

Turkey and nuclear weapons: playing a game of strategic ambiguity

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In media appearances this February, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has suggested that international developments could prompt Turkey to acquire nuclear weapons. Ankara is concerned about the prospect of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and the possible collapse of the non-proliferation regime amid growing doubts among US allies in Europe and Asia about the validity of US security guarantees. Fidan's remarks triggered a debate in Turkey, where they were interpreted as an effort to pursue strategic ambiguity. Under this approach, Ankara refrains from explicit declarations that it is prepared to develop a military nuclear programme, while simultaneously outlining red lines that could push it to do so and gradually expanding its civilian nuclear programme.

As a member of NATO, Turkey relies on the nuclear deterrence provided by the United States, although until recently it viewed nuclear weapons as a relic of the Cold War. It possesses a highly developed defence industry, but its civilian nuclear programme remains in its infancy. Turkey's calculations could change in the event of a drastic shift in transatlantic relations and the loss of the US nuclear umbrella. As noted by Fidan, the potential nuclearisation of the region would constitute another significant catalyst in this regard.

Commentary

- **Turkey relies on nuclear deterrence within NATO, provided by the United States.** It is one of five allies – alongside Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany – participating in NATO's nuclear sharing programme, which links US nuclear assets deployed in Europe with their delivery systems (ultimately F-35 aircraft) operated by those countries. The Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey most likely houses between 20 and 50 US B61 tactical nuclear bombs. The United States retains full control over these weapons. Open-source information does not make it clear whether Turkey possesses aircraft certified to carry nuclear bombs. If it does not, any NATO decision to conduct a nuclear mission would require US aircraft based elsewhere in Europe to deliver the weapons stationed in Turkey, as no US aircraft capable of performing this role are currently deployed at Incirlik.
- **Turkey has not directly addressed the ongoing European debates on nuclear deterrence for three reasons.** First, it seeks to avoid provoking Donald Trump in the hope of normalising Turkish–US relations (see '[Turkey and the US: a costly normalisation](#)'). Second, it maintains that while the United States may seek to reduce its contribution to

conventional deterrence within NATO, its nuclear deterrence guarantees for Europe remain stable. Third, this stance reflects low levels of trust in its allies – 72% of Turks do not believe that NATO would defend their country in the event of aggression – and particularly in France, with which Turkey has strained relations. Fidan's remarks suggest that the Turkish government fears a crisis in transatlantic relations that could prompt US allies to develop their own nuclear capabilities. This scenario could force Turkey to revise its current position, particularly if accompanied by the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

- **Amid the instability in the Middle East, public support in Turkey for developing an indigenous nuclear weapons capability has increased.** At present, 71% of respondents favour initiating work on such a programme, while only 18% oppose it, according to a Research İstanbul poll conducted in July 2025 following the so-called Twelve-Day War between Israel and Iran. The rising approval of the country's nuclearisation does not necessarily influence decision-makers, as the foundations of Turkey's security policy are largely detached from public perceptions and expectations. This is illustrated by the country's alliance with the United States despite strong anti-American sentiment among the population. Nevertheless, these public attitudes create fertile ground for further statements by politicians suggesting that the state may seek to acquire nuclear weapons.
- **Turkey could attain the status of a nuclear weapon state only in the longer term. Its civilian nuclear programme remains at an early stage of development,** and its first nuclear power plant at Akkuyu is being built under strict Russian supervision. This would complicate any potential Turkish effort to gain control of the fuel cycle, which is a prerequisite for developing a military nuclear programme. As for delivery systems, Turkey is intensively developing the Cenk medium-range ballistic missile. It also possesses SOM air-to-surface cruise missiles with a range of up to 300 kilometres and naval platforms capable of launching missiles against land targets, including the Reis-class submarine and the Ada-class corvette. Accelerating the development of a civilian nuclear programme, combined with progress in missile technology, could provide the technological basis for a military nuclear programme, should Turkish decision-makers take the relevant political decision. However, under the current non-proliferation regime (Turkey is a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) and in the face of likely external pressure and sanctions, developing a nuclear weapons capability would take at least a decade. Building an arsenal and the accompanying system required for credible strategic deterrence would take even longer. At present, the principal value of the advances made by Turkey's defence industry lies in lending credibility to Ankara's game of strategic ambiguity.