

CATS Network Roundup

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the CATS Network Roundup of news, developments and assessments on relevant issues of Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy.

In this issue we take an in-depth look at **Turkey's role within NATO**, ahead of the July 9–11 summit marking the Alliance's 75th anniversary. We analyse **Turkey's crucial role in the regional security landscape**, focussing on the **Black Sea region** and the regional **alliances**, Ankara's careful **balancing between NATO and Russia**, and the **transformation of the security landscape since Russia's invasion of Ukraine**.

The CATS Network Roundup will continue from September onwards.

Should you have any questions or suggestions, please e-mail us at cats@swp-berlin.org.

On the Spot



picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Francisco Seo

NATO will celebrate [75 years of collective defence](#) in July 2024. Turkey joined in 1952 and has become the Alliance's second-largest military power, providing major contributions to NATO operations – from the Korean War to Afghanistan to Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean. Unlike the Mediterranean, the Black Sea has never hosted a NATO operation and has remained off NATO's radar, not least because of Ankara's strict adherence to the Montreux Convention and its political decision to keep the region [closed to "outsiders"](#). Today, as the "gatekeeper" of the Straits and the only NATO member whose relations with Russia are ["going really well"](#), Turkey plays a crucial role in shaping the regional security landscape.

Changing tides in Turkey's Black Sea policy

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has challenged Turkey's "regional ownership" approach, but has not changed Ankara's main concern – to avoid a "Middle Easternization of the Black Sea", in the sense of open confrontation between the US/NATO and Russia. Despite major geopolitical shifts, Ankara's strategic goals in the Black Sea have remained largely unchanged: "to keep the United States out, the littoral states in and the Russians down", to paraphrase NATO's first Secretary-General, [Lord Ismay](#).

This requires a carefully crafted balancing policy from Ankara that limits NATO's naval presence in the region to that of the littoral states, while deterring (without openly challenging) Russia's military and naval superiority. It is also important for Turkey to ensure that Ukraine does not collapse. If Russia were able to occupy its southern regions, the prospects of the Black Sea becoming a "Russian lake" would increase significantly. Besides this delicate balancing act, Ankara stepped up efforts to strengthen national defence industry, increase naval capabilities and diplomatic clout in the region.

While this basic formula has been a constant of Turkey's regional policy for years, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has added new variables. The Kremlin's military footprint in the region has grown tremendously since 2014, with military buildup in Crimea, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. In 2022, Russia expanded its control to encompass much of the Black Sea and the entire Sea of Azov. Recent developments – including moves to establish a permanent Russian naval base [in Ochamchire](#) in the Moscow-occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia, an ["unprecedented upswing in Russia-Iran ties"](#), and Chinese strategic plans to build a deep-water port in [Anaklia](#), Georgia – underline that deterring the Russian threat is no less important than counterbalancing US influence in the region.

From Ankara's perspective, NATO is not a threat – but the United States may be

Ankara responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by [closing the Straits](#) to all warships not home-ported in the Black Sea, [stepping up](#) the development of its naval capabilities, and ["defence industrialisation" of its foreign policy](#). Turkey has also developed close cooperation with NATO's other Black Sea members – Romania and Bulgaria – most notably with the recent [trilateral initiative](#) to clear the Black Sea of floating mines. The [Mine Counter-Measures Task Group Black Sea](#) (MCM Black Sea) has the potential to evolve into a fully-fledged patrol mission protecting the northwestern Black Sea from conventional and hybrid threats, as well as countering [Russia's illegal activities at sea](#), should the political will of the parties involved in the mission exist.

Compared to previous initiatives, such as the [Black Sea Flotilla](#), the MCM task group has a much better chance of success as a "humanitarian initiative" to enhance maritime (and thus food) security. Given the limited naval assets of Bulgaria and Romania, and Turkey's leading role in this operation, it would be misleading to say that Turkey ["does not want to see NATO in the Black Sea"](#). Essentially, Turkey is ["NATO in the Black Sea"](#).

Turkey's leadership has consistently supported Ukraine's and Georgia's bids for NATO membership, adding weight to the argument that ["Turkey's approach to NATO's role in the Black Sea reflects its distrust toward the United States."](#) That perspective opens up new avenues for cooperation between Turkey and the West in the Black Sea, as their interests largely overlap (supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and deterring Russia). However, it also means that no breakthrough in the region can be expected without resolution of other problems in the broader context of the [US-Turkey strategic dialogue](#).

Ukraine as Turkey's "major non-NATO ally" in the region

Given that Turkey views the United States as a threat to its national interests in several regional theatres and Russia as a strategic rival for naval superiority in the Black Sea, this leaves Ukraine as a natural ally that would allow it to ["comfortably watch"](#) the gradual decline of Russia's naval capabilities ["from the sidelines"](#), without inviting US warships into the Black Sea.

Despite maintaining strong economic ties with Moscow, Ankara attaches strategic importance to its relations with Ukraine, which it sees as a counterbalance to Russia and an important partner for its defence industry. If [backed by other NATO allies](#), this emerging strategic link could become a backbone of the future security architecture in the region, while also reinforcing Turkey's pivot to the West. ([Yevgeniya Gaber](#))

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

Three Questions for...



[Serhat Güvenc](#) is Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University (Istanbul), where he serves as dean of the College of Economics and Administrative Sciences. He holds a PhD from Boğaziçi University. His research interests include Turkey's foreign relations and modern Turkish military and naval history.

As NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary, how has its role evolved?

NATO has turned out to be highly adaptable to the changing security environment in Europe since the end of the Cold War. It had to endure a long period of soul-searching after its nemesis, the Soviet Union disappeared. Its contribution to European security remained modest as a result of the changing character of threats, mostly unconventional out-of-area threats such as terrorism and irregular migration. NATO is a military alliance, but it has had a very strong political aspect. For example, it was instrumental in bringing the Central and Eastern European countries into the fold of the so-called rules-based international order. Although those countries' admissions were ultimately strategic and security-driven, NATO engagement was initially a political undertaking for the existing alliance members. The return of the Russian threat gave NATO a new lease of life as the only international organisation tackling hard security threats in Europe. It is certainly not "brain dead". But it does need to revive its military muscle memory.

What strategic role does Turkey play in the alliance today, especially in relation to its partnerships and tensions with European member states?

Turkey is one of the few members of the Alliance that can make across-the-board military contributions to NATO. Its capabilities have evolved in step with NATO's changing roles. Turkey's NATO membership is a valuable asset for European security, in ways that are not adequately appreciated by certain European allies. That applies especially to France, which sees Turkey as a strategic competitor. Ankara under Erdoğan does view France as a rival – not in the context of European security but in other regions such as the Caucasus and Africa. Unless the EU and Turkey redefine their relationship to adapt to the new geopolitical landscape in and around Europe, Turkey's strategic role will remain limited.

Given the ongoing discussions about burden sharing within NATO, how do you see Turkey's future contributions developing?

Turkey will meet the 2% defence spending target this year, and its active involvement in NATO exercises and missions demonstrates its continuing commitment to its alliance obligations. It recently joined a small group of NATO members to set up a Maritime Centre for Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure. And it has developed niche capabilities that have been overlooked, if not totally ignored, by its European partners, who insist on building their own capabilities from scratch rather than taking advantage of Turkey's expertise. Turkey possesses significant strategic power projection capabilities such as strategic airlifters (A400M) and amphibious assault vessels, as well as force multipliers such as aerial refuelling and AWACS aircraft. But these are rarely placed at NATO's disposal because Turkey is reluctant to commit its assets without a corresponding share in the Alliance's strategic decisions. The record so far suggests that the European members of NATO (some EU members) are interested only in Turkey's "military muscle" but not its "brain". Hence, Turkey may act or sound like a half-hearted ally or a member-only-in-name, but it actually pursues recognition of its status as a 72-year member in a 75-year-old alliance.

Interview by [Salih Bıçakcı](#)

Recommendations

This SWP Comment by [Daria Isachenko and Góran Swistek](#) examines regional and global conceptions of the security order in the Black Sea region, noting NATO's absence from the region following Russia's war against Ukraine and highlighting Turkey's unique role. For a more detailed analysis, see [Daria Isachenko's SWP Research Paper](#) on Turkey's role in the Black Sea.

In their CATS Network Project Report, [Sitki Egeci, Serhat Güvenc, Çağlar Kurç and Arda Mevlütoğlu](#) analyse the development of Turkey's defence industry, policies and partnerships and examine the country's balancing act between its desire for strategic autonomy and the influence of the United States, the European Union and other NATO allies.

In the latest CATS Network Perspective, [Galip Dalay, Salih Bıçakcı, Sinem Adar, Anouck Côte-Real, Valeria Talbot, Dušan Reljić, Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Alan Makovsky, Karol Wasilewski and Paul Levin](#) analyse Turkey's response to recent security developments and challenges, including Sweden's NATO accession, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war in Gaza, and the risks of escalation in the Middle East, from ten different regional perspectives.

In light of growing global security challenges, [Yaşar Aydın](#) discusses (in German) the need to understand and reconcile the differences and conflicts of interest between NATO and Turkey, which were highlighted during the negotiations for Sweden's NATO accession, and to recognise Turkey as a cornerstone of Western security.

Kind regards,

The CATS Team