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Balancing Deterrence and Partnership: The EU's Security Dilemma Between Russia and Turkey

Abstract

This article analyzes the comparative impact of Russia and Turkey on European Union security, focusing on their distinct strategies, tools, and the EU's varied responses. Russia represents a direct, revisionist threat through military aggression, hybrid warfare and energy dependency, leading the EU to adopt sanctions, bolster NATO's eastern flank, and support Ukraine. Turkey's approach combines assertive regional policies in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean with selective cooperation on migration, trade, and defense, resulting in a fragmented EU stance that balances engagement and limited punitive measures. The research addresses the question: In what ways do hybrid threats and migration pressures from Russia and Turkey challenge EU cohesion and strategic autonomy? The study finds that both actors exploit disinformation, weaponize migration and contest maritime zones, compelling the EU to adapt via initiatives such as the Strategic Compass, PESCO, and REPowerEU. While these reforms enhance resilience, internal divisions and NATO reliance constrain the Union's capacity for independent action, underscoring the need for coherent, long-term strategies that integrate deterrence with selective partnership.

Keywords: *hybrid threats, strategic autonomy, EU Security policy, Black Sea Security, migration as a policy tool*

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Tərəfdaşlıq və deterensiya arasında: Aİ-nin Rusiya və Türkiyə ilə təhlükəsizlik dilemması

Xülasə

Bu məqalə Rusiya və Türkiyənin Avropa İttifaqının təhlükəsizliyinə təsirini müqayisəli şəkildə təhlil edir, onların fərqli strategiyalarını, rıçaqlarını və Aİ-nin müxtəlif reaksiyalarını araşdırır. Rusiya hərbi təcavüz, hibrid müharibə və enerji asılılığı vasitəsilə birbaşa, revizionist təhdid yaradır. Bu, Aİ-ni sanksiyalar tətbiq etməyə, NATO-nun şərq cinahını gücləndirməyə və Ukraynaya dəstək verməyə sövq etmişdir. Türkiyənin yanaşması isə Qara dəniz və Şərqi Aralıq dənizində iddialı regional siyasəti, miqrasiya, ticarət və müdafiə sahələrində əməkdaşlıqla birləşdirir. Nəticədə, Aİ-nin mövqeyi ziddiyyətli olur və məhdud cəza tədbirləri ilə əməkdaşlıq arasında tarazlıq qurmağa çalışır.

Tədqiqat sualı belədir: Rusiya və Türkiyədən gələn hibrid təhdidlər və miqrasiya təzyiqləri Aİ-nin birliyinə və strateji muxtariyyətinə hansı şəkildə təsir edir? Təhlil göstərir ki, bu iki ölkə dezinformasiya, miqrasiyanın siyasi alət kimi istifadəsi və dəniz zonalarının mübahisələndirilməsi vasitəsilə təsir göstərir. Aİ Strategiya Kompası, PESCO və REPowerEU kimi təşəbbüslərlə adaptasiya olur, lakin daxili parçalanmalar və NATO-ya bağlılıq onun müstəqil hərəkət qabiliyyətini

məhdudlaşdırır. Bu vəziyyət deterensiya ilə seçici tərəfdaşlığı birləşdirən uzunmüddətli və vahid strategiyalara ehtiyacı vurğulayır.

Açar sözlər: *Hibrid təhdidlər, Strateji muxtariyyət, Aİ təhlükəsizlik siyasəti, Qara Dəniz təhlükəsizliyi, Miqrasiya siyasi alət kimi*

Introduction

Comparative Analysis of Russian and Turkish Impact on EU Security

In the past few years, the European security environment has undergone deep changes. Alper Coşkun (2025) notes that “it is a time of hard reckoning in Europe” as events led by Russia in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have come suddenly to question older assumptions concerning stability. At the same time with this erosion of long-standing security arrangements such as the U.S. security guarantee, the EU is required to assume more responsibility for its own defense. This “dual challenge” has drawn attention to the possibility of Turkey serving as a force multiplier for NATO, amongst uncertainty, Ankara could significantly strengthen continental defense should constructive engagement be forthcoming. Thus, the platform is set for a strategy to confront an aggressive Russia to the east and a maturing, although unpredictable Turkey to the south.

The EU is facing two neighboring strongmen on either flank from a strategic perspective, as noted by the EU Institute for Security Studies. They mention that Europe’s border environment becomes “more uncertain and challenging” as “the EU is flanked to the east and south by two assertive authoritarian regimes” (Secieru, Saari, & Bechev, 2021). While political repression runs rampant in each country under consideration-their judicial independence eroded, media freedom compromised-which in consequence has made its relations with Europe difficult, the EU policy acts very differently with the two (Secieru, Saari, & Bechev, 2021). Russia is generally perceived to be a revisionist threat for European security in a direct manner while the Western world, following Moscow's actions in Ukraine, responded collectively with sanctioning measures and enhancing defense. Turkey, instead, having maintained a status as a NATO ally and an EU candidate, continues to find different avenues of cooperation with Brussels despite its democratic backsliding. One analyst aptly notes that Turkey's alliance status, geography, and defense industry comprise “convincing reasons” to disregard Erdoğan's domestic abuses in exchange for security cooperation (Federico Baccini, 2025). This trade-off between ideals and security demonstrates the dilemma Europe is attempting to negotiate, balancing between ideals and strategic interests.

Research

Concurrently, Moscow and Ankara often overlap in their actions. In the Black Sea region, both nations try to assert their dominance without escalating to open conflict. Mustafa Aydın and Aslı Aydıntaşbaş (2025) refer to them as the “dominant powers in the Black Sea,” walking along the lines of competition and cooperation. Turkey has, for instance, never supported all EU sanctions fully, and also continues to trade energy with Russia while providing defensive aid to Ukraine (Maria Simeonova, 2025). Russia has long considered the rift between Turkey and the West as an avenue for exploitation. After the failed 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Moscow was largely seen by many Turks as more supportive than Brussels, allowing a few more steps toward reconciliation between the two players and culminating in the S-400 purchase. These examples demonstrate how European security cannot be formulated by negotiating Russian and Turkish issues in isolation, as the complex policies toward Russia and Turkey is often interconnected.

The regional naval interplay is illustrative of how Russia and Turkey exert influence in shared spaces. This image of Turkish naval vessels in the Bosphorus underlines the extent of Ankara's military reach at Europe’s doorstep. The Black Sea is often depicted as a contested arena, where “Turkey and Russia are the dominant powers each seeks to contain the other but also to avoid triggering a war” (Aydın & Aydıntaşbaş, 2025). The control options Turkey possesses, by means of a strong navy and control of the Bosphorus, are in contrast with Russia's substantial ability to project power in Eastern Europe through the Black Sea Fleet. For this reason, Aydın and Aydıntaşbaş (2025) recommend that the EU consider Ankara as a serious partner in Black Sea

defense planning: for example, a "pragmatic reset" of EU-Turkey relations would increase the capacity of both sides to contain Russia in the post-Ukraine war era.

To summarize, putting Russia and Turkey in comparison clarifies the landscape of EU strategic environment. Both these countries challenge the Union's narrative of a stable, rules-based order: Russia, by overt military aggression and revisionism; Turkey, by assertive regional policies and occasional alignment with Russian aims. Concurrently, each offers points of leverage: Turkey with its NATO alliance and with critical assets at the EU's borders; Russia as that middle player-induced necessity for Europeans to unify. Putting the two side by side brings into sharp relief where EU strategy might want to adapt (for instance, trying to build better ties between the EU and Turkey as part of an overall strategy toward Russia) and where more caution is necessary.

1. Converging Strategic Challenges to EU Security

1.1. Hybrid Threats and Information Operations

Russia has for decades been waging a covert "shadow war" on Europe, employing cyber-sabotage, espionage, and disinformation in a concerted bid to weaken the security of the EU. Dutch intelligence reported in 2025 that Moscow "is increasing its hybrid attacks" targeting the undermining of societal order in NATO and EU states (Deutsch & Meijer, 2025). The EU itself has warned against the emergence of a "systematic, international Russian campaign of media manipulation and distortion of facts" to destabilize the bloc. Recent developments across Europe, penetrations of critical infrastructure networks all the way to social-media disinformation propaganda, are evidence of Moscow growing brazenness with its tactics. The UK intelligence service even describes of a "staggeringly reckless" campaign of cyber-attacks and arson by Russia targeting the West. These hybrid operations collectively strive to degrade public trust in European institutions, sow political divisions within the continent, and thereby force the EU to try and sort out its own countermeasures (sanctions, cyber defences, media-literacy campaigns) while the Kremlin capitalises on every opportunity along the way to split European unity.

1.2. Authoritarian Outreach and Influence

Both Ankara and Moscow exert power outside their borders and attempt to influence European opinion and politics. The ruling AKP has been very active in mobilizing the Turkish diaspora in Europe. This is a policy which "has become a key element in the government's efforts to ... extend the country's influence globally." (Adar, Aydın, Günay, & Seufert, 2024). By hosting Turkish political rallies and campaigns in several EU countries, by pressuring expatriate voters, and by fostering identity politics discourse, Ankara injects its own domestic divisions into the European public arena. This diaspora outreach "has created tensions between Turkey and European countries" as issues of Turkish identity and Turkey's internal conflicts are played out on EU soil. In contrast, Russia uses ideological soft power in tandem with dark money. Investigations have shown how Kremlin-linked networks funneled "hundreds of thousands of euros" behind the back of the local authorities to far-right politicians in several EU member states with the view of "sowing division in Europe" over Ukraine and other issues (Belton & Mekhennet, 2024). Effectively, Russian and Turkish leaders have engaged illiberal trends within Europe: Moscow by giving strength to nationalistic and Eurosceptic parties, Ankara by feeding identity and populism oriented Turkish Muslims and conservatives. Both go against the democratic norms of the EU. Namely, these analysts see that the described authoritarian influence campaigns (in some instances through diaspora mobilization, others by covert funding of friendly entities) would seek to change European politics in ways that undermine collective security and the liberal order of the Union.

1.3. Border Pressures and Migration

Each side has weaponized migration as a security lever on the frontiers of the Union. Whenever Ankara has sought concessions, it has threatened to "open the borders" and let a surge of refugees and migrants spill into the EU (Kirişçi, 2021). This threat was carried out in early 2020 when President Erdoğan launched an crisis on the Greek boundary of a humanitarian dimension by shipping across it thousands of asylum-seekers. Greece declared a state of emergency in the face of reports of violent confrontations suspended the procedures for granting asylum on a temporary basis in view of a sudden influx that could destabilize an EU member. And there is a clear mirror on the

other flank of the EU. In 2021–22, the EU charged Belarus's leader with "weaponizing migration" by transporting Middle Eastern refugees up to the Polish and Baltic borders. Poland, Lithuania, and others openly accused Belarus and Russia of staging the wave with the aim of sowing discord and strengthening Europe's anti-immigrant far right (Niedzielski & Sokolowski, 2024). In either case, migrant populations fleeing persecution have cynically been held hostage to political machinations by opposing countries. Having pushed the EU to rethink asylum law and strengthen its external borders, these two migration crises have placed Ankara and Moscow on the negotiation table. EU intermediaries acknowledge that such flows test not just the fence and patrols, but European solidarity itself, which has to balance humanitarian commitments with the realities of hybrid warfare on its margins.

1.4. Black Sea Strategic Arena

Since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, the Black Sea region became a major strategic theatre for the EU. The annexation of Crimea by Moscow and the build-up of military assets in this location have impacted to the Black Sea with threat capabilities for projection type against Ukraine and the eastern NATO flank. Brussels has responded by drafting a complete Black Sea security strategy. A fresh EU communiqué (2025) explicitly relates this focus to "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine" and pledges to reinforce the EU's geopolitical role around the sea. The plan also foresees the establishment of a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub to coordinate patrols, de-mining, and information sharing among Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Turkey, and EU states. These steps recognize the Black Sea as both a vital economic corridor (linking Europe to the Caucasus and Central Asia) and a primary conflict zone. Despite being a NATO member, Turkey follows a Black Sea agenda of its own. Istanbul has command over the Bosphorus, giving it significant leverage over Russian naval movements, and Ankara has secured energy deals (e.g., TurkStream) to tie some Black Sea trade with its interests. According to German analysts, "with the right diplomatic efforts and mutual recognition of interests, regional cooperation is possible" in the Black Sea (Isachenko & Kaymak, 2024). But at present, the EU's task remains to deter Russia's destabilizing actions in its near abroad while constructively engaging Turkey. The inclusion of Turkey as a partner in the new Black Sea strategy (alongside Ukraine and other neighbors) is a testament to this dual approach. The Black Sea, therefore, has become an area where EU and Russian interests come into direct collision, and where Turkey's ambitions intersect with both. Stabilizing the Black Sea is now viewed by EU strategists as an urgent imperative even while Ankara wields considerable autonomy therein.

1.5. Eastern Mediterranean Turmoil

The Eastern Mediterranean has also emerged as a centre of EU security dilemmas. New natural gas finds off Cyprus and Israel held promises for European energy diversification. Instead, they have spawned crises of competing claims. European foreign-policy analysts now refer to East Med gas as "a massive diplomatic headache" (European Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Turkey completely rejects the Republic of Cyprus's authority to explore energy in almost all of its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone, contending that any development should involve the breakaway Turkish Cypriot administration. Turkish warships escorted drilling vessels into waters that are contested. This prompted Greece, another NATO member (with the backing of the EU), to threaten sanctions in 2020. These disputes over continental shelves and EEZ boundaries have drawn in EU capitals and even NATO leadership, undermining the unity of the Alliance. At the same time, matters are complicated by the Russian presence in the Mediterranean. Moscow has created permanent bases in Syria (and has a naval facility in Tartus) and has deepened cooperation with Turkey. As one analysis observes, Russia's Mediterranean posture – from energy deals to forward bases – presents "new challenges for NATO and the EU" beyond the Black Sea (Wehrey, 2021). For example, Russia sold advanced S-400 air defence system to Ankara even as it sells air defence systems to Greece, in effect playing both sides in the triangle of Mediterranean rivalry. In sum, the Eastern Mediterranean now appears as the geopolitical battlefield where Turkish "blue homeland" claims are opposed by EU-member interests in Greece and Cyprus, while simultaneous Russian entrenchment in Syria

serves to emphasize Moscow's scope. The ensuing shifting balance will keep the EU up at night worrying that any Turkish-Greek flare-up (for gas or maritime control) could devolve into a matter for other powers whilst also acknowledging the effect of Russian Federation from the sidelines. These happenings, in collaboration, creates a multifront security challenge for Europe. Often reinforcing one another, Turkey and Russia challenge the EU's borders, values, and cohesion. They both employ irregular means (including disinformation and migration coercion) while unequally pursuing aggressive regional policies that increase Brussels's troubles. For EU decision-makers, it becomes imperative to respond in a concerted manner, to newly established structures like the Black Sea security hub and the Eastern Med cooperation dialogues that aimed not just Moscow's aggression but Ankara's revanchism as well. The dual challenges from a boldly aggressive Russia and the tactically slippery Turkey divert the Union into a fine balancing act. The Union must defend its open borders and democratic principles from the predations of two major neighbors whose activities are increasingly crossing with Europe's strategic interests (Council of the European Union, 2025).

1.6. Diverging Strategies and EU Responses

The two countries have pursued fundamentally different political strategies with respect to Europe, with the EU responding to each with contrasting shades of pressure and engagement. Moscow's approach is much more overtly confrontational, it seeks to maintain influence by force and coercion in what it terms its "near abroad," while seeking to put European dependencies to leverage. In contrast, Ankara mixes assertive regional posturing with pragmatic bargaining, as a NATO member and EU candidate, Turkey uses its institutional ties and economic linkages while exercising military power in selected crises next door. Reflecting these strategic distinctions in the approaches of the countries, the EU responses too differ. With regard to Russia, the EU and most member-states focused on sanctioning Russia and on giving support to front-line states, looking at Russian aggression chiefly as a security threat. In contrast, the EU has alternated regarding Turkey between limited punitive actions (for maritime provocations or breaches of democratic standards) and further cooperation on migration, trade, and security, revealing stark divisions over how best to balance Turkey's dual roles as a partner and a rival.

2. Russia's Strategy and the EU's Response

A revisionist strategy towards Europe, which has been consistently pursued by Russia from as early as the 2000s, consists of the use of military force in combination with "hybrid" warfare. The 2014 annexation of Crimea, followed the full-scale invasion of Ukraine of 2022 are the vivid illustrations of the Russian flagship approach of using force to alter the territorial makeup, yet there is also broad erosion of European Union states, carried out by Moscow, which is more tactical than obvious. Academics have noted that Russia has consistently undermined both the arms control agreements of Europe, interfered with the EU and areas surrounding it (Dumoulin, 2023). This, in practical terms, meant that Putin's Russia relied heavily on the country's possessing (mainly) gas and oil resources, for the purpose of framing its foreign policy. Indeed, up to the 2022 conflict, Russia was providing over 40% of the gas imported by the European Union, which amounted to an economic weapon. Russia has also weaponized migration – for example encouraging irregular migration through Belarus – in order to pressure the EU's external borders. At the same time, the Kremlin has cultivated ideological and political influence inside Europe: CSIS Kremlin Playbook researches the economic policies of Moscow where malign economic influence is found to create strong economic classes within Europe, thereby assisting in creating dependency and reducing democracy within these environments (CSIS, n.d.). Thus, Russia's policy towards Europe is considered as aggressive and smart. It uses military threats, ranging from Northern Europe to the East and the Caucasus, energy dependence cannot be asserted by threats and actions alone campaigns, and other tools of soft power designed as disinformation campaigns to as "gaining leverage" over the EU member states. In responding to Russia, the EU has focused on maintaining economic sanctions and political isolation against it, something that its intentions have been tested by other contributing honor's interests. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the European Union introduced a range of sector-specific sanctions against Russia in the areas of finance, energy, and

military. Later on, such sanctions were reinforced and further sanctions were added by the EU from 2022. Those sanctions became the basic element of the EU's relations with Russia since various fallacy approaches were instrumental in the exposure of assertion on the aggression against any territorial conflicts. And the EU's sanctions were also accompanied with military assistance to Kyiv, build NATO's regional capacity, and encourage the further incorporation (including enabling the security) of Georgia and Moldova into the EU. Even so, commentators note that this is as often as not reactionary and imperfect. CEJISS includes in its literature review the assessment that EU sanctions are too often labeled "suboptimal" because one of the reasons is Europe's lack of capacity to respond to military threats with military power (Pertiwi, 2024). At the end, there is no independent battalion in Europe that is beyond the NATO control. Furthermore, the EU has failed to set up a separate Russia policy per se (its Russia policy is mostly tied in with the crisis in Ukraine) which has been highlighted as problematic by some critics. Divergence existed as a result of economic interdependence. In 2025, for example, Hungary and Slovakia (heavily reliant on Russian energy) resisted EU proposals to phase out Russian gas by 2027. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban was quite vocal in bargaining against Russian gas ban calling the proposal a Ukrainian squabble, warning Brussels about the heat piping systems that provide household heating and electricity to Budapest in particular (Reuters, 2025). Because of such factors, the European Commission has managed to come up with sanctions that would not include importing of gas from Russia unlike as noted by Reuters. Despite the fact that current EU measures only apply to a decrease in oil importation from Russia and do not target gas and this is because of the strong opposition from the Central European countries. This rift is factual and has a wider pattern: certain countries as recent members (Poland, Baltic States, the Visegrad Group) do push for the it most reductions and arming Ukraine while others (notably Hungary and partly Austria or Italy) are accommodative with, at times, exclusions, to their own economies. Commentators describe EU decision-making on Russia as marked by "national preference bargaining" rather than perfect unity (Pertiwi, 2024). Nevertheless, the overall line of the EU remained. Russia came out as the main aggressor with the Ukraine as the main target of support. The Single Market has imposed restrictions on entry of Kremlin elites into its financial system while providing notable (alongside NATO) backing of its eastern line. In essence, European policy towards Russia revolves around prevention, up to a great extent, though this is hedged by internal energy politics polarization and threat perception differentiation.

3. Turkey's Strategy and the EU's Response

Turkey's dealing with Europe is currently assertive under President Erdogan, sometimes uncomfortable for the EU partners, yet Turkey remains institutionally firmly attached to the West. Ankara engages in both hard-power projection within its immediate region and in transactional diplomacy. On the military side, Turkey intervened in Syria and Libya and supported Azerbaijan in Garabagh conflict. These acts have been meant to project their influence through the use of drones and proxy forces. For example, in second Garabagh war the drones produced by Turkish companies played crucial role. Most importantly from an EU perspective, Turkey has acted somewhat unfriendly in the Eastern Mediterranean: Turkish warships have accompanied seismic surveys, leading to drilling for gas off Cyprus and near Greek islands, testing the sovereignty of EU member states. Each state in the Eastern Mediterranean has its own EEZ claims. That is why the situation in the region is so complicated. For instance, Turkey accuses Greece and Cyprus with intervening its maritime territories. As the Centre for European Reform put it, Erdogan embarked on "an increasingly assertive and militarised foreign policy, often at odds with Europe" in claiming maritime zones claimed by Greece and Cyprus. Ankara has also put a strain on NATO ties, for instance vetoing Sweden's accession until concessions were received and bought the S-400 missile system from Russia, deepening ties with the country and creating mistrust. At the same time, the Turkish leadership considers maximizing its institutional leverage, it keeps the EU accession talks alive as a bargaining chip, demands modernization of the EU-Turkey customs union, and has wielded the Syrian refugee crisis as a strong diplomatic card. Additionally, actions like to take its

veto on Sweden shows Turkey is ally but tough on bargaining. Under the 2016 migration deal, Turkey undertook to house millions of refugees, receiving billions of euros in aid from the EU and used it for this purpose. Turkey can put pressure on the EU by threatening to ease border control measures. Ties between Turkey and the EU remain economically strong (almost half of Turkish exports go to the EU) and Ankara uses their mutual trade and investment relations as leverage. In other words, Turkey is mixing threats in its regional confrontations with pragmatic bargaining by exploiting its membership in NATO and candidacy for the EU to accomplish various concessions.

The EU has responded cautiously, often in a fragmented manner. Since 2019, Brussels has condemned in its official language the actions of Turkey deemed violations of international law in the Eastern Mediterranean plus domestic backsliding on practice. Following Turkey's drilling in Cypriot waters in 2019, the EU exacted limited sanctions on two Turkish energy officials: symbolic steps capable of winning broad agreement). The EU has similarly condemned Ankara's actions against Greece and Cyprus as violations of sovereignty and sanctioned persons involved. However, beyond such token sanctions, many member-states have balked at deeper ones. As one policy analysis notes, France had pressed for a tougher approach, but "most others disagreed, seeing Turkey as an important partner," leaving them with the carrot and stick approach (Scazzieri, 2021). Brussels even offered "positive agenda," including possible talks on the customs union, as bait for Turkish de-escalation. This is emblematic of the EU's lack of overall coherence: various capitals (Greece, Cyprus, Baltic States) push for maximum pressure on Ankara while others, being Germany, Italy, and Spain, push for engagement and common interests. Thus, despite political frictions, the EU finances the care for close to four million refugees in Turkey and supports Turkey's border security, thereby reinforcing the point that cooperation on migration is needed. Trade relations remain strong (Turkey profits from the customs union with the EU), and both recognize that deepening the estrangement of Ankara risks pushing it toward the other great powers.

In practice, the policy toward Turkey has been a balancing act. Brussels hides behind the "open-door" policy on accession (negotiations were only frozen, never closed), even as it condemns Turkey for human-rights backsliding. It also keeps the cooperation alive through pre-accession funds and through high-level dialogues touching on security issues such as the Middle East, migration, and counterterrorism. Yet another side of the EU flexes its norms, it has been concerned about Turkish democracy and human rights issues, threatening in for instance, further sanctions should Ankara now engage in "unilateral actions." The two-track approach can at times appear incoherent: as described in a CER brief, the EU "has to maintain cooperation with Turkey in areas of core interest" (migration, security) while in other cases it prefers to publicly criticize Ankara on rights and sovereignty issues (Scazzieri, 2021). There have been sharp splits in the past. Yet, when the block threatened sanctions briefly in 2020, Greek and Cypriot leaders felt left unsupported by the others, thereby building up frustrations in Athens and Nicosia. It shows how important actor Turkey is within Europe. Direct EU engagement (in refugee relocation, joint NATO drills) becomes a sign that Europe still needs Turkey on certain dossiers. These dynamics reflect how the internal divisions shape the external posture. As regards Russia, Europe has mostly reached consensus on a punitive and deterrent posture (sanctions and NATO deterrence), though with the warning of some members still being dependent on Russia for energy supply. On the other hand, Europe displays several ranges of approach towards Turkey: sanctions apply partially, with dialogue or economic incentives often siding with condemnation. Hence, the coherence with which the EU operates varies from very much. It has been quite united in condemning the Russian invasion although not without squabbles about how far to go. In contrast, regarding Turkey, the EU has wavered between engagement and estrangement subject to the issue. In brief, the much-publicized Russian act of aggression at least attempts to mobilize an almost united "circle of sanctions" from the EU. While Turkey's more ambiguous method generates a in pieces response. Part ally, part rival-marking ongoing European disagreement as to how to handle a NATO partner that has at times allied against it and has at others antagonized it (Scazzieri, 2021). Finally, such contrasts highlight the security dilemma faced by the EU. Sanctions are deemed barely sufficient by some, and this has forced the Union into tough introspection: can it truly exist with its own strategic autonomy and military

capacity (Dumolin, 2023)? With respect to Turkey, the challenge is somewhat different: to reconcile the promotion of values such as democratic standards and human rights with strategic objectives such as border security, energy, and regional stability. This interplay has etched itself into the security architecture that the EU must accommodate or recalibrate. One kind is contained as a destabilizing force, and the other is bargained with as a partner on the influence spectrum. In practice, this divergence is illustrative of foreign policy as fluid in one respect and wholly fragmented in another. A duality that analysts see as natural (given the diversity of threats and relations) and problematic (in that it exposes the limitations of European unity) (Dumolin, 2023).

4. Policy and Institutional Adaptation

The challenges posed by Russia and Turkey have catalyzed significant, if uneven, institutional adaptation within the European Union. In recognition of the limits of soft power, the EU has embraced a more integrated security approach. The adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 was an important step, setting out aspirations for crisis management, resilience, and the rapid deployment force to be established by 2025 (EEAS, 2022). This marks an important transition in EU thinking, security is not only diplomacy but requires defence capabilities in real terms. Alongside this evolution, PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and the EDF (European Defence Fund) have been reinforced, fostering joint defence projects and innovation, thus bearing in mind past criticisms of limited ambition (Béraud-Sudreau & Sweeney, 2022). The efforts thus target increasing the EU's strategic autonomy, notwithstanding the current budgetary and political constraints. The energy and migration realms have been adjusted as well. The REPowerEU plan was designed to break energy dependence on Russia through diversification of supplies and investments in renewables (European Commission, 2022). On migration, the controversial EU–Turkey Statement remains an influence in EU border management policies, repeating the fine line between moral considerations and security imperatives (European Council, 2016).

Whilst there are still debates on the link between EU defence initiatives and NATO (Nováky, 2022), the development is indeed evident. With time, it seems that the EU is shaping up from a normative actor into a pragmatic security player. If the changes would be enough to deal with external challenges remains questionable. However, what is indisputable is that the institutional groundwork for greater resilience is much stronger now.

5. Implications for Strategic Autonomy

A very recent series of challenges from Russia and Turkey have once again brought into the focus an otherwise long-standing debate about strategic autonomy within the European Union. Strategic autonomy is the capacity of the EU to safeguard its interests in the excessive need of external actors and has now transformed from an aspiration in theory to a practical necessity (Fiott, 2021). The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces showcased the perils of dependence, specifically in the domains of energy and security, while Turkey's policies marked the weaknesses of NATO and the EU migration management systems.

In consequence, the EU has been working toward strengthening its capacity to act independently. Defence cooperation projects such as PESCO and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have been vital in creating joint military capabilities (Biscop, 2022). These do not intend to replace NATO but to give the EU autonomy to act, if need to be. However, the want for strategic autonomy remains unevenly distributed among its member states. While France sees itself backing a more independent European defence identity, countries such as Poland and the Baltic states remain reluctant to do so, preferring to anchor security within NATO structures (Nováky, 2022). Striving for strategic autonomy has set the energy diversification policies such as REPowerEU into action. Symptoms of dependence on, for example, Russian gas would therefore have to be interpreted not just from an economic angle but also as a strategic threat (European Commission, 2022). The reform of migration policies also reveals an unfavourable recognition that putting one's security in the hands of outside bodies like Turkey is full with political and security risks. Despite all these developments, there are real obstacles to become a fully-fledged strategic autonomy. Diverging national interests, tight budgets, and overlapping NATO commitments cloud the picture.

Strategic autonomy is much beyond just defense, requiring also technology, energy, and critical infrastructure resilience (Béraud-Sudreau & Sweeney, 2022). For the EU, unveiling the concept of strategic autonomy will rather be an incremental construction, made by necessity and not by grand design. Yet, the pressure from Russia and Turkey has greatly energized the evolution of the EU into a more assertive security actor. The comparative analysis between Russia and Turkey's impact on European security demonstrates how both actors, have pressured the European Union to undergo adaptation and change despite being different. Russian outright aggression and Turkish strategic ambivalence have forced the EU to further develop its defense mechanisms, to find alternative sources of energy, and to rethink migration management strategies (Béraud-Sudreau & Sweeney, 2022). This shift from soft power toward a more pragmatical security stance can be seen in the Strategic Compass, PESCO, and REPowerEU projects (Biscop, 2022).

The second wave of pressure discusses strategic autonomy, which would allow the EU to lessen its reliance on outside actors and build resilience. However, the deeper EU struggles and deadlocking solutions are caused by internal divides, clashing national interests, and the continuing relevance of NATO (Nováky, 2022). While the institutional adaptations of the EU are a step forward, full strategic autonomy is still a slow and highly debated process. In any case, having faced the complicated challenges presented by Russia and Turkey has strengthened EU-based processes able to function coherently and more strongly.

Conclusion

This study compared the impact of Russia and Turkey on EU security and examined how their actions shape the Union's strategic responses. The research question asked: In what ways do hybrid threats and migration pressures from Russia and Turkey challenge EU cohesion and strategic autonomy? The analysis shows that both states use hybrid tactics- such as disinformation, covert influence, and the weaponization of migration- to pressure the EU. These actions test the Union's ability to act collectively and highlight internal divisions among member states. Russia's direct military aggression and energy leverage have produced a relatively unified but still reactive EU approach. Turkey's mix of cooperation and confrontation, especially on migration and regional security, has led to inconsistent policies and deeper political divides. EU initiatives like the Strategic Compass, PESCO, and REPowerEU are steps toward resilience, but they remain constrained by reliance on NATO and competing national interests. Addressing these dual challenges will require a coherent, long-term strategy that strengthens EU autonomy while preserving necessary partnerships. Without this balance, the Union risks remaining vulnerable to external manipulation on both its eastern and southern flanks.

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