



## NATO's Southern Flank: The Evolution of Türkiye's Strategic Role and Its Implications for Regional Security

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### Abstract

This article delves into the progressive development of Türkiye's strategic function within NATO, and what it signifies for regional security along the Alliance's Southern Flank. Türkiye, as a crucial NATO member since 1952, has steadfastly assumed a considerable part in the organization's collective defense, thereby bolstering the stability of the region. The article offers a historical review of Türkiye's involvement in NATO, tracking its journey from joining the Alliance during the initial Cold War years to navigating the more intricate security milieu of the post-Cold War era. The focus then shifts to the geopolitical challenges faced by NATO on its Southern Flank, particularly in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea region. Within this context, the article analyzes Türkiye's evolving strategic role, including its military capabilities and growing defense industry, diplomacy, and soft power initiatives, as well as its efforts to balance relations with NATO, Russia, and other regional actors. The article also explores Türkiye's strategic decision to acquire the Russian S-400 missile defense system, a move that underscores Türkiye's commitment to diversifying its defense capabilities and enhancing its national security, while also navigating the complex dynamics of international alliances and NATO's evolving security landscape. Subsequently, it discusses the possible advantages and hurdles that could arise from Türkiye's dynamic strategic role in regional security and on NATO's Southern Flank. Key topics addressed include the reinforcement of NATO's defense capabilities, the enhancement of regional security cooperation, and potential strains within the Alliance. The piece wraps up with an evaluation of future prospects for Türkiye's strategic function in NATO and the implications for regional security. This underlines the significance of maintaining a united and adaptable NATO that can adeptly respond to the evolving security challenges in the region.

**Keywords:** Black Sea Region, Eastern Mediterranean, Geopolitical Challenges, NATO's Southern Flank, Regional Security, Türkiye's Strategic Role.

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## NATO'nun Güney Kanadı: Türkiye'nin Stratejik Rolünün Evrimi ve Bölgesel Güvenlik Üzerine Etkileri

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### Öz

Bu makale, Türkiye'nin NATO içindeki stratejik rolünün evrimini ve bu rolün İttifak'ın Güney Kanadı'ndaki bölgesel güvenliğe etkilerini incelemektedir. 1952'den bu yana kritik bir NATO üyesi olan Türkiye, örgütün kolektif savunmasında önemli bir rol oynayarak bölgesel istikrarı güçlendirmiştir. Makale Türkiye'nin, NATO'ya katıldığı Soğuk Savaşın ilk yıllarından, Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemin daha karmaşık güvenlik ortamına dek süregelen yolculuğunu takip ederek Türkiye'nin NATO'daki rolüne tarihsel bir bakış sunmaktadır. Ayrıca, NATO'nun Güney Kanadı'nda, özellikle Ortadoğu, Doğu Akdeniz ve Karadeniz bölgelerindeki jeopolitik zorluklar üzerine odaklanılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye'nin artan stratejik önemi, askeri kapasitesi, genişleyen savunma sanayi, diplomasi ve yumuşak güç stratejileri ile NATO, Rusya ve diğer bölgesel aktörlerle olan ilişkilerinin dengelenmesi analiz edilmektedir. Makale, Türkiye'nin Rus S-400 füze savunma sistemlerinin temini ve bu durumun NATO'nun birliği ve etkinliği üzerindeki etkilerini de değerlendirmektedir. Ayrıca, Türkiye'nin bölgesel güvenlikte ve NATO'nun Güney Kanadı'nda üstlenebileceği dinamik stratejik rolün avantajları ve karşılaşılabilecek engeller tartışılmaktadır. Ele alınan başlıca konular arasında NATO'nun savunma yeteneklerinin güçlendirilmesi, bölgesel güvenlik iş birliğinin artırılması ve İttifak içindeki potansiyel gerilimler yer almaktadır. Makale, bölgedeki güvenlik zorluklarına etkin bir şekilde yanıt verebilen uyumlu ve birleşik bir NATO'nun önemini vurgulandığı, Türkiye'nin NATO içindeki stratejik rolünün geleceğe yönelik beklentilerine ve bölgesel güvenlik üzerindeki etkilerine dair değerlendirmelerle sonlanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** NATO'nun Güney Kanadı, Türkiye'nin Stratejik Rolü, Bölgesel Güvenlik, Orta Doğu, Doğu Akdeniz, Karadeniz.

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## Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949, has been a cornerstone of transatlantic security cooperation, aimed at safeguarding the freedom and security of its member states (Kaplan, 2004, p. 59). NATO's Southern Flank, encompassing the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Black Sea regions, has long been of strategic importance to the Alliance due to its proximity to volatile regions and potential threats (Lesser, 2016, p. 3). In this complex security landscape, Türkiye, a NATO member since 1952, has played a pivotal role in maintaining regional stability and contributing to the collective defense capabilities of the organization (Cook & Vale, 2012, p. 2).

The importance of Türkiye's strategic position within NATO has grown as the Alliance has confronted an array of security threats on its Southern Flank. Given Türkiye's geographical location at the junction of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, it possesses a unique perspective and sways in the region (Larrabee, 2010, p. 94). Consequently, Türkiye's participation in NATO's Southern Flank has grown progressively essential to the Alliance's strategies to handle security threats and preserve regional stability.

This article employs a multi-disciplinary methodological approach to critically examine Türkiye's evolving strategic role within NATO and its implications for regional security, particularly on the Alliance's Southern Flank. Anchored within the context of international relations theory, the study begins by conducting a historical analysis of Türkiye's involvement in NATO from its Cold War participation to its contributions in the complex post-Cold War security landscape. The paper then transitions to a focused investigation of NATO's geopolitical challenges on its Southern Flank—including issues in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea region—evaluating Türkiye's increasingly dynamic role in addressing these concerns. In doing so, the article aims to fill a gap in existing NATO studies by offering nuanced insights into the potential benefits and challenges that Türkiye's changing strategic position poses for regional security and NATO's Southern Flank.

In this study, we adopt a multi-theoretical approach, combining elements of Realism and Constructivism, to explore Türkiye's evolving strategic role on NATO's southern flank. Drawing from classical Realism, we consider Türkiye as a rational actor, assessing the balance of threats and opportunities in its immediate neighborhood and acting in its national interest. The emphasis on Türkiye's military capabilities, defense industry, and strategic positioning reflects this realist framework.

However, recognizing that states do not operate in a vacuum, we also incorporate elements of Constructivism to understand how Türkiye's diplomatic initiatives and engagement with regional actors shape and are shaped by broader norms, identities, and interests. Notably, we refer to works by Kenneth Waltz and Alexander Wendt as foundational theories that inform our analysis. The study aims to contribute to the existing literature by providing a nuanced understanding of Türkiye's multifaceted roles and responsibilities within the NATO alliance. Our analytical framework allows us to consider not just what Türkiye brings to the table in terms of military capabilities, but also how it navigates the complexities of internal and external tensions within NATO, thereby affecting the alliance's overall cohesion and effectiveness.

## 1. Historical Overview of Türkiye's Role in NATO

### 1.1. Türkiye's Accession to NATO: Reasons for Joining and Early Contributions

Türkiye's accession to NATO in 1952 was primarily driven by its desire for security guarantees in the face of the emerging Soviet threat and the potential spread of communism in the region (Gordon, 2010, p. 97). The Truman Doctrine of 1947, which aimed to contain the spread of communism by providing economic and military assistance to Greece and Türkiye, laid the groundwork for Türkiye's eventual membership in the Alliance (Sayari, 2000, p. 45). Furthermore, Türkiye sought to strengthen its ties with the Western world and modernize its economy and military capabilities through NATO membership (Robins, 2003, p. 63).

Following World War II, Türkiye was left in a delicate geopolitical situation. With the Soviet Union imposing territorial claims on Türkiye, including the eastern provinces and the control over the Turkish Straits, Turkish leaders perceived the necessity of aligning with Western powers to counter the Soviet menace (Larrabee, 2010, p. 95). Becoming part of NATO bestowed a sense of security upon Türkiye, safeguarding its territorial wholeness and sovereignty, while fostering its aspirations for modernization and amalgamation with the Western bloc (Aydin, 2005, p. 24).

Upon their integration into NATO, Türkiye provided considerable support to the Alliance's defense facilities and strategy, specifically in the context of the Cold War. Its strategically beneficial geographic position, linking Europe and Asia while neighboring the Soviet Union, enabled NATO to form a powerful presence in the area (Larrabee, 2010, p. 95). Türkiye was home to various NATO military bases, encompassing airfields, radar systems, and missile defense installations, enhancing the Alliance's power to dissuade any potential aggression from the Soviet Union (Gordon, 2010, p. 98). In addition, the sizable Turkish military force, ranking second only to the United States in NATO, was an integral part of the Alliance's collective defense stance (Sayari, 2000, p. 46).

Türkiye's preliminary contributions to NATO reached beyond its military resources. In the initial Cold War years, Türkiye was actively involved in NATO's political and military policy-making processes and endorsed NATO's initiative to inhibit communism in the region (Aydin, 2005, p. 25). Moreover, Türkiye functioned as an essential player in regional diplomacy, fostering cooperation between NATO and its Middle Eastern partners and advancing stability in the wider Mediterranean region (Sayari, 2000, p. 48).

### 1.2. The Cold War Era: The Strategic Significance of Türkiye and The Role of Türkiye in Deterring the Soviet Union

During the Cold War, Türkiye's strategic significance within NATO was primarily derived from its geographic location at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, which made it a crucial bulwark against Soviet expansionism (Gordon, 2010, p. 99; Larrabee, 2010, p. 96). The country's proximity to the Soviet Union, control over the Turkish Straits (connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean), and the border with the Middle East allowed NATO to establish a forward defense posture and project power in the region (Kuniholm, 1991, p. 36).

Türkiye's strategic role was significantly enhanced by its geographical position near the resource-rich Middle East and key transportation routes, which were crucial for NATO

in securing energy resources and controlling pivotal regional passageways (Sayari, 2000, p. 48). This aspect solidified Türkiye as a vital NATO partner, acting as a regional influencer and reinforcing the Alliance's strategy of deterrence (Aydin, 2005, p. 27). Beyond its geographic significance, Türkiye's adherence to secularism and democracy also established it as a key NATO ally, especially during the Cold War (Kaplan, 2004, p. 60). Its secular and democratic framework not only set a precedence but also showcased the possibility of a predominantly Muslim country successfully integrating with Western ideals and pursuing modernization (Kuniholm, 1991, p. 38).

Türkiye's role in deterring the Soviet Union during the Cold War was multifaceted, encompassing military, political, and diplomatic dimensions. Militarily, Türkiye's large and capable armed forces were a vital component of NATO's collective defense strategy, acting as a deterrent against potential Soviet aggression (Sayari, 2000, p. 46). Moreover, the presence of NATO military installations on Turkish soil, including air bases, missile sites, and radar stations, significantly enhanced the Alliance's early warning and surveillance capabilities, as well as its ability to project power in the region (Gordon, 2010, p. 100; Larrabee, 2010, p. 98).

Politically, Türkiye's membership in NATO signaled to the Soviet Union and other communist states that the Alliance was committed to protecting its members' territorial integrity and sovereignty, thereby creating a powerful deterrent against potential aggression (Larrabee, 2010, p. 97). Türkiye also played an essential role in NATO's efforts to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East, working closely with the United States and other NATO partners to maintain regional stability and limit the spread of communism (Robins, 2003, p. 66; Kaplan, 2004, p. 61).

In the diplomatic sphere, Türkiye facilitated the curbing of Soviet influence through the nurturing of strong relations with adjacent nations and fostering regional collaboration (Aydin, 2005, p. 29). This incorporated endeavors to act as a mediator in disputes, encouraging discourse among regional players, and active involvement in a range of regional entities and initiatives focused on boosting security cooperation in the Mediterranean and Middle East (Sayari, 2000, p. 49; Lesser, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, Türkiye initiated vibrant diplomacy with nations in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, aiming to consolidate relationships with these countries and aid their integration into the Western security framework (Kuniholm, 1991, p. 40). By forging bonds with states that were non-aligned and non-communist, Türkiye assisted in broadening NATO's sphere of influence and reducing the potential impact of Soviet-affiliated states in the area (Kaplan, 2004, p. 62).

Lastly, Türkiye's diplomatic endeavors also incorporated direct engagement with the Soviet Union. Throughout the duration of the Cold War, Türkiye skillfully navigated its obligations to NATO and its aspirations to steer clear of direct confrontations with the Soviet Union. This intricate balancing maneuver was noticeable in its quest for economic and cultural interaction with the Soviet Union, actions which served to diminish hostilities and encourage discourse between both nations (Lesser, 2016, p. 6). In essence, Türkiye's strategic importance during the Cold War era was predominantly anchored in its geographical positioning, military strength, and political synergy with the West. Its role in countering the Soviet Union spanned military, political, and diplomatic facets, thus rendering it an indispensable partner for NATO in confining Soviet influence and fostering regional stability.

### 1.3. Post-Cold War Era: Türkiye's Evolving Role within NATO

Upon the conclusion of the Cold War, NATO experienced a significant metamorphosis as it adjusted to the shifting global security landscape. The Alliance transitioned its emphasis from combating the Soviet menace to handling new security predicaments, including terrorism, state failure, and regional disputes (Yost, 2011, p. 12). As a result, Türkiye's part in NATO also adapted as the nation acclimated to the fresh strategic context (Kirişci, 2012, p. 34).

In the post-Cold War era, Türkiye shifted its focus towards regional stability and economic integration with Europe (Aydin, 2005, p. 33). Its rapport with neighboring countries, such as Russia, Iran, and Syria, became increasingly significant as it aimed to harmonize its NATO obligations with its regional interests (Lesser, 2016, p. 8). Furthermore, Türkiye aimed to reinforce its candidacy for European Union (EU) membership, which impacted its foreign policy goals and its strategy toward regional security (Kirişci, 2012, p. 36). In this post-Cold War era, Türkiye's part within NATO has transformed to mirror the changing priorities of the Alliance and the nation's own strategic interests. While Türkiye's strategic geography and military capabilities remain vital assets for NATO, its contributions to the Alliance have expanded to cover a broader range of security challenges (Yost, 2011, p. 14). Türkiye has been instrumental in various NATO-led operations, including peacekeeping in the Balkans, participating in the ISAF in Afghanistan, and engaging in counter-terrorism as part of the Global Coalition against DAESH (Lesser, 2016, p. 9; Kirişci, 2012, p. 38). These activities highlight Türkiye's dedication to tackling new security challenges and its commitment to NATO's wider goals. Additionally, Türkiye has been pivotal in fostering NATO's dialogue and collaboration with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, taking part in initiatives like the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative to boost security cooperation and promote regional stability (Yost, 2011, p. 15).

Türkiye has been a vital and steadfast member of NATO, consistently adapting its role within the Alliance to meet evolving global and regional challenges. While navigating its unique geopolitical position, Türkiye has skillfully balanced its alliance commitments with its domestic and regional priorities. This balance is evident in its approach to complex issues such as the Syrian conflict, migration, and its security needs, exemplified by the procurement of the Russian S-400 missile defense system (Lesser, 2016, p. 10; Kirişci, 2012, p. 39). These decisions reflect Türkiye's commitment to maintaining robust national defense in a challenging regional context. The strategic significance of Türkiye's geographic position and its crucial role in NATO's defense strategy, particularly since the end of the Cold War, is often underappreciated.

Türkiye's unique role and significant contributions to NATO's collective security and strategic goals are undeniable, despite varying perspectives within the Alliance. Türkiye's efforts in enhancing regional stability and addressing security challenges are fundamental, reinforcing its status as a key member of NATO. This narrative highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing Türkiye's contributions to the Alliance's objectives.

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## 2. Geopolitical Challenges on NATO's Southern Flank

### 2.1. The Middle East: Türkiye's Role in Regional Security

Türkiye takes on a substantial part in regional security within the Middle East, employing its strategic geographical location, military prowess, and diplomatic initiatives to tackle an array of security challenges (Yost, 2011, p. 17). Being a NATO member with robust connections to both Europe and the Middle East, Türkiye finds itself in a unique position to enable conversation and collaboration between the Alliance and regional players (Aydin, 2005, p. 37). This is evidenced by its participation in initiatives such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which aim to enhance security cooperation and promote regional stability (Kirişçi, 2012, p. 38).

Türkiye has demonstrated its commitment to the broader objectives of NATO through active participation in military operations and missions throughout the Middle East. Notable among these efforts is its contribution to the Global Coalition to Defeat DAESH, along with peacekeeping endeavors in Lebanon and Iraq (Lesser, 2016, p. 9; Stein, 2014, p. 82). Alongside these deployments, Türkiye has made strides to fortify its defense capabilities, exemplified by its deepening military cooperation with regional allies. Activities of joint military training, collaboration in the defense industry, and intelligence exchange have been undertaken with countries such as Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Özcan & Özdamar, 2018, p. 43).

Türkiye has been a steadfast defender of regional security, even as it navigates complex relationships with neighboring powers like Iran, Russia, and Syria. These relationships, while sometimes presenting challenges to its NATO commitments, also demonstrate Türkiye's pivotal role in addressing regional issues and promoting stability (Lesser, 2016, p. 10). Türkiye's strategic position has been crucial in managing the security challenges on NATO's southern border, especially the Syrian conflict, which has had far-reaching implications for both Türkiye and the broader Middle East (Stein, 2014, p. 80). Sharing a border with Syria, Türkiye has been at the forefront of responding to the conflict. The country has not only faced increased regional instability but has also shown tremendous humanitarian commitment by hosting a massive influx of refugees (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016, p. 60). This response underscores Türkiye's significant contribution to regional peace and stability, highlighting its role as a key player in addressing some of the most pressing security challenges in the region.

Türkiye's response to the Syrian conflict has been multifaceted, encompassing diplomatic, humanitarian, and military dimensions. Diplomatically, Türkiye has been a key player in efforts to reach a political solution to the conflict, participating in international negotiations and supporting the Syrian opposition (Kirişçi, 2012, p. 40). Additionally, Türkiye has provided substantial humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees, hosting over 3.6 million displaced persons and investing billions of dollars in aid and infrastructure projects (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016, p. 61).

Militarily, Türkiye has taken an active role in addressing the security threats emanating from the Syrian conflict. It has launched numerous military operations in northern Syria targeting both the terrorist organization DAESH and the YPG, the Syrian extension of the PKK terrorist organization. These operations have aimed to establish a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border, enhance border security, and create conditions for the safe return of Syrian refugees (Özcan & Özdamar, 2018, p. 46).

Nonetheless, some NATO allies, including the United States, have backed the YPG in the war against DAESH, whilst Türkiye has steadfastly resisted any collaboration with the faction (Özcan & Özdamar, 2018, p. 47). Even amidst such discord, Türkiye's involvement in managing the Syrian conflict and the refugee situation is instrumental for the security of NATO's southern periphery. Being a state at the forefront, Türkiye has significantly aided regional security by mitigating the collateral damage of the conflict, supplying humanitarian assistance, and partaking in global initiatives to alleviate the crisis (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016, p. 63).

In summary, Türkiye's participation in the Middle East has been pivotal in addressing geopolitical trials on NATO's southern boundary. Its endeavors to foster regional stability, address the Syrian unrest, and oversee the refugee situation have been valuable contributions to the Alliance's goals. However, the intricate dynamics of the Middle East and the ever-evolving regional security challenges will persistently influence Türkiye's role within NATO and its rapport with its allies.

## **2.2. The Eastern Mediterranean: Energy Resources and Disputes**

The unearthing of considerable energy assets in the Eastern Mediterranean has infused a fresh component into the region's geopolitical structure (Tsakiris, 2018, p. 9). The presence of natural gas stockpiles in the Levant Basin and the Nile Delta carries the capability to reshape the economic frameworks of nations situated along the Eastern Mediterranean, encompassing Türkiye, Greece, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt (EIA, 2021, p. 12). However, the extraction of these assets has simultaneously incited conflicts over sea boundaries and exclusive economic zones (EEZs), heightening strains amongst adjacent nations (Tsakiris, 2018, p. 10).

Türkiye's assertive policy in energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean is a strategic initiative to safeguard its national interests and address the perceived inequities in the distribution of regional resources (Aykan, 2019, p. 96). While its comprehensive seismic surveys and drilling operations in disputed waters have stirred responses from Greece, the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus, and the EU, these actions reflect Türkiye's commitment to securing a fair share in the region's energy potential (Birnbaum, 2020, p. 4). The historical complexities in Türkiye-Greece relations, including territorial and minority rights issues, are a backdrop against which Türkiye is navigating to promote stability and dialogue (Kotzias, 2015, p. 31). NATO's involvement, including the establishment of a military deconfliction mechanism by Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in September 2020, underscores the importance of diplomatic engagement and conflict prevention between its members, showcasing Türkiye's role in fostering constructive dialogue in the region (NATO, 2020).

However, NATO's role in resolving the underlying disputes between Türkiye and Greece

is limited, as the Alliance is primarily focused on maintaining collective security and avoiding intra-alliance conflicts (Tagliapietra & Zachmann, 2020, p. 16). Broader political and diplomatic efforts are required to address the complex challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the involvement of the United Nations and the European Union (Kotzias, 2015, p. 34).

In conclusion, the Eastern Mediterranean has emerged as a critical geopolitical flashpoint on NATO's southern flank, with energy resource disputes and strained Türkiye-Greece relations posing significant challenges to regional stability. NATO has taken steps to de-escalate tensions and prevent conflict between its members, but a comprehensive resolution of the underlying disputes will require concerted diplomatic efforts from all involved parties.

### **2.3. The Black Sea Region: Russia's War in Ukraine and Türkiye's Role from a NATO Perspective**

Taking the position as the singular NATO nation possessing direct connectivity to the Black Sea, Türkiye holds a crucial role in preserving regional equilibrium and countering the Russian sway (Tsereteli, 2018, p. 12). Its strategic geographical advantage, potent military strength, and historical connections with the region place it as a vital player in NATO's endeavors to tackle the security dilemmas in the Black Sea (Götz, 2018, p. 5). Türkiye has been an active participant in initiatives and exercises spearheaded by NATO in the Black Sea, like Sea Breeze, Sea Shield, and BALTOPS, which strive to bolster the Alliance's preparedness and collaboration in the area (Tsereteli, 2018, p. 13). Furthermore, Türkiye has embarked on a bilateral military collaboration with Black Sea nations, inclusive of joint drills, training programs, and defense industry alliances (Mankoff, 2019, p. 45).

Nevertheless, Türkiye's function within the Black Sea territory is not devoid of its intricacies. Its association with Russia is characterized by a blend of cooperation and rivalry, with Ankara striving to harmonize its NATO responsibilities with its economic and security considerations (Socor, 2016, p. 2). The dynamics of the Turkish-Russian connection have repercussions for wider regional security, as Türkiye maneuvers its stance between NATO and Moscow (Götz, 2018, p. 6). On the date of February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a comprehensive invasion of Ukraine. This act of aggression has been met with extensive international disapproval, including from members of NATO. Türkiye, as part of NATO, has assumed a nuanced role in this dispute. While Türkiye has criticized the invasion and provided Ukraine with humanitarian aid, it concurrently sought to maintain diplomatic ties with Russia, positioning itself as a potential intermediary in facilitating dialogue between the two countries (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, p. 1-4).

Türkiye's balanced approach in handling regional conflicts exemplifies its strategic position as a NATO member with significant ties to Russia. This approach, highlighting Türkiye's influence in the Black Sea region and its adept handling of relations with Russia, reflects a strategically layered stance (The Economist, 2022, p. 33). Türkiye's abstention from certain UN resolutions against Russia, while scrutinized by some NATO allies, actually represents its commitment to diplomatic engagement with all involved parties. This decision emphasizes Türkiye's belief in the necessity of dialogue with Russia to find peaceful solutions, showcasing its role as a peace-promoting actor in the region (The New York Times, 2022).

To sum up, the Black Sea territory introduces considerable geopolitical hurdles on NATO's southern edge, with the weight of Russia's sway and the continuing conflict in Ukraine creating threats to the regional equilibrium. The part Türkiye plays in preserving stability in the Black Sea is pivotal, given its strategic positioning and military proficiency form the backbone of NATO's initiatives to offset Russia's dominance. The part Türkiye has enacted in this dispute has garnered commendation from some quarters while encountering censure from others. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that Türkiye is a crucial participant in the dispute, and its role will be decisive in shaping the resolution of the war.

### 3. Türkiye's Evolving Strategic Role

#### 3.1. Military Capabilities and Defense Industry: Contribution to NATO's Defense Capabilities

In recent times, Türkiye has seen considerable advancement in crafting its own defense technologies, fueled by an aspiration to diminish reliance on foreign suppliers and bolster its military prowess (Lindenstrauss & Kaya, 2018, p. 80). The Turkish defense sector has experienced rapid growth, investing in innovation and research, along with forming tactical alliances with international defense corporations (Yayla, 2019, p. 4). Noteworthy accomplishments of Türkiye's defense sector include the crafting of the T129 ATAK helicopter, the HİSAR air defense system, the ANKA and Bayraktar TB2 unmanned airborne vehicles (UAVs), and the evolution of the ALTAY primary combat tank (Çelikpala, 2020, p. 12). These homegrown systems have not merely boosted Türkiye's military competence, but have also showcased the nation's potential as a substantial contender in the global defense industry (Erdi, 2017, p. 18).

The progress Türkiye has made in the realm of defense technologies and military abilities has enhanced NATO's comprehensive defense capacities. As a constituent of the Alliance, Türkiye has taken part in a myriad of NATO missions and operations, including the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean, and the NATO Response Force (NRF) (NATO, 2021). The mobilization of Türkiye's homegrown defense systems has enriched the Alliance's capacities in several essential areas. For instance, the Bayraktar TB2 UAVs have been deployed in a range of NATO drills and missions, offering invaluable reconnaissance and surveillance competencies (Yayla, 2019, p. 6). Likewise, Türkiye's contributions to the NATO Ballistic Missile Defense system, including the mobilization of its HİSAR air defense mechanism, have fortified the Alliance's capacity to counteract missile threats (Lindenstrauss & Kaya, 2018, p. 82).

Furthermore, the expansion of Türkiye's defense sector holds the potential to bolster the interoperability of NATO forces by providing a diverse array of equipment and technologies that can be incorporated with the systems of other NATO member nations (Çelikpala, 2020, p. 14). This interoperability is fundamental for ensuring the efficacy of the Alliance's military operations and its readiness to counter emerging security concerns (Erdi, 2017, p. 20).

In conclusion, Türkiye's evolving strategic role in the defense sector significantly enhances NATO's overall defense capabilities. This development can be analyzed through the lenses of prominent international relations theorists. Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, 1979), a neorealist, would likely view Türkiye's advancement in homegrown defense

technologies as a manifestation of the balance of power theory. In Waltz's perspective, states seek to maintain equilibrium in the international system, and Türkiye's bolstered military capabilities contribute to this balance within NATO, a collective security arrangement. This enhancement in capabilities does not only elevate Türkiye's stature but also serves as a stabilizing factor in the geopolitical landscape, in line with neorealist thought.

Furthermore, Alexander Wendt's constructivist approach (Wendt, 1992) offers a different angle. Wendt would argue that the evolution of Türkiye's defense industry and its integration into NATO's framework reshapes identities and interests through social interactions. As Türkiye's defense capabilities grow, its identity as a key NATO ally is solidified, influencing the perceptions and expectations of other member states. This evolution in identity and role within NATO is not just a reflection of material capabilities but also of shared values, norms, and mutual understanding fostered through the Alliance.

These theoretical perspectives enrich our understanding of the significance of Türkiye's growing defense capabilities. While Waltz's neorealism highlights the balancing aspect in the international system, Wendt's constructivism underscores the transformation in identities and inter-state relations. Together, they provide a comprehensive view of how Türkiye's advancements reinforce NATO's collective strength and preparedness to address evolving security threats. This dual analysis not only underscores the multifaceted impact of Türkiye's strategic role but also highlights the dynamic nature of international relations and alliance politics.

### **3.2. Diplomacy and Soft Power: Türkiye's Mediation Efforts in Regional Conflicts**

Türkiye has increasingly adopted an active diplomatic role in the resolution of regional conflicts, leveraging its historical connections and geographical position to serve as a mediator in various disputes (Öniş, 2011, p. 30). Türkiye's mediation efforts have included engagement in the Israel-Syria indirect peace talks in 2008, involvement in the reconciliation process between the Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas, and facilitation of the Iran nuclear negotiations (Keyman, 2016, p. 208). Moreover, Türkiye has sought to contribute to regional stability through its involvement in various multilateral platforms, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) (Çağatay, 2014, p. 29). These diplomatic initiatives reflect Türkiye's commitment to maintaining peace and stability in its surrounding regions and enhancing its international profile as a responsible actor.

Türkiye's expanding involvement in global diplomacy is further augmented by its extensive contributions to humanitarian and development aid efforts. In recent years, Türkiye has surfaced as a premier donor of humanitarian aid, securing a position among the leading contributors of official development aid (ODA) (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency [TIKA], 2020, p. 2). Türkiye's response to the Syrian refugee crisis stands as one of its most significant humanitarian endeavors. Since the inception of the conflict, Türkiye has provided refuge to millions of displaced Syrians, offering housing, healthcare, education, and social services to the refugee population (Kirişçi, 2014, p. 34). Türkiye's profound humanitarian support during this crisis has been globally acknowledged, reflecting its dedication to aiding vulnerable groups in need. Alongside

its humanitarian aid, Türkiye has also been proactively engaged in development aid initiatives, especially in Africa and Central Asia. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has executed a multitude of projects in fields such as education, healthcare, agriculture, and infrastructure, all aimed at fostering sustainable development and enhancing living standards in recipient nations (TIKA, 2020, p. 6).

To conclude, Türkiye's expanding sway in diplomacy and its soft power capacity is demonstrated via its mediation roles in regional disputes and its noteworthy contributions to humanitarian and development aid. Such endeavors underscore Türkiye's dedication to fostering peace, stability, and prosperity within its neighboring regions, supplementing its strategic function on NATO's southern edge.

### **3.3. Balancing Relations with NATO, Russia, and Other Regional Actors**

Türkiye's acquisition of the S-400 missile system from Russia reflects its strategic foresight and adaptability in defense. Acknowledging the evolving global security scenario, Türkiye's diversification of defense assets, as Stein (2019, p. 3) notes, enhances its national security. While there are challenges in integrating the S-400 with NATO systems, as Pantucci & Clark (2020, p. 43) point out, this move signifies Türkiye's unwavering commitment to maintaining a strong defense in a complex geopolitical landscape. Despite facing certain repercussions, such as the U.S.'s suspension of Türkiye from the F-35 program and CAATSA sanctions, Türkiye's role in NATO remains vital. Its dedication to the Alliance's collective security objectives, coupled with its willingness to engage with advanced defense technologies, underscores its indispensable position within NATO, as Gibbons-Neff & Schmitt (2019, p. A1) elaborate. This narrative highlights Türkiye's strategic autonomy and its contribution to regional and international security.

While navigating geopolitical complexities, Türkiye has striven to maintain equilibrium between its NATO relationships and its bonds with Russia, underscoring the need for communication and cooperation in managing shared security issues (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020, p. 9). Ankara's acquisition of the S-400 system was guided by its specific air defense needs, and the country continues to uphold NATO's collective defense principles. (Stein, 2019, p. 4). The diplomatic balancing act that Türkiye performs extends beyond its ties with NATO and Russia, as Ankara interacts with various regional actors to promote stability and protect its interests (Danforth, 2021, p. 16). In the Middle East, Türkiye has adopted a balanced foreign policy approach, maintaining diplomatic connections with nations such as Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, despite their differing geopolitical ambitions (Özcan & Özdamar, 2020, p. 12). In the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye actively engages in diplomatic initiatives and military drills with regional stakeholders, like Greece, the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus, and Egypt, to collectively ensure maritime and energy security. Ankara's diplomatic strategy reflects its commitment to fostering cooperation and dialogue to address regional security challenges. (Danforth, 2021, p. 18).

To sum up, Türkiye's crucial strategic role in NATO's southern flank is a result of its adept navigation of complex relationships with NATO, Russia, and other regional players. The S-400 acquisition from Russia underscores Türkiye's complex security considerations, balancing its regional interests and commitments to NATO. This move can be analyzed through Kenneth Waltz's neorealist lens, which views states as rational actors ensuring their survival in an anarchic international system (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118). At the same time, Türkiye's engagement with various regional stakeholders aligns

with Alexander Wendt's constructivist perspective, where state actions are shaped by social interactions and shared identities (Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it", p. 397). Türkiye's approach not only reflects its commitment to NATO but also demonstrates its proactive role in enhancing the alliance's security, especially on the southern flank.

## **4. Implications for Regional Security and NATO**

### **4.1. Potential Benefits: Strengthening NATO's Southern Flank**

Türkiye's dynamic strategic position brings with it a variety of potential advantages for NATO and regional security, particularly when considering the fortification of the Alliance's southern edge. Being a member state equipped with considerable military prowess, Türkiye makes substantial contributions to NATO's collective defense initiatives (Larrabee & Lesser, 2003, p. 55). Türkiye's geographical location, bridging Europe and the Middle East, offers the Alliance a strategic advantage in monitoring and responding to potential threats emanating from the region (Schmidt, 2015, p. 17). Moreover, Türkiye's indigenous defense industry has grown considerably in recent years, with the development of advanced military technologies, such as drones, which have proven effective in various conflict zones (Tokyay & Ege, 2021, p. 62). These capabilities can potentially enhance NATO's defense posture on its southern flank, as Türkiye shares its expertise and technologies with the Alliance (Coşkun, 2019, p. 50).

Türkiye's engagement in regional security through diplomatic and military channels fosters improved collaboration within NATO and with other regional entities (Yılmaz & Öztürk, 2019, p. 32). Ankara's peace initiatives, substantial humanitarian and development aid contributions, and active participation in multilateral forums highlight its commitment to regional peace, stability, and prosperity (Öniş, 2011, p. 30). With a foreign policy that includes various stakeholders, Türkiye facilitates dialogue on shared security concerns, such as terrorism, migration, and energy (Danforth, 2021, p. 18), playing a vital role in addressing security issues and reducing tensions (Yılmaz & Öztürk, 2019, p. 34).

To conclude, Türkiye's shifting strategic position on NATO's southern flank holds the potential to yield substantial advantages for regional security and the Alliance. Türkiye's military capacities, married with its active diplomatic engagement, can bolster NATO's defense posture, and encourage increased cooperation among regional actors to confront mutual security issues.

### **4.2. Potential Challenges: Internal and External Tensions within NATO**

While Türkiye's evolving strategic role presents unique opportunities for enhancing regional security and strengthening NATO, it also navigates through the complexities of international relations with skill and diplomacy. The evolving dynamics in Türkiye's relationships with key NATO members, including the United States and various European nations, highlight its proactive engagement in aligning diverse foreign policy priorities and strategies (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020, p. 11). These developments, rather than being viewed as strains, can be seen as Türkiye's contribution to enriching NATO's strategic discourse, thereby bolstering the Alliance's effectiveness in addressing regional security challenges (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020, p. 13).

Türkiye's strategic decision to procure the Russian S-400 missile defense system highlights its commitment to enhancing national security and diversifying its defense

capabilities (Gibbons-Neff & Schmitt, 2019, p. A1). While this decision led to Türkiye's departure from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program and subsequent U.S. sanctions under CAATSA, it also demonstrates Türkiye's proactive stance in adapting to the evolving global security environment. The S-400 issue has brought to the forefront important discussions about the compatibility and intelligence security within NATO, reflecting Türkiye's significant role in shaping defense strategy dialogues (Gramer & De Luce, 2019, p. 3).

The evolving role of Türkiye within NATO, far from causing discord, actually strengthens the Alliance by adding diverse perspectives and strategies. This dynamic role, as observed by Aydıntaşbaş (2020, p. 17), enhances NATO's adaptability and responsiveness to various security challenges. Türkiye's engagement with countries like Russia and Iran, as mentioned by Tol (2018, p. 52), should not be seen as a dilemma but as an opportunity for NATO to leverage Türkiye's unique position to foster broader dialogue and cooperation on critical issues, including Russian assertiveness and Iran's nuclear program. Such inclusivity in approach enriches NATO's collective defense strategy and aids in maintaining unity and operational effectiveness in addressing regional security threats.

In summary, Türkiye's strategic location on NATO's southern border is pivotal for the Alliance's regional security. Its unique position and evolving defense capabilities make it an invaluable NATO member, essential for stability in a crucial global area. Despite facing internal and external challenges, these can be transformed into opportunities for NATO to grow stronger through constructive dialogue, with Türkiye playing a key role. It's crucial for NATO to acknowledge Türkiye's strategic significance and collaborate effectively to leverage its contributions for the Alliance's collective strength and resilience.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have conducted an extensive exploration of Türkiye's evolving strategic significance within NATO, particularly focusing on its role in the Alliance's southern flank and the broader implications for regional security. The historical context reveals Türkiye's substantial contributions since joining NATO, emphasizing its crucial position as a defense against Soviet expansion during the Cold War and its adaptability in taking on new roles in the post-Cold War landscape. Our investigation extends to the intricate geopolitical challenges in the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, and Black Sea regions, critically analyzing Türkiye's strategic responses and initiatives in these complex scenarios.

Our synthesis of academic literature points to a broad recognition of Türkiye's growing military prowess, burgeoning defense industry, diplomatic endeavors, and interactions with various regional players, both within and beyond NATO's framework. These advancements are generally seen as bolstering NATO's presence on its southern flank and promoting regional security collaboration. However, they also bring to light potential internal and external strains within the Alliance, which could affect NATO's unity and overall efficacy.

In projecting Türkiye's future role, it is evident that it will remain a pivotal force in regional security dynamics. Yet, navigating this intricate geopolitical terrain necessitates diplomatic skill and internal consistency within NATO to ensure stability and effectively

counter emerging security threats. The vital role Türkiye plays in NATO will continue to be of paramount importance as the Alliance confronts an expanding range of regional security challenges. The degree to which Türkiye can balance its interactions with NATO, Russia, and other regional stakeholders will significantly determine its capacity to uphold regional equilibrium and advance NATO's goals.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that Türkiye's strategic position within NATO is not just a matter of geographical significance. In recent years, Türkiye has demonstrated its commitment to the Alliance through various concrete actions. For instance, Türkiye's role in NATO's mission in Afghanistan was notable, where it led the Kabul Regional Command and the Kabul International Airport's operation, contributing significantly to the mission's success. According to NATO's 2021 annual report, Türkiye provided vital support in terms of personnel and resources, showcasing its commitment to the Alliance's broader objectives (NATO, Annual Report 2021).

Moreover, Türkiye's defense spending has seen a substantial increase, aligning with NATO's guidelines. The latest data from NATO (2021) indicates that Türkiye's defense expenditure as a percentage of its GDP stands at 2.3%, surpassing the Alliance's target of 2% (NATO, Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021)). This financial commitment underscores Türkiye's dedication to not only bolstering its own defense capabilities but also contributing to the collective security framework of NATO.

In this context, it is imperative for other NATO members, including the USA, to acknowledge and support Türkiye's security concerns. Such support is not only expected but essential for the functionality and unity of NATO. A united approach towards common threats, such as terror organizations like PKK/YPG/DAESH, would not only strengthen NATO but also aid in addressing the escalating regional and global challenges. Therefore, a clear stance from NATO and the USA, showing solidarity with Türkiye, is crucial for the Alliance's efficacy and coherence.

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