



# Russian-Turkish Relations and Implications for U.S. Strategy and Operations

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## Contents

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<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Findings Summary</b> .....	1
<b>Methodology</b> .....	2
<b>Analysis</b> .....	4
<b>U.S. Strategic Interests in the Three AORs</b> .....	4
<b>Drivers and Characteristics of the Russia-Turkey Relationship</b> .....	6
<b>Scenario Analysis</b> .....	13
Scenario 1. “Russia Fights” .....	13
Scenario 2. “Russia Retreats” .....	18
Scenario 3. “Russia Consolidates” .....	20
The Role of Third Actors .....	22
“Black Swans” .....	23
<b>Key Findings and Recommendations</b> .....	25



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## Introduction

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Russia and Turkey's complex relationship has significant implications for U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strategic interests. The two states cooperate, deconflict, and compete in multiple theatres within Turkey's extended neighborhood, which straddles United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM), United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), and United States European Command (USEUCOM) areas of responsibility (AORs).<sup>1</sup> Their bilateral strategic trade has created mutual dependencies and vulnerabilities across multiple sectors, such as natural gas, nuclear energy, and tourism.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has many implications for the Russia-Turkey relationship. While engaging actively with Russia and stoking fears that its commercial ties with Moscow could serve Russia's evasion of Western sanctions, Turkey has also provided TB2 Bayraktar drones to Ukraine, invoked the Montreux Convention, and offered itself as a mediator on various operational issues in the Russia-Ukraine war. As a result of these steps, Turkey's leverage over both Russia *and* NATO allies has increased since February 2022. From a U.S. perspective, the implications have been mixed as Turkey has translated its increased leverage into foreign policy steps that threaten to undermine U.S. interests and NATO cohesion.

Turkey remains of significant importance to the United States in enabling its interests in the three aforementioned AORs, preventing third actors like China and Iran from operating in the "seams," and generating an enhanced, unified, and credible NATO capability and capacity in response to Russian aggression. It follows that Turkey's interplay with Russia in its extended neighborhood has far-reaching implications for the United States and NATO. This study aims to shed light on this relationship, its likely trajectory over the coming decade, its implications for U.S. strategic interests, and how the United States and NATO might shape the Russia-Turkey interplay to their advantage.

## Findings Summary

The trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine war—its longevity and the scope of Russian gains or losses—will shape Turkey's opportunities and vulnerabilities in relation to Russia over the medium-term. It will not only impact Turkey's foreign policy and its room to maneuver with Russia bilaterally, but will also have second- and third-order effects on the Russia-Turkey interplay in other AORs, the robustness of Turkey's alignment with NATO, and NATO's ability to agree on policies and execute operations across AORs.

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, we define Turkey's extended neighborhood to include the Black Sea, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and the Southern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus. Those geographies fall under the purview of several U.S. geographical combatant commands (GCCs). Central Asia and the Balkans, though areas of strategic interest to Turkey, are not a central focus of this study.

Our analysis suggests that future scenarios in Russia’s war against Ukraine—short of extreme developments such as Russia’s occupation of Ukraine’s entire Black Sea coast, or a defeat resulting in domestic instability in Russia—are likely to enhance Turkey’s leverage over both Russia and NATO. This study therefore concludes that Turkey’s centrality to the pursuit of U.S. strategic interests will increase across the scenarios and AORs analyzed as: (1) an enabler of unified NATO strategies and policies vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine, (2) an intermediary with a belligerent Russia, (3) a facilitator of Ukraine’s commerce, and (4) an actor enjoying enhanced leverage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and South Caucasus AORs, which has implications for U.S. strategic interests in Turkey’s extended neighborhood. Turkey will likely seek to maintain a functional relationship with Russia as both an “insurance” (given a fundamental distrust of the West and NATO) and a “balancer” (given a calculation that its continued balancing between NATO and Russia will generate higher Western attention to Turkey’s security needs and demands) in all scenarios analyzed. However, increased Russian belligerence will likely compel Turkey to look towards NATO for greater reassurance. This will afford the United States and NATO opportunities to enhance alignment with Turkey.

Based on our findings, we recommend that the United States and NATO strengthen Turkey’s leverage and resilience against Russia, and do so in ways that cater to Turkey’s strengths and make it feel like a valued partner and ally, thereby enhancing the prospect of constructive Turkish action across AORs. The study outlines an inventory of measures the U.S. government in general—and the DoD in particular—can take, comprising strategic and operational recommendations.

## Methodology

This study provides:

1. An analysis of the **Russia-Turkey relationship**, including Russian-Turkish **cooperation, deconfliction and competition**, with a focus on both states’ interests, leverages, and red lines in AORs under the purview of USAFRICOM, USCENTCOM and USEUCOM. In particular, the analysis will focus on: the Black Sea, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and the Southern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus. It will also account for Russia-Turkey strategic trade in the agricultural, construction, military-defense, natural gas, nuclear energy, real estate, and tourism sectors, as well as growing financial ties.
2. A **scenario analysis**, which projects the evolution of the Russia-Turkey relationship—and its second-order effects on the aforementioned AORs—over the coming 5-10 years on the basis of three possible futures in the Russia-Ukraine war:
  - Scenario 1: **“Russia fights”** (a war of attrition focused on eastern/southern Ukraine)
  - Scenario 2: **“Russia retreats”** (partially or fully from Ukraine)
  - Scenario 3: **“Russia consolidates”** (making further territorial gains on Ukraine’s Black Sea coast, occupying it fully or partially)

The scenario analysis will evaluate the impact of **additional factors** on the Russia-Turkey interplay, and its manifestation in the different AORs, including: the role of **third actors** (China and Iran) and the role of **domestic dynamics** in Russia and Turkey. The scenario analysis will also consider **“black**

**swans”** and their likely effects on the Russia-Turkey relationship, including Russia’s resort to nuclear use, and an orderly or disorderly leadership change in either Russia or Turkey.

3. An **assessment of the implications** of each scenario for U.S. strategic interests in the three AORs,
4. **Actionable recommendations** to improve the United States’ ability to sustain operational advantage over Russia in Europe and Turkey’s extended neighborhood. Specifically, recommendations for the DoD and NATO allies will be aimed at enabling them to: mitigate Turkish vulnerabilities to Russia; enhance alliance solidarity with Turkey and increase its ability and readiness to support the United States in pursuing its strategic objectives in the three AORs, and ensure that Turkey’s neighborhood remains inhospitable to the influence of malign actors, to the extent possible.

The study provides an **inventory of measures** the United States can use to pursue those ends. The research underpinning the findings presented in this study entailed a review of relevant original Russian and Turkish language documents, including statements by Russian and Turkish officials, Russian and Turkish expert and academic analyses, and press coverage from the two countries, among other sources. The authors augmented this analysis with individual interviews with Russian sources (mostly before February 2022) and Turkish sources (both before and after February 2022), as well as extensive consultations on the findings and proposed recommendations with current and former U.S. and NATO officials, as well as U.S. and regional experts on Russia, Turkey and NATO.



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## Analysis

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### U.S. strategic interests in the three AORs

In light of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States' principal objective is to deter further Russian aggression in Europe and discourage horizontal expansion of Russian military operations that would draw the United States and NATO allies into the war. Yet, even short of such escalation, the Russia-Ukraine war will likely have significant ripple effects on the global economy—driving inflation, high energy and food prices—that will also affect the United States domestically (especially as it approaches another election cycle). In addition, the war has already required diverting U.S. focus and resources to address Russia's actions and their impacts on Europe.<sup>2</sup> Russia's aggression will likely further incentivize states on NATO's eastern flank to press the United States for assistance in enhancing their defense and deterrence capabilities, reducing U.S. bandwidth to focus on China and the Indo-Pacific. Prospects for instability in Ukraine's wider non-NATO neighborhood, including in the Western Balkans, might further compound the resultant demands on U.S. attention and resources.<sup>3</sup>

The United States is also concerned with maintaining the U.S.-led order in MENA and the favorable regional balances of power that allow the United States basing, access, and overflight in pursuit of its broader objectives.<sup>4</sup> The United States' ability to achieve these aims will also be shaped by developments from Russia's war against Ukraine, and the spillover effects into these three AORs heightens the risk that states may become more vulnerable to the malign influence of not only Russia, but also China, Iran, and violent non-state actors. Further instability on NATO's southern flank—a possible second-order consequence of the war in Ukraine—might draw focus and resources and thereby undermine the alliance's ability to execute successful operations on the eastern flank, while reducing U.S. bandwidth for the Indo-Pacific even further.

The United States will need the support of allies and partners to address these actual and prospective challenges and Turkey will play a critical role. Turkey has refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia, continued to purchase Russian gas, engaged in highly active diplomacy with Russia, and stoked fears that its trade and financial ties with Moscow could aid

2 See: "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept", [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf). As of August 25, 2022, the United States had committed approximately 10.6bn USD in security assistance to Ukraine since January 2021, further indicative of the growing focus on NATO's eastern flank.

3 The Biden administration recently acknowledged that Russia's war against Ukraine might destabilize this region, welcoming steps taken by the European Union toward integration of the Western Balkans. White House, "Statement by President Biden Welcoming Important Steps Towards EU Integration for Albania and North Macedonia," July 19, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/19/statement-by-president-biden-welcoming-important-steps-towards-eu-integration-for-albania-and-north-macedonia/>.

4 These include: Support and strengthen partnerships with countries that subscribe to the rules-based international order and strengthen these countries' ability to defend themselves against foreign threats; ensure freedom of navigation through the Middle East's waterways; deter threats to regional stability and work to reduce tensions, de-escalate, and end conflicts wherever possible; ensure Iran never gets a nuclear weapon; build political, economic, and security connections between U.S. partners, and promote human rights. White House, "Remarks by President Biden at the GCC + 3 Summit Meeting," July 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/07/16/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-gcc-3-summit-meeting/>.

the latter in evading sanctions. But Turkey has also provided TB2 Bayraktar drones to Ukraine, invoked the Montreux Convention regulating the access of warships to the Black Sea, closed its airspace for Russian Syria-bound aviation, rejected Russia's recent proclaimed annexation of Ukrainian regions, while also offering its services broadly as a mediator during the Russia-Ukraine war, specifically during the grain export crisis.

The pursuit of U.S. objectives in the three AORs will increasingly require Turkish cooperation, notwithstanding U.S.-Turkish bilateral friction over a host of issues in recent years. The Turkish leadership has accused Washington (and Brussels) of insufficient attentiveness to Turkish national security needs and turned to Russia for pragmatic, selective engagement. Turkey perceived U.S. and NATO actions in its extended neighborhood (chiefly, the 2003 war in Iraq and U.S.-led support for the Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF] in Syria) as exacerbating threats to Turkey's national security. Several factors have impeded the United States' ability to repair a progressively deteriorating relationship with Turkey, including President Erdogan's apparent embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood and his pre- and post-coup crackdowns on the military, security services, and civil society. The United States' "pivot to Asia," its lack of a Mediterranean or Black Sea strategy, and weak response to Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 also weakened relations. These factors were compounded by Turkey's own reluctance to compromise with NATO or the European Union (EU) over a host of issues. Since February, Turkey has already translated its increased leverage into foreign policy steps that complicate U.S. interests and the maintenance of NATO cohesion, including by (1) making its consent to Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO conditional upon allies' concessions on other policy issues; (2) accusing Greece of militarizing the Aegean islands off Turkey's coast, threatening escalation; and (3) vowing renewed military action against Kurdish forces in northern Syria.

Yet, Turkey occupies a pivotal geographic location, hosts Incirlik Air Base and NATO's Allied Land Command at Izmir, contributes the second-largest military to NATO, and participates in active diplomatic engagement with a belligerent Russia that increasingly disengages from existing mediation platforms.<sup>5</sup> These factors make Turkey a linchpin in any successful U.S. management of the Russia-Ukraine war and its fallout across AORs. The pursuit of U.S. strategic interests in Turkey's extended neighborhood will require cooperation with Ankara, enhanced alliance solidarity with Turkey, and efforts to reduce Turkish vulnerabilities to—and alignment with—Russia.

In Turkey's extended neighborhood, the United States aims to weaken Russia; limit Chinese intrusions; restrict Iranian and Syrian malign influence; and ensure access, basing, and overflight, particularly to support an unfettered supply chain for USCENTCOM operations and Middle Eastern partners. In particular, Turkey's support is important for the United States to address the following strategic objectives in the three AORs:

5 In August 2022, Russia turned down a Swiss offer to represent Ukrainian interests in Russia and Moscow's interests in Ukraine, saying it no longer considers Switzerland a neutral country. Russia has also refused to continue using Geneva as a platform for the Bilateral Consultative Commission under the U.S.-Russia New START Treaty and the Syrian constitutional committee. Meanwhile, Russia accepted Turkish involvement in negotiations on modalities for grain exports from Ukrainian ports.

**In the EUCOM AOR:**

- Ensure NATO deterrence and defense in the Euro-Atlantic.
- Counter Russian activities and malign influence.
- Enhance the security of partners in the Western Balkans and Black Sea.
- Enable U.S. global operations.

**In the CENTCOM AOR:**

- Counter Iranian malign activities.
- Strategically compete with Russia and China.
- Advance and strengthen strategic relationships and reassure partners and allies of enduring U.S. commitment.
- Prevent the resurgence/ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al-Qaida.

**In the AFRICOM AOR:**

- Counter threats posed by Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO).
- Strategically compete with Russia and China.

## Drivers and characteristics of the Russia-Turkey relationship

Russia and Turkey maintain a **complex relationship**. They compete for influence but also cooperate and deconflict in the Black Sea, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and the Southern Mediterranean, and South Caucasus theatres. In addition, their bilateral trade has created mutual dependencies and vulnerabilities in the agricultural, construction, military-defense, natural gas, nuclear energy, real estate, and tourism sectors.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, **Russia's strategic interests vis-à-vis Turkey** consist of: (1) managing the bilateral relationship in the above-listed theatres, to ensure Russian interests in specific conflicts are met and red lines remain uncrossed; (2) fostering friction between Turkey and its NATO allies (since NATO disunity serves Russian broader strategic interests), and (3) enhancing economic cooperation in a range of sectors, as part of a broader Russian effort to diversify trade relations in light of Western sanctions. To that end, Russian companies are recently reinvesting in Turkey,

<sup>6</sup> Russian-Turkish trade has increased against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. According to reporting by *Politico*, Turkey's exports to Russia jumped from 417.3 million USD in July 2021 to 730 million USD in July 2022, whereas imports from Russia jumped from 2.5 billion USD in July 2021 to 4.4 billion USD in July 2022. Russia represented a 17 percent share of imports into Turkey between April and June 2022, compared with a 10 percent share a year earlier. Doug Palmer, "U.S. flags Russian-Turkish relations," *Politico*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/weekly-trade/2022/08/22/u-s-flags-turkish-russian-relations-00053051>.

and Russian oligarchs are attempting to shelter financial assets, buy real estate, and open new businesses in Turkey, prompting U.S. concerns that Turkey might aid Russia in evading sanctions.<sup>7</sup>

**Turkey's strategic interests vis-à-vis Russia**, meanwhile, are aimed at (1) compensating for a perceived U.S. disengagement from Turkey's extended neighborhood, chiefly MENA, and Russia's inroads in that geography, especially since Turkey considers Russia capable of hurting its interests and therefore as a player that "needs to be kept close"; (2) enabling Turkey's pursuit of "strategic autonomy" in foreign policy, which requires diversified great power relations; and (3) pursuing economic interests, especially related to Russian tourism in Turkey, opportunities for Turkish contractors in Russian public infrastructure projects, the import of Russian gas, and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant (NPP).<sup>8</sup> After Turkish banks pulled out of the Russian *Mir* payment system for fear of being penalized by the U.S. Treasury for sanctions evasion, President Erdogan emphasized his keenness to identify "alternatives".<sup>9</sup> With Erdogan's domestic political position recently eroded, mostly by economic crisis in Turkey, Ankara's intensified economic embrace of Russia since February 2022 has likely been driven by a desire for short-term economic gains ahead of the upcoming 2023 Turkish general election.

Besides these interests, Turkey's pivot to Russia has also been a byproduct of the Turkish establishment's growing **skepticism towards the United States**, which is perceived in Ankara as an unpredictable and unreliable protector due to its activities in the region. Observers easily mistake anti-American sentiments among the Turkish public and elites as indicative of rising pro-Russian views. Instead, such sentiments started to take hold in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>10</sup> The Turkish security establishment worried that the invasion would create instability in its immediate neighborhood and "undo" the existing, U.S.-led Middle Eastern nation-state system, with severe implications for Turkey's security. Such rising concerns over U.S. policies in the region, coupled with a lack of any coherent anti-American outlook or ideology held by the security establishment, opened up space for pro-Russian and Eurasianist views.<sup>11</sup> While Eurasianism in Turkey has never represented a coherent, consistent, or widely supported ideology, anti-American elements benefited from their reinstatement across Turkey's military and security establishments after the failed coup of 2016.<sup>12</sup>

7 "Russia and Turkey's Deepening Ties Prompt Concern in West Over Sanctions Compliance," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-and-turkeys-deepening-ties-prompt-concern-in-west-over-sanctions-compliance-11661249222>.

8 Turkey has also more recently relied on Russia in a quest for foreign currency, against the backdrop of economic crisis at home. Money transfers by Rosatom, which builds the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, and a recent deal allowing Turkey to pay in rubles for some of its Russian gas imports, appear to be pieces of an integrated effort to ease Turkey's foreign exchange crisis. "Russia offers Erdogan economic lifeline," *Al-Monitor*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/erdogan-offers-russia-economic-lifeline-paying-rubles>.

9 "Erdogan Seeks Alternatives After Private Banks Exit Russia's Mir Payment System," *Bloomberg*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-22/erdogan-seeks-alternatives-after-private-banks-exit-russia-s-mir>.

10 Fikret Bila, "Debate on the 1st of March vote in the Parliament," (Interview with a former Turkish chief of general staff, Hilmi Ozkok) (in Turkish), *Miliyet*, October 6, 2007, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/fikret-bila/1-mart-tezkeresiyle-ilgili-tartisma-216700>.

11 Sener Akturk, "The Fourth Style of Politics: Eurasianism as a Pro-Russian Rethinking of Turkey's Geopolitical Identity," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683849.2015.1021246?journalCode=ftur20>.

12 Between 2009 and 2015, many U.S.-skeptical elements in the Turkish military were imprisoned or removed from their posts, see: Güneş Yildiz, "Ergenekon: The court case that changed Turkey," *BBC Turkish*, August 5, 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-23581891>.

Turkey's relations with Russia **lack a firm institutional basis**, though political engagement has been somewhat routinized in recent years through the Astana platform and "2+2" meetings. Business connections are more institutionalized, especially in the energy and private security sectors.<sup>13</sup> The efficiency of the bilateral political relationship, however, is primarily a function of the **close rapport between Presidents Erdogan and Putin**. Besides "getting along" personally, both leaders bond over perceived U.S. efforts at democracy promotion in authoritarian states, which they believe may also target them or their allies. Indeed, regime survival considerations have played a growing role in buttressing Turkey's relations with Russia, especially following the 2016 failed coup.

The below section provides an analysis of Russian-Turkish engagement—**mutual interests, red lines, and leverages**—in the Black Sea, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and the Southern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus. Notwithstanding their divergent interests in these AORs, Russia and Turkey have effectively allowed each other to entrench their respective military presence, limited the influence of the United States and NATO (diplomatic and military), established anti-access/area-denial "bubbles", and established "military-control models" (in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh to date), controlling and freezing these conflicts.<sup>14</sup>

## The Black Sea

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**Interests.** In the Black Sea, Russian strategic interests vis-à-vis Turkey have consisted of maintaining a foothold to ensure a security buffer zone from Middle East volatility and to project power into the Mediterranean, protect Russia's economic connections to European markets, and ensure the dependence of southern Europe on Russian oil and gas. In pursuit of these interests, Russia has sought to ensure its freedom of navigation and a favorable balance of power in the Black Sea. Turkey has equally viewed the Black Sea as a buffer zone, including vis-à-vis Russia, and has sought to (1) maintain the status quo established by the Montreux Convention; (2) balance Russian military superiority; (3) promote multilateral platforms to maintain influence with littoral states and counter Russian primacy, without alienating the latter;<sup>15</sup> while also (4) protecting economic interests, especially maritime trade and transportation routes, and hydrocarbon reserves in its Exclusive Economic Zone.

**Red lines and Leverages.** Turkey's abrogation of the Montreux Convention, or adoption of any steps that would reduce or nullify the strategic advantages afforded to Russia by the Convention, would cross a red line for Moscow. Meanwhile, Turkish red lines in the Black Sea would be crossed in the event of a military confrontation with Russia, Russia limiting Turkey's commercial activities and

13 Turkish private security company SADAT, for instance, is alleged to have received training from Russia's Alpha Group. "Turkish mafia boss says reports circulating on existence of a 'death list' including his name," *Duvar English*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-mafia-boss-sedat-peker-says-reports-circulating-on-existence-of-a-death-list-including-his-name-news-59176>.

14 For full analysis, see: Güneş Yildiz, "Turkish-Russian Adversarial Collaboration in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh," SWP Comment, March 24, 2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkish-russian-adversarial-collaboration-in-syria-libya-and-nagorno-karabakh/>.

15 Mitat Çelikpala and Emre Erşen, "Turkey's Black Sea Predicament: Challenging or Accommodating Russia?" *Perceptions*, Vol. 23, 2018, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/549667>.

oil and gas exploration, and the *de jure* recognition of Crimea as Russian.<sup>16</sup> Russia has accumulated leverage vis-à-vis Turkey in the Black Sea by enhancing its naval superiority since 2014, and could build further leverage by dominating Black Sea littoral states, or enhancing military-defense cooperation in the Black Sea with third actors, for example Egypt and Armenia.<sup>17</sup> Turkey, meanwhile, maintains leverage as steward of the Montreux Convention, through cooperative activities with NATO, alongside military-defense cooperation with Ukraine.

**Cooperation-Deconfliction-Competition.** Notwithstanding a history of Russian-Turkish *modus vivendi*, Ankara was under no illusions about Russia's Black Sea ambitions even prior to February 2022, remaining wary of cooperating fully with NATO to mitigate the perceived threat.<sup>18</sup> Russia and Turkey have also lacked an effective regional platform to address conflicting issues in the region (with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE] being relatively inactive, and the EU or NATO representing unacceptable platforms to Russia), though the Montreux Convention has served as a reliable framework for deconfliction in the naval domain.

## Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean

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**Interests.** Russia has a strategic interest in maintaining its sphere of influence in the Mediterranean and broader MENA regions, which requires preserving its military presence, a friendly government, and a modicum of stability in regime-held areas, in Syria. In advancement of this fundamental interest, Russia seeks to (1) normalize the position of the Assad government internationally; (2) neutralize threats from northwest to regime-held Syria (which requires Turkish cooperation), and (3) ensure the gradual return of Syrian state institutions to northeast Syria (which requires a U.S. withdrawal and rapprochement between the Syrian Kurds and Damascus). Russian economic interests in Syria are secondary. Turkey's strategic interests, meanwhile, consist in containing threats to Turkey's stability and territorial integrity. Hence, Turkey seeks (1) to maintain of its military presence in Syria; (2) to create an environment conducive to Syrian refugees returning from Turkey (and, related, a high degree of autonomy for pro-Turkish groups in northwest Syria), and (3) to prevent the Kurdish-led autonomous region in the northeast from gaining greater autonomy and Western political recognition. Reducing cross-border security threats to Turkey, for instance from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or the People's Protection Units (YPG), is a lesser Turkish priority.

**Red lines and Leverages.** Russia views any threats to the survival of the Syrian regime, threats to Russian bases in Hmeymim and Tartus, or Russia's loss of its military presence and political influence in Syria, as red lines. To Turkey, red lines relate to the further empowerment of, or political autonomy for Syrian Kurds (with or without PKK links), and Syrian forces retaking Idlib

16 This red line may, however, be malleable. Turkey has reportedly made noises at closed NATO meetings regarding the Ukrainian Crimean Tatar minority, but refrained from doing anything too visible or substantial. Ankara may see possibilities for negotiating for Crimean Tatar political rights within a Russia-governed Crimea. Off-the-record interview with a senior NATO official.

17 In November 2020, Russia held joint Russian-Egyptian naval maneuvers in the Black Sea. The fact that Egyptian ships passed through the Straits to engage in exercises in what used to be a Turkish sphere of influence represented a major step forward for Egypt and a defeat for Turkey, according to Russian daily *Kommersant*. "Most nad bosforum" (in Russian), *Kommersant*, November 17, 2020, [https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4575289?from=four\\_mir](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4575289?from=four_mir).

18 Assessment based on interviews with Turkish officials, conducted before February 2022.

or Euphrates Shield areas (which would lead to a refugee crisis across Turkish borders and a loss of autonomy for Turkish-backed groups). Russia retains multiple levers vis-à-vis Turkey in Syria, since it can enable Syria's Kurds (militarily or diplomatically), support a regime offensive on Idlib, or stir up the Syrian refugee and Kurdish issues in Turkey domestically (e.g., via disinformation). Turkey possesses leverage given its ability to close the Straits and Turkish airspace for the Russian navy and aviation, respectively, and by pushing the limits of deconfliction agreements.

**Cooperation-Deconfliction-Competition.** Though Russia's and Turkey's long-term interests in Syria diverge, they have cooperated bilaterally and in the Astana format since 2017. Deconfliction materializes through regular joint patrols in Idlib and in northeast Syria, with several major flare-ups, including the killing of 34 Turkish soldiers in Idlib in early 2020. Those and similar incidents were played down by the Turkish military, which was indicative of the perceived sense of Turkish vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia in the past.

## Libya and the Southern Mediterranean

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**Interests.** Russia has a strategic interest in projecting power into the southern Mediterranean, viewing the region as part of an "arc of deterrence" to counter and deter NATO,<sup>19</sup> which fundamentally requires that any future Libyan government be friendly to Russia. In addition, Russia pursues economic interests, especially prospective hydrocarbon exploration. Turkey views its foothold in Libya as an avenue to project power, pursue economic interests, break its isolation in the Arab world, and test Turkish weapons. Maintaining that foothold requires a privileged relationship with the internationally recognized government (which provides legal cover for Turkey's hydrocarbon exploration off Libya's coast), and—ideally—institutionalizing Turkey's military presence (through Security Sector Reform and the maintenance and upgrading of its air and naval bases in al-Watiyya and Misrata).

**Red lines and Leverages.** Both Russia and Turkey view the loss of their political, economic, and military influence accumulated in Libya as a red line. Both Russia and Turkey seek to accrue leverage vis-à-vis each other by fostering ties *across* the Libyan political landscape, including in coordination with third actors (for instance, Russia with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]).<sup>20</sup> Turkey's deployment of TB2 Bayraktar has also afforded it leverage, given the vulnerability of Russia's Pantsir air defenses to the systems.<sup>21</sup>

**Cooperation-Deconfliction-Competition.** Though Russia and Turkey (largely) support competing actors, but also vie for influence over each other's protégés, both benefit from the status quo of low-level, protracted conflict in Libya (whereas a successful political process might cost Russia and Turkey their military presence and economic opportunities). Though their

19 Chen Kane and Miles Pomper, "Implications of Russia's Activities in the Middle East and North Africa Region for U.S. Strategy and Interests," *CNS Occasional Paper*, December 19, 2021, <https://nonproliferation.org/implications-of-russias-activities-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-region-for-u-s-strategy-and-interests/>.

20 Turkey has recently been exerting efforts toward mending ties with Egypt and the UAE, which may limit Russia's ability to turn these countries firmly against Turkish interests in Libya. It has also reached out more actively to actors in eastern Libya. "After years of hostility, Turkey forges ties with eastern Libya," *Al-Monitor*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/after-years-hostility-turkey-forges-ties-eastern-libya#ixzz7b55FvWC0>.

21 Libya observers note that Turkish TB2 Bayraktar continue to be used toward tactical gains by Turkey's Libyan proxies, see: [https://twitter.com/JMJalel\\_H/status/1563761175275487233](https://twitter.com/JMJalel_H/status/1563761175275487233).

deconfliction mechanisms are less robust than in Syria, and though Russia's military presence in Libya is covert, Russian-Turkish bilateral engagement has contributed to the sidelining of Western influence over the conflict.

## The South Caucasus

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**Interests.** Since tensions in the South Caucasus resonate inside Russia, Moscow views this theatre as an extension of its domestic security agenda.<sup>22</sup> Russia seeks to maintain stability, minimize Western influence, and maintain primacy in the region, as well as ensure leverage over the delivery of hydrocarbon resources to Europe via pipelines in the South Caucasus. Turkey equally seeks stability in the region, but in the context of a status quo that favors Azerbaijan. Toward that end, Turkey is adamant to preserve influence over Azerbaijan's military and politics.<sup>23</sup> Economically, Turkey views the South Caucasus as a "land bridge to Central Asia,"<sup>24</sup> while also relying on gas imports from Azerbaijan as part of a diversification drive. Strategically, its more assertive role in the South Caucasus underscores Turkey's quest for "strategic autonomy". Finally, Turkey is interested in the preservation of "deep-rooted historical and cultural ties" with people in the South Caucasus.<sup>25</sup>

**Red lines and Leverages.** Russian red lines in the region would be crossed if Turkey was to actively challenge Russian primacy in the region, or channel foreign fighters from MENA to the South Caucasus, thereby exacerbating security threats to Russia proper. Turkey's red lines primarily relate to a loss of influence over Azerbaijan (especially its military institutions) to Russia, alongside a Russian failure to push Armenia to accept the opening of the Nakhichevan corridor, which would connect Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan enclave and facilitate Turkish commerce.<sup>26</sup> Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia retains leverage through its diplomatic and military primacy: the Karabakh peacekeeping force involves Russian troops, whereas Turkey has only deployed monitors.<sup>27</sup> In the past, Turkey also viewed Russia as capable of exercising leverage over Ankara in Syria, with a view to pressuring it on Karabakh. Turkey, conversely, has accumulated leverage by gaining greater clout in Baku's decision-making, creating a linkage between Nagorno-Karabakh and MENA, and

22 Ahead of the October 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, for instance, there was substantial unrest in Moscow among the Armenian and Azeri diasporas. "Armenians and Azerbaijanis clash in Moscow," *RFE/RL*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenians-and-azerbaijanis-clash-in-moscow/30747590.html>.

23 Interviews with Turkish officials in November 2021. Turkey has come a long way since the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 in installing pro-Turkish figures and removing individuals unfriendly to Turkey from senior military posts in Azerbaijan.

24 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkey's Relations with South Caucasus Countries," [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-relations-with-southern-caucasus.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-southern-caucasus.en.mfa).

25 Ibid.

26 "Nakhchivan corridor to boost Turkey's trade with Azerbaijan, Caucasus," *Daily Sabah*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/nakhchivan-corridor-to-boost-turkeys-trade-with-azerbaijan-caucasus>.

27 In February 2021, Russia and Turkey opened a joint ceasefire-monitoring center in Azerbaijan. Beyond the presence of monitors, Turkey is not directly involved in mediation efforts. Russian peacekeepers are stationed at the main roads throughout Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin corridor that connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, whereas Turkish and Russian monitors keep watch from a center located 20km from the front. For further detail on the peacekeeping and monitoring arrangements, see: "Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh," *International Crisis Group*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/264-post-war-prospects-nagorno-karabakh>.



supplying military hardware to Azerbaijan. Turkey has essentially accumulated enough leverage to de-freeze the Karabakh conflict in order to pressure Russia in other theatres.

**Cooperation-Deconfliction-Competition.** Though Russia and Turkey broadly wish to see the South Caucasus secure, politically stable, and free of the involvement of extra-regional powers, Turkey has aimed at increasing its own influence and enable Azerbaijan in pursuit of that objective, while Russia seeks to retain primacy. Russian-Turkish deconfliction currently materializes through the joint ceasefire-monitoring center.

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## Scenario Analysis

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This section presents a **scenario analysis**, which projects the evolution of the Russia-Turkey relationship—and its second-order effects on the aforementioned AORs—over the coming 5-10 years, based on three possible futures in the Russia-Ukraine war. Each scenario considers the impact of **additional factors**, including the role of **third actors** such as China and Iran, the role of **domestic dynamics** in both Russia and Turkey, as well as a number of “**Black Swan**” events. The core assumption in each scenario is that Russia remains a belligerent actor, seeking to impose costs on the United States and its NATO allies, while using its leverage to gain relief from Western sanctions (or to circumvent them). The analysis shows how Turkey will likely position itself in each scenario.

### Scenario 1: “Russia Fights”

#### The Russia-Turkey relationship: interests, leverages, red lines

Scenario 1 assumes a war of attrition, largely playing out in eastern and southern Ukraine, with neither Russia nor Ukraine making territorial gains decisive enough to end the conflict. In this scenario of protracted, low-intensity conflict, Russia may hold on to Zaporizhzhia and Kherson *oblasts* and target other Ukrainian cities with missiles, but Ukraine maintains access to the Black Sea and a (limited) ability to conduct commerce.

Fundamentally, a war of attrition will likely afford Turkey the opportunity to continue its balancing act between Russia and NATO and will not compel it to break ties with the former. Turkey’s role in relation to Russia could even strengthen if (1) the recent grain export deal—mediated by the United Nations (UN) and Turkey, and operationalized with a major role for Turkey—proves sustainable over time, and if (2) Russia continues to shun traditional platforms, like Geneva, for negotiation with Western counterparts. The Turkish leadership will seek to leverage this mediation role both domestically and internationally, likely demanding concessions from the United States and NATO on issues of vital interest to Turkey.

Russia’s **net attractiveness as an economic partner** for Turkey will decline. Assuming that Western sanctions on Russia remain in place, Russia will not be in a position to provide foreign direct investment (FDI), which the Turkish economy desperately needs. A war of attrition will have additional negative economic repercussions for Turkey, given persistently higher food and energy prices globally. Still, these downsides will be partially offset by select commercial opportunities for Turkey with Russia: It will seek to attract international business fleeing Russia,<sup>28</sup> as well as fill select voids in the Russian market created by the departure of Western companies. A deal allowing

28 There is evidence that many Russians, following President Putin’s announcement of partial mobilization in late September, fled to Turkey. The current (and future) influx of Russians into Turkey will likely present the country with business opportunities, alongside challenges. “Turkey braces for fresh influx of Russians as Putin announces mobilization,” *Al Monitor*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/turkey-braces-fresh-influx-russians-putin-announces-mobilization#ixzz7fL96LbN>.

Turkey to partially pay for Russian gas in rubles will also partially ease Ankara's foreign exchange crisis, though Turkish businesses will likely continue to seek to avoid running afoul of Western secondary sanctions—as indicated by a recent decision by Turkish banks to pull out of the Russian *Mir* payment system.<sup>29</sup> Turkey will also seek to ensure the completion of the Akkuyu NPP<sup>30</sup> while continuing its efforts to diversify sources of gas imports to reduce reliance on Russia.

**Opportunities for enhanced military-defense cooperation will be circumscribed**, since Russia's military performance in Ukraine to date has already undermined the appeal of its defense exports, in Turkey's view.<sup>31</sup> Rumors to the contrary—for instance recent Russian claims that it has started supplying a second batch of S-400 systems to Turkey, or reports alleging the prospects of Bayraktar TB2 production in Russia—are assessed by Turkish observers as intended to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO allies.<sup>32</sup> Though President Putin, opening the "Army-2022" forum outside Moscow in mid-August, offered Russia's "allies and partners the most modern types of weapons", boasting that those have been tested in "real combat operations", no major defense deals are known to have been concluded with Turkish customers at the event.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Turkey is poised to benefit from enduring defense cooperation with Ukraine in Scenario 1. Turkey's recent decision to launch Ukraine's first Ada-Class Corvette for the Ukrainian Navy, alongside Baykar's professed intention to complete the construction of a manufacturing plant in Ukraine, are indicative of future opportunities and commitment.<sup>34</sup>

In Scenario 1, with fewer international partners, **Russia should be less inclined to blackmail Ankara economically** (as it did in 2015-2016, after Turkey had shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter aircraft). At the same time, Turkey's recent request to delay payments for some of its natural gas

29 "Erdogan Seeks Alternatives After Private Banks Exit Russia's Mir Payment System," *Bloomberg*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-22/erdogan-seeks-alternatives-after-private-banks-exit-russia-s-mir>.

30 Notwithstanding recent disputes over *Rosatom* terminating the contract of a Turkish partner in the project, both sides appear intent to move forward. "Russia offers Erdogan economic lifeline." In mid-September, Turkish officials stated that the dispute with Russia over a Turkish contractor's participation in Akkuyu had been resolved: "Turkey, Russia Solve Nuclear Dispute as Turkish Builder Restored," *Bloomberg*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-16/turkey-russia-solve-nuclear-dispute-as-turkish-builder-restored>. In October 2022, Rosatom also reportedly began negotiations with Turkey on participation in constructing a second NPP, near Sinop: "Rosatom begins negotiations with Turkish partners on possible participation in another NPP in the country – CEO," *Interfax*, October 19, 2022, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/84049/>.

31 Interview with a Turkish defense analyst, August 2022.

32 Interviews with a Turkish source, August 2022.

33 "Putin calls Russian arms 'significantly superior' to rivals," *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/15/moscow-ready-to-cooperate-with-allies-on-advanced-weapons-putin>.

34 "Turkey Launches Ukraine's First Ada-Class Corvette," *The Defense Post*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/10/06/turkey-ukraine-ada-class-corvette/>. "Turkey's Baykar to complete plant in two years – CEO," *Reuters*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-baykar-complete-plant-ukraine-two-years-ceo-2022-10-28/>.

imports from Russia until 2024 is could be a sign of the country's enduring vulnerability.<sup>35</sup> Russia's future ability to use gas supplies as leverage over Ankara will depend on (1) Turkey's ability to further diversify import sources, exploit hydrocarbon resources in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, and (2) whether Russia will sell gas to Turkey at discounted prices—or delay payment schedules—as a “sweetener”, to ensure continued Turkish support in other domains. Moscow could also use Russian tourism in Turkey as a bargaining chip, denying Ankara a significant source of revenue to build leverage. Notwithstanding such select opportunities, we assess **Russian net economic leverage over Turkey to decline** in Scenario 1.

Though a war of attrition is no linear concept and can take different forms, only the most extreme development in Scenario 1—**Russia's use of a nuclear weapon in Ukraine**—would fully upend Turkey's balancing act. Short of such escalation, most Turkish and non-Turkish sources interviewed do not expect **other manifestations of Russian revisionism**—even a complete halt of Russian gas supplies to Europe, or military action causing higher civilian casualties in Ukraine—to lead to a fundamental shift in Turkish policy. Turkey's foreign policy making has also shown to be relatively immune to international public opinion.<sup>36</sup> Should Western support for Ukraine fray amid protracted low-level conflict, especially if the economic repercussions become more severely felt in Western societies, Turkey's perceived ability to maintain a balanced approach with Russia will be further reinforced.

### Impact of Scenario 1 on the different AORs

In Scenario 1, Russia's and Turkey's **mutual interests and red lines** vis-à-vis each other in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus **remain largely unchanged**, compared to today. That said, the combination of several Turkish levers—Ukraine using Turkish TB2s to target Russian military assets, or Turkey regulating the access of Russian ships into the Black Sea more rigorously<sup>37</sup>—could degrade Moscow's naval and amphibious capabilities and enhance escalation risks between Ankara and Moscow. Protracted war in Ukraine will also likely **reduce Russia's military bandwidth for other**

35 “Turkey Wants Russia to Delay Its Gas Payments Until 2024,” *Bloomberg*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-03/turkey-asks-russia-to-delay-its-gas-payments-until-2024#xj4y7vzkg>. By early October 2022, Turkey had also become Russia's third largest buyer of crude oil, behind China and India: “Russian crude exports slide to 12-month low as EU ban, price caps loom,” *S&P Global Commodity Insights*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/100622-russian-crude-exports-slide-to-12-month-low-as-eu-ban-price-caps-loom>. It remains to be seen whether Russian proposals to set up a gas distribution center in Turkey—likely aimed at binding Ankara yet closer to Moscow—make economic sense and can materialize: “Putin's ‘gas hub’ plan aims to bolster Erdogan's image,” *Al Monitor*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/putins-gas-hub-plan-aims-bolster-erdogans-image>.

36 Turkey ignoring judgements issued by the European Court of Human Rights, as well as President Erdogan's populist discourse, are indicative of this.

37 According to U.S. officials, Turkey has allowed merchant ships, owned by sanctioned companies and used by Russia to move military cargo into the Black Sea, to pass the Bosphorus Strait unhindered. Turkey could regulate such activity more vigorously, if willing. “Russia is Scouring the Globe for Weapons to Use Against Ukraine,” *Bloomberg*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-09/russia-is-shopping-around-the-world-for-military-weapons-for-its-war-in-ukraine>. After it was reported that Russia had used a civilian cargo ship to transfer military equipment, including S-300 air defense systems, from Syria to Russia through the Bosphorus, Ukraine reportedly summoned the Turkish ambassador. See “Russia ships S-300 air defence missiles out of Syria – satellite images,” *Reuters*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-ships-s-300-air-defence-missiles-out-syria-satellite-images-2022-08-29/>.

**AORs** (though unlikely force a full Russian withdrawal)<sup>38</sup> and, as a result, decrease its leverage over Turkey. In Syria, for instance, Russia is less likely to play its strongest cards against Turkey—enable a Syrian regime offensive against Idlib—since Russia needs relative calm in Syria amid protracted war in Ukraine. In the South Caucasus, Scenario 1 will similarly afford Russia limited latitude to maneuver, given a reduced bandwidth to support Armenia economically, which could lead to enhanced opportunities for Azerbaijan and Turkey.

In Scenario 1, **Turkey will likely exploit such reduced Russian bandwidth**, especially in northern Syria and the South Caucasus,<sup>39</sup> but will tread cautiously to **avoid a direct confrontation** with Russia. While Turkey might engage in limited cross-border operations into northern Syria, it wants to avoid renewed, large-scale hostilities in the country, given the priority accorded across the Turkish political spectrum to refugee return from Turkey to Syria.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in the South Caucasus, Turkey will remain interested in a *modus vivendi* with Russia and stability that will enable the opening of transportation routes, though its backing of an increasingly emboldened Azerbaijan could still enhance the risk of renewed conflict in the region. Indeed, tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh have already been on the rise intermittently, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with growing doubts on both sides over the ability of Russian peacekeepers to stop ceasefire violations.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, select Turkish sources contend that Turkey needs to tread carefully across AORs since it remains vulnerable to **Russian hybrid threats**: Moscow could enable Kurdish insurgents in or outside Turkey, or enable (Iran-backed) proxies to attack Turkish forces in Syria or Iraq.<sup>42</sup> In Scenario 1, Turkey's preferred outcome in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus is therefore a **"middle ground"**—with Russian attention being largely consumed by Ukraine, yet not to the extent that Russia would have to withdraw from these theatres.

38 Several months into its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has not been forced to withdraw significant numbers of forces from other AORs, though some Wagner PMC forces may have been redeployed to Ukraine. At the end of May 2022, Russia even sent reinforcements to Qamishli in Syria's northeast, including Su-34 fighter aircraft and Ka-52 helicopters, according to media reports. That said, other reports alleged that Russia has handed over some bases in Syria to Iranian forces and Hezbollah and even redeployed a battery of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from Syria to the Ukrainian theatre—such steps may be indicative of somewhat reduced bandwidth. In Libya, estimates on Russia's PMC presence vary greatly, given its covert nature, but analysts converge in an assessment that any Russian drawdowns have been modest at best and do not threaten the general durability of Russia's presence. Finally, there is no credible evidence to date of Russia withdrawing its approximately 2,000 peacekeeping forces from Nagorno-Karabakh, though it is reported to have pulled troops deployed to Armenia as early as March 2022. "Russia pulls troops from Armenia, Syria, Serbia to transfer to Ukraine – the General Staff," *LB.ua*, March 13, 2022, [https://en.lb.ua/news/2022/03/13/10906\\_russia\\_pulls\\_troops\\_armenia.html](https://en.lb.ua/news/2022/03/13/10906_russia_pulls_troops_armenia.html).

39 The exception might be Libya, where Turkey has been treading with caution in light of recently renewed tensions in Tripoli, keen to see stability and worried Russia might see benefit in fostering a deterioration of the situation. "Turkey calls on all parties to exercise self-restraint and stop the clashes immediately," *The Libya Observer*, August 28, 2022, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/turkey-calls-all-parties-exercise-self-restraint-and-stop-clashes-immediately>.

40 Recent Turkish signals regarding a prospective willingness to normalize ties with the Assad government suggest Turkey's receptiveness to dealing with the Kurdish issue through multiple pathways. Should such normalization materialize—at present, overtures are accompanied by Turkish attacks on both Syrian Kurdish *and* government forces—it would also be indicative of an enduring Turkish readiness to acquiesce to Russia and adopt positions at odds with the United States in advancement of its security interests.

41 "Warding off renewed war in Nagorno-Karabakh," *International Crisis Group*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/warding-renewed-war-nagorno-karabakh>.

42 U.S. sources, meanwhile, doubt the materialization of such hybrid threats, commenting that Russia has no incentive to enact them while Turkey maintains its current balancing act.

### Implications of Scenario 1 for U.S. and NATO strategic interests

While Turkey's net leverage gains over Russia in Scenario 1 are welcome from NATO's perspective in principle, they could embolden Ankara to conduct a more assertive foreign policy to achieve what it considers national strategic interests (such as weakening the Kurdistan Workers' Party [PKK]), which could result in actions at odds with U.S. and NATO policies.<sup>43</sup> Aggressive Turkish action could have negative ripple effects in Syria and into Iraq, where the United States and NATO maintain small missions.<sup>44</sup> Implications for U.S. interests will depend on *whether* and *how* Turkey fills any voids left by Russia in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus (i.e., whether Turkey can be encouraged to provide a stabilizing presence).<sup>45</sup> Third actors could also seek opportunities, especially Iran in Syria (which would heighten escalation risks between Iran and Israel), and Azerbaijan and Iran in the South Caucasus (which would threaten the fragile status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh). Azerbaijan's military attack on Armenia in mid-September 2022 was indicative of this mounting danger. Russian and regional observers have also suggested that Russia might actively welcome a more assertive Iranian role, for instance in Syria, as its own bandwidth for the Eastern Mediterranean becomes somewhat constrained.<sup>46</sup> In August, heightened friction between USCENTCOM and Iran-backed militias in northeast Syria was indicative of the challenges the United States might face going forward.<sup>47</sup> While there are few indications that Russia's war against Ukraine has directly fomented greater instability in Libya, recent unrest in Tripoli between armed fighters backing the UN-recognized government based in Tripoli and forces loyal to rival Prime Minister Fathi Bashagha leaves the country vulnerable.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, there is a risk in Scenario 1 that, the longer the war lasts, and the more severe its repercussions are for the Turkish economy, the more likely it becomes that Turkey may try to push Ukraine toward accepting a "bad peace," which would be detrimental to U.S. and NATO

43 Not all Turkish foreign policy reversals, aimed at pursuing strategic interests, need to be at odds with U.S. interests, however. For instance, Turkey's recent efforts at normalizing relations with different Arab states and Israel—partially aimed at mitigating Turkey's economic crisis—are welcome from a U.S. perspective.

44 There are already indications that Turkey looks at Syria and Iraq as one geostrategic space in which to confront perceived security threats. In late August 2022, President Erdogan outlined plans for a "safe zone" that links territories in both countries. "How realistic is Erdogan's vision for security belt from Syria to Iraq?" *Al-Monitor*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/how-realistic-erdogans-vision-security-belt-syria-iraq>.

45 As these developments crystallize, Turkey may not always be a constraining factor vis-à-vis Iran. For instance, there are signs of closer Iranian-Turkish cooperation against Kurdish militias across the region. See: <https://twitter.com/HamidRezaAz/status/1561819348548964354>.

46 Based on conversations with Russian and Israeli sources in August 2022. However, a Russian expert indicated that Russia will continue to afford Israel the necessary leeway to target Iranian assets and forces in Syria, as long as a) Russian forces remain unharmed by such action, and b) Israel "doesn't poke Russia in the eye regarding Ukraine." Iranian scholar Hamidreza Azizi also views Russia's new naval doctrine—and its emphasis on the Eastern Mediterranean—as indicative of the fact that Russia will not allow Iran to fully fill a vacuum in Syria. Hamidreza Azizi, "Will Russia's new naval doctrine transform cooperation with Iran?" *Amwaj Media*, August 19, 2022, <https://amwaj.media/article/what-russia-s-new-naval-doctrine-says-about-tehran-moscow-relations>.

47 U.S. Central Command Press Release, "CENTCOM forces engage militants in northeast Syria," August 25, 2022, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3139284/>. Observers have also noted the implications of heightened Iranian activity in northeast Syria for the security situation in Iraq: "Iran-linked attacks on US forces in Syria rekindle Iraq border concerns," *Al-Monitor*, August 26, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/iran-linked-attacks-us-forces-syria-rekindle-iraq-border-concerns>.

48 "32 killed in Libya's Tripoli as fears grow of a wider war," *Al Jazeera*, August 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/28/23-killed-in-tripoli-clashes-fears-grow-of-wider-libya-war>.

interests. Meanwhile, the United States and NATO will likely continue to have to rely on Turkish mediation to achieve concessions from Russia over Ukraine, including on technical issues such as the export of grain, the security of Ukrainian NPPs, prisoner exchanges, and perhaps localized ceasefires—which will afford Ankara leverage.<sup>49</sup> Turkish leverage was on clear display in early November 2022, when Ankara played a key role in getting Russia to return into the Black Sea grain deal regulating exports from Ukrainian ports, just a few days after Moscow had suspended its participation.<sup>50</sup>

## Scenario 2: “Russia Retreats”

### The Russia-Turkey relationship: interests, levers, red lines

A partial or full Russian retreat from Ukraine is beneficial to Turkey if it produces a “humbled” Russia acting less aggressively in its neighborhood, while maintaining the wherewithal to conduct trade with Turkey and retain a limited military presence in the AORs analyzed. In Scenario 2, Turkey’s economic levers and vulnerabilities regarding Russia will largely mirror those in Scenario 1: Russia’s attractiveness as an economic partner for—and economic leverage vis-à-vis—Turkey will decline even further compared to Scenario 1. The greater the difficulties faced by the Russian economy under this scenario, the less substantial the economic benefits Turkey might still accrue from the relationship become, such as *Rosatom* financing Akkuyu, or Russian tourists having the financial means to vacation in Turkey. Russia’s attractiveness as a source of defense assets for Turkey would also further decline. On the other hand, Turkish businesses could benefit from participating in Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction, which could materialize in this scenario.<sup>51</sup>

Compared to the other two scenarios, this scenario entailing a Russian retreat from occupied areas inside (or altogether from) Ukraine, leading to the cessation of hostilities with limited or no Russian territorial gains, would be Turkey’s preferred scenario. Yet, an “extreme” Scenario 2, one in which a Russian withdrawal would set in motion the internal destabilization of Russia, severely weakening its economy, or even threatening civil war, could adversely affect Turkish national security interests. Most sources interviewed contended that Ankara needs a stable, “functioning” Russia, both for stability in Turkey’s extended neighborhood, as well as to balance the United States. Furthermore, a Russian humiliation in

49 During his recent visit to Lviv, President Erdogan reportedly offered to mediate a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine. And on August 24, 2022, Istanbul hosted IAEA Director General Grossi and *Rosatom* Director General Likhachev for a discussion on a prospective IAEA mission to Zaporizhzhia NPP. See: [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1562446685712023552](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1562446685712023552). In addition, in the first half of 2022, Ankara played a role in hosting Russian-Ukrainian peace talks, exerted efforts to end the Russian siege of Mariupol, repeatedly offered to host direct talks between Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy, while a Turkish role in prospective “security guarantees” for Ukraine was being floated, including by the Ukrainian government. After Russia announced the suspension of its participation in a deal facilitating the export of Ukrainian grain in late October, Turkey vowed continued efforts to preserve the deal, liaising with all its participants, while avoiding open criticism of Moscow: “Turkey promises to keep grain moving despite Russian suspension,” *Al Monitor*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/31/grain-exports-continue-despite-russian-withdrawal>.

50 “Rossiya vozobnovlyaet uchastie v zernovoi sdelke,” *Kommersant* (in Russian), November 2, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5650283>.

51 On August 18, 2022, Presidents Erdogan and Zelenskyy signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Turkey’s involvement in post-war reconstruction during the former’s visit to Lviv, Ukraine.

Ukraine would also increase the risks of erratic Russian foreign policy moves, including toward Turkey. That said, one Turkish source noted that Russian internal turmoil might lead Russian regions with cultural and religious affinity with Turkey to cooperate more closely with Ankara, which would be welcome.

### Impact of Scenario 2 on the different AORs

A Russian retreat in, or withdrawal from Ukraine, would likely materialize in a context in which **Russia is significantly weakened militarily**. The AOR-specific outlook would then depend on whether Russia can leverage any remaining military resources (if no longer fighting in Ukraine) for other theatres, though it should be assumed that such **resources will be limited**, which will give Turkey even greater leverage in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus, relative to Scenario 1. That said, a weakening of Russia to the extent that it will need to withdraw from these theatres would be detrimental to Turkey's interests. Ankara prefers to deal with Russia through established deconfliction mechanisms over having to contend with Iran, or managing the consequences of instability and emboldened foreign policies of third actors that might ensue in the event of a full Russian retreat. Overall, Turkey's military leverage vis-à-vis Russia *will likely increase further relative to Scenario 1*, with leverage gains in specific AORs depending on the extent of Russia's retreat from Ukraine, and the conditions under which it materializes.

### Implications of Scenario 2 for U.S. and NATO strategic interests

Like in Scenario 1, Turkey will be less vulnerable to Russian economic and military leverage, which is welcome from a U.S. viewpoint, but could conduct more emboldened foreign policies in other AORs. In addition—and of concern to the United States—perceptions of declining Russian power across Turkey's extended neighborhood could also render Russian clients less reliant on, and pliant toward, Moscow while emboldening these clients' adversaries. Compared to Scenario 1, this development could be the source of more acute instability in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Regarding Syria, for instance, a substantially weakened Russia might intensify reliance on, and defense cooperation with Iran, likely prompting commensurate Israeli action. In Nagorno-Karabakh, a more emboldened Azerbaijan that views Russia as weak could more intensely test the staying power of Russian peacekeeping forces, putting Turkey in a bind. Conversely, perceptions of reduced Russian bandwidth could also further erode the appeal of Moscow as chief mediation platform for the Karabakh conflict and heighten a desire in Baku and Yerevan to turn to Brussels.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, because an “extreme” Scenario 2—a full Russian retreat from Ukraine leading to national humiliation and instability—would be detrimental to Turkish interests, there is a risk that Ankara might take steps in support of Russia to thwart such an outcome, once it assesses that the trajectory on the Ukraine battlefield points to a Russian defeat. Such steps could lead to friction with NATO allies.

52 Interview with Russian source in August 2022. In August 2022, and ahead of Armenian-Azerbaijani talks in both Moscow and Brussels, Russian commentators already noted that a desire in Baku and Yerevan to turn to “alternative platforms” (i.e., the EU) was partially driven by their disappointment with a lack of progress in the existing (Moscow-led) platform, as well as Armenia's hope for financial investments and economic help (which Russia is unlikely able to provide). “Pustit' Karabakh v Evropu,” (in Russian) *Kommersant*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5535391>.



### Scenario 3: “Russia Consolidates”

#### The Russia-Turkey relationship: interests, leverages, red lines

On September 30, following Russia’s conduct of sham referenda, President Putin announced the annexation of four Ukrainian regions—Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia—notwithstanding the fact that Russia’s military control over these regions remained partial, and notwithstanding international protestations (including from Turkey).<sup>53</sup> In the event that Russia consolidates further, i.e., makes additional territorial gains on Ukraine’s Black Sea coast and occupies it fully or partially, the implications for Turkey will depend on the permanence and scale of Russian advances. If Russia’s hold of territory on Ukraine’s coastline is temporary, to be leveraged in negotiations in a final peace settlement, its negative consequences could be mitigated. A permanent Russian occupation, however, especially one that were to include Odessa, would undermine the balance of power in the Black Sea region to Turkey’s detriment. It would cause, according to some Turkish interlocutors, a strategic reassessment among Turkey’s defense and security establishment. While some sources interviewed argued that such an “extreme” Scenario 3 would pose an existential threat to Turkey, others contended that Turkey will find novel ways to manage its balancing act with Russia, and even exploit new opportunities given its ability to leverage the Montreux Convention. Indeed, defense analysts note that Turkey’s recent efforts to enhance its naval capabilities—including in cross-domain drone warfare and ballistic missiles—have put the Turkish navy in an increasingly strong position vis-à-vis its Russian counterpart, which has displayed a lack of situational awareness capacities and inadequate interoperability with the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) in the Russian campaign against Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

In this scenario, Turkey’s unique role as an intermediary between the West and Russia may become yet more important. Should Ukraine, for instance, retain access to some of its port infrastructure, albeit in a limited way or under Russian control, Russia may approach Turkey to help facilitate exports of Ukrainian products. This could enhance alignment of both states’ interests and underscore Turkey’s centrality to the West and non-West alike. Further, Turkey might agree to deconfliction mechanisms with Russia in the Black Sea, building on their joint experience in Syria. Relative to Scenarios 1 and 2, Turkey’s economic and military leverage vis-à-vis Russia would decrease, given the balance-of-power implications of a Russian land grab in southern Ukraine. At the same time, Russia’s isolation from the West might reach its apex in Scenario 3, which could also afford Ankara opportunities, including as an intermediary for commerce from Ukraine’s occupied ports.

#### Impact of Scenario 3 on the different AORs

Of all scenarios analyzed, Scenario 3 would have the **most far-reaching implications for the Russia-Turkey balance of power in the Black Sea**. In the worst case, Ankara’s ability to conduct hydrocarbon exploration in the Black Sea might be diminished, resulting in greater dependence on

53 Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Press Release Regarding Russia’s Annexation of Some Regions of Ukraine,” September 30, 2022, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-300\\_-rusya-nin-ukrayna-nin-bazi-bolgelerini-ilhaki-hk.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-300_-rusya-nin-ukrayna-nin-bazi-bolgelerini-ilhaki-hk.en.mfa).

54 See: <https://twitter.com/EdamDefense/status/1589632223804002311>.

Russian gas. Russia might even demand free naval movement via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, pushing Turkey into a **selective implementation of the Montreux Convention**. Indeed, Russia's recently adopted naval doctrine, which also references the Black Sea and Sea of Azov (whose coastline Russia has already fully occupied) as "important areas" for the Russian navy, is viewed by some Turkish observers with great concern.<sup>55</sup> One former naval officer warns of a growing Russian deterrent power vis-à-vis Turkey, should Russia increase its position in the Black Sea, which could cause friction once "Turkey doesn't interpret the articles of the Montreux Convention as Russia interprets them."<sup>56</sup> While Turkey will therefore likely seek to uphold the integrity of the Convention at all cost, keeping NATO ships out in order not to antagonize Russia, other littoral states—mainly Romania and Bulgaria—will likely seek greater NATO presence in the Black Sea in light of Russian expansionism, which could generate tensions between them and Turkey.

**In other AORs, the picture is more equivocal.** Though Scenario 3 will produce a more confident Russia, it appears unlikely that Russian land grabs in southern Ukraine will free up significant military resources for Syria, Libya, or the South Caucasus. Ukrainians under occupation will likely mount resistance and insurgency for years to come, tying down Russian troops. It should therefore not be expected that Russia, even in Scenario 3, will enjoy the bandwidth to enhance its presence in other AORs. Turkey, meanwhile, might seek to compensate for its weaker position in the Black Sea by exercising its levers vis-à-vis Russia in other theatres more boldly.

### Implications of Scenario 3 for U.S. and NATO strategic interests

Though it would be more vulnerable to Russia compared to the other scenarios, two Turkish concerns will hamper Ankara moving decisively closer to NATO in Scenario 3: first, a fundamental distrust of the West and NATO, and in the prospect that Western states will back Turkey if it chooses to challenge Russia;<sup>57</sup> and second, a calculation that its continued balancing between NATO and Russia will generate higher Western attention to Turkey's security needs and demands. In short, Turkey will continue to need Russia both as "insurance" and as a "balancer". Even in the "extreme" Scenario 3—Russia's conversion of Ukraine into a landlocked country, which could even precipitate the collapse of the Ukrainian state and end Turkey's economic ties with Kyiv—Turkey will likely maintain a functional relationship with Russia, calculating that it cannot afford to rely only on NATO.

That said, the greater the manifestations of Russian expansionism in Scenario 3, the more likely it is that Turkey will seek some reassurance from the United States and NATO (short of permanent naval deployments into the Black Sea), for instance demanding anti-access and area denial (A2AD) support over its Black Sea coast or more frequent NATO maneuvers.<sup>58</sup> The extent to which Western powers will provide such reassurance will then likely shape Turkey's strategic calculus. Some sources interviewed warned that (1) should NATO fail to respond vigorously to Russian expansionism in

55 Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii "Ob utverzhdenii Morskoi doktriny Rossiiskoi Federatsii," (in Russian) July 31, 2022, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202207310001>.

56 Fatih Yurtsever, "Analysis: Great danger for Turkey lies hidden in the new Russian naval doctrine," *Turkish Minute*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/08/03/ey-lies-hidden-in-the-new-russian-naval-doctrine/>.

57 This distrust was fomented in the fall of 2015, when Turkey perceived NATO's support—after its shooting down of a Russian fighter jet, which had intruded into Turkish airspace—to be weak.

58 Interview with a Turkish source, July 2022.

Scenario 3, Turkey might even consider a strategy of nuclear hedging, and (2) any closer Turkish alignment with NATO in Scenario 3 would be compartmentalized to the Black Sea and not extend to other issues and areas.

Russia's occupation of Ukraine's Black Sea coast would have negative implications for a host of U.S. strategic interests, given the ramifications for global food security, the energy security of Black Sea littoral states, and demands among those states for greater reassurances (especially from Romania and Bulgaria). Russia's domination of the Black Sea could also pose risks to U.S. and NATO operations in the Middle East and Turkey's extended neighborhood in terms of restricted access, basing, and overflight.

## The Role of Third Actors

### China

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China is not expected to seek major inroads—beyond existing commercial opportunities in arms sales and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—into Turkey's extended neighborhood, west of Central Asia. A serious Chinese effort to exploit voids created by a retreating Russia would require the cultivation of relations, infrastructure and logistics, and there is little indication at present that China is prepared for such an effort. In addition, China cannot easily replace Russia as Turkey's trading partner, given the specific sectors in which Ankara and Moscow engage—natural gas, nuclear energy, and tourism—all while Turkish businesses look West rather than East for opportunities in other sectors. A Russian source closely studying China also contended that Beijing will be focused on its immediate neighborhood over the medium-term, since it calculates that its options to act on Taiwan will worsen over time. China might spend significant resources to prepare for a prospective war in the Taiwan Strait, meanwhile seeking to maintain its current presence in other parts of the world, rather than expanding it further.

### Iran

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Scenarios 1 and 2, which entail reduced Russian power projection in AORs beyond Ukraine, present several opportunities for Iran: Tehran will likely press for enhanced military-defense cooperation with Russia, and will have greater leverage in doing so, given Russia's own defense needs and limited opportunities for arms exports. Amid reporting that Iran is providing Russia with combat drones, for instance, Tehran might demand fighter aircraft, advanced air defense systems, or other previously-denied capabilities in return.<sup>59</sup> Iran and its proxies will also have greater room to maneuver in Syria and Central Asia, where Moscow might even explicitly welcome such a presence as a counterweight to Turkey. Yet, there will be challenges for Iran, too: a more emboldened Turkish foreign policy could threaten Iranian interests in Syria and, in particular, in the South Caucasus, where Tehran prefers

59 "Iran sends first shipment of drones to Russia for use in Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/29/iran-drones-russia-ukraine-war/>.

the status quo over an empowered Azerbaijan.<sup>60</sup> Scenario 3, meanwhile, might afford Tehran fewer operational benefits, especially if it produces a more confident or relaxed Russia, which might grant Iran less leeway to maneuver in Syria. Finally, the closer the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and Turkey align with the West, the more Russia might go “all in” with Iran, including in supporting malign Iranian activities in the region. In that context, some analysts warn that a Russia, with the wherewithal to implement its new naval doctrine, could also pursue closer maritime cooperation with Iran, including in the Persian Gulf.<sup>61</sup>

### “Black Swans”

**Russia uses a nuclear weapon** in Ukraine or against a NATO ally. This would upend Turkey’s balancing act, according to all sources interviewed. Turkey has refrained from commenting publicly on Russia’s nuclear saber-rattling in recent months, instead repeatedly offering itself as a mediator over access to Ukrainian NPPs narrowly, and the conflict more broadly. But in this extreme, “all bets are off” scenario of actual Russian nuclear use, Turkey would fully align behind NATO and its response.

**Putin leaves.** If a Russian leadership similar in ideology and orientation assumes power (which many Russia analysts assess as likely), and does so in an orderly process, no significant changes in Russia-Turkey relations are expected. There might be some initial adjustment period if the personal rapport between Presidents Erdogan and Putin is no longer a factor. Should a Russian leadership transition materialize through significant domestic turmoil—for instance in Scenario 2—Turkey’s response is difficult to predict and will likely depend on the scale and longevity of instability in Russia. According to one source, significant turmoil in Russia might cause Turkey to move decisively closer to the West. Others contended, however, that Ankara might take steps in support of Russia to thwart its decisive weakening—which would be at odds with the positions adopted by NATO allies.

**Russia fully mobilizes for war.** On September 21, Russia announced partial military mobilization for the war in Ukraine, which was declared over in late October. Further mobilization waves, however, remain conceivable. The Kremlin’s decision to call for full national mobilization would likely be aimed at preventing Scenario 2. Such a step would likely further erode Russia’s attractiveness as an economic partner to Turkey and would further erode Russia’s military leverage over Turkey in other AORs. In such a scenario, Russia might decide to bring military resources home from overseas before calling for full mobilization, putting Turkey in a stronger position in each AOR. That said, Russia’s further descent into a fully militarized, totalitarian society would also likely heighten Turkish threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia and might draw it closer to NATO.

**Erdogan leaves.** Should President Erdogan leave office through elections, an incoming government might take steps to eliminate problems afflicting the Turkish economy, including a sale of the S-400

60 A more belligerent Azerbaijan is of utmost concern to Tehran also due to the former’s defense cooperation with Israel. Iran’s recent hosting of a drone competition with Russia, Belarus and Armenia is further indicative of (1) potentially growing Russian-Iranian defense cooperation, and (2) prospects for greater tensions in the South Caucasus between Iran and Turkey. “Iran holds drone tournament with Russia, Belarus and Armenia,” *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/15/iran-hosts-drone-tournament-with-russia-belarus-and-armenia>.

61 Azizi, “Will Russia’s new naval doctrine transform cooperation with Iran?”

and a détente with Greece, in order to gain U.S. economic assistance and relief from Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions. Fundamentally, however, Turkey, even under new leadership, is unlikely to abandon its quest for "strategic autonomy," which also requires a functional relationship with Russia.<sup>62</sup> Disorderly regime change and civil war in Turkey, meanwhile, represent the only conceivable scenario—mentioned by U.S. sources interviewed—in which Incirlik Air Base would be at risk. Only one source mentioned the possibility of Russia coaxing the Turkish leadership into pushing the United States out of Incirlik Air Base (or severely limiting U.S. operations from the base), for instance in the context of an "extreme" Scenario 3.

62 According to a conversation with a senior Turkish opposition official, a new CHP-led government would live up more fully to Turkey's NATO obligations, resolve the S-400 dispute, and reduce Turkey's "asymmetric reliance" on Russia. More generally, it would: stop instrumentalizing foreign policy for domestic purposes, stop intervening in domestic issues of other states, refrain taking sides in disputes in the neighborhood, conduct a secular foreign policy, and "demilitarize" foreign policy, heightening the focus on diplomacy. However, such a government would *not* change Turkey's "balanced approach on the Russia-Ukraine war", since Turkey "has to be careful" vis-à-vis Russia, and would not supply weapons other than TB2 to Ukraine, nor join anti-Russian sanctions, since "the Turkish people do not support such steps."

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## Key Findings and Recommendations

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Overall, we conclude that Russia's war in Ukraine—short of extreme scenarios such as Russia's full occupation of Ukraine's Black Sea coast ("extreme" Scenario 3), or a Russian withdrawal resulting in domestic instability ("extreme" Scenario 2)—will likely enhance Turkey's leverage vis-à-vis both Russia *and* NATO, embolden Turkish foreign policy across issue areas, and reduce Russia's bandwidth for action in MENA and the South Caucasus, affording Turkey, Iran, and third actors greater room to maneuver.

### (1) Turkey's centrality to the pursuit of U.S. strategic interests across scenarios and AORs will grow.

This includes Turkey's centrality as: (1) an enabler of unified NATO strategy and policy vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine, (2) an interlocutor with a belligerent Russia (because Ankara can provide some "guardrails" in the event of a more erratic and aggressive Russian foreign policy), (3) a facilitator of Ukraine's commerce (especially in Scenarios 1 and 3), and (4) an actor enjoying enhanced room to maneuver in the MENA AORs, which has implications for U.S. strategic interests there. In recent years, Turkey has felt misunderstood, isolated, and undervalued as a U.S. ally and within NATO. Steps taken by the United States and NATO, either directly in response to Turkey's actions or to developments in MENA, undermined—in Ankara's view—its national interests within its broader neighborhood (Black Sea, Eastern and Southern Mediterranean) and damaged the perceived credibility of NATO's security guarantees. Mutual grievances in the U.S.-Turkish relationship were further amplified by President Erdogan's abrasive rhetoric and actions, as seen from Washington, particularly after the perceived reluctance of Western leaders to support President Erdogan during the 2016 coup attempt.

**Recommendation:** To overcome the resultant deep mistrust, and given Turkey's central role in achieving U.S. interests, the United States **needs to reassess its relationship** with Turkey, with the objective of restoring confidence in one another and moving to relations based on long-term interests. To achieve this, the United States and NATO should (1) strengthen Turkey's leverage and resilience against Russia, and do so in ways that (2) cater to Turkey's strengths and make it feel like a valued partner and ally to the United States and within NATO. Though fostering Turkey's self-perception as a valued partner might be difficult while President Erdogan remains in power, the United States should still try—given the costs of neglecting Turkey for U.S. long-term strategic interests in the scenarios analyzed, and with a view to preparing for the U.S.-Turkish relationship after President Erdogan's departure. DoD should take the mid- to long-term view to better manage the relationship with Turkey. **The proposed reassessment has four steps – the United States should:**

1. **Identify U.S. national security objectives in Turkey's extended neighborhood**—which straddles the three AORs analyzed—and develop a comprehensive strategy that treats Turkey's neighborhood as a single geostrategic space, taking into account the Russia-Turkey interplay. Organizational silos based on geography create blind spots that U.S. adversaries can exploit and accrue influence in.

2. **Map the degree to which Turkey's role** is vital (versus important or secondary) in enabling the United States in achieving its objectives in the three AORs. Such a mapping exercise should take into account areas where gaining Turkey's support requires altering the fundamental nature of the U.S.-Turkey relationship, versus where Turkey's transactional support is needed to ensure NATO's responsiveness vis-à-vis Russia, the pursuit of U.S. objectives in MENA, etc.<sup>63</sup>
3. Building on item 2 above, assess the costs and benefits of a **fundamental reset** versus a **transactional relationship** with Turkey. A fundamental reset would require difficult trade-offs for U.S. policy, including an end to U.S. support for the SDF in Syria and a recalibration of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Greece, as well as overcoming important lobbies in Washington. A more functional transactional relationship with Turkey, on the other hand, would also require some U.S. "gives and takes," for instance on weapons supplies or Turkey's counterterrorism sensitivities within NATO. Such a relationship would also require successful **compartmentalization** (rather than resolution) of chronic disagreements.
4. In pursuing item 3 above, accept the fundamental reality that **Turkey will continue to balance** the United States and Russia, but that specific irritants in the relationship might be resolved and that the execution of Turkish foreign policy might become less antagonistic after President Erdogan departs from power.

## (2) Turkey will not abandon NATO or Russia.

None of the scenarios or "black swans" analyzed—with the exception of Russia using nuclear weapons—anticipate Turkey breaking decisively with either NATO or Russia. Even in the "extreme" Scenario 3, Turkey will likely seek to maintain a functional relationship with Russia as both an "insurance" and as a "balancer." That said, manifestations of greater Russian belligerence will compel Turkey to look towards the United States and NATO for greater reassurance (short of permanent naval deployments into the Black Sea). Turkey's strategic calculus will likely be shaped by the extent to which Western powers will provide such reassurance. Scenario 3—while in principle the least desirable from a U.S./NATO standpoint—would afford the greatest opportunities for enhancing Turkey's solidarity with the alliance.

**Recommendation:** Since Turkey will abandon neither NATO nor Russia, the United States should **invest time and effort** into the U.S./NATO-Turkey relationship to make the Alliance Turkey's partner of choice, when and where possible. The United States should, in order of anticipated impact from high to low:

63 In this transactional approach, balancing Turkey's behavior against U.S. interests, the United States can leverage Turkey's actions to make or consolidate gains in its favor: Specifically, the United States benefits from Azerbaijan's resistance to Iran, from an end to any of the frozen conflicts in its extended neighborhood, which lessens Russia's influence, from international support for the UN-backed government in Libya, from continued opposition to Assad in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, from Turkey's assistance to refugees and control of migration to Europe, and from the continued transit of gas and oil to Europe through pipelines traversing Turkey. Further, sensible but rapid development of hydrocarbon deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean will mean less European dependence on Russia, and in the Horn of Africa, Turkish FDI would be preferable to Russian or Chinese investment.

- **Commend Turkey** more vocally in the North Atlantic Council for constructive action within NATO or for showing initiative on specific issues, such as its leadership of the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in 2021, or—in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine—implementing the Montreux Convention and hosting the Black Sea Grain Initiative Joint Coordination Centre (JCC).
- **Institute a senior U.S. official** with an understanding of Turkish culture to lead the interagency implementation of the comprehensive Turkey strategy. This official should have direct access to senior U.S. leadership (i.e., the White House and Congress) and authority to convene interagency deliberations. Provide this “ambassador-at-large” with an interagency secretariat, a budget, and dedicated intelligence community support.
- **Align DoD Policy, the Joint Staff, and Combatant Command** efforts to execute the comprehensive strategy. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, with the Joint Staff J5, should regularly convene their respective regional offices with the three geographic combatant commands (GCCs) (J3, J5, J9/JIATF) to assess implementation.
- Assign an active duty two-star flag officer in the U.S. Embassy in Ankara as a **Senior Defense Official/Defense Attaché** (SDO) to reinforce the apolitical nature and importance of the defense relationship. Continue to separate the functions of Defense Attaché and Chief, Office of Defense Cooperation from the SDO.
- Leverage the recently instituted **U.S.-Turkey Strategic Mechanism** as a platform for more regularized engagement.

### (3) In Scenario 3, Turkish vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia will increase in the Black Sea.

This will be the case even though Ankara will likely seek to mitigate them through creative steps such as deconflicting with Russia or leveraging the Montreux Convention. Failure on the part of the United States / NATO to mitigate Turkish vulnerabilities might (1) reinforce a sense in Ankara that Western security guarantees are weak; (2) heighten the risks of Turkey taking unilateral action at odds with the preferences of Black Sea littoral states Bulgaria and Romania, and (3) result in more aggressive Turkish actions in other AORs, which might lead to renewed instability there.

**Recommendation:** In light of anticipated **Turkish vulnerabilities in the Black Sea**, especially in Scenario 3, the United States should:

- Step up consultations, through NATO, with **Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania**, regarding their threat perceptions and specific security needs in each scenario (especially Scenario 3), to generate a timely assessment of what reassurances NATO is able to provide to whom and how to avoid potential friction between Black Sea littoral states.
- **Offer greater assurances to Turkey**, short of permanent military deployments to the Black Sea, for instance through more frequent U.S./NATO maneuvers and/or task forces moving in and out of the Black Sea, or offer to provide anti-ship missiles and A2AD cover for Turkey’s Black Sea coast.
- **Refrain from pressuring Turkey** to abrogate the Montreux Convention (because doing so may push Turkey closer to Russia).



**Recommendation:** The United States should **strengthen Turkey’s defense capabilities and equities by:**

- **Providing F-16s** (new, refurbished, or in-place upgrades). Address opposition in Congress, if needed, through briefings about the potential risks of Turkey pursuing further defense cooperation with Russia should the F-16 sale not be implemented.<sup>64</sup>
- **Providing Patriot missile batteries**, possibly via a NATO ally, if Turkey agrees to a resolution of the S-400 dispute (e.g., passing the system to a third country). Though Patriot systems are in short supply, and were previously rejected by President Erdogan, Turkey’s need and receptiveness for the missile batteries might increase, especially in Scenario 3.

**Recommendation: The United States should intensify U.S.-Turkish military-to-military engagement**, including in NATO training, exercises, and operations, and more actively involve Turkish assets in NATO activities. This would foster a Turkey that is both more capable and feels more secure. This could be achieved by the United States **resuming naval/port visits** (following the conclusion of an agreement on how to prevent and respond to hooding incidents<sup>65</sup>); **conducting joint exercises** with Turkey (and encourage joint Turkish-Greek participation in such exercises to showcase the ability of both NATO allies to work closely together in the Mediterranean); **establishing a joint NATO mine-clearance mission** for the Black Sea once hostilities in Ukraine have subsided sufficiently, possibly leveraging the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 (SNMCMG-2)<sup>66</sup>; **returning Turkish officers** (and troops) to their **liaison role** with U.S. forces in the region; **highlighting Turkey’s contribution to NATO battlegroups** (BGs); soliciting greater Turkish contributions to the BGs in Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia,<sup>67</sup> and **enhancing Turkish capabilities through education, investment, and training, including through the NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Centre (NMIOTC)**.<sup>68</sup>

#### (4) Turkey’s extended neighborhood will become less stable.

Across the scenarios analyzed, Russia’s military bandwidth for AORs other than the Black Sea will likely be reduced, whether because it has committed its troops to Ukraine (Scenarios 1 and 3) or

64 In mid-October 2022, the Turkish daily *Hürriyet* reported that two conditions on the F-16 sale have been removed from the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) bill’s U.S. Senate version. See: “Two conditions on F-16 sales to Türkiye removed from US bill,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/two-conditions-on-f-16-sales-to-turkiye-removed-from-us-bill-177637>.

65 The United States stopped naval and port visits to Turkey after an incident in 2021 in which Turkish protestors put a hood over the head of a visiting U.S. navy civilian employee. “Turkey detains 17 people over protest against U.S. Navy personnel in Istanbul,” *Reuters*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-detains-17-people-over-protest-against-us-navy-personnel-istanbul-2021-11-03/>.

66 According to former Turkish naval officer Fatih Yurtsever, there is no legal impediment to using SNMCMG-2 under the Montreux Convention. Fatih Yurtsever, “Analysis: Can Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 enter the Black Sea to clear floating mines?” *Turkish Minute*, April 14, 2022, <https://turkishminute.com/2022/04/14/analysis-can-standing-nato-mine-countermeasures-group-2-enter-the-black-sea-to-clear-floating-mines/>.

67 Four new battlegroups (in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia) are currently being set up and integrated into NATO’s command structure. Turkey is in the Battlegroup in Hungary: Host nation: Hungary; Framework nation: Hungary; Contributing nations: Croatia, Türkiye and the United States.

68 NMIOTC is commanded by Commodore GRC(N) (a Greek), while Deputy COM duties have been assumed by a Turkish Navy Captain. See: <https://nmiotc.nato.int/>.

its military has been significantly weakened (Scenario 2). This state of affairs will likely invite more emboldened action by Turkey, Iran, and potentially other third actors, which could have negative ripple effects for U.S. interests in Syria, Iraq, and the South Caucasus. From a U.S. perspective, much will depend on whether the United States can encourage Turkey to provide a stabilizing presence in lieu of Russia. The instability emanating from the war in Ukraine into Turkey's extended neighborhood will also heighten threats related to proliferation, migration, and border security, and Turkey will be pivotal to assist the United States in addressing those.

**Recommendation:** The United States should **ensure its continued diplomatic bandwidth** for the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, especially attentiveness to the Russia-Turkey interplay, and ensure that active U.S.-led diplomacy mitigates prospects for heightened instability on the back of the Russia-Ukraine war. The recent appointment of Ambassador Philip Reeker as Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations and Minsk Group Co-Chair is a welcome step in that regard.

**Recommendation:** The United States should **more actively assist Turkey** in pursuing those **strategic goals in MENA** that do not conflict with U.S. interests, for instance supporting Turkey's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, or affording Turkey leadership opportunities in areas of the three AORs where other NATO allies show reluctance (Eritrea, Somaliland). In these areas, the United States should consider **increasing intelligence sharing** to a level that enables Turkey to advance U.S. objectives.

**Recommendation:** The United States should **improve Turkish counterterrorism** capability and capacity by enhancing Turkey's relationship with the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

**Recommendation:** **The United States should initiate specific measures and cooperative projects** to strengthen the U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship and ensure Turkey's ability and readiness to support the United States' counter-weapons of mass destruction (WMD) mission set:

- **Establish a joint U.S.-Turkey(-Qatar) working group** following the FIFA World Cup in October 2022 to consult Turkey on lessons learned from its experience in advising the Qatari government on preventing chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN)-related incidents during the event.<sup>69</sup>
- Leverage Turkey's recent efforts to mitigate tensions around Zaporizhzhia NPP to establish a **Crisis Prevention Working Group for Ukrainian NPPs**. The working group could include Ukraine, Turkey, and potentially other NATO allies.
- **Enhance Turkish CBRN-related defense capabilities**, including resilience at airports, seaports, and of frontline soldiers, either bilaterally<sup>70</sup> or within NATO.

69 "Turkey to take on biological and chemical threats at Qatar's World Cup," *Doha News*, July 27, 2022, <https://dohanews.co/turkey-to-take-on-biological-and-chemical-threats-at-qatars-world-cup/>.

70 Stopping CBRN proliferation by enhancing Turkish capabilities requires close DoD collaboration with the FBI, CBP, the U.S. Treasury, and the U.S. Department of Justice while coordinating with the U.S. Department of State to leverage OSCE activities and OSCE-contributing nations. EUCOM J9 and the Joint Interagency Countertrafficking Center employ these representatives who work together toward this end with military intelligence and financial support from EUCOM. Note, in the past the FBI enjoyed a close and highly productive relationship with the Turkish National Police.



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