

# The diplomatic significance of Turkey's drone programme

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*As Turkish Baykar's unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) Akıncı completes its maiden flight, countries are lining to purchase its predecessor, the Bayraktar Tactical Block 2 (TB2).*

Turkey's drone production has become an integral part of Ankara's hard power diplomacy, which it has used to expand its sphere of influence across the Middle East and Europe. The rapid growth of the Turkish defence industry was driven by the 1975 US arms embargo against the country which received renewed impetus following Washington's recent reluctance to make advanced combat drones available to Ankara. This pushed Turkey to develop its own domestic industry. As a result, Ankara is now producing cutting-edge UCAVs among other drone technology. In April this year, the new Baykar combat drone, Akıncı, successfully tested Turkish-made smart micro munitions (MAM). The Chief Technology Officer of the Baykar Makina program, Selçuk Bayraktar, shared the results of the exercise on his Twitter feed, showcasing the prototype aircraft firing accurately with the latest Roketsan munitions: MAM-T, MAM-C and MAM-L. Akıncı is a new addition to the combat drone systems developed by Turkey over the last two decades.

## **Battle-hardened system**

As Baykar moves to mass-produce the new Akıncı model, attention has turned to its predecessor, the Bayraktar TB2. The model is no longer the pinnacle of Baykar development; however, it remains the drone of choice for countries with limited airpower capabilities. The TB2's medium altitude and long range has proved effective against armoured enemies, vehicles, ammunition depots and air defence systems and spearheads. It has been deployed by the Turkish Armed Forces against the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in northern Iraq and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. The TB2 also played a decisive role in turning the tide in the Libyan civil war in favour of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). More recently, the UCAV was used in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, a breakaway region that is inside Azerbaijan's borders but run by ethnic Armenians. Azerbaijan's use of Turkish drones gave it a decisive edge and eventual victory over Armenia.

Turkish UCAVs have garnered praise from state and non-state actors alike. American writer and political theorist, Francis Fukuyama, discussed the impact of Turkish UCAVs in his recent [Droning in the Middle East](#) article. In it, he described drones as a "central battlefield weapon," suggesting that this particular system had done much to advance Turkey's regional clout.

Turkey is reportedly the fourth-largest drone producer in the world. Drones have become a symbol of Turkish ascendance in a market previously dominated by the US, China and Israel. The US's stricter export regulations around drones created a gap in the market that was readily exploited by Turkey. This has enabled Turkey to make lucrative and strategic deals, while also reshaping the global drone market. The Bayraktar TB2s low cost and efficiency has enabled Turkey to attract domestic and foreign customers. While several countries have purchased combat drones, others have negotiated joint ventures to produce their own UCAVs. Baykar Makina has reportedly sold over 200 TB2s, generating millions of dollars in exports.

Azerbaijan, Qatar, Morocco, and Ukraine were among the first countries to purchase TB2s from Turkey. Two NATO members, Albania and Poland, are also in the process of procuring TB2s. Poland became

the [first](#) NATO and EU member state to buy combat drones from Turkey, putting it on a collision course with the EU and NATO. Poland's defense minister, Mariusz Błaszczak, [announced in May](#) this year the purchase of twenty-four aircrafts armed with anti-tank missiles. He discussed their reliability, [stating](#) that Turkish produced drones "have proven themselves in battle," while adding that the first deliveries are expected in 2022.

Deals with Albania and Poland have opened a new door for Turkey. As a NATO member, Turkey can benefit from the sale of military equipment to fellow members without the extensive import, export and transfer permissions normally required when trading with other non-members.

### **Foreign policy & drone exports**

Turkey continues to add new customers to its list. Saudi Arabia and Latvia are among the many countries rumoured to be interested in purchasing TB2s. Hungary has also [reportedly sent delegates](#) to test the combat drones.

Despite being a latecomer to the field, Turkey is fast emerging to be a drone power. Internationally, the efficiency of combat drones has elevated Turkey as a major regional power with a dynamic export industry. UCAVs allow Ankara to cement bilateral and regional ties, adding weight to its diplomatic outreach. Domestically, combat drones have become a symbol of pride and self-sufficiency, while also providing a significant revenue stream for the Turkish economy. In 2020 Turkey [earned revenue of \\$2.279](#) million in exports related to defense and aviation.

Ukraine is one of the main customers of TB2s, acquiring twelve in 2019. It is also [set](#) to purchase five more, while joining forces with Ankara to [produce](#) a fleet of 48 drones. Ukraine has tested the TB2s in the eastern Donbass region, where government forces and Russia-backed separatists have been vying for control. However, defence ties between Turkey and Ukraine have increased tensions between Ankara and Moscow. In a sign of growing displeasure about Turkey's involvement in Ukraine, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said, "obviously, there can hardly be anything to rejoice about given that Turkish drones, as the story goes, are surfacing somewhere in Donbas."

These developments have also heightened tensions with Turkey's long time rival, the UAE. In Libya, Syria and the eastern Mediterranean, both countries have been working behind the scenes, pulling the levers of power. This rivalry has been one of the main drivers of instability across the region. Turkey's deployment of TB2s against the UAE-backed forces of General Khalifa Haftar reportedly [disrupted](#) Emirati weapons supplies, contributing to successive setbacks. As a result, the UAE announced it would jointly develop an advanced drone-defense system with Israel. Turkey's TB2 drones have been rapidly altering the military balance in the region, particularly in northeast Syria where Turkey has extensively used drones to attack the PKK.

Allegations of civilian casualties in various conflicts and their instrumental use for targeted killings have raised [human rights concerns](#) in Nagorno-Karabach. In response, Canada has suspended export permits to Turkey. According to Canada's foreign minister, [Marc Garneau](#), Turkish drones were "not consistent with Canadian foreign policy, nor end-use assurances given by Turkey." Two more foreign companies have followed Canada in suspending the supply of components to Turkey, stating their products were only intended for civilian use. In response, Turkey continues to develop TB2 prototypes, further nationalising the cluster, while the chairman of Turkey's Defense Industries, Ismail Demir, recently announced that Turkey is developing [a naval version of the TB2](#), Bayraktar TB3.