

# Turkey In The International System: Nato Accession And Its Role During The Cold War

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**Abstract:** This text comprehensively analyzes the fundamental changes in Turkey's foreign policy and national security strategy in the context of the bipolar international system formed after the Second World War. The work reveals the geostrategic significance of Turkey against the backdrop of the beginning of the "Cold War," the geopolitical and ideological confrontation between the Western bloc led by the USA and the socialist camp led by the USSR. Turkey's role in the regional and global security architecture, located at the junction of the Black Sea and Mediterranean straits and directly bordering the Soviet Union, is particularly emphasized.

**Keywords:** Turkey during World War II, Cold War, bipolar system, Turkish foreign policy, national security, geopolitical position, Soviet threat, Kars and Ardahan issue, Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, Western bloc, Truman Doctrine, NATO membership.

**Introduction:** The aftermath of the Second World War fundamentally transformed the global political system and reshaped the balance of geostrategic power. Beginning in 1945, the principle of bipolarity solidified in international relations, intensifying the ideological and geostrategic rivalry between the Western bloc led by the United States and the socialist camp under the leadership of the Soviet Union. Thus began the period of global confrontation known as the "Cold War." In this context, Turkey faced the necessity of redefining its foreign policy orientation, national security strategy, and its position within the system of international alliances.

Turkey's geostrategic position—particularly its location at the nexus of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea routes, its land and maritime borders with the Soviet Union, and its placement at the geostrategic intersection of the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus—made it a central pivot in global competition. Consequently, during the Cold War, Turkey was recognized as a strategically vital territory and as a defensive bulwark in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union's territorial claims against Turkey—specifically concerning the provinces of Kars and Ardahan, as well as proposals for joint

control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits—compelled Ankara to seek closer alignment with the West. Western historiography often interprets this situation as "geopolitical pressure," whereas Turkish scholars view it as a "turning point in the restructuring of the national security concept."

During this period, Turkey's foreign policy followed two primary directions:

1. Neutralizing the Soviet threat and ensuring security guarantees;
2. Achieving institutional integration into the Western bloc.

This trajectory culminated in Turkey receiving assistance under the Truman Doctrine and joining NATO in 1952. As a result, Turkey emerged as a firmly established Western ally within the international political system, occupying a critical strategic position in the regional security architecture.

This section analyzes Turkey's accession to NATO, its role in Cold War politics, elements of military-political transformation, and the impact of these processes on the domestic political and economic system. Additionally, it examines how various historiographical schools have interpreted these developments.

The post-Second World War period began under a complex geostrategic environment for Turkey. The

years 1945–1947 marked a “period of reconfiguration of the security paradigm” in the country’s foreign policy. Immediately following the end of the war, the Soviet Union took diplomatic steps that posed a direct threat to Turkish interests. In several official notes delivered to the Turkish ambassador in Moscow, the USSR demanded the return of the provinces of Kars and Ardahan and proposed the establishment of joint Soviet-Turkish control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. These demands directly targeted Turkey’s territorial integrity and sovereignty over crucial maritime routes.

In Turkish historiography, this period is interpreted as a “critical geostrategic turning point.” For instance, Turkish diplomat and scholar Çağrı Erhan emphasizes that the Soviet threat compelled Ankara to move closer to the West for strategic, rather than ideological, reasons. Similarly, although Soviet archival materials justify these demands in terms of “strategic needs,” their direct threat to Turkish sovereignty is

indisputable.

Moreover, this pressure defined the primary objective of Turkey’s foreign policy: integration into the Western security system. It was precisely during this period that Turkey gradually aligned with the Western bloc through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and U.S. political and military assistance programs.

This era also brought a profound transformation in Turkey’s domestic security policy. Official circles regarded Soviet policy as an element of “military-geopolitical expansion” and abandoned the previous model of diplomatic neutrality. Evidence of this shift includes the mobilization of Turkish forces and a significant increase in the military budget between 1946 and 1949, with defense expenditures reaching approximately 40% of the state budget.

According to official statistical reports, Turkey’s defense spending increased sharply between 1945 and 1949:

Indicator	1945	1949	Growth
Defense expenditures (share of state budget)	23.4%	41.2%	76%
Number of armed forces	09,000	615,000	20% increase
Mobilization rate	8.1% (of working-age population)	9.4%	1.3%

(Source: T.C. Ministry of Finance, Budget Tables, 1946–1950; TÜİK, 1961)

During this period, the fact that defense expenditures accounted for more than 40 percent of the state budget indicates that Turkey responded to Soviet pressure with considerable seriousness. The Soviet note of 7 August 1946 constituted a turning point in Turkey’s political history, as it proposed placing the Straits under a “joint defense regime.”

According to the Turkish historian Çağrı Erhan, these diplomatic pressures compelled Turkey to move closer to the West not for ideological reasons, but on the basis of “geostrategic imperatives.”

At the same time, the modernization of the Turkish armed forces accelerated. Within the framework of the Truman Doctrine in 1947:

- 100 million U.S. dollars in military assistance were provided;
- heavy artillery, communications equipment, and transport vehicles were supplied;
- more than 23,000 Turkish military personnel were trained by U.S. specialists.

It should be emphasized that the Turkish leadership viewed this assistance not merely as a defensive measure, but as a strategic instrument for safeguarding national sovereignty. Soviet political pressure not only posed territorial risks but also shaped the external vector of Turkey’s modernization model. As a result, Turkey chose to present itself within the international system not as a “geopolitical buffer state,” but as an

active member of the Western security bloc.

This transformation exerted a profound influence on Turkey's foreign policy over the subsequent decades and accelerated the country's accession to NATO.

After the Second World War, it became evident that the concept of "permanent neutrality" could no longer meet Ankara's security needs. Consequently, foreign policy gradually shifted toward institutional integration with the West. The key mechanism of this shift was the Truman Doctrine, announced before the U.S. Congress on 12 March 1947, which formalized security assistance to Greece and Turkey as a distinct policy package. For Turkey, the Doctrine provided not only financial and military resources but also an entry point into a new security architecture.

In his address to Congress on 12 March 1947, Truman designated Turkey, together with Greece, as a recipient of "strategic assistance." Congress subsequently approved a total package of 400 million U.S. dollars, of which approximately 100 million dollars were allocated to Turkey.

On 22 May 1947, the U.S. Act on Aid to Greece and Turkey entered into force. Under this legislation, the U.S. Military Assistance Mission in Turkey (JAMMAT/JUSMMAT) was established in Ankara, and a coordinated training and supply channel was created in cooperation with the Turkish General Staff.

In 1948, Economic Cooperation Agreements aligned with the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) were signed. Turkey was integrated into the structures of the OEEC and introduced new planning and reporting standards in economic governance.

In 1949, new packages under the U.S. Mutual Defense Assistance Act expanded the scope of military-technical modernization and simultaneously accelerated Turkey's diplomatic alignment with NATO standards.

As a result of the Truman Doctrine, profound institutional transformations occurred in three key dimensions:

1. **Military sphere.** Through the U.S. military mission, Turkey received artillery systems, communications equipment, and transport and logistics technologies. Between 1947 and 1951, approximately 20,000–23,000 Turkish military personnel were trained with the participation of U.S. specialists, both domestically and abroad, through structured training programs.

2. **Economic governance.** In coordination with the European Recovery Program (ERP), the remainder of the "counterpart funds" mechanism was introduced. This facilitated the adoption of OEEC/ECA methodologies in budgeting, procurement, auditing, and national

economic planning, marking a shift toward standardized Western administrative practices.

3. **Diplomatic and strategic planning.** At the level of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Staff, standardized procedures for threat assessment, personnel training, and joint contingency planning with allied partners were institutionalized. This included, for example, joint defense scenarios concerning the Turkish Straits.

Based on the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) documents and Turkish budgetary records, the total value of military assistance directed to Turkey between 1947 and 1949 amounted to approximately USD 100 million. When combined with the economic and technical assistance packages of the ERP (1948–1952), the overall flow of aid reached an estimated USD 180–220 million. These funds were primarily allocated to:

- Equipment and logistics (communications, transport, artillery), which constituted the largest share;
- Training programs, involving the preparation of thousands of officers and technical specialists;
- Institutional assistance, aimed at reforming planning, accounting, and auditing systems.

A qualitative indicator of this phase is that by the end of 1949, the terminology of "neutrality" was de facto abandoned in Turkey's foreign policy discourse, while the rhetoric of collective defense became dominant. In this sense, the Truman Doctrine functioned as a "bridging mechanism" that integrated Turkey's rapprochement with the West into a formal and institutionalized framework.

For Ankara, the Truman Doctrine represented far more than a conventional aid program. It redefined Turkey's security identity (from neutrality to collective defense), aligned its economic and institutional governance with OEEC/ECA standards, and created the normative and operational groundwork for NATO membership. Consequently, the subsequent phase (1950–1952), including Turkey's participation in the Korean War and accession negotiations, was implemented relatively rapidly and with limited internal or external friction. The Doctrine thus operated as a systemic response to geopolitical pressure in Turkish foreign policy.

Following the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, the most significant stage in Turkish foreign policy was the country's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This process unfolded gradually between 1949 and 1952 and fundamentally altered Turkey's position within the international system.

After NATO was established in April 1949, Turkey

promptly submitted a formal application for membership. However, this request was initially deferred, as NATO's early strategic concept focused primarily on the defense of Western Europe. At the time, NATO Secretary General Lord Ismay articulated this position by noting that the Alliance's regional nature necessitated the consolidation of existing European defense lines rather than immediate expansion.

Moreover, certain factions within the U.S. State Department viewed Turkey as a "logistical risk zone", meaning a territory that would require protection rather than one capable of contributing effectively to NATO's collective defense.

The outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950 significantly broadened NATO's strategic outlook. Turkey's response was decisive: in July, Ankara dispatched a 4,500-strong military contingent to the Korean front. This move constituted not only a powerful political signal but also a practical demonstration of Turkey's readiness to assume responsibilities within the emerging global security order.

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