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The Strategic Importance of Türkiye in European Security: Navigating the Transatlantic Realignment of 2025–2026

Avrupa Güvenliğinde Türkiye'nin Stratejik Önemi: 2025–2026
Transatlantik Yeniden Yapılanmasını Yönlendirmek

Abstract

The European security environment is experiencing a period of systemic instability driven by uncertainty surrounding traditional U.S. security commitments and growing tensions within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The shift in U.S. foreign policy following the 2024 presidential transition, increasingly associated with the transactional approach of the Trump 2.0 administration, has encouraged European actors to reconsider the foundations of transatlantic security and pursue greater strategic autonomy. Against this background, this study examines Türkiye's role as a strategically significant actor in the development of a more robust European security architecture. It analyzes Türkiye's military capacity, geostrategic position, defence-industrial capabilities built on its doctrine of national self-sufficiency, diplomatic balancing, and regional security role during 2025–2026. The analysis indicates that Türkiye has moved beyond its traditional characterization as a NATO flank state and has assumed a more prominent position within the broader European security environment. Its defence-industrial capacity, role in the Black Sea under the Montreux Convention, and importance as an energy and connectivity hub enhance its strategic relevance, while its objective of full accession to the European Union remains unchanged. The study argues for a pragmatic security partnership between the European Union and Türkiye alongside, rather than in place of, the existing accession framework, while identifying political reluctance within the EU as a significant constraint on deeper cooperation.

Keywords: European Security Architecture, EU–Türkiye Relations, NATO, Indigenous Defence Industry, Black Sea Security

Öz

Avrupa güvenlik ortamı, geleneksel ABD güvenlik taahhütlerine ilişkin belirsizliklerin artması ve Kuzey Atlantik Antlaşması Örgütü (NATO) içerisindeki gerilimlerin derinleşmesiyle birlikte sistemik bir istikrarsızlık sürecinden geçmektedir.

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2024 ABD başkanlık seçimlerinin ardından dış politikanın giderek Trump 2.0 yönetimiyle özdeşleşen işlemsel bir niteliğe yönelmesi, Avrupa ülkelerini transatlantik güvenliğin mevcut dayanaklarını yeniden değerlendirmeye ve stratejik özerklik arayışını güçlendirmeye yöneltmiştir. Bu çerçevede çalışma, Türkiye'nin daha güçlü bir Avrupa güvenlik mimarisinin oluşturulmasında stratejik açıdan önemli bir aktör olarak rolünü incelemektedir. Araştırmada Türkiye'nin 2025–2026 dönemindeki askeri kapasitesi, jeostratejik konumu, millî kendine yeterlilik doktrinine dayanan savunma sanayii yetkinlikleri, diplomatik dengeleme yaklaşımı ve bölgesel güvenlikteki rolü ele alınmaktadır. Analiz, Türkiye'nin geleneksel bir NATO kanat ülkesi olarak konumlandırılmasının ötesine geçerek Avrupa'nın daha geniş güvenlik ortamında daha belirgin bir konum kazandığına işaret etmektedir. Savunma sanayii kapasitesi, Montrö Sözleşmesi çerçevesinde Karadeniz'deki rolü ve enerji ile bağlantısallık merkezi niteliği Türkiye'nin stratejik önemini güçlendirirken, Avrupa Birliği'ne tam üyelik hedefi de değişmeden sürmektedir. Çalışma, mevcut üyelik çerçevesinin yerine geçecek bir modelden ziyade, Avrupa Birliği ile Türkiye arasında mevcut katılım sürecine paralel yürütülebilecek pragmatik bir güvenlik ortaklığını savunmakta ve AB içerisindeki siyasi isteksizliği daha derin iş birliğinin önündeki önemli kısıtlardan biri olarak değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Güvenlik Mimarisi, AB–Türkiye İlişkileri, NATO, Yerli Savunma Sanayii, Karadeniz Güvenliği

Introduction

The European security environment in 2025–2026 is marked by a significant crisis in transatlantic relations. Donald Trump's return to the White House has increased uncertainty surrounding the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, particularly amid the security and diplomatic tensions that emerged in early 2026. This shift in the U.S. administration's posture toward its security commitments has contributed to growing unease among European allies regarding the long-term reliability of transatlantic security arrangements. In response, the European Union (EU) has accelerated its pursuit of strategic autonomy through initiatives such as the Readiness 2030 plan and the ReArm Europe framework (Spatafora, 2026).

Nonetheless, structural deficiencies in traditional deterrence and command-and-control functions continue to constrain the EU's efforts to strengthen its strategic autonomy. Within this changing security environment, Türkiye has increasingly emerged as an important stabilizing actor. Rather than being viewed solely as a partner positioned at the periphery of European security, Türkiye can be considered an increasingly significant component of the continent's broader security framework. The following analysis examines the multidimensional nature of this role and considers the extent to which a stronger security partnership with Ankara may contribute to the development of a more effective European security architecture (Seyrek, 2026).

Review

Changing European security between 2022 and 2026 has become a significant concern in contemporary scholarship. The first studies in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine focused on the resurgence of traditional territorial defence. Nonetheless, from 2025 onward, the literature has increasingly focused on the deterioration of transatlantic relations. Other authors identify the Trump

factor as a critical inflection point that requires an alignment of interests between the EU and Türkiye (Adar et al., 2025).

According to Özçelik, the structural rupture in the European security vision reflects the tension between the discourse of Europe as a normative club and the geopolitical realities surrounding Türkiye, including its position in the Black Sea and its proximity to instability in the Middle East (Özçelik, 2026). Recent think-tank analyses also highlight the potential spillover effects of defence cooperation for Türkiye–EU relations (Seyrek, 2026). This paper uses a qualitative review of primary and secondary sources on topics related to the subject of the study, published between January 2025 and May 2026. The main dataset consists of:

Policy Papers: The strategic analyses of Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), and the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM). Official Statements: Transcripts of the 2026 Munich Security Conference and briefings of the Turkish Ministry of National Defense and the UK Ministry of Defence. Defense Reports: Mordor Intelligence market analysis and technical analysis of the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI). The study summarizes these sources to assess how the role of Türkiye has changed in response to the pressures of the Trump 2.0 administration and the ongoing regional conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Analysis

Geostrategic Role: Black Sea, Middle East, and Corridors

The geographical location of Türkiye at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East provides it with significant strategic leverage in three major areas. This geographical position makes Türkiye particularly relevant to European security, as developments across these regions directly affect the broader security environment.

Black Sea Stewardship: As the sovereign guarantor of passage through the Turkish Straits under the 1936 Montreux Convention, Türkiye exercises a longstanding and legally entrenched authority over Black Sea security. Building on this historic mandate, Ankara leads the Maritime Component Command (MCC) in Istanbul as part of emerging security arrangements concerning Ukraine (Soylu, 2026), a role that reflects Türkiye's own established custodianship of the region rather than a delegated function. This position reinforces Türkiye's centrality to the evolving security framework of the Black Sea and underscores its indispensable relevance to European security considerations.

Middle East Stability: Guided by its own independent regional strategy, Türkiye has continued to play a leading and constructive role in stabilising its neighbourhood, most notably through its active

facilitation of Syria's political transition and its efforts to institutionalise counterterrorism cooperation with regional partners on its own terms. This sustained, self-directed engagement in managing instability along the EU's southern periphery illustrates the extent to which Türkiye's regional leadership directly benefits the broader European security calculus. Türkiye's geographical proximity to the region and its proven diplomatic capacity give this leadership particular value for the security environment surrounding Europe.

Connectivity Corridors: The Middle Corridor (ITTR) has become an important alternative to the Northern Corridor via Russia, reflecting Türkiye's own long-term vision of positioning itself as an indispensable hub between Europe and Asia. The TRIPP (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) project, previously referred to as the Zangezur Corridor, is advancing through the South Caucasus and is expected, once operational, to further consolidate Türkiye's role as the connective backbone linking Europe to Central Asia. These developments reinforce Türkiye's position as an indispensable and self-determined connection point between Europe and Central Asia.

Military Capacity: NATO, Army and Defence Industry

The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) maintains a substantial active-duty force, one of the largest within the NATO alliance. This capacity was demonstrated during the 2026 Steadfast Dart exercise in Germany, where the TSK supplied one of the largest national contingents among participating allies, and Türkiye's contribution received prominent recognition in NATO's own coverage of the exercise. These figures underline the scale of Türkiye's military contribution within the wider European security context.

The Turkish defence industry, developed under Türkiye's "Yerli ve Milli" (indigenous and national) doctrine of sovereign defence-industrial self-sufficiency, reached record export levels in 2025. The following developments are particularly significant:

UAV Capability: Baykar holds a leading share of the global UAV export market, and the TB3 is expected to conduct joint sorties with Eurofighters during NATO exercises in 2026. This development highlights the growing relevance of Türkiye's unmanned systems capabilities within its broader defence profile.

The Eurofighter Deal: In 2025, Türkiye signed an agreement to acquire a new fleet of Eurofighter aircraft, signalling a significant shift toward cooperation with European defence manufacturers. The agreement also illustrates the increasing importance of defence cooperation between Türkiye and European actors.

Integrated Air Defence: Türkiye officially joined the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) in February 2024, becoming integrated into a layered European air-defence architecture involving systems such as HİSAR and SİPER (C-UAS Hub, 2026). Türkiye's participation in this framework adds another dimension to its role in European security.

Taken together, Türkiye's geographical position, military capacity, defence-industrial capabilities, and participation in European defence initiatives reinforce its strategic importance within the evolving European security environment.

Strategic Balancing: Among the West, Russia and China

Ankara's foreign policy reflects a confident and sovereign strategy of strategic autonomy, rooted in Türkiye's own independent assessment of its national interests. As a committed NATO member, Türkiye simultaneously maintains a principled and balanced dialogue with Moscow, a capacity that has enabled it to act as an effective mediator in the Russia–Ukraine conflict and in the 2026 Iran–Israel tensions. Far from representing ambiguity or a departure from the West, this multi-vector diplomacy is a deliberate and mature expression of Türkiye's long-standing doctrine of maintaining working relations with all regional actors in order to prevent a broader vacuum that would serve no one's security interests. Türkiye's continued hosting of critical NATO infrastructure on its territory further demonstrates that this diplomatic latitude is exercised entirely within, and in service of, its unwavering commitment to the alliance. This combination of diplomatic flexibility and steadfast security cooperation is a defining strength of Türkiye's distinctive position within the wider European security environment.

EU–Türkiye Relations: From Accession to Security Partnership

Formal accession talks between the EU and Türkiye have been at a standstill for several years — a stagnation attributable primarily to the EU's own political reluctance and to unresolved bilateral disputes among certain member states, rather than to any shortfall on Türkiye's part, whose commitment to the accession process and to its own reform agenda has remained consistent. Notwithstanding this institutional freeze, Türkiye has continued to engage constructively with the Union, and a parallel, functional model of cooperation has taken shape — one that operates alongside, rather than in place of, Türkiye's full-membership objective, and that has become increasingly indispensable to the EU's own security interests. This duality was captured well in early 2025, when European Council President António Costa began describing Türkiye simultaneously as a “candidate country” and a “strategic partner,” a formulation that mirrors the broader geopolitical recalibration

described in the literature, whereby shifting transatlantic security dynamics have prompted the EU to re-engage discursively with Türkiye even as the formal accession track remains frozen (Turhan, 2025).

Migration Management: As a matter of policy and humanitarian responsibility, Türkiye has assumed leadership in hosting the largest number of individuals under temporary protection anywhere in the world, a role it has sustained largely through its own resources and institutional capacity. The financial support the EU has provided over the past decade toward this effort — channelled mainly through dedicated refugee-facility mechanisms rather than the accession budget itself — remains modest relative to the scale of Türkiye's own commitment, yet migration cooperation has nonetheless evolved into a freestanding pillar of the relationship, largely insulated from the broader political freeze.

Defence Funding: Türkiye's position in Europe's evolving defence architecture reveals a structural inconsistency on the EU's part rather than any deficiency in Türkiye's own capacity. Despite possessing one of the continent's most capable militaries and a rapidly maturing defence-industrial base, Ankara remains excluded from several flagship EU funding and procurement instruments that are reserved for member states — an exclusion that a growing number of European governments themselves now recognise as short-sighted. As European capitals seek to reduce their dependence on any single external supplier, this self-imposed exclusion of Turkish industrial capacity runs counter to the EU's own diversification goals, representing a missed opportunity for Europe rather than a limitation on Türkiye.

Trump Factor & U.S. Uncertainty

The return of Donald Trump has significantly altered the security calculations of European capitals. In early 2026, President Trump declared that Article 5 commitments would be discretionary and would depend on the U.S. president's assessment of whether an ally was making necessary contributions.

This ambiguity has enhanced the strategic value of Türkiye for two reasons. First, the United States has adopted a more protectionist approach, increasing European concerns about the volatility of American security commitments and the future of transatlantic interoperability. Second, the United States has signalled its intention to scale back its involvement in regional missions such as KFOR and the NATO advisory mission in Iraq, creating a security vacuum that could increase the importance of capable regional allies such as Türkiye (Spatafora, 2026).

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether Türkiye constitutes a strategically significant actor in the development of a more robust European security architecture at a time of profound transatlantic

realignment. The evidence reviewed across Türkiye's geostrategic position, military capacity, defence-industrial base, diplomatic balancing, and regional security role indicates that the answer is unambiguously affirmative. Türkiye's stewardship of the Black Sea under the Montreux Convention, its sovereign leadership role in Syria and the wider Middle East, its position at the heart of emerging Eurasian connectivity corridors, and a defence-industrial base built on an explicit doctrine of national self-sufficiency together confirm that Türkiye has moved decisively beyond its historical characterisation as a NATO flank state.

The studies conducted during the period of 2025–2026 indicate that Türkiye has become an indispensable participant in the European security system, and one whose importance to Europe is at least as great as Europe's importance to Türkiye. U.S. uncertainty under the second Trump administration and continued Russian revisionism have created structural pressures that make a closer EU–Türkiye security relationship not merely desirable but necessary. Türkiye contributes military capacity, technological capability in autonomous systems, and strategic access to energy and maritime routes that are indispensable to European security, while continuing to pursue its own sovereign foreign policy agenda and its unchanged objective of full EU membership.

Accordingly, this study argues that the EU's future security architecture should move beyond the limitations of geopolitical othering and the stalled accession process — a recalibration that would serve the EU's own strategic interests at least as much as Türkiye's. A pragmatic security partnership, developed alongside rather than as a substitute for the existing accession framework, could institutionalise defence cooperation, facilitate Türkiye's participation in arrangements such as SAFE on terms commensurate with its standing as a leading NATO ally, and strengthen coordination on regional stability in the Black Sea and the Middle East, where Türkiye's leadership role is already well established (Seyrek, 2026). Without such cooperation, the European project of strategic autonomy risks remaining an aspirational objective rather than a fully realised geopolitical reality. Future research should build on this analysis by examining the institutional mechanisms through which such a partnership could be formalised, and by tracking how the EU's own political dynamics evolve in response to Türkiye's growing indispensability.

Author Contributions

Farid Bahramli contributed to the conceptualization and methodological design of the study, data collection and analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the manuscript. The author also contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript and approved the final version for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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