

**Turkey's Geostrategic Role in British Foreign Policy
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Abstract

This article discusses British foreign policy towards Turkey during World War II (1939–1945). The outbreak of the war marked a significant shift in Britain's approach to Turkey, transitioning from a pre-war focus on economic relations to a wartime emphasis on political and strategic considerations. This study explores the rationale behind Britain's diplomatic engagement with Turkey and assesses the impact of British efforts to shape Turkish foreign policy during the conflict. Using a

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qualitative methodology based on content analysis, this article draws upon British archival sources from the Public Record Office (PRO) and other library resources. The findings indicate that Turkey's strategic location at the crossroads of key global regions made it a crucial player in the wartime balance of power. Control over Turkish territory, particularly the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits, had direct implications for military strategies in the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Consequently, Britain's primary objective was to prevent Turkey from aligning with the Axis powers and to ensure its continued cooperation or, at minimum, its neutrality. To achieve this, Britain employed a range of diplomatic, economic, and military strategies. Diplomatic efforts included treaties and negotiations aimed at securing Turkish cooperation, while economic measures such as trade agreements and military aid were designed to strengthen British influence. At the same time, Britain sought to reassure Turkey of its security concerns while countering potential German influence in the region. Although Turkey maintained its neutrality for much of the war, British diplomatic efforts played a role in its eventual decision to join the Allies in 1945. This study concludes that British foreign policy towards Turkey was primarily driven by strategic and defensive considerations. Turkey's geopolitical significance made it essential for Britain to engage diplomatically to secure regional stability. The evolution of British-Turkish relations during the war highlights the broader geopolitical challenges faced by Britain in

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securing its interests. By maintaining Turkey's neutrality and gradually influencing its alignment, Britain was able to protect its strategic position and contribute to the wider Allied war effort. The case of British foreign policy towards Turkey illustrates the complexities of wartime diplomacy and the significance of strategic partnerships in shaping global conflict outcomes.

Keywords: World War II, Foreign policy, British, Turkey, Strategic

I. Introduction

The relationship between Britain and Turkey during the Second World War, from 1939 to 1945, marked a significant chapter in the wider history of British diplomacy, especially in the context of great power rivalries over strategically important regions. Although the ties between the two countries had been cultivated since the sixteenth century and had grown steadily throughout the nineteenth century based on shared strategic interests, the onset of global war gave new urgency to Britain's engagement with Turkey. This was largely driven by Turkey's physical geography, which had a direct impact on military planning and foreign policy formulation.

Turkey's strategic value lay in its unique geographical position at the crossroads of Southeastern Europe and Western Asia. The country controlled two crucial maritime straits, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, which connect the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. These narrow waterways served not only as key economic and military corridors but also as gateways to the southern border of the Soviet Union. In this sense, whoever controlled or influenced Turkey could potentially shape the flow of military and commercial traffic into and out of the Black Sea. In geopolitical terms, understood as the influence of geography on political and strategic decisions, Turkey held the capacity to

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enable or restrict regional dominance across the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.¹

By early 1939, following Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia and the worsening security environment in Europe, British policymakers began to recognize that Turkey's alignment would be crucial in determining the course of Axis expansion. Turkey's location made it a natural bulwark against the southward movement of German forces into the Balkans, as well as a key to safeguarding Allied access to oil-producing regions in Western Asia.² Thus, the physical features of Turkey's geography directly shaped British diplomatic priorities, as the country stood at the centre of a potential conflict zone linking Central Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East.³

At the same time, Turkey was still in the process of consolidating its national recovery after the trauma of previous conflicts. Preserving territorial integrity and political independence remained its foremost priority. To achieve this, Ankara adopted a policy of active neutrality, maintaining relations with both Allied and Axis powers while avoiding formal alliances.

¹ Mustafar Bilgin, *Britain and Turkey in The Middle East*. United Kingdom (Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 9-11.

² Enh, A.M. *Balkan war 2 in 1913 and the diplomacy of the Great Powers: Analysis from the British documents*. Tamkang Journal of International Affairs, 2016, 20(1): 95 – 138.

³ Enh, A.M., Bin Awg Lah, M.N.H., Mansor, S., Othman, *Russia-Ukraine conflict: An analysis of geopolitical alignments in Asian countries*. International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences, 2024, 10(10): 86–93

Though Italy posed the most immediate military threat in the Mediterranean, Turkish leaders were more concerned about the long-term intentions of the Soviet Union, which shared land borders with Turkey along the north and east. In this context, Turkey began to seek explicit security guarantees from the Allied powers, particularly from Britain.⁴

Within British strategic planning circles, especially in the Admiralty, Turkey's importance was repeatedly highlighted. Internal assessments noted that Britain often failed to grasp the full extent of its reliance on Turkey's cooperation. One such view stated plainly that *"we often fail to realise that we need Turkey more than Turkey needs us."*⁵ Turkey's control over the straits, its proximity to critical oil resources, and its vulnerability to potential German or Soviet advances combined to make it an essential element in Britain's wartime calculations.⁶ Consequently, British foreign policy towards Turkey was increasingly shaped by the strategic imperatives imposed by the region's geography.

⁴ Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in The Middle East 1914-1956*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 1963), 16.

⁵ Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in The Second World War*. London, (University of Oxford London, 1970), 211.

⁶ Mansor, S.A., Enh, A.M., Mansor, S., Othman, A.-A. The Implications of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 on the Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria: Reports from the British Documents. *Global Journal Al Thaqafah*, 2024, 14(1), pp. 33–48.

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II. Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study adopts a qualitative approach based on content analysis. As this is a historical study, the primary research relies predominantly on first-hand sources. The principal archival materials used in this research are obtained from the National Archives of the United Kingdom, which serve as the main reference. Key sources include files from the Foreign Office (FO), Cabinet Papers (CAB), Ministry of Defence Files (DEFE), War Office Files (WO), Ministry of Information Files (INF), Government Code and Cypher School Files (HW1), and the Private Papers of Eden (1935–1946). Additionally, several unpublished archival documents have also been consulted.

This study further incorporates an examination and interpretation of sources acquired from various academic institutions, including the Tun Seri Lanang Library at the National University of Malaysia (UKM), the Library of Malay Civilization, and the Resource Centre for the Study of History, Politics, and Strategy at UKM. The majority of primary materials consist of treaty documents, official correspondence, meeting minutes, and reports from Foreign Office officials concerning British-Turkish relations between 1942 and 1945. Public sources such as books, memoirs, and newspapers—predominantly written by politicians, diplomats, and government officials—are equally crucial in

understanding the issues under study (Enh & Samak, 2020). Additionally, academic sources, including monographs and journal articles, have been extensively utilized.

This study also refers to documents from prominent international affairs institutions, particularly the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Notable references include *Documents on International Affairs, 1951* (Oxford University Press, 1954), *Documents on International Affairs, 1952* (Oxford University Press, 1955), *Documents on International Affairs, 1953* (Oxford University Press, 1956), *Survey of International Affairs, 1951* (Oxford University Press, 1954), *Survey of International Affairs, 1952* (Oxford University Press, 1955), and *Survey of International Affairs, 1953* (Oxford University Press, 1956). Furthermore, online journal articles and several theses from previous scholars have been consulted to enhance the understanding of this subject matter.

III. Britain's Foreign Policy Priorities Regarding Nearby Regions

During the onset of World War II in 1939, the British policy towards Turkey underwent a marked transformation. Preceding the Second World War, British interest in fostering relations with Turkey was primarily economically oriented, with less emphasis on political aspects. However, amid the unfolding of World War II, the emphasis shifted dramatically towards defense and strategic

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concerns in cultivating ties with Turkey. At the war's outset, Turkey opted to maintain a stance of neutrality, refraining from aligning with either the Allied or Axis powers. Nevertheless, the British persisted in cultivating positive relations with Turkey and consistently extended offers for the country to join the Allied cause. This pursuit stemmed from Turkey's geographical location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, imparting significant strategic importance to both the Allied and Axis blocs.⁷ Complete control over Turkish territory could influence strategies and defense capabilities within the region.

Moreover, the Turkish control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits served as vital passageways connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Mastery over these straits conferred strategic advantages to any bloc in command, enabling the regulation of both commercial and military vessel traffic. Additionally, Turkey boasted a pivotal naval base in the city of İzmir.⁸ The British perceived Turkey as a nation offering strategic advantages during the war and deemed it crucial to ensure Turkey's alignment as an ally during this critical period. Therefore, the British viewed Turkey not merely as a neutral country during a critical moment of the war, but as a strategic asset with the potential to determine the balance of power in the

⁷ Mustafar Bilgin. *Britain and Turkey in The Middle East*. United Kingdom. (Bloomsbury Academic. 2008). 31-32.

⁸ Mustafar Bilgin. *Britain and Turkey in The Middle East*. United Kingdom. (Bloomsbury Academic. 2008). 38-39.

Mediterranean and Balkan regions. Turkey's position between the main axes of conflict enabled it to serve as a defensive bulwark against German incursions into the Middle East as well as a barrier to the expansion of Soviet influence. On this basis, British leaders concluded that ensuring Turkey's alignment or at the very least, a pro-British neutrality, was a critical foreign policy necessity, not because of the timing of the war itself, but due to Turkey's irreplaceable geostrategic value.

While Turkey did not formally join the Allied bloc at the war's outset, Turkish authorities maintained diplomatic relations with Britain and the United States while fortifying their own defenses. Turkey adhered staunchly to its policy of neutrality and non-involvement in direct combat during the conflict. This is evidenced by the fact that Turkey did not declare war on any party during the majority of the conflict, from 1939 until early 1945. Despite facing diplomatic and economic pressure from both the Allied and Axis powers, Turkey consistently refused to enter the war and maintained its official stance of neutrality until 1945.⁹ However, both the Allied and Axis powers endeavored to sway Turkey to align with their respective causes. Both blocs engaged in a race to secure political and military support from Turkey. Despite Turkey maintaining its neutral stance throughout the war, it strategically utilized this position to bolster its strength and reap

⁹ Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955), 667.

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benefits from both blocs. Nevertheless, regarding the significance of fostering relations with Turkey, the British persisted in their efforts to court Turkey as an ally. The importance of this strategic position was reiterated by eminent Middle Eastern historian Albert Hourani, who stated:

...to control the Middle East is a necessity for any Power which want to extend its influence from one continent or sea to another, to joint forces with another Power who centre of influence lies in another continent or sea, or to prevent some other Power any of those things. This importance it has retained and probably will retain whatever changes take place in the distribution of world power.¹⁰

Therefore, according to this statement, the primary interests for the British in fostering relations with Turkey during World War II were the defense advantages and the strategic position held by Turkey. Therefore, one of the initial steps taken by the British was the signing of the Ankara Agreement of 1939 between Britain, France, and Turkey on 19 October 1939. This agreement marked the first phase of Turkey's neutrality policy with a pro-British inclination from 1939 to 1941.¹¹

¹⁰ Albert Hourani. *Great Britain and The Arab World*. (London. John Murray Press. 1945). 32.

¹¹ FO 371/23747, European situation: Declaration Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty. Code 67 File 661 (papers 7261 - 8264), 19 October 1939.

A. The defense significance for the British military

One of the primary interests of British foreign policy towards Turkey during World War II was defense.¹² Turkey's geographical position, bridging three major continents Europe, Asia, and the Middle East rendered it an ideal territory for British defensive fortification to impede Axis military advances. For instance, Turkey's access to both the Mediterranean and Black Seas allowed the British to control Axis troop movements arriving from the Mediterranean direction. Control over the Mediterranean and Black Seas during the war was crucial as these water bodies served as vital supply routes and connected Axis forces with their allies in the Mediterranean and North Africa.¹³ Furthermore, Turkey's geographical location provided access to block Axis troop movements via land routes, such as through Balkan defenses, to thwart incursions from Axis allies in the Balkans like Italy and Bulgaria. Therefore, this section will discuss the defense significance for the British military, namely obtaining military assistance from Balkan nations, blocking German incursions into the Mediterranean, improving Russo-Turkish relations, and impeding Italian troop movements into the Balkan region.

¹² Al-hakim, M., Enh, A.M. & Mansor S. Tun Abdul Razak in His Efforts to Establish Diplomatic Relations with The People's Republic of China. *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*. 2023, 27 (1) : 111-162.

¹³ Stanford J. Shaw. *Turkey and the Holocaust: Turkey's Role in Rescuing Turkish and European Jewry from Nazi Persecution. 1933-1945*. (New York. New York University Press. 1993). 52-55.

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B. Obtaining Military Assistance from Balkan Nations

Gaining a foothold in the Balkans during World War II constituted a defense advantage highly contested by both the Axis and Allied blocs. This was due to the Balkans' strategic position between Central Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. Control over this region would afford dominance over crucial maritime trade between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Commanding these routes facilitated efficient transportation of supplies and troops across various theaters of war. Additionally, the Balkans served as a primary gateway to the Mediterranean region.¹⁴ The British, with a strategic interest in maintaining control over the Mediterranean and safeguarding their maritime trade routes, greatly relied on assistance from Balkan nations. By securing support from Balkan nations, the British aimed to strengthen their position in defending the Mediterranean and prevent Axis forces from entering this vital area. Turkey, as an influential nation in the Balkans, implied that by gaining a position in Turkey, the British indirectly gained a foothold in the Balkans. Consequently, the British government planned to establish an Allied defensive stronghold in the Balkans to impede Axis troop movements.

However, this endeavor seemed rather implausible without support from Turkey and might arouse suspicion from Italy,

¹⁴ Sir Llewellyn Woodward. *British Foreign Policy in The Second World War*. (London. University of Oxford London. 1970). 61.

which at that time had yet to enter the war. Consequently, the British adopted a more prudent policy by appeasing Italy initially and attempting to minimize its hostility in terms of blockades, aiming to avoid actions that could force Italian Prime Minister Mussolini to choose between remaining neutral or aligning with Germany. Maintaining a secure position in Turkish territory was imperative as the Allied forces were expected to have troops either in Salonika or Istanbul, Turkey, to obstruct potential German incursions towards the Mediterranean or the Straits. Such forces would act as a buffer for the Balkan nations, which might either succumb to German demands or fail to unite against German aggression.¹⁵ British Prime Minister at that time, Arthur Neville Chamberlain, emphasized that the Allies could not take any action to impede German incursions through Yugoslavia because maintaining forces in Salonika or Istanbul would impose an enormous strain on Allied shipping and naval escort.¹⁶ This was because Salonika was not a suitable base or starting point for offensive operations, and under any circumstances, the use of any location would depend on the stances of Italy and Turkey. Moreover, it was impossible to reconcile the neutral Balkan bloc's plans with the presence of Allied forces in any Balkan nation. Hence, no decision was made except to “explore” this position through diplomatic channels in Rome and Ankara.

¹⁵ CAB 65/1/22. Minutes of The War Cabinet Meeting. (The National Archives. London. 21 September 1939)

¹⁶ CAB 65/1/22. Minutes of The War Cabinet Meeting. (The National Archives. London. 21 September 1939)

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At the outbreak of the war, Great Britain and Turkey were at the verge of finalizing a Mutual Aid Agreement. Historical negotiations indicate that Turkey had decided to deviate from its alliance policy with Germany and revert to its longstanding tradition of amicable relations with Great Britain. The decision to make this shift was made prior to the death of Atatürk in November 1938. President Ismet İnönü succeeded Atatürk as Turkey's second President and continued Atatürk's policies. Consequently, the Turkish government was prepared to join Great Britain in a declaration that both nations would formalize a long-term agreement. Furthermore, in the event of an invasion leading to warfare in the Mediterranean region, British and Turkish cooperation was pledged to fully assist and collaborate in resolving Mediterranean issues.¹⁷ Both governments also acknowledged the necessity of ensuring security in the Balkans and agreed to conduct joint negotiations with the aim of achieving this objective as swiftly as possible.

C. Blocking German Naval Movements to the Mediterranean

Turkey shares borders with the German Empire in Southeastern Europe and the Soviet Union to the north. Turkey's presence in this region is critical for monitoring German activities

¹⁷ CAB 79/8/23. Assistance to Turkey. Annex. Telegram from COS to Cs-in-C. Mediterranean and Middle East. COS (40)1006. 1026 & 1028. London. (The National Archives. 11 Dec 1940)

and limiting their potential expansion into this territory. Additionally, Turkey controls the Dardanelles Strait, a strategic maritime passage linking the Aegean Sea¹⁸ with the Black Sea. Despite being a neutral country and maintaining a neutral stance throughout the war, Turkey still regulated the movement of warships and military convoys through this strait. By exerting strict control over the Dardanelles, Turkey could impede the movement and supplies of Germany in the region. Based on Turkey's advantage in controlling this maritime route, the British perceived that Turkey could obstruct German naval movements into the Mediterranean if Turkey aligned with the Allies.¹⁹ Furthermore, the British could leverage Turkey's influence as a means to persuade Yugoslavia and Greece to engage in war while there was still a chance to counter German military advancements, thereby safeguarding themselves against potential future attacks. This strategic perspective emerged due to Yugoslavia and Greece sharing borders with Turkey, allowing the British to hinder German naval access to the Mediterranean through both maritime and land routes if all three countries Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Greece aligned with the British cause.

¹⁸ The Aegean Sea constitutes a part of the Mediterranean Sea. Situated between the Balkan Peninsula and Anatolia, it lies amidst the prominent lands of Greece and Turkey. It connects to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits.

¹⁹ WO 106/3111. Anglo-Turkish staff conversations. (London. The National Archives 1939 June-1940 Jan. 1939).

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Germany clearly aimed for a swift and decisive victory. Hence, the British believed that such blockades might alleviate the situation in the west by disrupting German plans and providing time for defensive preparations. However, the Foreign Office did not deem this proposal practical, and the War Cabinet decided on June 13, 1940, to refrain from taking any action on the matter until they heard more about Turkey's stance. The rapid advancement of German troops in France and Turkey's delayed approval caused the Foreign Office to lean towards rejecting the proposal, even though Turkey had expressed readiness to consider it.²⁰ Although this decision only differed by a few weeks, the subsequent developments deviated significantly from the initial plans. France exited the war after succumbing to Germany on June 10, 1940, and Italy entered, rendering the Balkan nations incapable of resisting an attack, let alone initiating one. For reasons beyond the British government's control, Turkey did not fulfill the terms of the agreement it had made, assuming that if a conflict arose with Italy in the Balkans, the Turkish people would receive full British-French assistance.²¹

²⁰ CAB 84/22/37. The attitude of Turkey. Note by the Secretary. (London. The National Archives. 10 November 1940).

²¹ CAB 84/2/21. Action by France If the Full Weight of a German Offensive Falls On Great Britain. Meeting held on 18th March. 1940 at 3.30pm. (London. The National Archives. 1940).

D. Blocking Italian Military Movements

Eleven days after Italy's entry into the war, the Foreign Office took action by sending a circular telegram to all His Majesty's Missions. This telegram garnered attention as it addressed the questions raised in the House of Commons on June 19, 1940, regarding the British stance on Italy's position in Abyssinia and Albania. According to the telegram:

*...in view of the unprovoked entry of Italy into the war against this country, we held ourselves entitled to reserve full liberty of action in respect of any undertakings given by us in the past to the Italian Government concerning the Mediterranean, North or East African and Middle Eastern areas.*²²

The objective of this statement, elucidated in the telegram, was to liberate Britain from assumed commitments made in the past, particularly under the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1938, without binding the British government to future obligations. Upon Italy's entry into the war, Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen was instructed to investigate whether the Turkish government was willing to take action in accordance with the Anglo-Franco-Turkish tripartite agreement to block the Italian military movements. Secretary of State Lord Halifax was directed

²² CAB 101/246. Printed set of personal telegrams. Prime Minister. (Churchill): 14 May-31 December 1940 (contains index). (London. The National Archives. 1940).

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to meet with the Turkish Ambassador on June 11, 1940, to discuss these measures.²³

On June 21, 1940, Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen was directed to propose to the Turkish government a modification of their declaration from “agreement with Great Britain” to “agreement with the Allies.” France’s withdrawal from the war would not affect Turkey’s obligations under that agreement, and the conflict in the Mediterranean involving France and Great Britain, envisaged under Article 2 of that agreement, had erupted prior to France’s defection.²⁴ However, it was evident that Turkey’s stance would not be determined by legal considerations, and Turkey was reluctant to refer to the Allies. The declaration eventually made by the Turkish Prime Minister during the National Assembly on June 26, 1940, stated that the Republic Government had taken into consideration the circumstances arising from Italy’s entry into the war and decided to invoke the provisions of Protocol 2, notifying its effect. Therefore, Turkey would maintain a non-belligerent stance at that time for the safety and defense of the Turkish state, continuing to enhance military preparedness. According to the Turkish Prime Minister, following

²³ HNKY 5/4. Correspondence with Lord Halifax. (London. The National Archives. 11 June 1940).

²⁴ CAB 65/5/14. Military Policy in the Middle East - Administrative preparations. (London. The National Archives. 21 June 1940).

this issue, the Turkish government should also remain more vigilant than before.²⁵

The Turkish government also asserted that, with this precautionary stance and by avoiding any provocation, Turkey would uphold security for their own nation and those in the surrounding regions.²⁶ This declaration thereby disregarded any reference to agreements with Great Britain or the hope that Turkey's non-belligerent nature was only temporary.²⁷ The paragraph about Turkey's military preparations fell far short of a mobilization notice or anything binding Italian forces as Italians. The general perception was that Turkey had shifted towards strict neutrality. However, the British government did not press the Turkish government to obtain a more satisfactory statement because Turkey's non-belligerent nature had also helped to hinder Italy from advancing further into the Balkan region.

²⁵ CAB 120/862. Personal telegrams between the Prime Minister and President Inonu. Turkey. (London. The National Archives. 26 June 1940).

²⁶ FO 371/25017/316. Turkish foreign relations and attitude towards European situation: earthquake in Turkey. Code 44 file 316 (papers 8242 - end). (London. The National Archives. 1940).

²⁷ FO 371/25017/316. Turkish foreign relations and attitude towards European situation: earthquake in Turkey. Code 44 file 316 (papers 8242 - end). (London. The National Archives. 1940).

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**IV. The Ways In Which Turkey's Geography Influenced
British Decisions**

Throughout World War II, in addition to defense interests, Turkey's importance to the British was also evident through its strategic geographical position situated at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East which directly affected the operational and logistical considerations of the Allied forces. As a member of the Allied Powers, the British aimed to ensure Turkey's neutrality or alliance due to Turkey's strategic location bordering areas controlled by Germany, including Greece under German occupation. The British sought protection from German threats in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. In this context, Turkey's strategic position served as a frontline in preventing German expansion southward and eastward. Moreover, Turkey possessed strategic military bases such as the Naval Base in İncirlik and the Air Base in Adana, which were crucial for the British in maintaining a military presence in the region.²⁸ These bases provided the British with a strong tactical position to conduct military operations and secure the Eastern Mediterranean region. The strategic importance also involved the placement of British troops in the Black Sea, controlling German influence in the Balkan region, and overseeing chrome supplies. Therefore, these strategic interests prompted the British to foster close

²⁸ Elizabeth Monroe. *Britain's Moment in The Middle East 1914-1956*. (London. Chatto & Windus. 1963) 72.

relations with Turkey during World War II, despite Turkey choosing to remain neutral and not actively engage in the conflict.

A. The Deployment of British Troops in the Black Sea

The significance of Turkey's involvement with the Allies during World War II was not only perceived as a robust defense against the blockade of enemy forces but also as a strategic position for the deployment of British military camps in the Black Sea. The importance of Turkey joining the war on the side of the Allies was once again emphasized by the British during the Moscow Conference held from September 28th to October 4th, 1941.²⁹ This conference involving three major powers the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain commenced when British and American representatives arrived in Moscow on September 28th and concluded on October 4th. During this conference, the primary issues addressed to the British representatives initially focused on supply matters and subsequently considered the general strategic situation concerning the following aspects:

"The conference must proceed on the basis that the United States is not a warmonger. The burden on British manpower is

²⁹ WO 193/664. Moscow conference August-October 1941. (London. The National Archives. 1941).

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already heavy and the pressure will be intense in 1942 and beyond. Apart from the assistance which Britain receives from the Dominions, India and the Colonies, the manpower The British were also fully involved. The British also had to feed themselves and survive by maintaining a large merchant fleet in constant motion. superior, and also from the most dangerous form of air attack by the main strength of the enemy Air Force, which could be moved with rapidly from East to West at the convenience of the enemy. The Allies had to maintain their forces in the Middle East and hold a line from the Caspian to the Western Desert. The Allies hoped to develop on this front in 1942 about 25 divisions, British, Indian, and Dominion, which consisted of all the rear of the services required in this undeveloped area and a strong proportioned Air Force, about a million men. The strain on shipping supplied this force largely round the Cape, and the time taken in rounding the available vessels, should be explained, if necessary, in detail."³⁰

The British needed to establish military deployments in the Balkan region because a substantial number of British troops would take a considerable amount of time to reach the theater of war. Additionally, the British needed to defend other islands. For defense within the British Isles, the British had an army comprising over two million individuals, supported by

³⁰ WO 193/664. Moscow conference August-October 1941. (London. The National Archives. 1941).

approximately one and a half million armed Home Guard personnel. The British also possessed around three and a half million rifles, with a projected increase of 100,000 or more for the following year. Of the two million troops, 900,000 constituted the Field Force³¹, consisting of 20 mobile infantry divisions, 9 less mobile regional or coastal divisions, and 6 armored divisions, of which only three were partially formed, along with 5 army tank brigades, of which only one remained fully operational. Nearly one million individuals were needed for the sizable Air Force, with 750,000 already enlisted. The Navy had absorbed half a million sailors and marines to support its operations. When combined with these figures, the shipbuilding industry, aircraft production, ammunition manufacturing, and domestic food production requirements, among other public domestic industries, were all reduced to minimal levels. It is evident that the workforce, both male and female, available for a population of 44,000,000, is either currently at or soon to reach its limit. From the one million individuals supporting the Land Forces, Great Britain's Air Defense, Coastal Defense, the garrison in Northern Ireland, draft production units, and training schools to secure aerodromes and vulnerable locations, only a small margin remained. It would be impossible to substantially increase the Field Army within the country beyond the mentioned divisions,

³¹ The Field Force in military terminology refers to a combined armed land force operating under actual or assumed combat conditions, typically for a specific military campaign. While used by other nations, its interpretation may vary.

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less than forty in total, while significant efforts would be required to maintain the existing strength domestically and supply forces to the Middle East and Mediterranean.³²

Therefore, Turkey's involvement in these plans significantly contributes and could resolve numerous arising issues. Conversely, if Britain could secure Turkey, it would be considered a substantial advantage during the war. This is because not only would Germany's access to Syria and Egypt be obstructed by forces stationed in Turkey, but significant advantages in the Black Sea defense could be maintained, thereby aiding the defense of the Caucasus.³³ Turkey's course of action might soon be determined with promises that if Turkey engages in the conflict, aid in the form of troops and modern equipment, including aircraft support, armored vehicles, anti-tank shields, anti-aircraft artillery, among others, must be provided by the Allies. It should also be clarified to the Soviets that much of this equipment and a significant portion of troops would undoubtedly be diverted from the existing contribution to the Soviets to accommodate Turkey. However, to encourage Turkey's alignment with the Allies, especially in the near term, both Great Britain and the Soviet Union consider it worthwhile to reassess their war arrangement.

³² FO 371/30099. Naval and Military assistance to Turkey. Code 44 file 274 (to paper 8953). (London. The National Archives. 1941).

³³ WO 201/1072. Turkey: Strategic appreciations. (London. The National Archives. 1941).

However, there was no political issue discussed on September 29, 1941, during the review of the war arrangements. On September 30, 1941, Lord Beaverbrook, the British Minister of Aircraft Production, discussed aid to Therefore, the Allies needed to reassure Turkey in any way possible to gain the strategic advantage of troop placement in Turkish territory. Turkey, highlighting that certain propellants and projectiles unwanted by Stalin might influence Turkey's decisions.³⁴ Stalin concurred but remarked that Turkey wasn't acting like an ally, and the Allies must ensure that supplies from their side to Turkey wouldn't be lost. Lord Beaverbrook argued that British assistance might re-establish the alliance. According to Stalin in this context, Turkey feared Bulgaria due to Bulgaria's alliance with Germany and the potential aid Germany might provide.³⁵

B. Controlling German Influence in the Balkan Region

During lengthy negotiations between the British and Turkey prior to the outbreak of the German offensive in the Balkans, there were particular concerns on the British side as Germany also endeavored to persuade Turkey to join the Axis powers in the war. The main reason for this action was evident, as Germany also

³⁴ CAB 111/382. Civil supplies to Turkey. (London. The National Archives. 30 September 1941).

³⁵ FO 954/24B/531. Soviet Union: Foreign Office telegram to Moscow. No 2 ARGUS (from Lord Beaverbrook). (London. The National Archives. 1941).

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needed Turkish territory to serve as a defense for the Axis against the Allies' attacks. This situation raised concerns for the British as the complete surrender of Turkey to the Axis would escalate the wartime situation. In early March 1941, Germany made specific efforts to establish connections with the Turkish government. Hitler sent a personal message on March 4, 1941, through Herr von Papen, the German Ambassador in Ankara, to President İnönü. Hitler attempted to explain in this message that:

*...Germany had no territorial interest in the Balkans, and that she was concerned there only with measures to resist British attempts to secure a foothold in the European continent.*³⁶

Once these measures succeed, German troops will be withdrawn from Bulgaria and Romania. According to Hitler, Germany and Turkey require close economic cooperation, and there should be no opposition between the two countries regarding the post-war territorial arrangements. Therefore, Germany will not do anything to jeopardize Turkey as long as the Turkish people themselves do not take steps requiring a change in Germany's attitude. This German action baffled the British, leading them to take steps to entirely eliminate German influence in Turkey.

³⁶ FO 371/169550. Visit to Turkey of Herr von Papen. wartime German Ambassador. (London. The National Archives. 4 march 1941).

However, Turkey's reaction to this message seemed to satisfy the British when M. Saracoglu acted by showing Hitler's letter once to Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, stating that Turkey would only respond to this message to 'fulfill a protocol requirement' alone. The Turkish government did not send a reply to Hitler until March 12th. The Turkish government subsequently expressed regret to Germany for Germany's failure to keep their promise not to invade the Balkans. Thus, the Turkish government gave the same assurance to Germany that Turkey would not attack unless Germany changed the situation.³⁷ Meanwhile, Germany renewed its pressure after the fall of resistance in Yugoslavia and the British defeat in Greece. This situation was taken seriously when Herr von Papen returned to Ankara on May 13th after a visit to Berlin. The new pressure was related to the uprising in Iraq. The Foreign Office had information that German forces intended to come through Turkey, with or without Turkey's consent, to assist the rebels.

On June 12, however, Herr von Papen once again offered Turkey an agreement stating that both countries would respect each other's integrity and territorial inviolability and maintain good relations in all matters concerning their mutual interests to bring about an understanding other than war.³⁸ Although

³⁷ FO 371/30110. Turco-German Commercial Agreement. Code 44 file 622. (London. The National Archives. 12 march 1941).

³⁸ FO 371/169550. Visit to Turkey of Herr von Papen. wartime German Ambassador. (London. The National Archives. 4 march 1941).

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Germany accepted these terms and requested Turkey to immediately sign the agreement, Turkey, being a neutral country, could not refuse this agreement as it would raise suspicions from the Axis. Germany also indicated that they had no intention to attack Turkish territories, and with the German occupation, the situation in the Middle East was improving.³⁹ Regardless of the conditions of the agreement, it would have a profoundly negative impact, not only on the Allied forces in the Middle East but also on Great Britain and the United States.

The War Cabinet resolved that since they could not prevent the conclusion of the Turkish-German agreement, they would not exert further pressure regarding it. The fundamental fact was that Turkey remained neutral and did not actually join Germany. The Foreign Office stressed that British newspapers should not hold Turkey accountable and that the Allies should continue delivering the promised supplies under the Anglo-Turkish agreement. Should the Allies cut off these supplies, even though Turkey had given assurances that they did not compromise their agreement with the Allies, Turks might question whether the Allies mistrusted them or whether the military position of the Allies themselves was so weak that they couldn't provide Turkey with supplies.⁴⁰ Therefore, the War Cabinet agreed to continue the supply

³⁹ FO 371/30110. Turco-German Commercial Agreement. Code 44 file 622. (London. The National Archives. 12 march 1941).

⁴⁰ Selim Deringil. *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War*. (United Kingdom Cambridge University Press. 2004). 65.

shipments, despite the situation having been altered somewhat by the Turkish-German agreement.

C. Improving Soviet Union-Turkey Relations

The British considered good relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey a key element in their strategy to safeguard their interests and maintain stability in the Balkans and the Mediterranean during World War II. However, relations between the Soviets and Turkey during this period were somewhat strained, particularly due to Turkey's concerns over Soviet threats after the war. Nevertheless, on July 1, 1940, the British received a report from their ambassador in Moscow, Sir Stafford Cripps, noting that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had expressed his desire to improve relations with Turkey.⁴¹ This statement presented an opportunity for the British, as Stalin emphasized that the Soviet Union had no intention of expanding its influence in the Balkans and was concerned about any Turkish actions that might hinder their plans. Stalin also requested British mediation in this effort, a request that provided the British government with a strategic opportunity to ensure regional stability.⁴²

⁴¹ FO 954/24B/304. Soviet Union: From Sir S. Cripps. Attitude of Stalin towards Britain and Germany. Russian problems. (London. The National Archives 1 July 1940).

⁴² Frank G. Weber. *The Evasive Neutral: Germany, Britain and the Quest for a Turkish Alliance in the Second World War*. University of Missouri Press. Columbia and London 1979. 58.

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Despite this, the British remained cautious about the sincerity of the Soviet proposal, particularly since the Soviets appeared interested in changes to the Montreux Convention. Stalin sought to modify control regulations over the Dardanelles Strait, raising questions about whether the Soviets were actually aiming for exclusive strategic control over the area. The Montreux Convention (1936), which granted Turkey full control over the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits, was a key element of the stability guaranteed by the British in the region.⁴³ Any changes to this convention could provide Germany with direct access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, thereby threatening British defense interests. The British thus viewed efforts to improve Soviet-Turkish relations as an effective means of alleviating Soviet concerns over Turkey's position in the region.⁴⁴

Sir H. Knatchbull Hugessen, the British ambassador to Turkey, was instructed on June 22, 1941, to inform the Turkish government that their willingness to cooperate with the Soviets would provide mutual benefits in maintaining stability in the

⁴³ FO 954/28B/219. Turkey: Foreign Office telegram to Cairo. No 166 (For Sir A. Cadogan). Soviet Government and possible revision of Montreux Convention. Volume 28. folio(s) 219. Numbered Tur/43/12 on the original. (London. The National Archives 27 January 1943).

⁴⁴ CAB 79/6/28. Telegram From Sir H Knatchbull-Hugessen. Turkey. 21.8.40. Turco Soviet Relations. COS(40)649. (London. The National Archives 23 Sept 1940).

Balkans.⁴⁵ Turkey's response indicated that, although they shared a common interest in preventing German and Italian advances, they remained skeptical of Soviet intentions. This uncertainty posed a significant challenge for the British in establishing a stable alliance between the two countries. The British also insisted that the entire issue of changes to the status of the Straits be thoroughly discussed before any agreement was reached. Thus, on July 11, 1941, Hugessen was directed to obtain feedback from the Turkish government regarding British proposals for balancing Soviet demands without completely relinquishing control over the Dardanelles. The British emphasized that they did not intend to strip Turkey of its rights under the Montreux Convention, but they needed to ensure strategic stability in the region.⁴⁶

Sir S. Cripps, the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, stressed to the British government that Soviet-Turkish cooperation was a crucial barrier against German incursions into the Black Sea. The British recognized that changes in the status of the Straits would increase Soviet power in the region, but they were concerned that if they offered too many concessions, the Soviets might exploit the situation to gain full control of the strategic passage.⁴⁷ This created anxiety for the British, who

⁴⁵ WO 201/1256. British Liaison Staff No. 21: Russian And Turkish Relations. (London. The National Archives 1 March- 31 May 1941).

⁴⁶ FO 371/30130. Montreux Straits Convention. Code 44 file 2095 (papers 7681-end). (London. The National Archives 1941).

⁴⁷ FO 371/24849/93. Sir S. Cripps - Ambassador To Moscow. Code 38 File 93. (London. The National Archives 30 October 1940).

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needed to be cautious in every diplomatic step to maintain stability in the Mediterranean and the Balkans without opening the way for Soviet dominance. The Turkish government, on the other hand, maintained its commitment to Britain but remained vigilant against offers that might come from Germany. On September 16, 1941, Turkish Foreign Minister Mehmet Saracoglu began considering allowing the Turkish Ambassador to return to Moscow to discuss a Balkan alliance proposal that could alleviate concerns over German influence. This marked a crucial turning point in British efforts to support regional stability through a stronger entente.⁴⁸

A meeting between the Turkish Ambassador and Vyacheslav Molotov on October 17, 1941, saw Molotov welcoming Turkish military preparations in Thrace as a supportive measure to prevent Italian forces from invading Greece. Although this discussion did not immediately lead to changes in the Balkan situation, it indicated that Soviet-Turkish cooperation had the potential to strengthen the southern European defense front. Molotov also reaffirmed the sincerity and friendship of the Soviets towards Turkey, which was a positive sign for regional stability.⁴⁹ On October 30, Sir S. Cripps reported that the Soviets might be

⁴⁸ CAB 79/6/28. Telegram From Sir H Knatchbull-Hugessen. Turkey. 21.8.40. TURCO-SOVIET RELATIONS. COS(40)649. (London. The National Archives 23 Sept 1940).

⁴⁹ FO 371/25012/203. Turco-Soviet relations: frontier situation. Code 44 file 203 (to paper 6976). (London. The National Archives 1940).

considering an offer from Germany regarding the Straits. If true, such an offer would provide the Soviets with bargaining power that could potentially undermine British diplomatic efforts in the Mediterranean. Although the British recognized that Turkey would be persuaded to make certain concessions, they maintained that preserving the status quo was the safest option, as it ensured Turkey's continued control over the Straits without excessive foreign intervention.⁵⁰

Overall, while Soviet-Turkish relations did not reach a full agreement, they remained a key focus of British diplomatic strategy to maintain strategic stability in the Black Sea during World War II. The British recognized that fostering cooperation between the Soviets and Turkey would help curb German influence in the region. Ultimately, the British chose to support Turkey's position in the Dardanelles as a primary measure to prevent German advances into the Mediterranean. This approach also aimed to establish a security zone along the Straits, thereby safeguarding British strategic interests and those of their allies in efforts to maintain control and stability across a broader region, including the Middle East and the Balkans. At this point, it can be seen that relations between Britain and Turkey had entered the second phase, during which Turkey adopted an armed neutrality

⁵⁰ FO 371/24849/93. Sir S. Cripps - Ambassador To Moscow. Code 38 File 93. (London. The National Archives 30 October 1940).

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stance and balanced its relations between Britain and Germany from 1941 to 1943.

D. Controlling Chromium Supplies

Turkey's geographical position was not only significant in terms of strategic routes and military location, but also contributed to a form of "economic geography" that influenced British foreign policy. One key aspect was its possession of chromium (chrome) resources. During World War II, the significance of chromium supplies in Turkey escalated notably. Chromium is a crucial mineral in steel production and has various military applications, including weapon manufacturing, ammunition, and armor. As both the Allied and Axis powers were competing for access to chromium supplies, this mineral became pivotal in the production of weapons and armaments. Turkey possessed abundant chromite sources, particularly in the southern part of the country. For the Allies, ensuring a stable supply of chromium was crucial to maintain their weapons production. Simultaneously, Axis forces, primarily Germany, also sought chromium supplies for their military industries. Therefore, both the Allied and Axis powers made efforts, offering agreements and negotiations to Turkey, in their pursuit to gain full control over chromium supplies. Securing complete control over these chromium resources would grant a strategic advantage to any nation during the war.

On September 6, 1941, a German trade delegation arrived in Ankara and began pressuring Turkey to readjust its trade to meet Germany's needs, primarily focusing on chromium supply.⁵¹ For the British, controlling or at least restricting German access to Turkey's chrome resources was a key strategy in weakening the enemy's military industrial capabilities. Chrome is crucial for all stainless steel and chrome-nickel alloy, while chrome-molybdenum is essential for shields, gun barrel plating, and various types of ammunition. In the early 1940s, Great Britain and France secured an agreement guaranteeing Turkey's entire chrome output for two years, with an option to purchase for a third year. The British government argued that France's fall did not nullify this pact, and the agreement between Turkey and Great Britain remained in force. Until 1941, the Turkish government accepted and adhered to this agreement, assuring that they would not allow Germany to purchase any of their chrome.⁵²

However, under German pressure, Turkey began to stipulate that the renewal of the agreement after January 1942 depended on notification by France and also by the British government. The British government contested this view and affirmed that they had

⁵¹ HW 1/93, Japanese chargé, London: Turkey has given way to German threats and undertaken to supply Germany with chrome, (London. The National Archives, 1941).

⁵² FO 93/110/116. Supplementary to Agreement regarding Chrome of 8 January. 1940. 11 Oct 1940 - 15 Oct 1940. (London. The National Archives. 1940).

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continued to fulfill their commitment to supplying Turkey.⁵³ Turkey's action of selling chrome to Germany was likened to providing a means to kill Allied forces. Following over a month of negotiations with Germany, the Turkish government resisted supplying Germany with chrome until January 1943, after the expiration of the original Anglo-French agreement. However, under British pressure, Turkey only promised a certain quantity, less than what Germany requested, before and after January 1943. In return, the Turkish government asked for deliveries of items that Germany would find difficult or even impossible to supply to Turkey. Hence, the Foreign Office argued that, under those circumstances, the Turkish government provided only a minimal amount of chrome to Germany, and after the political agreement with Germany the previous June, Britain believed it should continue supporting Turkey to keep it leaning towards the British side.⁵⁴ The lack of Turkish chrome supplies to Germany has significantly hampered German war efforts, providing an advantage to the Allied forces.

This action demonstrates that Turkey's natural geographical factors, in the form of mineral resources, influenced Britain's decision to prioritise relations with Turkey in its foreign policy.

⁵³ FO 93/110/116. Supplementary to Agreement regarding Chrome of 8 January. 1940. 11 Oct 1940 - 15 Oct 1940. (London. The National Archives. 1940).

⁵⁴ FO 371/30082, Anglo-Turkish Chrome Agreement - shipments to the United States. Code 44 file 179 (to paper 6664), (London, The National Archives, 1941).

When Germany attempted to persuade Turkey to sell chrome to them, Britain not only opposed the move but also asserted that any sale of chrome to Germany would be regarded as a direct threat to the security of Allied forces. It is therefore evident that Turkey's geographical position, in terms of resource location and economic potential, served as a key driver of British diplomatic policy aimed at curbing enemy influence and strengthening the alliance. This illustrates how geographical elements in the form of mineral resources also played a crucial role in shaping geopolitical decisions. This situation indirectly reflected that the relationship between Britain and Turkey had entered the final phase, in which Turkey showed a greater inclination towards siding with Britain from 1943 to 1945.

V. Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from the events of World War II indicates British involvement in several international alliances, with a primary focus of this study being Turkey. British engagement with Turkey began primarily during World War II when Britain offered Turkey a mutual assistance agreement with Britain and France on October 19, 1939. Turkey entered into this agreement primarily out of fear of attacks from Germany and Italy, assuming there would be no difficulty with the Soviet Union due to their strong opposition to Nazism and Fascism. Although initially appearing disinterested in any alliances and preferring to remain neutral, Britain viewed Turkey as a crucial nation to

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become an ally. This was because Britain needed Turkey's support to gain full control of the Mediterranean and the Middle Sea. Control over these areas was vital for trade routes and military strategy in the war against the Axis powers involving nations in that region.

Furthermore, the importance of controlling Turkish territory also offered crucial access for Britain to attack Germany and Italy from the South, thereby increasing pressure on the European front. The United Kingdom attempted to keep Turkey within the allied camp to prevent the possibility of Turkey siding with the Axis powers. This involved various political negotiations and military assistance offered by Great Britain to Turkey. Establishing economic ties between Britain and Turkey during the war was also a highly significant aspect. Britain provided economic and logistical aid to Turkey, while Turkey maintained beneficial economic relations with Britain to ensure the sustainability of its economy. Although Turkey maintained its neutral stance for much of the war, it eventually decided to align with the Allies under pressure and to secure their safety and territorial integrity post-war. Consequently, the relationship between Britain and Turkey during World War II was highly significant for both parties. In terms of military strategy, geopolitics, economics, and diplomacy, the cooperation between these two nations had significant implications for the course of the war and regional political dynamics thereafter.

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