

The Fragile Balance: Security Dilemmas and Geopolitical Rivalry in Russia-Türkiye Relations

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Abstract. This research offers an extensive review of the security interplay of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Türkiye during the first decades of the 21st century. Although the first decade of the century showed some signs of "multi-dimensional cooperation," the following years have proven that there were fundamental structural tensions. This research examines the development of their relationships from an offensive realism perspective and through the security dilemma theory. The analysis will focus on the conflict-prone regions of the Black Sea, Syria, and the South Caucasus, where a "competitive coexistence" pattern emerges. The special emphasis will be on Russia's revisionism and Türkiye's strategic autonomy as factors that lead to overlapping security zones and resulting confrontations.

To fulfil the purpose of this research, it is necessary to consider the theoretical basis for how the balance established at the end of the Cold War gives way to an age of increasing geopolitical tension, with emphasis on the disruptive role of hegemonic aspirations. Methodologically, the paper relies on qualitative analysis of the region's geopolitical dynamics, doctrines, and conflict outcomes, drawing on empirical evidence from naval deployments, treaties, and indicators of energy dependence. It becomes clear that instruments such as the Astana process can be seen as means of managing rivalry rather than of building peace. Moreover, the paper finds that Türkiye's hard power serves as a critical balancing force against Russian dominance after the Second Karabakh War of 2020. The article also argues that energy interdependence creates asymmetric vulnerability and can generate coercive geopolitical leverage.

Keywords: Russia-Türkiye relations; Security dilemma; Black Sea security; South Caucasus geopolitics; Energy weaponisation; Syrian Civil War; Offensive realism; Montreux Convention.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, Russia and Türkiye were each trying to carve out a new position within a world order that was growing ever more multipolar and unstable. In this context, Türkiye's desire to pursue an active foreign policy, known as "Strategic Depth," could be interpreted as an attempt to capitalise on its strategic location to bring stability to its neighbourhood. Yet Türkiye's ambition to be a regional leader came at a time when Russia, too, was rising under Vladimir Putin's leadership. In Moscow's case, the key goal was to regain Russia's position as the preeminent

Eurasian superpower, in line with the principles of the "Primakov Doctrine."

The early signs of a partnership with the potential to become an important geopolitical tool were evident in the "Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia" of 2001, but soon gave way to nothing more than tactical, short-term optimism. In fact, any positive feelings about the new relations between the two countries disappeared when the different approaches to security began to take centre stage.

The shift occurred when the Russian state shifted from mere diplomacy to direct military action. Indeed, the invasion of Georgia in 2008 was an

indication of something bigger happening that threatened to disrupt the international order entirely – and this was Russia's willingness to take action by way of kinetic power to draw new maps. The culmination of this process happened with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then the subsequent creation of unrest in eastern Ukraine. For Türkiye, this development was not just a challenge to regional security but also an existential threat to the balance of power in the Black Sea region. The international order and international norms, including international treaties and respect for national borders, were breaking down due to Russia's revisionist and expansionist foreign policy. In turn, this placed Türkiye in an extremely uncomfortable position, caught between the breakdown of the post-Cold War international order and a resurgent Russia to its north [1, 2].

METHODS

The methodology used for this paper is qualitative, with an analytical approach grounded in theories of offensive realism and the security dilemma. A comparative and historical analysis of Russia-Türkiye relations from the beginning of the 2000s to the present day characterises the approach. Some of the main sources of data analysed in the paper include official doctrines by states (Russia's Naval Doctrine), international agreements (Montreux Convention, Shusha Declaration), and strategic positions taken by the countries in different geopolitical theatres. Through a critical analysis of these main variables along with secondary sources, the hypothesis "competitive coexistence" has been tested in this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Black Sea region has traditionally been one of the main arenas of rivalry between Moscow and Ankara. At the beginning of the 2000s, Türkiye's naval strategy relied on the concept of "regional ownership." Through initiatives such as BLACKSEAFOR and Operation Black Sea Harmony, Ankara sought to develop a littoral-led security framework. This approach had two main objectives: to prevent the Black Sea from becoming an arena of direct competition among extra-regional powers, particularly the United States and NATO, and to preserve a workable equilibrium with Russia. Nevertheless, Ankara's regional ownership model presupposed Russia's recognition of the sovereignty of other littoral states, a

principle that was later undermined by Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

The 2014 Shift: Crimea as a Power Projection Base. The annexation of Crimea by force in 2014 marked a decisive turning point for the idea of regional cooperation in the Black Sea. Rather than merely occupying territory, Moscow significantly altered the naval and strategic balance in the basin. Following the annexation, Russia accelerated the militarisation of Crimea, transforming the peninsula into what military analysts often describe as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier." This included the deployment of S-400 Triumf long-range surface-to-air missile systems, Bastion-P coastal defence systems, and the modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet with Kalibr-equipped Kilo-class submarines and frigates [3].

The A2/AD Challenge. The creation of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zones around Crimea enabled Russia to restrict air and maritime access in parts of the Black Sea. This strategy constrained freedom of manoeuvre in the northern and western Black Sea and complicated the operational planning of other littoral states, particularly Ukraine, Romania, and Türkiye. It also challenged Türkiye's traditional role as a key maritime security actor in the basin.

Naval Doctrine. Russia's 2022 Maritime Doctrine identifies the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov as important areas of national interest and calls for strengthening Russia's geopolitical position and the capabilities of the Black Sea Fleet in the region [16]. Russia's earlier naval doctrinal thinking also reflected ambitious maritime goals, even if some analysts considered these ambitions unrealistic [4].

The Montreux Conundrum and "Active Containment." In this highly militarised context, Ankara's role as the sovereign regulator of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles under the 1936 Montreux Convention has shifted from a primarily diplomatic function to a major legal and strategic instrument. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Türkiye invoked Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, restricting the passage of warships belonging to belligerent states through the Turkish Straits, while preserving the Convention's limited exceptions. While maintaining an open channel of dialogue with Moscow, Türkiye's decision significantly limited Russia's ability to reinforce its Black Sea Fleet from other naval theatres.

This policy illustrates a shift from brokerage toward legal and strategic containment. As recent studies suggest, Türkiye's policy has moved beyond simple balancing and increasingly includes elements of legal containment; Ankara uses international law to limit Russia's ability to establish uncontested maritime dominance in the Black Sea [5, 6]. Türkiye's application of the Montreux Convention remains one of the key legal instruments limiting Russian naval reinforcement in the Black Sea. At the same time, Ukraine's asymmetric maritime capabilities have also significantly constrained Russia's operational freedom [19].

Syria: Proxy Warfare and the Paradox of Managed Rivalry. Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria can no longer be described simply as a theatre where Russia guarantees Assad's survival. Rather, Russia's military presence at Hmeimim and Tartus has entered a more uncertain phase, depending on negotiations with Syria's new authorities. At the same time, Türkiye's regional influence has increased in the post-Assad environment [21].

Divergent Strategic Endstates: The security dilemma in Syria emerges from conflicting strategic endstates. Until the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria represented the centrepiece of Russia's Mediterranean policy. By supporting Assad, Moscow secured access to the Tartus naval facility and the Hmeimim air base, projecting power toward NATO's southern flank. Russian engagement in the Syrian civil war was marked by the extensive use of air power and private military formations, including Wagner-linked actors, in support of the Assad regime.

On the other hand, Türkiye's participation in the conflict stems from pressing national security considerations. Ankara has viewed the instability in northern Syria as a source of security risks, particularly because of the presence of YPG/PKK-linked forces and the large-scale refugee burden. Therefore, Türkiye's overriding objective has been to establish and maintain a "safe zone" or buffer zone in northern Syria in order to prevent what it describes as a "terror corridor" and to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees.

The Astana Process: Managed Rivalry and Conflicts, Not Peace-Building. Despite being recognised as a model of cooperation, an important study sheds light on the reality that the Astana Process (formed in 2017) is a vehicle for "managed rivalry" and not actual conflict resolution. This mechanism enabled both parties to set up de-

escalation zones; however, they would only serve as a temporary break before Russian forces resumed attacks on opposition-controlled regions. In the words of experts, this is "adversarial collaboration," where de-escalation efforts aim merely to avoid a kinetic confrontation between two powerful armies while destroying their respective strategic positions in the region [7]. The Balyun airstrike campaign in 2020, which claimed the lives of Turkish soldiers, illustrated that Russia was willing to use deadly force to test Türkiye's determination and assert its dominance over Syrian airspace during the Assad period.

Weaponised Migration and Hybrid Threats. During the Assad period, Russia's military pressure on opposition-controlled areas, particularly Idlib, contributed to refugee movements toward the Turkish border and became part of the broader hybrid-pressure environment. This pressure had a twofold effect: it placed socio-economic strain on Türkiye's government and strengthened Russia's bargaining position in negotiations with Türkiye and Western actors [8].

The South Caucasus: Dismantling the "Monopoly on Security" and the Rise of Counter-Hegemony. Russia viewed the South Caucasus as its "exclusive backyard" or "near abroad" for almost three decades after the Soviet Union's disintegration. The years leading up to 2020 were characterised by a monolithic approach to Russian security in the region, in which Russia served as the key arbitrator, peacekeeper, and supplier of weaponry to all warring parties. Nevertheless, the Second Karabakh War of 2020 marked the emergence of a new regional security order. In this war, Türkiye's military-political support for Azerbaijan disrupted Russia's traditional dominance over regional security arrangements.

The Breakdown of the OSCE Paradigm and the Triumph of Bilateralism: Until 2020, security in the South Caucasus region stagnated within the OSCE Minsk Group format, an arena dominated by Russia and largely ignored by Western players. By providing military assistance (through the delivery of the Bayraktar TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles) and tactical advice, Türkiye managed to circumvent the Minsk Group's ineffectiveness as a multilateral body. Türkiye and Azerbaijan demonstrated that they could shift regional power dynamics without the Kremlin's prior approval. The Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership, officially institutionalised through the Shusha Declaration (2021), created a new security axis that challenged

Russia's traditional dominance in the South Caucasus security architecture [9].

The Failed "Peacekeeping" Paradigm: The deployment of a Russian "peacekeeping" contingent following the 2020 ceasefire was initially seen as Moscow's move to re-establish its boots-on-the-ground presence. However, the years that followed revealed a fundamental erosion of Russian credibility. Moscow's inability—or unwillingness—to fulfil its security guarantees to its nominal ally, Armenia, while Türkiye and Azerbaijan pursued a policy of "active restoration of sovereignty," highlighted the limitations of Russian power. The Turkish-Russian Joint Monitoring Centre was established in 2021 in Aghdam. For the first time in modern history, a NATO member state (Türkiye) had a recognised military-monitoring role in the heart of what Russia considered its sovereign sphere of influence [10].

This centre was important as a symbolic challenge to Russia's exclusive security role in the South Caucasus. However, its closure in 2024, together with the full withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Azerbaijan, marked a further erosion of Moscow's post-2020 security presence in the region [15].

The Geopolitical Significance of the Zangezur Corridor: From a security standpoint, Türkiye views the Zangezur Corridor as a crucial pathway into the Turkic world and an important alternative transportation route that bypasses both Russia and Iran. To Moscow, the concept of the Zangezur Corridor is one of encroachment, which, if implemented, will reduce Russia's status as the "exclusive transit regulator" of the Caucasus region and give Türkiye (and thus the West) a permanent foothold south of Russia.

After the August 2025 Washington Declaration, the issue of connectivity between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan entered a new diplomatic phase under the TRIPP framework. Therefore, the corridor should be analysed not only as a source of geopolitical contestation, but also as part of the emerging post-conflict connectivity architecture in the South Caucasus [17, 18].

The Caucasus – A Contested Space: The South Caucasus region has transformed itself from a one-sided Russian realm into a contested security area. In this context, Türkiye's hard-power instruments, including military training, defence industry integration, and joint exercises, now contribute to a balancing strategy vis-à-vis Russia.

Indeed, Ankara's move in its quest for a balancing act coincides with the overall diversification of regional countries' security policies, which strive not to depend on a single, perhaps revisionist, power. The decline in Russian influence in the Caucasus is not just an isolated case. Still, it reflects broader overstretching policies by Moscow, as its actions in Ukraine continually drain its political and military resources in Eurasia [11].

Energy Interdependence vs Geopolitical Leverage: The Anatomy of a Strategic Vulnerability. One of the most common fallacies in international politics is the "liberal peace" approach, which holds that deep economic and energy cooperation, including initiatives such as Blue Stream, TurkStream, and Akkuyu NPP, helps prevent negative security dynamics. In reality, however, the Kremlin has employed its energy exports as an instrument of hybrid influence rather than an ordinary business transaction for the past 20 years. For Moscow, energy is another facet of its security policy, aimed at creating interdependencies that can then be used as leverage.

The Trap of Asymmetric Interdependence: As Türkiye seeks to become a major energy hub, its current dependence on natural gas from Moscow creates a situation known as "asymmetric interdependence." In other words, rather than enjoying equal bargaining power in this partnership, Türkiye remains exposed to Russian pressure through energy resources. During the 2015–2016 jet crisis, Moscow imposed economic sanctions and created uncertainty around major energy projects, including TurkStream. However, natural gas trade largely continued, demonstrating both Türkiye's vulnerability and Russia's reluctance to disrupt a major energy market [12]. At the same time, Türkiye's vulnerability should not be understood as static: recent diversification efforts, including LNG contracts and alternative supply routes, have reduced the share of Russian gas in Türkiye's overall gas mix, even though Russia remains an important supplier [20].

TurkStream and Bypassing Ukraine: The implementation of the TurkStream gas pipeline can be read as a case of geopolitical engineering. Not only did Russia try to reduce its dependence on the Ukrainian GTS (Gas Transport System), but it also increased its presence in the Southern European market through Türkiye. From the Turkish side, such a deal may seem quite profitable, both economically and in terms of geopolitical leverage. However, Turkish infrastructure is also

integrated into a Russia-led energy network that may be exposed to international sanctions and geopolitical risks.

Akkuyu NPP – Security Footprints for the Coming Century: Russia's first overseas "Build-Own-Operate" (BOO) nuclear power station, Akkuyu NPP, located on Türkiye's Mediterranean coast, poses further significant geopolitical risks for the country.

Technology Dependence: Russia is likely to retain significant technological and operational influence over Türkiye's first nuclear power sector for decades.

Security Consequences: Akkuyu may provide Russia with a long-term institutional and technological presence in Türkiye's strategic energy sector, while also creating additional sensitivities for NATO-related security planning in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Energy as "Non-Military Leverage": Russia's "energy diplomacy" may create economic constituencies in Türkiye that favour continued cooperation with Moscow, thereby complicating Türkiye's efforts to coordinate more closely with the West. In this manner, energy becomes an important element of the security dilemma, whereby Türkiye's cooperation in the energy sphere to support its economic development undermines its strategic independence. Against the backdrop of the changing global energy situation amid the war in Ukraine, Türkiye's attempts to diversify through TANAP/TAP and Black Sea gas fields are seen as crucial [13, 14].

CONCLUSIONS

The dynamics of security relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Türkiye during the first quarter of the twenty-first century can be regarded as a case of concealed geopolitical rivalry behind seemingly practical cooperation. This research shows that, although there were instances when the interests of both countries intersected and significant initiatives on energy

supplies emerged, their underlying rivalry continues to shape competition for influence in the Eurasian security environment. Contradictory geopolitical aims and a complete lack of strategic trust between the parties always challenge the "strategic partnership" concept used for domestic purposes.

Thus, one of the major drivers of regional instability appears to be Moscow's aggressive revisionist foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. By establishing its neo-imperial sphere of influence in Eurasia (through events such as the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014), Russia has violated the established security order and threatened the integrity of the Black Sea security balance. Türkiye's stance on these events is expressed in "active containment" and smart use of the Montreux Convention.

Moreover, the Syrian and South Caucasus cases indicate a transition from proxy warfare to "managed rivalry," in which tactical deconfliction does not signify collaboration but rather serves to avoid kinetic confrontations while actively seeking to weaken the other side's long-term influence. Especially in the South Caucasus, the 2020 Karabakh War marked the end of Russia's traditional dominance over regional security arrangements, as Türkiye's military-technical assistance to Azerbaijan contributed to the emergence of a Türkiye-backed security pole in the region.

Lastly, the research shows that energy dependency creates an asymmetric vulnerability rather than stable interdependence. In particular, Akkuyu NPP represents a long-term strategic and technological dependence mechanism, with the first unit planned to begin electricity production in 2026 rather than becoming a fully operational nuclear facility [22]. Considering the increasingly fragmented and polarised character of the international order in light of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, the future of Moscow–Ankara relations is likely to be defined by "competitive coexistence" as a central pattern of regional security.

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