

Türkiye's Role in the USCENTCOM AOR

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Key Points

- Türkiye has a unique geographic position that connects it historically, culturally, economically and geopolitically with Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and even Africa, but Türkiye's influence at CENTCOM AOR has been limited so far.
- Türkiye has improved relations with many of its former rival countries, while President Erdoğan is willing to pursue benefits, even if it would hurt its traditional Western allies.
- Foreign policy efforts are taken to help the troubled economy, to secure another tenure for President Erdoğan and to quickly secure gains by leveraging the current strategic environment. So far it seems that it is maneuvering successfully within different blocs.
- Türkiye's role in adjacent and among CENTCOM AOR is rising, but it remains to be seen whether President Erdoğan can position Türkiye for greater and enduring influence on CENTCOM AOR.

Introduction

Türkiye has quite a unique position in many perspectives e.g., geographically, geopolitically and geoeconomically. It lies at the intersection of Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia (and Africa) with ties to all of them; it has a land connection to the CENTCOM AOR, and it controls the entry to and from the Black Sea. It is a member of NATO and a dialogue partner with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); it has strong ties to both East and West. It is militarily involved in Syria and throughout the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye has balanced between Russia and Ukraine and its allies.

The international balance of power is in motion. The post-Cold War era of unipolarity is contested towards multipolarity, and this era is seen as one of strategic competition. The balance of power in the vicinity of Türkiye changed when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan and is tilting towards the Indo-Pacific. Since then, the U.S. has a noticeably smaller posture in the CENTCOM AOR. At the same time, China is signing agreements and investing in the AOR countries and wants to contest the international order and the U.S. domination. While China is on the rise and growing its influence in the AOR, Russian influence globally and within the AOR is decreasing after its peak until the invasion of Ukraine. All this opens room for Türkiye to take advantage of the evolving situation.



Figure 1. Map of Türkiye and its neighborhood.

Türkiye has recently been active in foreign policy, and it has become clear that it seeks to leverage the current situation to strengthen its position for more influence. This paper shows some of Türkiye's actions and discusses the possible results of these actions and some of the reasons behind them. In this way it tries to outline the role of Türkiye adjacent to CENTCOM AOR and finally suggests some recommendations from the conclusions.

Some background for the more recent actions of Türkiye

When considering Türkiye's foreign policy actions, it is important to know a few past events and circumstances, as they are interconnected and set the context for the more current ones. The steps in foreign policy are always tied to internal politics as well and Türkiye's case is no different. President Erdoğan is seeking re-election in May 2023, which might be his toughest race for re-election, and it also shapes his maneuvering in foreign diplomacy. Internally, one of the biggest issues the voters are not satisfied with is high inflation, which was officially 64.27% by the end of 2022.¹ According to independent academics the consumer price inflation rate was as high as 185.34% in October, compared to the officially reported 85.51%.² Inflation has risen sharply since late 2021, when the central bank started cutting its policy rate, an operation president Erdoğan pursued.³ As high inflation eats the popularity of the current leadership and government of Türkiye, it is something that president Erdoğan tries to improve.

¹ Turkey Inflation rate, January 21, 2023, [Turkey Inflation Rate - 2022 \(inflationtool.com\)](https://inflationtool.com) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

² Turkey's independent academics announce annual inflation rate as 185 percent, November 3, 2022, [Turkey's independent academics announce annual inflation rate as 185 percent \(duvarenglish.com\)](https://duvarenglish.com) (accessed on Nov 3, 2022)

³ Ibid.

For decades, Türkiye has had a multivector foreign policy with several objectives through many efforts and cooperation with partners, without prioritizing efforts. It has aimed for strategic autonomy, and it has also been in favor for multipolar world. Türkiye has tilted more towards the East for some time, and it has cultural, diplomatic and economic ties with many of the CASA countries.⁴ These relations are likely to strengthen further, because CASA countries are rightfully concerned about Russia invading its smaller neighbors and they are looking outwards. While Türkiye has solid ties to CASA countries, this was not always the case with the other CENTCOM AOR countries. For example, some countries didn't look favorably upon what they saw as Türkiye expanding its influence in the region during the Arab Spring. Türkiye has had tensions and disputes with Egypt over the military coup and ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and over issues related to Libya and Eastern Mediterranean;⁵ with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), when it supported the coup in Egypt and in the case of the Khashoggi assassination;⁶ Türkiye had tensions with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) due to political differences, especially when UAE was resetting diplomatic relations with Israel.⁷ While Türkiye supported Qatar when it was boycotted by KSA, UAE and Egypt, it further chilled relations with those countries.⁸ Türkiye had tensions with Iran over the war in Syria and the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia,⁹ while their interests have aligned on the issue with Kurdish militias.

Türkiye has strong ties with the West, especially in trade, but it has had some friction with its Western allies as well. The EU and Türkiye signed a Customs Union agreement in 1999, marking the official recognition of Türkiye as a candidate for full membership and negotiations for full membership started in 2005.¹⁰ However, the process hasn't seen any progress since 2016 and Türkiye and the EU have had disagreements on whether Türkiye is a fitting candidate.¹¹ In 2017, Türkiye made a deal with the EU regarding Syrian refugees, stopping them from entering EU, thereby giving Türkiye some influence on the EU.¹² In mid-2022 Türkiye held some 3.6 million Syrian refugees.¹³ The U.S. and Türkiye had their disagreements over the treatment of the Kurdish militias: the U.S. supported Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIS by supplying them with weapons, while Türkiye fought its own conflict with Kurdish separatists, mainly the PKK,¹⁴ which Türkiye, EU and U.S. have listed as a terrorist group. Türkiye perceived the U.S.

⁴ Turkey in Central Asia: Possibilities and limits of a greater role, January 18, 2022, [bp328 toni-alaranta-kristiina-silvan turkey-in-central-asia.pdf \(menlosecurity.com\)](#) (accessed on Nov 3, 2022)

⁵ Egypt-Turkey Strained Relations: Implications for Regional Security, March 18, 2020, [Egypt-Turkey Strained Relations: Implications for Regional Security \(arabcenterdc.org\)](#) (accessed on Jan 23, 2023)

⁶ Why Turkey Is Resetting Relations With Saudi Arabia, May 4, 2022, [Why Turkey Is Resetting Relations With Saudi Arabia | Council on Foreign Relations \(cfr.org\)](#) (accessed on Jan 23, 2023)

⁷ Analysis: Turkey and UAE rein in dispute that fuelled conflict and hurt economy, September 6, 2021, [Analysis: Turkey and UAE rein in dispute that fuelled conflict and hurt economy | Reuters](#) (accessed on Jan 23, 2023)

⁸ Arab states talk to Turkey after yearslong rift, May 12, 2021, [Arab states talk to Turkey after yearslong rift – DW – 05/12/2021](#) (accessed on Jan 23, 2023)

⁹ Egypt's coup shakes Brotherhood's Islamic partners in Turkey, July 10, 2013, [Egypt's coup shakes Brotherhood's Islamic partners in Turkey - CSMonitor.com](#) (accessed on Jan 31, 2023)

¹⁰ EU starts historic Turkey membership talks, October 3, 2005, [EU starts historic Turkey membership talks \(nbcnews.com\)](#) (accessed on Nov 28, 2022)

¹¹ Turkey's EU membership bid evaporating, Commission says, October 6, 2020, [Turkey's EU membership bid evaporating, Commission says | Reuters](#) (accessed on Jan 11, 2023)

¹² What is the EU-Turkey deal?, March 18, 2022, [What is the EU-Turkey deal? | The IRC in the EU \(rescue.org\)](#) (accessed on Dec 14, 2022)

¹³ Ranking of the largest Syrian refugee-hosting countries in 2022, January 4, 2023, [Major Syrian refugee-hosting countries worldwide 2022 | Statista](#) (accessed on Jan 23, 2023)

¹⁴ Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK

support to Kurdish militias as betrayal.¹⁵ The U.S. and Türkiye had frictions in FMS and security as well. When Türkiye acquired Russian S-400s in 2019, after Türkiye was denied the option to procure a comparable U.S. weapon system, the U.S. excluded Türkiye from the F-35 program because “F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform that will be used to learn about its advanced capabilities”.¹⁶

Türkiye, NATO and SCO

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO has returned to its roots of collective defense. At the same time, Sweden and Finland made the decision to apply for NATO membership.¹⁷ The application process has been fast so far, all but two countries have ratified their applications to join NATO at the time of this writing. Officially, Türkiye is holding the ratification process because it says these two countries are not doing enough against terrorism e.g., it wants Finland and Sweden to extradite those who it accuses of taking part in the failed coup d'état back in 2016 (PKK and FETÖ members in these countries). Türkiye is also a dialogue partner of SCO seeking full membership. SCO was established “to ensure security and maintain stability across the vast Eurasian region, join forces to counteract emerging challenges and threats, and enhance trade, as well as cultural and humanitarian cooperation”.¹⁸

Assessment: *It's widely speculated that President Erdoğan holds the ratification process to put leverage on the U.S. to acquire U.S. made F-16 fighters as F-35s are out of the question. Delaying the ratification and getting something out of it would likely show president Erdoğan in a better light for the upcoming elections, mainly in the eyes of nationalists. By seeking full membership of SCO, Türkiye mainly looks to improve trade and help the country's economic situation and to further develop ties with CASA countries. Although SCO is not a military alliance in a sense of NATO's Article 5, as a member of both NATO and SCO Türkiye could potentially find itself in a conflicting situation where it might have to choose between the two and potentially further harming the unity of the defense alliance that is NATO. Although not acting in favor of the NATO majority with the ratifications, Türkiye makes itself even more relevant among the allies.*

The War in Ukraine

Before and during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye has balanced between Ukraine and the West and Russia. Türkiye has ties with Russia in tourism, energy, defense and trade and has good relations with Kiev. Türkiye has condemned the Russian invasion and sold Bayraktar drones to Ukraine,¹⁹ but it has not joined the international sanctions against Russia. President Erdoğan calls Putin his “dear friend”, while saying that Russia is not entitled to any occupied territory from Ukraine, including Crimea.²⁰ President Erdoğan has met with Putin during the war and

¹⁵ How Turkey Tries Balancing East and West as War Rages, October 24, 2022, [How Turkey Tries Balancing East and West as War Rages - The Washington Post](#) (accessed on Nov 29, 2022)

¹⁶ US removes Turkey from F-35 fighter jet programme, July 17, 2019, [US removes Turkey from F-35 fighter jet programme - BBC News](#) (accessed on Nov 30, 2022)

¹⁷ Finland announces ‘historic’ NATO bid, and Sweden follows, May 15, 2022, [Finland announces ‘historic’ NATO bid, and Sweden follows | NATO News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Nov 30, 2022)

¹⁸ The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Counteracting Threats to Peace and Security, October, 2017, [The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Counteracting Threats to Peace and Security | United Nations](#) (accessed on Jan 27, 2023)

¹⁹ Russia complains to Turkey over drones sales to Ukraine, Turkish bureaucrat says, April 8, 2022, [Russia complains to Turkey over drones sales to Ukraine, Turkish bureaucrat says | Reuters](#) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

²⁰ Turkey President Erdoğan on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the future of NATO, September 19, 2022, [Turkey President Erdoğan on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the future of NATO | PBS NewsHour](#) (accessed on Dec 5, 2022)

has voiced his will to seek a solution for peace. He acted as a mediator during the war, brokering deals (mainly between the parties of Ukraine, Russia, and UN) on grain,²¹ fertilizers exports,²² and the exchange of POW's.²³

Assessment: *Türkiye seems to leverage the balancing act in its favor. By not taking sides on the war in Ukraine, it can pick the best from both sides. By condemning the Russian invasion, it respects international law and stands with the West, but by not joining the sanctions front against Russia, Türkiye can continue to trade with Russia and even open new economic possibilities. One of these is the planned gas hub in Türkiye²⁴—mainly of Russian natural gas, a move that was fueled by the talks between the Kremlin and Ankara held amidst the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. This gas hub could be very important in shaping Turkish relations with Russia and influence in the region.*

Türkiye's relations with China

Türkiye has come closer with China in recent years and China plays a major part in Türkiye's tilt towards the East. Türkiye can trade more freely with China without the strains that the EU or the U.S. might have, supporting Türkiye's drive for strategic independence. China offers an opportunity to alleviate high inflation and fill some of the gaps left by deteriorating relations with the U.S.²⁵ Although they have disagreed on the Chinese stance on Uyghurs²⁶, in China Türkiye has a likeminded partner supporting a multipolar world. Also, Türkiye's unique position in the intersection of Europe, CAS and the Middle East favors China's strategies, one of which is changing the current rules-based world order.²⁷

Assessment: *Keeping good ties with Türkiye, China benefits from Türkiye's geopolitical position between different regions. Türkiye and China are aligned enough to complement each other over different things in the region. China can utilize Türkiye's ability to move between different blocs to erode Western alliances and international order, and on the other hand, Türkiye having ties with China supports Türkiye's efforts in the Gulf. Together, the two can try to influence the CENTCOM AOR through the economy, something that in the future could be turned into influence over other matters as well—and in Türkiye's case, successful Bayraktar sales are one useful tentacle.*

Relations in CENTCOM AOR

The U.S. footprint has shrunk in the CENTCOM AOR, China is engaging more in the region, Russia's role is changing, and regional countries are moved by regional issues—like rivalries and threats—maybe more than before. The changing dynamics of strategic competition has shifted the equilibrium in the region in a way that leaves the region with more opportunities and independence—even so for Türkiye—as they are not moving in tune with the

²¹ Putin: We could quit grain deal again, but would not block grain for Turkey, November 2, 2022, [Putin: We could quit grain deal again, but would not block grain for Turkey | Reuters](#) (accessed on Jan 23, 2023)

²² Joint Coordination Centre opens in Istanbul to facilitate safe export of commercial foodstuffs and fertilizers from Ukrainian ports, July 27, 2022, [Joint Coordination Centre opens in Istanbul to facilitate safe export of commercial foodstuffs and fertilizers from Ukrainian ports | United Nations in Ukraine](#) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

²³ Russia, Ukraine exchange nearly 300 prisoners in surprise swap, September 21, 2022, [Russia, Ukraine exchange nearly 300 prisoners in surprise swap | Russia-Ukraine war News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

²⁴ Aspiring to be the regional gas hub: the role of Turkey and other SEE countries, January 26, 2023, [Aspiring to be the regional gas hub: the role of Turkey and other SEE countries - CEENERGYNEWS](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

²⁵ Turkey, China and the Evolving Challenge to the Liberal Democracies, August 19, 2022, [Turkey, China and the Evolving Challenge to the Liberal Democracies | Defense.info](#) (accessed on Jan 31, 2023)

²⁶ Turkey and China keep relations on track despite Uighur dispute, February 5, 2022, [Turkey and China keep relations on track despite Uighur dispute | Middle East Eye](#) (accessed on Jan 32, 2023)

²⁷ Turkey, China and the Evolving Challenge to the Liberal Democracies, August 19, 2022, [Turkey, China and the Evolving Challenge to the Liberal Democracies | Defense.info](#) (accessed on Jan 31, 2023)

superpowers.²⁸ Türkiye has been actively in talks and mended ties with many of the CENTCOM AOR countries it used to have friction with. Lately, Türkiye has normalized ties with Israel;²⁹ improved relations with UAE;³⁰ have had talks with Egypt,³¹ although not without some bumps;³² improved relations with Iran;³³ and relations with KSA have developed quite quickly. Saudi Arabia's finance minister, Mohammed al-Jadaan, commented that "there is great improvement in our relationship with Türkiye and we aspire for investment opportunities in Türkiye and other countries".³⁴

Assessment: *While the superpowers are not insignificant, the changing strategic climate is pushing countries to improve their relations with former opponents regardless of who takes the initiative. This has favored Türkiye as well. By improving ties with AOR countries, Türkiye tries to help its troubled economy by, for example, ending the blockade by KSA of Turkish goods³⁵ and opening diplomatic and economic venues. By resetting relations, it is making way for Türkiye's heavily grown military industry in a situation where Russia doesn't have the capacity to provide due to the war in Ukraine, and where the U.S. doesn't always meet the needs of the regional countries with FMS.*

Türkiye and Iran

Recently, president Erdoğan has been warming relations with Iran as well. The leaders of Türkiye, Russia and Iran met trilaterally on 19th of July 2022 to discuss "cooperation to eliminate terrorists in Syria".³⁶ More recently Iran's foreign minister met with his counterpart and president Erdoğan in Türkiye on 17th of January 2023 where they also discussed about "rapprochement between Türkiye and the Syrian government". Turkish – Iranian relations have not always been only courteous, as they have had disagreements over different issues.

Assessment: *An example of how Türkiye is willing to move between different blocs without caring too much of the repercussions – one reason why Arab countries have not developed strong trust with Türkiye. Although there might be some repercussions when balancing between different parties, it makes Türkiye a more significant contender to consider. Turkish – Iranian relations are tied to the energy sector, as Iran is a major supplier of natural gas to Türkiye³⁷ and will most likely contribute to Türkiye's desire to become a global gas hub.*

²⁸ 10 key events and trends in the Middle East and North Africa in 2022, December 19, 2022, [10 key events and trends in the Middle East and North Africa in 2022 | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

²⁹ 10 key events and trends in the Middle East and North Africa in 2022, December 19, 2022, [10 key events and trends in the Middle East and North Africa in 2022 | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

³⁰ Why Turkey Is Resetting Relations With Saudi Arabia, May4, 2022, [Why Turkey Is Resetting Relations With Saudi Arabia | Council on Foreign Relations \(cfr.org\)](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

³¹ Turkey-Egypt Relations: Prospects for Normalization and Challenges Ahead, January 11, 2023 [Turkey-Egypt Relations: Prospects for Normalization and Challenges Ahead - Politics Today](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

³² Turkish FM says slowdown in normalizing relations with Egypt 'not from Ankara', December 31, 2022, [Turkish FM says slowdown in normalizing relations with Egypt 'not from Ankara' - Egypt Independent](#) (accessed on Jan 25, 2023)

³³ Turkey, Iran to step up cooperation on Ankara-Damascus thaw, January 17, 2023, [Turkey, Iran to step up cooperation on Ankara-Damascus thaw - Al-Monitor: Independent, trusted coverage of the Middle East](#) (accessed on Jan 30, 2023)

³⁴ Saudi Arabia will soon make \$5 bln deposit with Turkey -Saudi finance minister, December 7, 2022, [Saudi Arabia will soon make \\$5 bln deposit with Turkey -Saudi finance minister | Reuters](#) (accessed on Jan 25, 2023)

³⁵ Why Turkey Is Resetting Relations With Saudi Arabia, May4, 2022, [Why Turkey Is Resetting Relations With Saudi Arabia | Council on Foreign Relations \(cfr.org\)](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

³⁶ In Tehran, Putin, Raisi and Erdogan vow to continue Syria cooperation, July 19, 2022, [In Tehran, Putin, Raisi and Erdogan vow to continue Syria cooperation | The Times of Israel](#) (accessed on Jan 30, 2023)

³⁷ Iran FM says Turkey, Iran to implement strategic cooperation plan soon, January 17, 2023, [Iran FM says Turkey, Iran to implement strategic cooperation plan soon | Al Mayadeen English](#) (accessed on Jan 30, 2023)

Türkiye's security concerns in Syria

The Erdoğan and al-Assad families used to have close ties, but since the Syrian conflict broke they have been on opposing sides. Recently, president Erdoğan voiced his will to normalize relations with al-Assad's Syria, in a quite surprising move that could have significant effects. Türkiye has managed to put this desire into action, with the help of Russia as the mediator. Defense ministers of Türkiye, Syria and Russia held talks in December 2022 and discussed the Syrian crisis, refugees and fighting extremists,³⁸ and in late January 2023, president Erdoğan called for another meeting between them, this time saying Iran could join them for the first time.³⁹

As mentioned, Türkiye has improved its relationships with the Arab countries and Israel, but these countries are not excited about Türkiye potentially expanding its 'safe zone' territory in Syria. Türkiye has suffered terrorist attacks by the PKK in Türkiye and has tried to suppress the threat with military operations against PKK in Northern Syria. As a result of these operations, Türkiye has stationed troops in Syria and established what it considers as a security buffer along the southern border. Türkiye signed agreements to suppress the terrorist threat from north Syria with both the U.S. and Russia, but the terms of these agreements were not fulfilled by the U.S. and Russia, at least according to Türkiye.⁴⁰ President Erdoğan has threatened to launch another land operation in Syria⁴¹ and the U.S. and Russia have voiced their concerns about any new attacks and appealed to President Erdoğan to refrain from any land operations.⁴²

Assessment: *Possible normalization of relations between Türkiye and Syria would reshape the situation in Syria, as it is a hard turn in policy.⁴³ This move to normalize ties with al-Assad has pros and cons for Türkiye; it could help stabilize the country and thus lessen the terrorist threat towards Türkiye (and open up economic possibilities in long term), but it could also do the opposite, as al-Assad certainly wants Turkish troops out of Syria. For the U.S., this shift in policy is a hit in already troubled relations between them. This is also a move by Türkiye, showing that it will operate without caring much about the views of the U.S. For the countries in the AOR, Türkiye acknowledging al-Assad gives more confidence in their own position towards Syria. Türkiye's move will likely further erode the U.S. influence in the AOR, as more countries are willing to accept al-Assad's regime, and at the same time Türkiye and AOR countries find one more issue to agree on. Countries in the region would oppose any Turkish land operations in Syria, as it would escalate the violence in the region and most likely benefit ISIS. More importantly, now when Arab*

³⁸ Turkey, Syria, Russia defence ministers hold talks in Moscow, December 28, 2022, [Turkey, Syria, Russia defence ministers hold talks in Moscow | Syria's War News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Jan 27, 2023)

³⁹ Erdogan Calls for Turkish-Syrian-Russian-Iranian Meeting, January 31, 2023, [Erdogan Calls for Turkish-Syrian-Russian-Iranian Meeting - The Syrian Observer](#) (accessed Jan, 31, 2023)

⁴⁰ In 2019 the U.S. and Türkiye made an agreement regarding the situation in north Syria. They agreed that the two governments commit to safeguard religious and ethnic minorities, both governments would increase cooperation to help detain ISIS fighters. Türkiye agreed to pause its offensive for 120 hours to allow the United States to facilitate the withdrawal of YPG forces from the Turkish-controlled safe zone. A bit later similar agreement was made between Türkiye and Russia.

⁴¹ Erdogan threatens ground operation into Syria, November 21, 2022, [Erdogan threatens ground operation into Syria - Al-Monitor: Independent, trusted coverage of the Middle East](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

⁴² Russia Expects Türkiye to Abandon Operation in Northern Syria, December 13, 2022, [Russia Expects Türkiye to Abandon Operation in Northern Syria | Asharq AL-awsat \(aawsat.com\)](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

⁴³ Turkey, Syria, Russia defence ministers hold talks in Moscow, December 28, 2022, [Turkey, Syria, Russia defence ministers hold talks in Moscow | Syria's War News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Jan 27, 2023)

League countries like KSA and UAE have changed their stance in the conflict and opened trade with al-Assad's Syria,⁴⁴ any attacks would again risk the efforts towards more normal relations and stability.⁴⁵

Arms Sales, Military Cooperation

In recent years, Türkiye has successfully increased its foreign military sales and it has many competent weapon systems like the Sungur air defense missile system⁴⁶, the Akinci drone, future combat drone Kizilelma,⁴⁷ Barkan armored vehicle and the Bayraktar TB2,⁴⁸ which has become its most valuable weapon system. The demand for UAVs/UASs rose since their operational success in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Libyan civil war, war in Syria,⁴⁹ and Tigray war.⁵⁰ It has sold battle-tested Bayraktar drones to at least 28 countries,⁵¹ including Ukraine and Qatar, KSA, Kuwait, Iraq, UAE, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. With the rising demand for UAV/UAS, Türkiye has become one of the world's leading armed drone producers.⁵²

Assessment: *In the success of FMS spearheaded by the Bayraktar drones, Türkiye has an effective diplomatic instrument. When Türkiye recently alleviated the disputes with Arab countries, the Bayraktar was one of the concrete tools making it possible. Although the manufacturer of Bayraktar, Akinci and Kizilelma is not a government-owned company, its products are a valuable tool of strategic communications for the government. With arms sales, Türkiye can strengthen and gain influence within CENTCOM AOR, including the countries who accused Türkiye of spreading its influence during and following the Arab Spring.*

Conclusion

Türkiye's balancing between East and West is nothing new, but lately it has made moves in a way that tests many countries relations with Türkiye, maybe more so within its Western allies than its partners in the East. It has shown that it is willing to push for gains, even if it might do some collateral damage to the cohesion between allies. Being a NATO member and a dialogue partner of SCO gives opportunities from both worlds, but it could be very conflicting for Türkiye. Potentially Türkiye might need to make choices over one or the other and thus it could harm Türkiye's goal of strategic independence, as it might narrow its space for maneuver. The fact that Türkiye does not participate in the sanctions front against Russia and keeps fairly close ties with Russia is not welcomed within Western allies, but for Türkiye it has made it possible to broker the grain deal, an effort that has alleviated the wheat crisis.

⁴⁴ Despite the war, Syria to revive trade with Saudi Arabia, January 23, 2023, [SYRIA – SAUDI ARABIA Despite the war, Syria to revive trade with Saudi Arabia \(asianews.it\)](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

⁴⁵ UAE top diplomat back in Syria as relations continue to thaw, January 4, 2023, [UAE top diplomat back in Syria as relations continue to thaw - ABC News \(go.com\)](#) (accessed on Jan 26, 2023)

⁴⁶ SUNGUR Air Defence Missile System, [Roketsan - SUNGUR Air Defence Missile System](#) (accessed on Feb 2, 2023)

⁴⁷ Turkey's Supersonic 'Kizilelma' Combat Drone Completes Maiden Flight, December 15, 2022, [Turkey's Supersonic 'Kizilelma' Combat Drone Completes Maiden Flight \(thedefensepost.com\)](#) (accessed on Feb 2, 2023)

⁴⁸ Akinci, Kizilelma, Bayraktar and Barkan are manufactured by Baykar Technology.

⁴⁹ An Unmanned Interdictor: Bayraktar TB2s Over Libya, November 22, 2021, [An Unmanned Interdictor: Bayraktar TB2s Over Libya - Oryx \(oryxspioenkop.com\)](#) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

⁵⁰ Turkish Drones Join Ethiopia's war, Satellite Imagery Confirms, January 11, 2022, [Turkish Drones Join Ethiopia's war, Satellite Imagery Confirms - Peace Organization PAX \(paxforpeace.nl\)](#) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

⁵¹ Turkish drone-maker Baykar exports Bayraktar TB2 to 28 countries, January 18, 2023, [Turkish drone-maker Baykar exports Bayraktar TB2 to 28 countries \(aa.com.tr\)](#) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

⁵² The Turkish Drone That Changed the Nature of Warfare, May 9, 2022, [The Turkish Drone That Changed the Nature of Warfare | The New Yorker](#) (accessed on Jan 24, 2023)

Türkiye mending ties with Arab countries is in conformity with those countries stepping out of the tune of the superpowers and tuning more into the beat of the regional situation. The changing equilibrium of strategic competition gives room for the middle powers to seek a more prominent role and Türkiye is actively involved in the race. The oil countries are also diversifying their economy, and Türkiye fits in that slot, too.

Depending on your perspective of Türkiye's actions, they may either be welcomed and nothing out of the ordinary, or they may be seen as "cherry picking" while risking relations with allies. By balancing between different blocs, Türkiye works in accordance with its strategic goals. It is willing to make some rivals along the way if the gains are greater than the repercussions. While this policy has given Türkiye more weight in the near term, it also harms itself by bouncing around. It remains to be seen how long Türkiye can leverage the situation for a greater role and profits without getting harmed in another way. The war in Ukraine is an indicator to watch, because when the war in Ukraine ends, it will show whether Türkiye has succeeded in turning short-term gains into long-term rewards.

Türkiye needs balanced actions within the AOR if it wants to keep the improvement of relations moving forward. In the AOR countries, it doesn't go unnoticed that Türkiye does not always care too much about the opinions of its allies. Swinging between blocs has previously harmed the trust between Türkiye and Arab countries. Türkiye should choose its bidding wisely and not push hard in its efforts for influence, as these newly improved relations are in their infancy after decade or so of icy conditions. Otherwise, Türkiye remains relevant and even more in strategic competition. When countries and coalitions are in motion and Türkiye is more willing to maneuver between the blocs, it is important to continue the work with Türkiye and to have resolve to keep it out of the Russia – Iran bloc. Türkiye remains as a vital member of NATO and a partner to the U.S. and its allies throughout the adjacent CENTCOM AOR.

Recommendations for the U.S./USCENTCOM

- Sustain efforts to improve relations and mutual trust with Türkiye so that it does not lean too close to Russia and Iran. NATO provides a natural structure for both multi- and bilateral cooperation.
- Communicate to Türkiye the harms of the growing involvement of China and Russia over possible gains. Russian invasion in Ukraine gives plenty of reasons.
- In Syria, work with both Türkiye and the Kurdish militias, as Türkiye's policy shift in Syria might leave a small opportunity to stabilize the Kurdish area in Syria. Try to calm the situation between the Kurdish militias and Türkiye by encouraging Türkiye to find a solution to withdraw or reduce its troops in Syria and trying to influence these militias to abstain from attacking Türkiye. Previous agreements provide a starting point.
- Monitor the outcome of the general elections in Türkiye in May 2023.