NATO bid and offered President Zelensky a warm welcome with Erdoğan's viral umbrella photo seen as symbolic solidarity.

Yet, Türkiye has [resisted](#) joining the EU and U.S. sanctions on Russia and has profited from continued trade. In 2024, it [applied](#) for BRICS membership and was granted "partner country" status at

the Kazan summit. Just months later, Ankara [renewed](#) its push for EU membership, highlighting the elasticity of its foreign policy. This flexibility is not new; Türkiye grew less constrained by its traditional anti-communist and anti-Iranian role after the Cold War. Under Turgut Özal and his successors, it expanded ties with post-Soviet states, especially Turkic countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, relying on soft power tools like trade, investment, and education. As Süleiman Demirel put it, Türkiye aimed to be a central player "from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China."

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) continued Türkiye's global push in foreign policy but gave it a new tone—more focused on the Middle East, the Islamic world, and a revisionist, sovereigntist identity. This shift is not abrupt but the product of both internal changes—the AKP's social engineering over two decades—and external shifts, including the decline of dominant global powers and Türkiye's stalled EU membership bid. Economic growth in the 1990s-2000s empowered Ankara to seek greater global status and regional leadership, even through seemingly contradictory moves.

Türkiye's foreign policy today resembles "multi-alignment," a model seen in India, where alliances shift by circumstance rather than fixed values. Unlike the West's value-based alliances, especially Europe's NATO paradigm, Türkiye plays all sides.

Türkiye's foreign policy today resembles "multi-alignment," a model seen in India, where alliances shift by circumstance rather than fixed values. Unlike the West's value-based alliances, especially Europe's NATO paradigm, Türkiye plays all sides. It remains in NATO, supports Ukraine and missions like the ISAF, yet clashes with members like Greece and criticizes Western actions in the Middle East and North Africa. It cooperates with

the U.S. but opposes its Syria policy and support towards the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

This transactionalism extends to the EU as well. Ankara demands full membership while presidential advisors [call](#) the EU “the sick man of our times.” The results are mixed—Türkiye has scored wins in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh but its unpredictable posture has eroded trust, particularly in Europe. With member states wary after experiences like Hungary, Türkiye’s EU path remains blocked. Though it has many partners, it has few true allies—mostly Azerbaijan, Qatar, and Hamas, each tied more to ideology or culture than enduring strategic alignment.

Europe’s New Security Architecture and the Role of Türkiye

Türkiye is largely doing what Kyiv expects: blocking new Russian warships from entering the Black Sea, supplying and co-producing military hardware, backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity and NATO bid, and voting for all UN resolutions condemning Russia, even after the U.S. voted against.

As noted above, Türkiye is largely doing what Kyiv expects: blocking new Russian warships from entering the Black Sea, supplying and co-producing military hardware, backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity and NATO bid, and voting for all UN resolutions condemning Russia, even after the U.S. voted against. Erdoğan, unlike others, did not delete pro-Zelensky tweets following Trump’s attacks. Yet this support does not mark a return to Cold War-style Western alignment. Türkiye maintains political ties with Russia and avoids sanctions, framing its Ukraine stance as loyalty to international law and bilateral friendship, not bloc solidarity.

Russian victory in Ukraine would undermine Turkish interests. A weakened Russia offers Türkiye more leverage and deepens Moscow’s dependence.

In truth, a Russian victory in Ukraine would undermine Turkish interests. A weakened Russia offers Türkiye more leverage and deepens Moscow’s dependence. Despite recent rapprochement, the two remain historical rivals with brief episodes of cooperation. Their closeness surged after the 2016 coup attempt, when Russia quickly backed Erdoğan, sharing intelligence and paving the way for Türkiye’s controversial purchase of Russian S-400 systems—undermining NATO ties and provoking U.S. CAATSA (Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act) sanctions and exclusion from the F-35 program.

This post-coup thaw came after tensions, notably in Syria and the [downing](#) of a Russian jet. But clashes resumed across Syria, Libya, and the Black Sea. Türkiye’s backing of Azerbaijan in its wars with Armenia (2020, 2023) further weakened Russia’s grip in the South Caucasus. In Syria, the rise of HTS, reportedly backed by Türkiye, led to Russian military withdrawals from key bases—moves that Moscow resents. Some analysts link Türkiye’s limited BRICS status to this friction.

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s halting of Russia’s Black Sea advance at Kherson and its naval victories benefit Ankara which has no interest in Russia dominating the entire Black Sea coast. The crippling of the Russian fleet only enhances Türkiye’s own maritime influence in this strategic region.

Trump – A New Best Friend?

While it is believed that Trump’s U.S. and Erdoğan’s Türkiye can get along, the reality is far more uncertain. The fact that relations between Ankara and Washington were extremely poor un-

der Biden does not automatically mean they will inevitably improve. One thing is certain: Trump likes authoritarian leaders and will not trouble his Turkish counterpart with concerns about democracy or the rule of law. However, U.S.-Turkish relations were far from smooth during Trump's first presidency and even experienced significant turbulence.

In 2019, Trump [sent](#) an infamously bizarre and threatening letter to Erdoğan after the Turkish army entered northern Syria: "Don't be a fool, don't be a tough guy. It will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don't happen. I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy," he wrote. For his part, Erdoğan was [furious](#) over the Pentagon's deployment in eastern Syria and its support for the YPG Kurdish militias which Türkiye sees as an extension of the PKK and an existential threat. It was also under Trump's first term that Türkiye [was sanctioned](#) for purchasing the Russian S-400 missile system.

It is true that contacts between the two leaders are easier than under Biden (Erdoğan met Biden only 16 months after his inauguration while Trump and Erdoğan have already spoken by phone and are planning a live meeting in the coming weeks), but the core disagreements—especially in the Middle East—remain unresolved. Türkiye still expects the U.S. to withdraw from Syria and end support for the YPG and it opposes America's near-unconditional backing of Israel. Erdoğan strongly [criticized](#) Trump's plan to relocate Palestinians from Gaza and turn the area into a "Riviera of the Middle East," calling it a major threat to world peace. He instead backed an alternative peace and reconstruction proposal approved by the Arab League.

Even though Trump declared he had "a great relationship with a man named Erdoğan," Türkiye is not Washington's preferred interlocutor in the region.

Moreover, even though Trump declared he had "a great relationship with a man named Erdoğan," Türkiye is not Washington's preferred interlocutor in the region. It is not even the second-most preferred after Israel—Saudi Arabia's relationship with Trump appears far more solid and reliable.

Europe – Still a Good Option

While Ankara has long been dissatisfied with U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the prospect of an American withdrawal from Ukraine—or even from Europe and NATO—is a source of deep concern for Türkiye. Such a retreat would strengthen Russia and raise the risk of losing the Ukrainian coastline. It could also call into question the American nuclear umbrella, leaving Türkiye in a precarious position between a nuclear Russia, a nuclear-armed Israel, and an Iran on the nuclear threshold. In this context, Türkiye's interest in Europe and a common European defense project is bound to increase.

Europe, newly motivated to build a credible autonomous defense, opens a space for Türkiye to expand its political and economic influence.

This interest stems not only from Türkiye's fears and anxieties but also from the opportunities that Europe's vulnerability presents. A Europe, newly motivated to build a credible autonomous defense, opens a space for Türkiye to expand its political and economic influence. With the strategic assets at its disposal and Europe's growing needs, a productive synergy becomes possible.

Türkiye has re-engaged at the highest level in European discussions, notably during the early days of Trump's return to global politics. After years of absence, Turkish officials reappeared at key summits: Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in Paris and Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz in London, signaling

Ankara's intent to shape the new European security architecture.

President Erdoğan himself, in talks with Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Antonio Costa, and Polish PM Donald Tusk—visiting Türkiye as the EU's rotating president—[voiced](#) his desire to revive Türkiye's European trajectory. Days later, in a speech to foreign ambassadors, Erdoğan [declared](#) that “EU security without Türkiye is unthinkable” and “Europe cannot survive as a global actor without Türkiye.” He reaffirmed that EU membership remains a “strategic priority.”

Reassessing both the risks and the opportunities of the shifting geopolitical landscape, Türkiye offers Europe full cooperation—but also sets conditions. The most ambitious of these is the demand for rapid EU accession. Türkiye, which applied in 1987 and was granted candidate status in 1999, began accession talks in 2005. But after two decades, only one of 35 chapters has been closed. Negotiations are now frozen, primarily due to the democratic backsliding and erosion of civil liberties under Erdoğan's rule.

The Turkish public and government are bitter and disillusioned, especially as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were suddenly granted candidate status—two of them already advancing toward membership faster than Türkiye. Realistically, any resumption of accession talks is highly unlikely under current conditions. The arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, the main opposition candidate with a real chance of winning the presidency, makes EU membership virtually impossible—something Erdoğan knows all too well.

It is precisely because the AKP perceives the international context as favorable—a Europe in need of defense partners and a U.S. administration that no longer prioritizes democracy—that the regime dares cross red lines such as imprisoning its most serious opponent. Beyond domestic politics, Tür-

kiye's candidacy also faces resistance from several EU member states that have experienced prolonged tensions with Ankara.

AKP perceives the international context as favorable—a Europe in need of defense partners and a U.S. administration that no longer prioritizes democracy—that the regime dares cross red lines such as imprisoning its most serious opponent.

Cyprus sees 35% of its territory as illegally occupied by Türkiye since 1974. Greece remains in conflict over Aegean maritime boundaries, exacerbated by Turkish naval maneuvers. In addition to the Greek-speaking states, France and the Netherlands have recently faced harsh rhetoric from senior Turkish officials, amplified by pro-government media and parts of the Turkish diaspora. While diplomatic efforts continue on all sides to ease tensions, mutual trust and stable relations remain elusive.

If Not Membership, Then What?

However, a likely refusal from Brussels and the member states to relaunch Türkiye's EU accession bid gives Ankara's other demands a better chance of success while pushing concerns about the rule of law and democracy into the background.

These alternative demands are fourfold. First, Türkiye seeks full participation in shaping Europe's new security architecture with real influence over the process. Second, it wants Turkish defense companies involved in European procurement and reconstruction efforts—initiatives with Italy's Leonardo and the UK are already underway. Third, Türkiye continues to push for visa liberalization, a longstanding demand since talks began in 2013, with little progress. And fourth, Ankara calls for renegotiating the customs union agreement, in place since 1 January 2016, aiming to expand it to

include agriculture, services, and public procurement. Studies [suggest](#) a modernized deal could boost Türkiye's economy by 1.5-2.5%.

Türkiye could step up arms deliveries to Ukraine and join a coalition of willing states to help guarantee a ceasefire and Ukraine's stabilization. It can actively contribute to a new European security framework where full EU membership is not a prerequisite.

Despite the political hurdles preventing rapid EU accession, the shifting global context is nudging both sides toward deeper cooperation. Türkiye could step up arms deliveries to Ukraine and join a coalition of willing states to help guarantee a ceasefire and Ukraine's stabilization. It can actively contribute to a new European security framework where full EU membership is not a prerequisite (as shown by the UK and Norway's roles).

Türkiye's defense industry may benefit from the *Rearm Europe* initiative announced at the March 2025 EU summit. Member states like France, which have insisted these funds go only to EU-based firms, may now soften their stance. In return, as a committed supporter of European defense, Türkiye could gain a renewed customs union and a more flexible visa regime.

Ultimately, Europe is evolving toward a multi-speed or concentric model. Türkiye could be fully integrated into the defense circle, partially into the economic one (via the customs union), but remain outside the political institutions—the Council, Commission, and Parliament—reserved for member states. Given the uneven nature of Türkiye's bilateral ties with EU countries, its deepening cooperation may focus on select partners such as Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and southern European countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

What Prospects for Georgia and the South Caucasus?

Like the Middle East, the South Caucasus is a region where Türkiye sees itself as a principal stakeholder and is wary of outside powers like the U.S. or the EU. This thinking shaped the “Stability Platform for the South Caucasus” proposed after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. Although politely rejected by Tbilisi, it envisioned regional security managed by the three South Caucasus states and three regional powers: Türkiye, Iran, and Russia. The same concept lives on in the current 3+3 format.

Türkiye's main regional partner is Azerbaijan. Once captured in the slogan “*Bir millet, iki dövlət*” (One nation, two states), their cultural proximity has evolved into a deep strategic partnership, underpinned by defense agreements and military interoperability. In the early post-Soviet years, Türkiye focused on economic, energy, and logistical ties, avoiding direct confrontation with Russia. However, Azerbaijan's victories over Armenia in 2020 and 2023, backed by Türkiye, have shifted the regional power balance.

Nagorno-Karabakh was a critical lever of Russian influence in the region; its loss and the departure of Russian peacekeepers have weakened Moscow's grip on both Baku and Yerevan.

Nagorno-Karabakh was a critical lever of Russian influence in the region; its loss and the departure of Russian peacekeepers have weakened Moscow's grip on both Baku and Yerevan. Armenia, in turn, has begun seeking alternatives to Russian tutelage. Türkiye is interested in normalizing relations with Armenia and this now seems more attainable with Yerevan's leadership open to it. The long-standing “Azerbaijani mortgage” that hindered progress, so

long as the Nagorno-Karabakh issue remained unresolved, may now be lifted. Should a peace deal be signed, Turkish-Armenian ties could normalize quickly and Armenia would have little need for Russia's military presence. Türkiye could even pressure Baku to accelerate peace efforts. Still, Russia is unlikely to remain passive and may resort to hybrid tactics to preserve its influence.

Meanwhile, Georgia's drift back into Russia's orbit under the Georgian Dream keeps Moscow's hopes alive. Under earlier pro-Western governments, ties with Türkiye were framed through NATO, Türkiye being the only Alliance member with which Georgia shared a border. Turkish-Georgian defense cooperation, dating back to the Shevardnadze era, was both practical and politically symbolic.

From the 2010s onward, dynamics shifted. Türkiye grew more ambivalent toward the West while Georgia slowly pivoted toward Moscow—a trend that has since accelerated. Although Türkiye continues to support Georgia's NATO aspirations, this is no longer Tbilisi's priority.

Even if Türkiye is unlikely to join the EU soon, its role as a key pillar in European security is in Georgia's vital interest.

In the new geopolitical landscape shaped by Russian aggression and U.S. retrenchment, Türkiye's rapprochement with Europe presents a potential opportunity for Georgia, provided it remains on a European track rather than veering toward the Russian sphere. Even if Türkiye is unlikely to join the EU soon, its role as a key pillar in European security is in Georgia's vital interest.

One likely scenario is a multi-tiered Europe: a Defense Europe, a Customs Union Europe, a Single Market Europe, and a Political Europe. The EU today is three out of four with security outsourced

to NATO. But if U.S. disengagement continues, Europe will have to assume responsibility for its defense.

Georgia's 30-year pursuit of EU and NATO membership has achieved many milestones—an Association Agreement, DCFTA, visa liberalization, EU candidate status, and the 2008 NATO pledge—but actual membership remains distant. The current crisis demands faster, more pragmatic approaches. If Türkiye joins Defence Europe and renews its customs union with the EU, the core of integration will already be in place.

Containing Russian imperialism must go beyond Ukraine; the Caucasus is the next front.

Türkiye straddles the Caucasus and anchors the Black Sea. It is tied to Azerbaijan through a strategic alliance. Once Türkiye is integrated into Europe's security architecture, Europe will already have a foothold in the Caucasus where the same adversary looms as in Ukraine: Russia. Containing Russian imperialism must go beyond Ukraine; the Caucasus is the next front. This could create new openings for Georgia which may find joining this emerging alliance easier than NATO. And if the EU's "four freedoms" (goods, services, capital, and people) are extended, Georgia's economic integration with Europe would be nearly complete.

Every crisis carries opportunity as the well-known Chinese saying goes. The ability to seize it determines success. The Türkiye-Europe rapprochement, born of today's global instability, could be Georgia's chance—if it is led by a government elected by its people and loyal to the constitution, especially Article 78 which enshrines European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Not by proxies of a foreign power bent on revenge against the free world and reversing the course of history ■