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FROM “GOOD RELATIONS” TO “STRATEGIC PRAGMATISM”: ITALY-TURKEY DEFENSE COOPERATION IN A FRAGMENTED GEOPOLITICAL ORDER

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Introduction*

As the European Union attempts to develop a new security and defense architecture, Turkey-EU relations appear increasingly caught between traditional normative commitments and the imperatives of security cooperation. Accelerated by the war in Ukraine and a mounting Russian threat and complicated by the uncertainties about U.S. policies, the EU and the so-called "Coalition of the Willing"[1] began to discuss Turkey's potential role and included Ankara in fresh talks on new defense cooperation mechanisms during the meeting held in the UK on April 10.[2] However, recent developments in Turkey's domestic politics—above all, the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu—have threatened to stall the positive momentum for enhanced cooperation.[3] Still, Europe's modest criticism seems to signal that Brussels continues to value the role of Turkey's geostrategic position and growing defense industry as a potential asset for meeting European security needs.[4]

Within this context, the fourth Italy-Turkey Intergovernmental Summit, held in Rome on April 29, comes at a significant time, especially when the relations between the two countries are marked by a strong and unprecedented commitment to cooperation in defense matters. On the one hand, this is a notable example of how, in the absence of broader institutional alignment, interest-based collaboration is advancing between an EU member and a third country. On the other hand, it raises the question of whether this could represent a positive springboard for a broader cooperation framework at the EU level or if cooperation will remain limited due to longstanding constraints in Turkey-EU relations.

* For an extended discussion on the topic, see the authors' talk for Turkey Recap, "Webcast, Turkey-Italy Ties and Defense Cooperation," April 30, 2025, https://www.turkeyrecap.com/p/webcast-turkey-italy-ties-and-defense-29d.

Partners of Necessity: From Economic Foundations to a Strategic Turn

The cordiality and depth of Turkey-Italy relations are not novelties.[5] Indeed, relations have traditionally been stable even amid periodic geopolitical tensions and political divergences. Unlike the often more confrontational paths taken between Turkey and other EU member states, Ankara and Rome have demonstrated an ability to avoid escalation and find fruitful compromises in critical areas like the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya.[6]

Historically, economic and commercial ties were the bedrock of the bilateral relationship. Italy is one of Turkey's top five export markets, with over 1,600 Italian companies operating across various sectors. As the bilateral trade volume has grown from USD 26 billion (2023) to over USD 32 billion (2024), the two governments have now set a mid-term target of USD 40 billion in trade volume, a sign of their shared intent to elevate economic cooperation to a new level. At the Rome summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's high-level delegation also engaged in negotiations that led to the signing of ten memoranda of understanding, including upgraded economic agreements covering infrastructure development, digital connectivity, and renewable energy. During the meeting, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni thanked President Erdoğan for drastically reducing the number of migrants reaching Italy, and both parties stressed their shared vision to cooperate and stabilize Libya, Syria, and Ukraine.[7]

While bilateral trade continues to form a key pillar of the Italy-Turkey relationship, shared regional interests and a mutual commitment have recently led to substantial developments in security cooperation and defense. The previous intergovernmental

summit, which took place in Ankara in 2022 after a 10-year gap, laid the foundation for the most recent developments. At the time, confronted by the pressing issue of the war in Ukraine, the two countries were not only quick to mend fences after then Prime Minister Mario Draghi's "dictator gate" but also to sign several preliminary defense agreements.[8]

This pragmatic understanding, which was reaffirmed in the 2025 summit, has become even more relevant in the current international strategic climate. The recent signature of a joint venture agreement between Baykar Technologies and Leonardo, the two countries' major players in the military industry, is a case in point. While previous bilateral collaborations, including the T129 ATAK helicopter and the Göktürk-1 satellite, have paved the way for strong bilateral defense relations, this latest venture, coupled with Baykar's acquisition of Italian defense company Piaggio Aerospace, signals more ambitious integration in systems development and supply chains. This cooperation assumes a higher value in the current geopolitical setting amid an uncertain moment in which the EU is trying to develop its own strategic autonomy.[9] As several European countries, including Italy, are still lagging behind in military expenditures,[10] many European states see third countries such as Turkey as potential contributors.[11]

Such joint ventures have positioned Turkey not merely as a supplier but as a co-developer within the European defense market. Within the next ten years, Turkey's drone market is estimated to be valued at USD 100 billion. Confronted with the unpredictability of the U.S. commitment to NATO, Turkey's defense industry offers both scale and operational relevance. First, Turkey's industrial base could fill some of Europe's demand for ammunition. Second, Turkey's defense cooperation agreements with some EU members, whether through bilateral ties or small-sized industrial clusters, demonstrate that, to a certain extent, Turkey's importance in sustaining and complementing Europe's security needs is already a factor in the equation.[12]

Certainly, bilateral engagements are, by definition, less complex and easier to manage.[13] By prioritizing its direct ties with Ankara, Italy has reiterated Turkey's informal entry into Europe's defense equation. However, while Turkey's integration has occurred largely through bilateral channels, bypassing traditional multilateral EU frameworks that often prove cumbersome, the defense dimension of the Italy-Turkey partnership raises the broader question of whether such bilateral cooperation can serve as a stepping stone for Turkey's involvement in Europe's nascent strategic architecture and defense ecosystem.

Bilateral Alignment vs. Broader Challenges

Despite the strategic potential of the Italy-Turkey partnership, its translation into long-term structural alignment with the EU remains fraught with uncertainty. Regulatory divergences, export control restrictions, and political resistance—especially from member states such as France, Greece, and Cyprus—continue to limit the feasibility of embedding Turkey into the EU's formal defense framework. The EU's internal divisions on defense procurement—epitomized by France's "Buy European" stance—may also limit the space for third-country participation, regardless of operational value. On the Turkish side, the persistent concerns over democratic standards, the rule of law, and Ankara's posture toward Russia act as enduring constraints. Germany's recent decision to block the sale of Eurofighter jets to Turkey—despite earlier backing from Italy, Spain, and the UK—

highlights lingering unease in European capitals about involving Ankara in defense cooperation beyond narrowly defined bilateral channels. While the move is likely tied to Germany's current transitional government, it nonetheless signals broader reservations about Turkey's role within collective European defense initiatives.[14]

However, geopolitical conjectures may compel both sides to continue navigating these tensions. Erdoğan's offer to contribute to a potential peacekeeping force in Ukraine and Ankara's active engagement in Black Sea stability initiatives underscore Turkey's critical operational role. Similarly, Italy's pursuit of strategic influence—especially in Africa, the Mediterranean, and transatlantic relations—creates natural convergences with Turkey's regional ambitions.[15]

On the one side, Erdoğan, who has proven a good strategist throughout his political career, managed to act as a mediator at the beginning of the Ukraine conflict and to emphasize how important Turkey is for the European strategic framework. Moreover, following the significant deterioration of U.S.-Turkey relations during the Biden administration, Ankara is now looking to capitalize on personal ties with Donald Trump.

On the other side, from her early days as an outspoken critic of Erdoğan, Meloni has seemingly shifted toward a cooperative and transactional posture, highlighting how strategic necessity has reshaped political positioning on both sides. Although such a pragmatic stance seems coherent with her foreign policy direction, such a posture presents both opportunities and challenges. The effort to position herself as a European leader at a time when the EU lacks a clear strategic direction was manifested in her recent visit to Washington, where she sought to bridge gaps between European concerns and a less predictable U.S. administration, underscoring this ambition. Yet, this balancing act is delicate: while attempting to be the voice of a more autonomous Europe, Meloni must also steer perceptions of being politically aligned with conservative U.S. circles. Moreover, in Italy, debates over increased defense spending remain contentious, with both the opposition and parts of the governing coalition skeptical of large-scale military investments.[16]

Nonetheless, in this context, the strong rapport between Meloni and Trump could still serve Turkey's interest in restoring strategic relations with Washington after years of strained diplomacy. At the same time, recent U.S. tariffs appear to affect Turkey less directly than Europe, positioning Ankara as a potentially valuable partner for Italy amid growing economic uncertainty. The revitalized Turkey–Italy partnership could thus offer a dual advantage: strengthening bilateral trade ties to help Italy and other European countries absorb the tariffs' economic impact, while reinforcing Turkey's geopolitical relevance in the transatlantic arena.[17]

Looking Ahead: Anchoring Pragmatism within a Sustainable Framework

If the Italy-Turkey axis is to evolve beyond pragmatic alignment, it will require a structured framework for engagement that acknowledges constraints without being paralyzed by them. A coalition-based model—allowing for flexible partnerships within or adjacent to EU mechanisms—could offer a path forward. Under such a model, Turkey's involvement in procurement consortia, infrastructure initiatives, and strategic dialogues could be institutionalized without passing through the slow and complex European bureaucracy. In this regard, the recently signed Türkiye-UK

Defense Industry Council (TUDIC) Specification is a case in point.[18]

Italy, for its part, can act as a conduit between Ankara and the broader European system, "advocating for engagement based on deliverables rather than mere rhetoric."[19] Rome's role in facilitating Turkish contributions to the EU's defense industrial base, post-conflict reconstruction efforts, and neighborhood stabilization projects could help anchor this cooperation on firmer ground. Rome's eventual support of Ankara's long-desired reform of the Customs Union and visa liberalization could serve as confidence-building measures.[20] At the same time, Ankara must provide political reassurances to sustain this trajectory. Incremental steps, such as a clearer foreign policy direction and signals of domestic liberalization, could reinforce mutual trust. Concurrently, as İmamoğlu himself has underlined, European leaders should make the effort to discern the short-term interests of the current Turkish government from the long-term interests of Turkey.[21] This implies that both sides must strike a balance between flexibility and predictability, between interests and values, and between status quo and change.[22]

As one EU diplomat highlighted, "it is better to have [...] a clear institutional framework than knocking on Turkey's door when it may be beneficial."[23] In other words, this means preventing short-sighted, ad hoc agreements such as a "refugee deal 2.0 based on transactionalism and false promises that would just alienate the two parties."[24] While defense cooperation with Italy does not guarantee Turkey a formal seat at all the EU's tables, it may reinforce Ankara's status as a strategic actor that Europe can neither exclude nor ignore. Whether this relationship matures into a more stable pillar of European security will depend not just on shared needs but on the political willingness and "imagination" of its architects.

Notes

1 | In a statement from the UK Ministry of Defence, "The UK Defence Secretary and the French Ministre des Armees convened counterparts from 30 countries and representatives from the EU Commission, EU Council, and NATO, to reaffirm our commitment to work together to drive progress towards a just and lasting peace in Ukraine." See "Coalition of the Willing: Joint UK-France statement following 10 April meeting," April 11, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coalition-of-the-willing-joint-uk-france-statement-following-10-april-meeting

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8 | Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Declaration: 3rd Türkiye-Italy Intergovernmental Summit," July 5, 2022, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Joint_Declaration_3rd_Turkiye_Italy_Intergovernmental_Summit_5July2022_Ankara.pdf.

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12 | Sıtkı Egeli, Serhat Güvenç, Çağlar Kurç, and Arda Mevlütoğlu, **From Client to Competitor: The Rise of Turkiye's Defence Industry**, Center for Foreign Policy and Peace Research and International Institute for Strategic Studies,

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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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