

BUSAM ANALYSIS

**THE USS MISSOURI, TURKIYE, AND THE MAKING
OF THE POSTWAR INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

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BATTLESHIP DIPLOMAT

The Enduring Legacy of the *USS Missouri*



NANCY SNOW

In April 1946, less than a year after the end of World War II, one of the most famous battleships in modern history and the last battleship of the United States, appeared in the Bosphorus Strait.

The USS Missouri, the battleship aboard which Japan formally surrendered to end World War II, arrived in Istanbul on what officially appeared to be a diplomatic courtesy mission: the repatriation of the remains of Turkish Ambassador Mehmet Münir Ertegün, the widely respected dean of the diplomatic corps in the U.S. capital, Washington, D.C. Yet history would reveal that the Missouri's arrival represented something far larger than ceremonial mourning.

The visit symbolized the beginning of a new international order.

For me, this history is also deeply personal. My father, U.S. Navy Ensign Victor Snow, served aboard the USS Missouri during that historic 1946 Mediterranean diplomatic cruise. He was 20 years old and a new electrical engineering graduate of Rice Institute (now Rice University) in Houston, Texas. Assigned to the ship's Third Division in Turret 3, he was among the young American sailors who witnessed firsthand the Missouri's transformation from wartime battleship to peacetime diplomatic envoy. Among our family treasures is a photograph of my father standing with Turkish naval officers during the ship's visit to Istanbul, a reminder that diplomacy is ultimately conducted not only through governments and treaties, but also through human encounters and mutual respect.

My forthcoming book, *Battleship Diplomat: The Enduring Legacy of the USS Missouri* (Naval Institute Press, 2026) demonstrates that the USS Missouri was not merely a weapon of war, but an armored diplomat: a floating symbol of diplomacy, reassurance, alliance formation, and strategic communication. This story is especially important because Türkiye occupied a pivotal role in the earliest formation of the post-World War II Western alliance system that eventually included NATO.



The story begins in Istanbul. When the USS Missouri entered the Bosphorus on April 5, 1946, Turkish newspapers celebrated the arrival of the ship. Electric lights on the Asiatic shore reportedly spelled out in English, “Welcome Missouri,” while Turkish and American flags flew together during ceremonies attended by dignitaries and ordinary citizens alike. The atmosphere was not one of conquest or intimidation. Rather, it was one of reassurance and symbolic partnership during a moment of rising uncertainty.

The timing mattered enormously.

Only weeks earlier, Winston Churchill had delivered his famous “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton, Missouri, warning that Europe was being divided between democratic and Soviet spheres of influence. At the same time, Soviet pressure on Türkiye regarding control of the Turkish Straits and access to the Mediterranean had intensified. The strategic importance of Türkiye suddenly became central to Washington’s geopolitical thinking.

The Missouri’s arrival therefore carried layered meaning. Officially, it honored Ambassador Erteğün. Strategically, it signaled that the United States viewed Turkish sovereignty and stability as matters of international importance.

In many respects, Missouri’s visit to Istanbul foreshadowed the Truman Doctrine announced in 1947, in which President Harry S. Truman declared that the United States would support nations resisting coercion and authoritarian pressure. That doctrine became one of the foundational principles of the Cold War order and eventually contributed to Türkiye’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, in 1952. The Missouri thus served as an early instrument of alliance diplomacy.

Today, scholars often focus on NATO primarily as a military alliance. Yet alliances are sustained not only through military power, but also through symbols, narratives, trust, and shared perceptions of commitment. Warships have historically served this purpose exceptionally well.

They communicate resolve through physical presence. They reassure allies without requiring war. They create political theater that transforms abstract strategy into visible reality.

As a current grantee of The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye and visiting distinguished professor in science diplomacy and mediation at Başkent University, I have become increasingly attentive to the relationship between technological innovation and



national influence. In its time, the USS Missouri represented one of the most sophisticated technological achievements in the world: a floating fortress of engineering, communications, industrial production, and naval design. Built at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and commissioned in 1944, the battleship embodied the extraordinary scientific and manufacturing capacity that enabled the United States to emerge from World War II as a global power. Even today, the Missouri remains a remarkable technological symbol. Permanently moored in Pearl Harbor

facing the sunken USS Arizona Memorial, the battleship stands not only as a relic of war, but also as a monument to innovation, resilience, and the enduring relationship between technology, security, and diplomacy.

Throughout its active service, USS Missouri excelled in this symbolic role.

The ship had already achieved global recognition as the site of Japan's surrender in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. The photographs of Allied leaders aboard the battleship became enduring images of the end of global war. Yet only months later, the same vessel was recast from warship to diplomat. Instead of receiving surrender documents, it carried the remains of a Turkish ambassador home with full honors.

That transformation reflected a broader American ambition after World War II: to shape an international order based not solely on conquest, but on alliances, economic reconstruction, and strategic cooperation.

This was the era of the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, and eventually NATO. The United States emerged from World War II with unmatched industrial and military power, but American leaders understood that long-term stability required more than weapons. It required institutions, relationships, and shared political purpose. Türkiye became one of the earliest testing grounds for this emerging strategy.

From a Turkish perspective, the USS Missouri visit occupies an important place in collective memory because it marked the beginning of a deepening bilateral relationship with the United States during a dangerous geopolitical transition. For many Turkish officials and citizens, the ship's arrival represented recognition that Türkiye mattered strategically, culturally, and politically to the future balance of power in Eurasia. That strategic importance has not diminished.



If anything, Türkiye's geopolitical relevance has intensified in the twenty-first century. Situated at the intersection of Europe, Asia, the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, Türkiye remains one of the indispensable diplomatic actors in an increasingly fragmented international system. In today's era of multipolarity and geopolitical uncertainty, Türkiye has emerged not merely as a regional actor, but as a mediator state. This modern diplomatic role is deeply connected to the historical trajectory symbolized by the Missouri's arrival in 1946.

Throughout the Cold War, Türkiye served as NATO's southeastern anchor, balancing military readiness with political resilience. Yet contemporary Türkiye increasingly defines itself not simply through defense commitments, but through mediation diplomacy and strategic convening power. Turkish diplomacy today seeks to position the country as a bridge-builder capable of maintaining dialogue across rival geopolitical blocs.

This role has become particularly visible in recent years through Türkiye's efforts to mediate conflicts and facilitate negotiations in crises stretching from the Black Sea to the Middle East. Turkish leaders have emphasized dialogue, regional stabilization, and diplomatic engagement even amid escalating tensions throughout the surrounding regions. Whether one agrees or disagrees with every aspect of Turkish foreign policy, it is undeniable that Türkiye has become an essential diplomatic platform in global affairs. The convening of the 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara this July further underscores this reality.

The summit carries profound symbolic meaning. Eight decades after Missouri sailed into Istanbul as a symbol of emerging Western alliance politics, Türkiye now hosts one of the most important gatherings of the alliance itself. The historical arc is striking. In 1946, the United States demonstrated its commitment to Türkiye through the visible arrival of an iconic warship. In 2026, Türkiye stands not as a passive recipient of reassurance, but as an active diplomatic stakeholder helping shape discussions about the future of regional security, deterrence, strategic communication, and alliance cohesion.

The challenges facing NATO today differ dramatically from those of the early Cold War. The alliance must navigate cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, information manipulation, hybrid conflict, disinformation campaigns, energy insecurity, migration pressures, and renewed great-



power rivalry. Traditional military deterrence remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient. Narratives now matter as much as missiles.

Long before social media transformed the meaning of the word “influencer,” Missouri operated as one of the world’s most consequential influencers. Unlike many figures in today’s attention economy whose visibility depends upon outrage, spectacle, or fleeting scandal, Missouri’s influence rested on credibility, presence, symbolism, and historical consequence. The battleship communicated American industrial power, technological innovation, strategic resolve, and diplomatic reassurance simply through where it sailed and whom it welcomed aboard. Its influence was not measured in clicks or followers, but in the ability to shape international perceptions and political relationships. In this sense, the Missouri became an early masterclass in strategic communication long before the digital age gave such concepts contemporary vocabulary.

As a scholar of propaganda, public diplomacy, and strategic communication, I often remind students that international politics operates simultaneously in both physical and psychological space. The Cold War itself was never solely a military contest; it was also a struggle over legitimacy, perception, persuasion, and credibility. In today’s digital age, these struggles have accelerated exponentially.

This is one reason why Türkiye’s emphasis on mediation and diplomatic engagement deserves closer scholarly attention. Mediation itself is a form of strategic communication. It involves narrative management, trust-building, symbolic gestures, and the creation of political space where adversaries can continue dialogue despite deep disagreement.

In many ways, Missouri’s 1946 mission represented an early version of this same principle. The battleship projected strength, but its mission was ceremonial and diplomatic. It communicated reassurance without direct confrontation. It blended hard power and soft power into a single visible performance of alliance commitment. That duality remains central to diplomacy today.

The postwar international order established after 1945 was never perfect, nor was it free from contradiction. Yet its architects understood something fundamental: durable stability requires more than military superiority. It requires institutions, rituals, symbols, and relationships



capable of sustaining trust between nations even during periods of crisis. The USS Missouri became one such symbol.

Today, as the world experiences renewed geopolitical fragmentation, Türkiye once again occupies a strategically vital diplomatic position between regions, systems, and competing visions of world order. The NATO Summit in Ankara highlights not only Türkiye's military importance within the alliance, but also its growing role as a diplomatic convener in an unstable era.

For the Turkish people, Missouri's story therefore resonates on two levels. It is both a historical account of an iconic battleship and a reminder of Türkiye's enduring importance in global diplomacy. The Bosphorus visit of 1946 was not simply a ceremonial footnote to World War II. It was one of the opening scenes of the postwar order itself. That order continues to evolve.

Yet the central lesson endures today. Diplomacy requires presence, symbolism, communication, and the willingness to build relationships even amid uncertainty. The USS Missouri demonstrated this principle in Istanbul eighty years ago. The Republic of Türkiye, in many respects, continues to demonstrate it today.

Dr. Nancy Snow is a global scholar who has taught, lectured, or lived in more than 35 countries. She held Fulbright scholarships in Germany, Japan, and Greece and has taught public diplomacy and strategic communications at Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication and the Schwarzman Scholars program. In the United States, she served as a foundational faculty member in the two leading graduate programs in public diplomacy: the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. A former official with the U.S. Information Agency and Department of State, she earned her Ph.D. in International Relations from American University's School of International Service, one of the world's leading schools of international affairs. She is Professor Emeritus of Communications at California State University, Fullerton, and the author, editor, or co-editor of seventeen books, including *Battleship Diplomat: The Enduring Legacy of the USS Missouri*. She is currently a TÜBİTAK Distinguished Visiting Professor in Science Diplomacy and Mediation at Başkent University and will serve as a freelance journalist covering the 2026 Ankara NATO Summit this July.



Honor guard surrounding the casket of Turkish Ambassador Mehmet Münir Erteğün aboard Missouri during its diplomatic mission to Istanbul in April 1946, a voyage that helped inaugurate the postwar U.S.-Türkiye partnership and emerging NATO alliance system.



Ensign Victor Snow aboard the USS Missouri during its historic diplomatic visit to Istanbul in 1946, a mission that foreshadowed the emerging U.S.-Türkiye alliance and eventual NATO partnership.