Turkey Is Not Choosing Sides: Ankara's Strategy in a Fragmenting World

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As power disperses and alliances grow more flexible, Ankara is multiplying its security partnerships. The Mecca Defense Agreement, rivalry with Israel in Syria and shifting Eastern Mediterranean alignments show Turkey pursuing strategic autonomy within NATO while confronting the limits of hedging strategies.

Highlights

1. When Libya's eastern-based parliament endorsed the 2019 maritime deal with Turkey in October 2026, it showed Ankara's ability to win over former adversaries – making Turkey an indispensable interlocutor for Italy, despite persistent frictions.
2. Geographical reach is not strategic control. Turkey's economic, institutional and military resources are finite, and spreading them across too many theaters risks eroding the very freedom of action Ankara seeks to preserve.
3. Ankara's influence also runs through the Middle Corridor and COP31 diplomacy. As in Byzantine and Ottoman statecraft, the challenge is to turn a crossroads position into leverage without becoming captive to any power.

Turkey is preparing for an international order in which power is increasingly dispersed, alliances are becoming more flexible, and regional actors are trying to shape their own geopolitical environment. Ankara's decision to join a collective defense arrangement with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, its increasingly tense relationship with Israel, and the expanding cooperation with Turkic states may initially appear to be separate developments. However, they reflect Turkey's determination to secure a pivotal position within the new international security architecture.

The weakening of established regional balances, the consequences of successive wars, and doubts about the reliability of external security guarantees have encouraged regional powers to reconsider their partnerships and to explore alternative arrangements. These supplement traditional alliances, providing additional instruments of influence, deterrence, and diplomatic flexibility. For Turkey – a member of NATO and of the Council of Europe, as well as an official candidate for EU accession – this transformation creates opportunities as well as risks. Ankara seeks to consolidate its influence in Syria, deepen its partnerships

with Turkic states, Gulf countries and Africa, defend its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and maintain its relevance within the Western alliance. At the same time, it tries to manage an increasingly difficult relationship with Israel without allowing regional competition to develop into direct military confrontation.

Three recent and interconnected developments illustrate how Ankara is seeking to transform regional uncertainty into diplomatic leverage.

1. The Mecca Agreement: A new security architecture?

On 7 August 2026, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement, establishing a collective defense framework. The agreement provides that an armed attack against one of the participating countries will be considered an attack against all. The arrangement acquired urgency following attacks by Yemen's Houthis against Saudi territory and infrastructure. On 5 October, the three countries convened an emergency meeting in Riyadh and agreed to begin implementing their collective defense commitments. They also announced measures to facilitate the rapid deployment of agreed military capabilities to Saudi Arabia.

First, the agreement brings together three countries with complementary strategic capabilities. Saudi Arabia possesses considerable financial resources and a central position in global energy markets. Pakistan contributes a large military establishment and nuclear deterrent capabilities, although the agreement should not automatically be interpreted as extending Pakistan's nuclear umbrella to its partners. Turkey brings a NATO-standard military, a robust defense industry and operational experience across several regional theaters.

Second, the agreement reflects the changing relationship between Ankara and Riyadh. Only a few years ago, Turkey and Saudi Arabia were on opposing sides of several regional disputes, particularly following the Arab uprisings. Their rivalry became especially visible during the Qatar crisis of 2017 and after the murder by Saudi agents of the Saudi journalist and US resident Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's Consulate General in Istanbul in 2018.

Their current rapprochement demonstrates an important characteristic of diplomacy: ideological disagreements and political rivalries can give way to pragmatic cooperation when strategic interests converge. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to describe the Mecca Agreement as the emergence of an anti-Western alliance. All three countries are close US partners, and as far as Turkey is concerned, NATO possesses an integrated command structure, established procedures and decades of institutional experience. Besides, the new trilateral arrangement remains at an early stage of institutional development, despite the appointment of its first secretary-general in October. There is also a fundamental question concerning the extent of collective defense obligations. A commitment to mutual assistance does not automatically determine the nature, scale or timing of a military response. These matters depend on political decisions, military capabilities and domestic legal procedures.

For Ankara, the principal attraction of the agreement is therefore not necessarily the prospect of fighting alongside Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. It is the possibility of acquiring additional strategic leverage and contributing to the development of a regional security order in which Turkey is a participant rather than a spectator. Besides, Ankara is interested in Saudi Arabia's financial power, which could support Turkey's defense industry.

The implications of this rapprochement also extend to the Horn of Africa, where Turkey has established a significant military, economic and diplomatic presence, particularly in Somalia. The Gulf and the Horn of Africa can no longer be regarded as separate geopolitical theaters: developments in the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden increasingly connect their security dynamics. Saudi Arabia's growing engagement with Somalia creates opportunities for Ankara and Riyadh to coordinate maritime security, infrastructure investment and diplomatic initiatives. However, the Mecca Agreement does not automatically translate into a common African strategy.

The agreement also carries risks. Saudi Arabia's confrontation with the Yemeni Houthis demonstrates how collective defense commitments can expose participating countries to conflicts they do not directly control. Turkish policymakers will therefore try to reconcile the credibility of their commitments with the need to avoid unwanted military entanglement. The Mecca Agreement is best understood as an experiment in regional security cooperation, reflecting both the ambitions of middle powers, and the uncertainties of a changing international system.

2. Syria: The epicenter of the Turkish-Israeli rivalry

If the Mecca Agreement illustrates Turkey's search for new partnerships, Syria reveals the growing difficulties of managing relations with established regional powers. The deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations cannot be explained exclusively by developments in Syria, as the Israeli military operations in Gaza have profoundly damaged bilateral relations. Yet Syria has introduced a potentially more dangerous dimension: the possibility that Turkish and Israeli security interests might collide directly.

For Ankara, Syria is a central component of Turkish national security. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Turkey has hosted more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees and faced cross-border security threats. Turkey's principal objective is the emergence of a stable Syrian state capable of exercising authority over its territory, while preventing armed groups regarded by Ankara as terrorist organizations from consolidating autonomous structures along the 911-km-long Syrian-Turkish border.

Israel approaches Syria from a different perspective. Israeli policymakers have traditionally regarded Syria as a potential source of military threats, particularly because of its historical confrontation with Israel, its relationship with Iran and the presence of armed organizations hostile to the Israeli state. The weakening of Syrian central authority has created opportunities for Israel to act against perceived threats, but it has also generated uncertainty about the country's future political and military orientation.

Here lies the fundamental contradiction: Turkey regards the restoration of Syrian state authority as an essential condition for regional stability. By contrast, Israel is concerned that the consolidation of a Syrian state could create new security risks. This does not mean that Turkey and Israel, both US partners, are heading toward a direct military confrontation. Their objectives, however, can become incompatible when translated into military deployments, security arrangements and territorial influence.

The Turkish position reflects both a legal principle and a strategic calculation. A fragmented Syria would complicate border security, weaken the prospects for refugee returns and potentially create additional opportunities for armed organizations. Israel, for its part, has security concerns regarding hostile forces near its borders and seeks to prevent the emergence of military threats in strategically sensitive areas. The danger is that actions considered defensive by one side may be interpreted as offensive by the other.

This is a classic security dilemma: measures adopted by one state to increase its security can generate a perception of insecurity for another, producing a cycle of mutual suspicion and military countermeasures. The Syrian theater therefore requires mechanisms for preventing incidents, managing military proximity and maintaining communication even when political relations remain hostile.

3. The politics of regional alignments

The third development Turkey is carefully monitoring concerns the increasingly close relations between Greece, the Greek Cypriot Government and Israel, alongside the expanding regional role of the United Arab Emirates. From Ankara's perspective, these relationships are particularly sensitive because they connect two dimensions that Turkish policymakers have traditionally considered separately: the Eastern Mediterranean and the European Union.

Greece and Israel have recently developed substantial cooperation in defense, intelligence, technology and energy. Their relationship has become especially visible through military procurement and joint security initiatives. In August 2026, Greece and Israel concluded a major defense agreement concerning the development of Greece's air and missile defense capabilities. For Athens and Nicosia, cooperation with Israel contributes to military modernization and deterrence. For Israel, it provides opportunities for defense exports and strengthens its relationships with European partners, potentially increasing its leverage vis-à-vis Turkey. Similar considerations have contributed to the growing strategic partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan, too.

The UAE adds another dimension. Abu Dhabi has developed extensive political, economic and security relations with Greece while maintaining relations with Israel through the framework established by the Abraham Accords. However, these overlapping partnerships should not be mistaken for a formal trilateral alliance directed against Turkey. Their objectives are not necessarily identical, and the participating countries maintain other

regional relationships that complicate any interpretation based on rigid opposing blocs. Indeed, the UAE's relations with Turkey have improved considerably since the period of intense regional rivalry that followed the Arab uprisings. In other words, its cooperation with Greece and Israel does not automatically imply confrontation with Ankara.

Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of these partnerships influences Turkish threat perceptions. One example is the Great Sea Interconnector, a major electricity infrastructure project designed to connect Greece and Cyprus, with a possible subsequent extension to Israel. Turkey disputes aspects of the maritime jurisdiction underlying the project and insists on prior coordination regarding activities in areas where it asserts maritime rights. Greece rejects the Turkish interpretation and considers the project legitimate under its understanding of international maritime law. The United States has also expressed support for the initiative, regarding it as part of a broader effort to diversify energy connections. The dispute illustrates how infrastructure projects can acquire geopolitical significance.

For Turkey, the concern is not simply that Greece and Israel are cooperating. It is that the accumulation of economic, technological and military partnerships could gradually reduce Ankara's influence over the regional arrangements that shape its immediate environment. There is, however, a danger in interpreting every partnership involving Greece or Israel as an attempt to contain Turkey. Such an interpretation risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: cooperation perceived as threatening produces countermeasures, which then reinforce the original perception of hostility. The Eastern Mediterranean therefore illustrates both the importance and the limitations of balance-of-power politics.

Libya provides another illustration of the complexity of these regional alignments. Turkey's military intervention in support of the Tripoli-based government in 2019–2020 and its controversial maritime delimitation agreement with Libya have made Ankara an indispensable actor in the country's political future, while complicating relations with other Mediterranean powers. More recently, Turkey has also developed contacts with eastern Libya, reflecting a pragmatic effort to diversify its local partnerships. A particularly revealing development occurred on 20 October 2026, when Libya's eastern-based parliament approved the controversial 2019 maritime agreement with Turkey, reversing years of opposition. This decision illustrated Ankara's capacity to engage former adversaries and consolidate its Mediterranean position without abandoning its relationships with Tripoli. At the same time, it reopened questions about competing maritime claims and generated renewed objections from Greece and the Greek Cypriot Government.

This evolution is particularly significant for Italy, too. Although Ankara and Rome do not always share the same Mediterranean priorities, their overlapping interests in Libyan stability and migration management have encouraged pragmatic cooperation. The trilateral meeting between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Libyan Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah in Istanbul in August 2025 demonstrated the potential for practical cooperation. Nevertheless, important differences remain, particularly concerning maritime jurisdictions and the regional consequences of Turkish military influence. Libya thus illustrates a broader paradox of contemporary Mediterranean geopolitics: the same Turkish activism that generates friction with certain European partners can simultaneously make Ankara an indispensable interlocutor for others. For

Italy, engaging Turkey is not necessarily an endorsement of Ankara's regional ambitions, but an acknowledgment of geopolitical realities.

4. Strategic autonomy does not mean abandoning NATO

The Mecca Agreement and the developments concerning Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa illustrate a common feature of contemporary Turkish diplomacy: Ankara increasingly operates across interconnected geopolitical theaters, where partnerships in one region may coexist with rivalries in another. As a matter of fact, Turkey's foreign policy has long involved balancing relations with different centers of power. Its membership in NATO since 1952 has never prevented it from maintaining extensive relationships with Russia, developing partnerships in the Middle East or pursuing diplomatic initiatives beyond the Western institutional framework. The difference today is the increasing number of security arrangements in which Ankara seeks an active role.

The NATO summit held in Ankara on 7–8 July 2026 provided an important reminder of the continuing significance of the transatlantic relationship. For Turkey, hosting the summit was diplomatically significant, as it highlighted the country's importance within NATO at a time when security challenges extend from the Black Sea to the Middle East. Turkey possesses NATO's second-largest armed forces in personnel terms and occupies a geographical position connecting several regions central to the Alliance's security concerns.

The United States occupies an increasingly paradoxical position in this equation. Washington remains Turkey's principal security partner, yet American policies in Syria, Washington's relationship with Israel, and longstanding disagreements over defense procurement have also contributed to Ankara's search for greater autonomy. At the same time, several of Turkey's regional competitors or partners maintain close relationships with Washington. The challenge for Turkish diplomacy is therefore not simply to balance the United States against other powers, but to navigate a regional environment in which American influence remains considerable without necessarily producing a coherent or predictable security order. In this sense, Turkey's search for strategic autonomy is partly a response to the uncertainties of American leadership, rather than a rejection of the transatlantic relationship.

Turkey's hedging strategy is designed to maintain multiple relationships to reduce dependence on any single partner and preserve options under conditions of uncertainty. Yet hedging has limits. Partnerships can create contradictory expectations, and commitments undertaken in one regional framework may complicate relations within another. Turkey's challenge is therefore to ensure that this diversification increases its diplomatic flexibility without producing incompatible military obligations.

Strategic autonomy also has a material dimension. Turkey's diplomatic ambitions extend across an increasingly broad geographical space, but its economic resources, institutional capacities and military power are not unlimited. Maintaining influence simultaneously in multiple theaters requires sustained political attention and considerable financial

resources. Moreover, geographical reach should not be confused with strategic control: being present in several regional theaters does not necessarily mean being able to determine their outcomes. The risk for Ankara is that the multiplication of partnerships and commitments may eventually reduce the very freedom of action they are intended to preserve.

Turkey's search for influence is not limited to security partnerships. It also encompasses economic connectivity and multilateral diplomacy, two dimensions illustrated by the recent summit of the Organization of Turkic States (29–30 October) and the COP31 climate conference (9–20 November). For Turkey, cooperation with the Turkic states offers opportunities to strengthen connections with Central Asia and support the development of trans-Eurasian transport routes. The Middle Corridor, connecting Asia and Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus and Turkey, is particularly important in this regard. Its strategic significance extends beyond commerce. Transport corridors can reduce dependence on individual transit countries, facilitate economic diversification and generate new forms of political interdependence.

As for climate diplomacy, at first glance, it may appear disconnected from military alliances and regional rivalries. Yet the relationship is increasingly close: energy security, technological competition, critical minerals, infrastructure investment and climate adaptation are components of international power politics. Turkey's role as host of COP31 provides an opportunity to engage countries with which it may otherwise have difficult political relations. It also highlights an important characteristic of contemporary Turkish diplomacy: Ankara seeks influence not only through military capabilities and security partnerships but also through international institutions, economic connectivity and multilateral negotiations.

5. Conclusion

Turkey's growing diplomatic reach should not be confused with unlimited strategic autonomy. The ultimate measure of Ankara's success will not be the number of partnerships it establishes or the geographical extent of its influence, but its ability to convert these relationships into lasting advantages without becoming entangled in commitments it cannot control. In this respect, Turkish foreign policy may be understood in the light of a much longer diplomatic tradition. Both Byzantine and Ottoman diplomacy were shaped by the imperative of navigating complex geopolitical environments, managing rival powers, exploiting shifting alignments, and preserving room for maneuver through negotiation as much as through military strength. Although the historical contexts are profoundly different, the underlying strategic challenge remains familiar: how to transform a geographical position at the intersection of competing worlds from a source of vulnerability into an instrument of influence. In the 21st century's increasingly fragmented international order, Ankara's success may therefore depend less on choosing the right camp than on mastering the art of diplomacy that the "New Rome" cultivated for centuries: the ability to engage competing powers without becoming captive to any of them.

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