

Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict, the re-emergence of the Pakistan-India conflict, the possibility that the ongoing war in Ukraine will not end but will continue to intensify, the civil war in Sudan, the potential internal conflict in Somalia, the military engagement against the Houthis in Yemen fueling asymmetric conflicts, and tensions between the United States and Venezuela could push the competition beyond controllable limits.

The third is the widening gap between the normative claim of the international order and the power politics on the ground: Although rules and institutions continue to exist, deterrence, coalitions and temporary alliances are becoming more decisive in resolving conflicts. The opposite situation may also be true: political and military engagements that are not based on rules and international legitimacy may deepen the conflict. This shows that the rules-based international system is weakening rather than strengthening.

The fourth intensifying dynamic is the chronic nature of crises and the increased risk of their spread. Issues such as the Gaza war and its regional consequences, the challenges faced in building the state and security architecture in Syria, and the impact of the Ukraine war in the Black Sea on maritime security and trade routes point to the existence of prolonged risks in 2026, rather than a temporary wave. In this environment, while European security is seeking a new defense-industrial transformation, the security architecture in the Middle East is being reshaped in a fragmented and competitive manner. Potential tensions centered in the Asia-Pacific region also place security-related vulnerabilities at the forefront. Consequently, 2026 stands out as a year in which both the search for regional order accelerates and vulnerabilities become entrenched.

#### Turkey's orientation

Within this global framework, it is possible to interpret Turkish foreign policy around three main themes during the 2025-2026 transition: the security axis and the immediate neighborhood; alliances, balancing and multilateralism; geo-economics, connectivity, and capacity. These themes are not disconnected from one another; on the contrary, in a period of increasing interconnectedness between issues, developments in one area directly affect the scope for action in other areas.

From a security perspective, the transition from 2025 to 2026 shows that risks in Turkey's immediate neighborhood have taken on a "multifaceted" nature. Here, the Black Sea, Syria and Israel, along with the Eastern Mediterranean, have become three sub-areas that influence each other within the same security equation.

#### Black Sea security

The prolonged conflict in the Black Sea creates a framework that constantly tests Turkey's role within NATO and its regional stability policy. The need for maritime security, continuity of trade and limiting the geographical spread of the conflict is pushing Ankara to maintain deterrence and collective defense on the one hand, while seeking "controlled stability" in the Black Sea on the other. In particular, the testing of Black Sea security and the homeland defense line by Russian-made drones at the end of the year has placed the need to deepen military capacity at the center of Turkey's foreign and security policy as a critical issue. In this context, the cornerstone of Turkey's balancing policy is to maintain a line that does not upset regional power balances or escalate tensions but makes security risks manageable. The primary risk in the Black Sea in 2026 is that the war will continue to have an indirect impact on maritime security and critical infrastructure/logistics lines, simultaneously challenging both Turkey's economic connectivity and security priorities.

#### YPG as Israel's hand in Syria

The transition to 2026 in the Syria file means the simultaneous management of the triad of field security, state building and diplomatic normalization. From



Turkey's perspective, security priorities in the field are directly linked not only to border security and counterterrorism but also to whether the governance architecture that emerges in Syria will produce long-term stability. The emphasis on inclusivity and national unity at this point is not merely a normative preference, but a strategic framework carrying security rationality: An order that deepens internal legitimacy and can involve national actors in a Damascus-centered state-building process reduces the risk of fragmentation and limits the reproduction of cross-border security threats.

The aforementioned objective necessitates the implementation of military and diplomatic deterrence to eliminate the YPG issue without delay. However, Israel's disruptive influence in Syria and the fragile balances on the ground may make it possible for "external factors" to exploit the axis of inclusivity, thereby complicating the achievement of the desired outcomes. In 2026, the decisive test in this file will be the slowing integration processes, the position of some armed actors, and the possibility that Israel's security reflexes on the ground will erode its capacity to produce stability. Therefore, 2026 stands out as a year in which Turkey will seek to reinforce its deterrence by using "hard balancing" methods in Syria and in which the constraints on Israel will be tested.

#### Anti-Turkey axis in East Med

At this point, we see that the Israeli factor has been added as a critical layer to the security axis as a whole. In the transition from 2025 to 2026, the competition between Turkey and Israel is no longer limited to tactical tensions in Syria but is extending to the wider Eastern Mediterranean. In the process of rebuilding Syria's security architecture, Israel's security orientation clashes with Turkey's border security and stability priorities, which makes the competition more visible and riskier. However, the Eastern Mediterranean dimension of the competition has become the main factor reinforcing the structural nature of the issue.



In 2026, Turkey's "threshold management" means balancing strategic autonomy, NATO commitments and regional crises while aligning geopolitical aims with economic capacity.



Interlinked tensions in the Black Sea, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, especially involving Israel and the YPG, risk militarizing disputes, testing Turkey's alliances and geo-economic resilience.

Turkey is at the center of the realignment trend along the Israel, Greece and Greek Cypriot administration axis, because this realignment is often legitimized by a strategic rationale aimed at limiting Ankara's influence over maritime jurisdiction areas, energy and connectivity corridors. Thus, Turkey is not merely the "opposing actor" in this axis; it has become the central variable determining the reason, pace and form of the realignment.

An important consequence of this competition is the risk that the struggle for position in the political-diplomatic arena will increasingly shift to a militarized domain. Energy projects, disputes over maritime jurisdiction, joint air and sea exercises, defense cooperation agreements and discussions on regional basing are making it difficult for diplomacy to remain at a low-cost level of rhetoric, paving the way for security interactions in which deterrence demonstrations are increasingly employed.

#### Intertwined security issues

In 2026, two effects of this shift will come to the fore: First, the likelihood of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean will increase, raising the risk of miscalculation. Second, the interconnection between issues will deepen: developments in Syria will affect the military-diplomatic balance in the Eastern Mediterranean, while alignments in the Eastern Mediterranean may directly affect Turkey's bargaining space in its alliance policy and regional strategic calculations.

Therefore, the Israeli factor in 2026 is not a single crisis issue for Turkey. It has become a multilayered arena of competition that must be managed simultaneously on land and sea. Consequently, Israel's shift from its 2016-2022 geo-economically centered (primarily energy-related) moves against Turkey toward military balancing and "military provocation" in the new period could lead to a more severe rupture in Ankara's security paradigm than ever before and shift the tension between Türkiye and Israel from the political to the military axis.

#### Alliances as answer

The second main theme in Turkish foreign policy is alliances, balancing and multilateralism. Throughout 2025, Turkey's capacity for bargaining within alliances became more pronounced, as it continued to keep its national security priorities on the table while remaining part of the deterrence and collective defense agenda within the NATO context. This line could be tested in two ways in the transition to 2026. The first is the transformation in the European security architecture: the trend toward increased



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defense spending, joint procurement and defense industry capacity expansion presents both opportunities and risks for Turkey. The opportunity lies in the possibility of industrial partnerships and integration into supply chains, particularly through programs such as the Security Action for Europe (SAFE). The risk lies in the strengthening of exclusionary mechanisms in institutional and financial instruments. Greece and the Greek Cypriot administration's attempts to consolidate an anti-Turkey front within Europe in defense and security architecture discussions may accelerate Ankara's search for alternative forms of relations. Second is the nature of relations with the US. A more realistic reading of the Turkey-US relationship in 2026 will be framed by "controlled coordination and crisis management" rather than "strategic alignment." Technical processes in the defense field, particularly Turkey's removal from CAATSA, and the need for coordination on the ground may foster cooperation, but mutual distrust will maintain fragility. Therefore, Turkey's success in 2026 will depend on its ability to sustain alliance relations not solely through normative alignment but through mechanisms that function on concrete dossiers and crisis management capacity.

#### Economic sustainability

The third theme in Turkey's foreign policy is geo-economics, connectivity and capacity. The performance of Turkish foreign policy in the transition from 2025 to 2026 will be measured not only by security moves but also by economic sustainability. Energy supply security, the role of transit country, transportation corridors, and critical infrastructure projects increase Turkey's geopolitical value. But this value is directly related to parameters such as financing conditions, investment climate and risk premium. Therefore, the alignment of foreign policy and the economy becomes even more critical in 2026.

Uncertainties that increase the cost of diplomatic moves may narrow the room for maneuver. Conversely, the economic capacity generated through connectivity and supply chain integration can strengthen diplomatic flexibility. Defense industry diplomacy is a separate lever here. Platform exports, joint production models, and technology collaborations can provide Turkey with both geopolitical influence and economic resilience.

#### Test for Turkish foreign policy

As a result, the overall state of Turkish foreign policy in the transition from 2025 to 2026 points to a "balance and capacity" test: striving to maintain strategic autonomy under conditions of high uncertainty; aiming to build a security belt in the immediate neighborhood while simultaneously keeping alliance relations functional; and having to support this with geo-economic capacity. The decisive parameters in 2026 will be the capacity to exert diplomatic influence in chronic crises such as Gaza and Syria; the ability to manage the impact of the war in the Black Sea on maritime security and connectivity lines; the ability to keep the militarization trend extending from Syria to the Eastern Mediterranean, driven by Israeli-Turkish competition, under control; the extent to which it can integrate into Europe's defense-industrial transformation; the capacity to maintain file-based coordination with the US without creating fragility; and the ability to combine all of this within a strategic framework compatible with economic sustainability. When these parameters come together positively, 2026 could be a year in which multitrack diplomacy becomes a strategic advantage for Turkey. Conversely, the same flexibility could evolve into fragility that narrows the scope for action as tensions and costs accumulate between issues.

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