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NATO-Türkiye Relations: From Irreplaceable Partner to Questionable Ally

Abstract

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, Türkiye's role in NATO has once again become a topic of intellectual discussion, with many observers arguing that a revival of Russian power would lead to Türkiye's return to the alliance as a good-standing member, while others questioned the likelihood of such a scenario due to the country's political transformation. This is not the first time Türkiye's role within the alliance has become a subject of debate. Türkiye is often described as a valuable and dedicated partner of NATO. Yet, since the beginning of its membership, the country's role in the alliance has been questioned more than that of any other member state. This article seeks to analyse NATO's relations with Türkiye and the country's role within the alliance from a historical perspective. It aims to understand the debates on Türkiye's role within NATO by focusing on the moments of transformation in relations. The main assumption of this article is that, from the beginning of Türkiye's membership process, Turkish-American relations have been the main determinant of Türkiye-NATO relations. Türkiye's role, defence, and identity have always been questioned by European members. But these debates on Türkiye had, until as recently as the 2010s, been directed and/or suppressed by the US in accordance with its own interests. The US had been the main supporter of Türkiye in the alliance against the opposition and criticism of Europeans in exchange for Türkiye's commitment to US policies. While differences on interests and values between the US and Türkiye became more visible after 2010, Türkiye failed to secure the support of the alliance's European members to fill the gap left by the waning US support. Indeed, the differences between them grew from security-based issues, to wider, more major identity issues.

Keywords: Turkey, Türkiye, NATO, United States, Transatlantic Security

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Introduction

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, Türkiye's role in NATO once again become a topic of intellectual discussion, with many observers arguing that a revival of Russian power would lead to Türkiye's return to the alliance as a good standing member, while others questioned the likelihood of such a scenario due to the country's political transformation. This is not the first time Türkiye's role within the alliance has become a subject of debate. Türkiye is often described as a valuable, dedicated partner of NATO, yet, since the beginning of its membership, the country's role in the alliance has been questioned more than that of any other member state.

This article seeks to analyse NATO's relations with Türkiye and the country's role within the alliance from a historical perspective. It aims to understand the debates on the role of Türkiye within NATO by focusing on the moments of transformation in relations. The main assumption of this article is that, from the beginning of Türkiye's membership process, Turkish-American relations have been the main determinant of Türkiye-NATO relations. Türkiye's role, defence, and identity have always been questioned by the European members. But these debates on Türkiye were directed and/or suppressed by the US in accordance with its own interests. The US had been the main supporter of Türkiye in the alliance against the opposition and criticism of Europeans in exchange for Türkiye's commitment to US policies. During the Cold War, Türkiye was an irreplaceable partner not only because of its location close to the Soviet Union, but also due to its utility in out-of-area operations towards the Middle East. After the end of the Cold War, Türkiye maintained its strategic importance as far as the US was concerned, but the differences in interests and values between the two allies became more visible after 2010. Türkiye failed to secure the support of the alliance's European members to fill the gap left by waning US support. Indeed, the differences between them grew from that of security issues to wider, more major identity issues. In the last decade, Türkiye turned into a more problematic and less reliable ally in the eyes of its NATO partners. In my article, I first discuss the impact of the US on the role of Türkiye in NATO during the Cold War years and why Türkiye was a unique and valuable partner in that period. Then I analyse how and why Türkiye maintains this position even after the disappearance of the Soviet threat, and finally I examine how Türkiye has turned into a problematic and questionable ally in the eyes of its allies in the last decade.

Transatlantic Bargain: The Türkiye Episode

In the late 1960's, American ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Harlan Cleveland (1970, p. 5) described the organisation as a 'transatlantic bargain' to emphasise the calculations of national self-interest on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Ellen Hallams (2013, p. ix) during the 21st century, this bargain had been based on an exchange between US commitment to European security in return for a position of leadership and dominance of NATO for America. Particularly in the first half of the Cold War, the US dominated almost the entirety of the policy-making process. Sometimes the political choices of the US made the European partners unhappy, yet in order to utilise the American aid and security umbrella, they had no choice but to approve America's decisions (Kaplan, 2012, p. 35). The admission of Türkiye into NATO was a good example of this unwilling acceptance. Although European partners had fears that the inclusion of Türkiye and Greece into NATO would result in a diversion of United States resources to these countries, the US found a way to convince them after Washington had described the admission of Türkiye and Greece as being in the best interests of the security of the North Atlantic area in 1951 (Joint Strategic Plans Committee, 1951).

The US administration was also against the membership of Türkiye within the alliance at the beginning, but American military officials had been aware of the strategic importance of the country since the Second World War (Bölme, 2012, pp. 149–156). In a memorandum of 1946 concerning the Straits, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1946) described Türkiye as "strategically the most important military factor in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, and the only nation possessing a firm resolution to oppose the apparent Soviet policy of expansion in the area". However, both the American government and the army were determined not to undertake any security commitments in a wider geography unless they felt safe in Europe wherein they had just become involved (Policy Planning Staff, 1948a).

In 1948, the negotiations between the Brussels Treaty Powers and the United States & Canada gave Ankara some hope on the emerging security arrangements. However, neither the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and Department of Defense nor the Department of State were willing to support Türkiye's NATO membership. According to them, members of the organisation created under the North Atlantic Pact had to be "few, small in number and not duplicate instrumentalities created by the United Nations" (Foreign Assistance Correlation Committee, 1949). Partner countries also agreed on restricting the scope to countries of the North Atlantic region. It was made clear that Türkiye would not be included

in the new pact. On the other hand, military officials had been expecting to utilise the benefits of Türkiye's strategic location in the event of war (Policy Planning Staff, 1948b).

In September 1949, the detonation of the first Soviet atomic device ended the atomic superiority of the US and made strategic bombing bases around Soviet territory more important. This reality put Türkiye in a critical position; if Türkiye developed sufficient military strength that could deter Soviet aggression in the event of war, the Turkish army could control the Straits, operate in the Black Sea and control land approaches to the oil-bearing areas of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean (Foreign Assistance Correlation Committee, 1949). The US gradually increased military aid to Türkiye and a massive American building effort began in the spring of 1950 (Department of the Army Office of the Chief of Engineers, 1950). In 1947–1952, in accordance with the American Army's demands, The American Mission for Aid to Turkey constructed medium-bomber bases, military airfields and military facilities, established communication systems, and modernised, equipped, and trained Turkish forces. The aid was not entirely technical as it also included a reorganisation of the Turkish military establishment (Livingston, 1994).

Türkiye's Republican People's Party (CHP) government wanted to turn this rapprochement into a permanent security guarantee and, in the last days of their power, on May 11th, 1950, Ankara applied for membership to NATO. However, newly-established NATO members were reluctant to include countries extant outside the North Atlantic region, and the US administration believed that without having to give any extra guarantees, they could find a way to get Türkiye's permission to use the military facilities under the then current military aid program (Leffler, 1985, pp. 820–821; JCS, 1949). The NATO Council turned Türkiye down, but this disappointment did not stop the Turkish administration. The newly elected Democrat Party in Türkiye saw the Korean War as a new opportunity for NATO membership and, on August 1st, 1950, applied for a second time, just after the Turkish Grand Assembly approved the sending of troops to Korea. Although the Turkish troops' achievements in the war impressed the US administration (Joint Strategic Plans Committee, 1951) and NATO partners, it was not enough to change their positions regarding Türkiye. Indeed, during a meeting with President Celal Bayar, Assistant Secretary of State George C. McGhee used the Korean War, which created substantial new requirements and affected the security guarantee capacity of the US, as an excuse for not entering into security arrangements with Türkiye (Department of State, 1951b). As a result, Ankara's application was once again rejected.

However, after a Korean War that revealed the necessities of conventional war, the US administration decided to re-evaluate Türkiye's request. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were still against full membership and recommended giving Ankara an informal security guarantee with the UK and France against a Soviet attack and including Türkiye with Greece in NATO planning. According to military officials, the admission of Türkiye and Greece could be useful for military planning and actions in the Mediterranean and the Near and Middle East, but it could also adversely affect the progress of the American Army in the defence of the NATO area, which was the US' primary military commitment. Therefore, the inclusion of Türkiye could be considered after the defence of the member nations was assured. The Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff shared similar opinions. However, the Department of State worried more about disappointing Türkiye, yet believed that if the other members approved the joining of Türkiye and Greece into NATO's planning that it would mean opening 'Pandora's box' on the way to full membership (JCS, 1950; Department of State, 1951c).

At the beginning of 1951, in the US' policy planning, the security of Türkiye was identified as being vital to the security of the U.S. (Policy Planning Staff, 1951). Under the then current military aid & construction program, the American administration had already spent huge amounts of money and gone to great lengths to prepare Türkiye for a greater role in stopping Soviet expansion, yet there still was a serious problem. There was no long-term confirmation of the rights for American forces to utilise the facilities in Türkiye, therefore American officials had to find a way to guarantee access to all these facilities in the event that Türkiye was not at war while the US was. For the previous three years, Türkiye had been insisting on an assurance, in one form or another, that the US would come to their help in the event of an attack, adamantly refusing any other offers. On the Turkish side, there was huge disappointment. Although the Joint Chiefs of Staff were still against any kind of commitment that implied sending US forces to the area in the event of hostilities, the State Department started to worry about causing a deep-seated and lasting resentment against the US. Besides, Türkiye was the first foreign country to get the US extended military assistance on that scale in the post-war period to build up its defensive capabilities, and after such a huge investment it was unthinkable not to help Türkiye in the event of a Soviet attack (Policy Planning Staff, 1951). The visit of Assistant Secretary of State George C. McGhee in February 1951 revealed the fact that NATO membership was the only option for the Turkish administration (Department of State, 1951b). Türkiye would veer towards a policy of neutralism, and

until a commitment was extended to Türkiye, there was no assurance that Türkiye would declare war unless it was attacked (Department of State, 1951a). During World War II, Türkiye had managed to pursue a policy of 'active neutralism' and not enter into war under the pressure of the Great Powers (Deringil, 1998). American diplomats had reason to believe that the Ankara government could do it again. As Churchill once said to Roosevelt, "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them" (Harris, 1997).

On May 15th, 1951, the US formally broached the subject of Greek and Turkish NATO membership to allied countries as the best solution for security for the southern flank of the Western defence system. There followed four months of extensive debate (National Security Council, 1951). The other members were particularly worried about a potential cut in the American military aid that they were receiving. Denmark led the Scandinavian & Benelux bloc against the admission of Türkiye and Greece into NATO. According to them, a lack of mutual cultural ties, particularly with Türkiye, could damage NATO's character and open a way to admitting other nations that are farther away or undemocratic and totalitarian. There was also the possibility of provoking the Soviet Union that had concerns about encirclement, increasing the risk of war by extending the commitments into traditionally problematic regions such as the Balkans, the Dardanelles, and the Mediterranean, and dragging these countries into a conflict in which they had no interest. The United States, however, managed to convince these countries, except Denmark, of the military advantages of admitting Türkiye and Greece, and alleviate their security concerns. Although the Danish administration was determined to use its power of veto, it did not want to be the one to destroy the unity of NATO at the first challenge that the organisation was faced with and changed its decision (Wilkinson, 1956, p. 395). More important than all these objections, Britain, which positioned Türkiye in a regional Middle East Command under British control, was against the admission of the two (Athanasopoulou, 2013, p. 9). However, the US administration was determined not to permit any obstruction hindering the integration of Türkiye into NATO. Finally, Britain agreed to postpone the Middle East Command negotiations until Türkiye and Greece fully integrated into NATO's military arrangements. Washington dominated the entire decision process and, in one way or another, managed to convince all the allies. In September, the North Atlantic Council invited Türkiye and Greece into the alliance. Türkiye gained formal acceptance on February 15th, 1952 and, in a short while, turned into a solid logistical base and earned a key place in the NATO alliance, and all because the US had planned it so.

Türkiye's Role in 'Out-of-Area' Operations

During the Cold War, Türkiye was viewed as a barrier against Soviet expansion as a part of European security, but, from the very beginning, for the purposes of American and therefore NATO security planning, Türkiye played a critical role in the Middle East & Eastern Mediterranean (Joint Strategic Plans Committee, 1951). Türkiye's role in the Middle East & Eastern Mediterranean was a more complex issue than its role in European theatre. Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949) defined the geographic scope that the allies agreed on collectively defending as 'the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America.' Although the security of the Middle East and Mediterranean regions was strategically important to the countries of Western Europe for oil supply and transportation, from the beginning, the allies chose to take limited responsibilities only in the Mediterranean (Martins, 2016). The Middle East was out of NATO's aim and scope. European partners did not see the region's security as a priority since they felt far from being sufficiently able to protect even their own territories. Under those circumstances, protecting the oil resources in the Middle East and preventing Soviet expansion in the region became the main issue for the US administration. Türkiye's potential utility in war not only in the North Atlantic region but also in the Middle East could have been the answer. Although the US adopted a policy of keeping the military base rights in Türkiye within NATO, it did not hesitate to depart from this policy when the Lebanon crisis broke out in 1958 (Department of State, 1958). In 1970, in order to support King Hussein against the Palestinian resistance in Jordan, the US once again utilised the Incirlik Air Base despite the fact that the base was assigned to US forces only for NATO purposes (Bölme, 2012, p. 276). In the first decade of the Cold War, because of military agreements with the US besides the North Atlantic Treaty, and due to Türkiye being heavily dependent on American aid, the distinction between the US and NATO was blurred in the minds of Turkish officials (Bölme, 2012, pp. 212–218). This allowed Washington to persuade Ankara to allow them to use the NATO facilities in Türkiye in 'out of area' operations and take advantage of military rights granted to US forces in accordance with the North Atlantic Treaty.

In the following years, however, a series of incidents — such as the unilateral withdrawal of Jupiter missiles from Türkiye by the US as a solution to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1964 Cyprus Crisis, and the Johnson Letter — launched a re-evaluation process in Türkiye's foreign policy. In his letter, penned in response to a possible Turkish

intervention in Cyprus, President Johnson made it clear that, in a scenario where Ankara was in an offensive position, there would be no guarantee that the NATO allies would defend Türkiye if it was attacked by the Soviets (Johnson, İnönü, 1966). This knowledge made Ankara more reluctant towards the future demands of Washington. During the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israel Wars, Ankara allowed Washington to utilise communication stations but refused to permit American forces to use military facilities assigned to NATO (Bölme, 2012, pp. 261–292). On 10th October 1973, the Turkish government declared that “US facilities in Turkey were for the security and defence of NATO territory, including the protection of Turkey, but would not be used in connection with conflict in the Middle East” (Winrow, 1993, p. 636). Türkiye was not alone. In the 1973 war, barring Portugal, all other NATO members declined American demands to use their facilities in out-of-area involvement.

Following the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, Türkiye found itself in an even more difficult position in NATO while tensions between the US and Soviet Union reached new heights. In 1979, the Carter Administration established a mobile military force capable of responding to worldwide crises under the name ‘Rapid Deployment Force’, which was specifically assigned to protect the Gulf region. In this new security environment, in the eyes of Pentagon strategists, Türkiye’s primary role as a potential base was not in Europe, but in the Persian Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean for ‘out-of-area’ operations (Athanasopoulou, 2013, p. 17). When Washington asked for military base access for its newly established force from Ankara, in the absence of any NATO security guarantees, the Turkish administration was unwilling to accept this request, which entailed serious risks. The European governments opposed Carter’s “ineffective and dangerously provocative” policy (Stork, 1980, p.6). According to many commentators, in a scenario where Ankara was to support non-NATO operations in the Middle East and Gulf region and cause Soviet aggression, European allies in particular would decline to protect Türkiye due to its provocative position (Winrow, 1993, p. 637). On the other hand, European allies were still lacking the ability to present a coordinated position that could balance US decisions, therefore Washington’s strategic choices, which the United Kingdom mostly supported, continued to dominate NATO’s plans.

In December 1979, in response to the Soviet SS-20 Saber missile systems in the Eastern Bloc, NATO adopted the ‘Dual Track’ policy. Under this policy, if negotiations on removing Soviet missiles were to fail, US intermediate-range nuclear missiles would be deployed by 1983.

Despite establishing a ‘Special Consultative Group’ within NATO, in 1983, the Reagan administration announced the Strategic Defence Initiative without prior consultation with allies (Aybet, 1997, pp. 142–143). Türkiye was striving to break out of the economic and politic isolation by the West after 1980’s military coup and accepted the deployment of Intermediate Range Nuclear Missiles in its territories in the name of the alliance. While the US administration was increasing economic and military aid to Türkiye, the renovation and modernisation of air bases for the new nuclear mission was begun. The Turkish military bases’ modernisation process raised questions about the role of these bases in the Middle East. Both the Turkish and the US administrations offered assurance that the obligations of Türkiye were only to NATO, and that the Rapid Deployment Force would not use these bases in any given situation (Bölme, 2012, pp. 314–315).

On the other hand, NATO’s changing perspective towards the developments outside the NATO area offered clues about Türkiye’s changing mission. In 1980, NATO Secretary-General Luns mentioned in an interview “a need to have strategic perception that is not confined narrowly to the region of the North Atlantic Treaty”. According to Luns, “Both Afghanistan and Iran, even though outside the geographical boundaries of NATO, are still nonetheless very much Alliance business” (Stork, 1980, p. 7). The statement of the Secretary-General became official with the Final Communiqué of the NATO Defence Planning Committee (1983): “...developments outside the NATO Treaty area might threaten the vital interests of members of the Alliance”. While the alliance members, particularly the US, became more interested in developments in the Gulf region, expectations from Türkiye to facilitate out-of-area operations were increased. However, Türkiye was not keen. There was no security guarantee from NATO allies in case of an attack from the region. Furthermore, Ankara did not want to be dragged into any conflict in the region that entailed serious risks with the potential to ruin its relations with the neighbouring countries. Hence, in the 1983 Lebanon Crisis, Ankara did not allow the US to use the Incirlik Airbase for the transportation nor the storage of non-military supplies (Bölme, 2012, pp. 316–317).

Security in the Middle East continued to be a dilemma for Türkiye throughout the rest of the Cold War years. While the region was becoming more important in NATO’s defence planning, the discord among the allies on out-of-area operations in the Middle East and their reluctance to defend Türkiye in the case of war created a difficult position for Turkish officials. This would not end with the end of the Cold War.

The Role of Türkiye After the Cold War: Security Questions of an Irreplaceable Partner

At the end of the Cold War, many observers had doubts about NATO's future in the absence of a Soviet threat and most of them were questioning Türkiye's role in the new security environment. In the first decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite debates, the member states found a way of uniting different interests due to pressure from the US which wanted to continue its position as first among equals (Kamp, Volker, 2012). NATO modernised and reoriented itself to face the new challenges of the post-Cold-War era. While the NATO switched its strategy from 'collective defence' to 'collective security', the strategic focus of the alliance turned from a 'monolithic, massive, predominant threat,' to 'multi-faceted and multi-directional various risk factors.'

In this transformation process, Ankara had initially feared losing its strategic importance to the Western security community. The outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990, however, removed all doubt in people's minds and reinforced the opinion within the Pentagon that Türkiye's geographical location was still strategically important. Türkiye could maintain its role as a part of Gulf security; moreover, it could provide a cultural bridge between Europe and the Middle East as the only Muslim country in NATO (Kuniholm, 1991, pp. 34–39).

During the Gulf War, American forces used the Incirlik Airbase in Türkiye to strike targets in Iraq. Ankara, for the first time in the history of its relations, requested air defence from NATO against the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. In response to Türkiye's request, the US, Germany, and the Netherlands deployed batteries of Patriot missiles under the NATO flag (Townsend, Ellehuus, 2019). NATO sent 42 "somewhat outdated" combat jets from Germany, Italy, and Belgium to Malatya Erhaç Airbase (Kuniholm, 1991, p. 37). Türkiye's demands, however, opened the old discussion among the members on whether the North Atlantic Treaty defence guarantee towards Türkiye would apply if Türkiye found itself under attack because of its "provocative" position. This debate also included a question on whether eastern Türkiye was actually in-area or out-of-area (Winrow, 1993, pp. 637, 645). In the event of an attack, some of the members, including France, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, and Spain, were against the implementation of Article 5 of the Treaty, which stated that an attack on one member of NATO is an attack on all of its members. On the other hand, the US, supported by the UK, argued that Türkiye was not in a provocative action because the operation was based on a UN Security Council resolution and insisted on giving Türkiye

assurance. Finally, on January 25th, 1991, the NATO Defense Planning Committee declared that NATO would invoke Article 5 if Türkiye was attacked by Iraq (Bölme, 2012, pp. 341–342), but the reluctance of the allies created distrust in the minds of Turkish officials about NATO's credibility in the defence of Türkiye (Güvenç, Özel, 2012, p. 538).

The Gulf War proved that the competition over access to major energy sources was one of the main security issues in the post-Cold War era. At first glance, Turkish-American security interests overlapped in the 1990s. Türkiye, finding itself at or near major conflict areas from the Balkans to the Middle East and the Caucasus, had shared security concerns with the US on these regions. For the US administration, Türkiye, as the country on or near the crossroads of important energy corridors and the main conflict areas, had vital value. (Nişancı, Dufourcq, 2005). Since the early 1980s, US officials, who were deeply influenced by strategic analyst Albert J. Wohlstetter's views, believed that Türkiye was crucial in the protection of Persian Gulf oil fields not only because of its unique location with military bases but also its membership in NATO (Karaosmanoğlu, 1983, pp. 167–168). At that time, however, when the US administration offered to carry the Gulf defence under NATO's framework, the European allies opposed, since they did not want to follow "the US leadership" while pursuing their interests at least out-of-area (Aybet, 1997, pp. 153–155). The post-Cold-War security environment, indeed, strengthened their opinion. They were not eager to undertake more responsibilities 'out-of-area' just because of the US security priorities and they did not share the US' idea on Türkiye's strategic value on the defence of the NATO area. According to them, although Turkish lands might be valuable just as a buffer zone between Europe and conflict areas, Türkiye's close proximity to all these conflict zones carried the risk of dragging European allies into new conflicts in which they had no vital interests. Critical base access during NATO's combat operations in the Balkans proved these members wrong on Türkiye's geographical value for the defence of Europe, but it did not end the differences on security issues and questions on Türkiye's defence, which was increasingly considered as a part of the Middle Eastern security architecture (Güvenç, Özel, 2012, p. 538; Oğuzlu, 2012, p. 154).

Reflection of a Shift in Turkish-American Relations: A Questionable Ally

Throughout the 1990s, discussions continued within NATO about the role the alliance would take after the disappearance of the Soviet threat. Although the new strategic concepts adopted in 1991 & 1999 (The

Alliance's New Strategic Concept, 1991; 1999) were responses to these debates, the diverging security priorities and threat perceptions among NATO members deepened during the 2000s, especially in the aftermath of the US-led war in Iraq. In this period, groupings over security priority, threat, and burden sharing increased within the alliance, giving rise to what has come to be known as the "transatlantic split". During this time, Türkiye could neither maintain its old relationship with the US nor build new, common ground with its European members.

After 9/11, Türkiye's strategic significance once again gained importance in the Middle East context. When NATO took over the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, Türkiye was one of the first NATO countries that agreed to send troops; however, in accordance with its foreign policy priorities, it did not accept any combat role so as not to be a part of any conflict in a Muslim country (Oğuzlu, 2013, p. 8). Despite its active military role in the alliance on a global scale, Ankara again faced the hesitation of some European allies when it requested the deployment of surveillance aircraft and missiles against possible attacks from Iraq prior to the war in Iraq in 2003. France, Germany, and Belgium were against any early defensive measures, claiming they could undermine efforts to find a peaceful solution. Due to their opposition, the NATO Council failed to reach an agreement. Finally, under pressure from the US, the decision to provide support to Türkiye was made by the Defence Planning Committee (NATO, 2022). Ankara was committed to maintaining its relations with NATO, but it was also becoming more sceptical about meeting every expectation of an alliance wherein members refrained from giving defence support to Türkiye unless their own security was at stake.

In the following years, Türkiye became less cooperative regarding issues that mattered most to the European members of NATO. Türkiye, for instance, treated with caution the efforts to develop coordination and cooperation between the EU and NATO as part of a larger project to establish a European security and defence structure under the EU. The Turkish General Staff interpreted these efforts as the prioritisation of Central Europe at the expense of Türkiye, which it perceived would lead to groupings in Europe and create a 'Western Curtain' instead of an 'Iron Curtain' in the medium term (Bilgin, 2003, p. 345). Türkiye nearly came to the point of rejecting the Berlin Plus Agreement¹ on EU-NATO cooperation (Vamvakas, 2009, p. 58). When Türkiye's accession was tied

¹ The Berlin Plus agreement is the short title for a comprehensive package of agreements between NATO and the EU based on the conclusions of the NATO Washington Summit (See: Vamvakas, 2008).

to the resolution of the Cyprus issue while Cyprus was accepted into the EU without any similar precondition in 2004, it created a deadlock in negotiations and Ankara used its veto power in NATO to block the inclusion of Cyprus in NATO-EU security cooperation (Açıkmeşe, Triantaphyllou, 2012). While Ankara faced various obstacles in its EU membership process, Türkiye's role in this redesigned Euro-Atlantic environment became even more problematic for European allies. The efforts of the European members to transform NATO for their own security priorities, their increasing questioning of Türkiye's role in this sense, the difficulties in the European Union process, and the neglect of Türkiye's security concerns by its Western allies have all strengthened the anti-Western discourse within Türkiye and further fuelled distrust towards the alliance. As the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which has Islamist roots and rejects the old Western paradigm, consolidated its power in its second term and turned to a more autonomous foreign policy in an effort to become a regional leader, Turkish-Western relations became more confrontational.

At around the same period, Turkish-American relations saw one of its lowest points due to Türkiye's refusal to participate in the 2003 Iraq War coalition. Despite the support of the US in Türkiye's EU membership process and collaboration in Afghanistan under the NATO flag, the usual nature of Turkish-American relations entered a path of change. The transition of Türkiye's US relations from military aid to defence sales, conflicts on the Kurdish issue and Iraq policies, and ambitions of Türkiye to improve its relations within the neighbouring regions were some of the factors that affected the two countries' bilateral relations and their partnership in NATO. Since the end of the Cold War, Türkiye had seen more opportunities to become a regional power and had more confidence and manoeuvring capability to realise that. With AKP rising to power in 2002, Türkiye's regional power aspirations in the Middle East became more prominent (Gürsoy, Toygür, 2018, p. 2). Türkiye wanted to establish closer ties with countries from the Balkans to the Caucasus and the Middle East, casting itself as an alternative power to the West. (Davutoğlu, 2001; Kutlay, Öniş, 2021). In Türkiye's view, NATO should lead an operation only when there is a humanitarian crisis and with the authorisation of the UN Security Council (Oğuzlu, 2012, p. 156). There was a certain amount of common ground in how Türkiye and some major European powers approached the US. Both the Turks and Europeans viewed the unilateral actions of the United States with suspicion. The broader public in both countries increasingly came to believe that NATO had become a vehicle for US foreign policy in the post-cold-war period (Pertusot, 2011, p.

31). Among the European countries, Greece, Italy, and Germany had generally strong reservations about military campaigns abroad, while the others occasionally vetoed such policies (Sperling, Weber, 2009, p. 499). Although the US and Türkiye continued to share concerns with the divergent security orientations within Europe, Türkiye's point of view meant a split in the 'Atlanticist camp'. From the beginning of its membership, despite some bumps on the road, Türkiye had mostly acted in concert with the US, and had thus been considered a part of the Atlanticist camp in NATO, more so than the Europeans (Güvenç, Özel, 2012, p. 540). The US was once the main supporter of Türkiye in the alliance against the opposition and criticism of Europeans in exchange for Türkiye's commitment to US policies. While differences in interests and values between the US and Türkiye became more visible after 2010, Türkiye could not fill the gap left by the decreasing US support in the alliance with the support of the European members. It was, in fact, to the contrary; their differences grew from security-based issues to wider identity issues.

With the growing weight and number of European countries in NATO, Türkiye started to experience the same political and cultural objections and criteria that had hindered Türkiye's membership progress in the European Union (Vamvakas, 2009, p. 64). The Islamist roots of the ruling AKP in Türkiye and its anti-Western tendencies led to the framing of Türkiye-NATO relations in identity terms. (Güvenç, Özel, 2012, p. 534). Even though Türkiye helped to constitute and secure the 'Western identity' during the Cold War through its security policies and commitments to NATO (Bilgin, 2003, p. 348), since the beginning of its membership there had always been doubt among European members about Türkiye's alliance identity. On the other hand, this had never been an issue in Turkish-American relations until the second term of the AKP government. Türkiye's assertive foreign policy based on active engagement with all regions in the neighbourhood and AKP's motivation to make Türkiye a leader in the region and the Muslim World along with growing relations with Russia all started to raise questions in the US media on whether Türkiye was drifting away from a Western orientation towards an Eastern one (*The Economist*, 2010) (Cohen, 2010). In 2010, Ankara's mediation of a nuclear swap deal with Tehran, and Türkiye's 'no vote' on sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council popularised the comments that claimed 'a shift of axis' in Turkish foreign policy. During NATO's Lisbon summit in December 2010, Türkiye's insistence on not naming Iran as a threat to the NATO missile shield, and its 'threat to veto' if that happened increased concerns in both Washington and Europe. Ivo H. Daalder, who was the U.S. ambassador to NATO between 2009 and 2013, summarises

the conflict between Türkiye and the rest of the members in that period thus: “In my four years there, it was quite often 27 against one” (Crowley, Enlanger, 2022). Türkiye denied all the claims that it was abandoning the West (Davutoğlu, 2012), yet it was evident that under an AKP government, NATO had lost its meaning as part of Türkiye’s Western identity and had turned into a “pure” defence organisation whose contribution to Türkiye’s defence was more doubtful (Oğuzlu, 2012, p. 153).

At the beginning of the Arab Uprisings, the chill between Washington and Ankara thawed for a short period. Türkiye’s significance rose once again as a “role model” for less democratic nations of the Middle East, and as a key regional partner in Syria where the US was reluctant to engage militarily. Türkiye’s eagerness to engage in the conflict could provide the US a sphere of influence in Syria. In the first years of the war, the two old allies managed to build close cooperation. Hence, following the downing of a Turkish aircraft by Syrian forces in June 2012, the NATO Council announced its solidarity with Türkiye, and the US, Germany, and the Netherlands deployed Patriot missile batteries against the threat posed by Syria’s ballistic missiles (NATO, 2013). However, when Russia intervened in Syria in 2015, disagreement appeared between the US and Türkiye on how to address that. Political and military support of the US to PKK-affiliated entities in Syria, such as the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), heightened tensions in US-Turkish relations. The crisis deepened with the West accusing the AKP government of being reluctant to fight against Jihadist groups (Schanzer, 2014). The withdrawal of the Patriots first by Germany, then the Netherlands, and finally the US at a time when Russia was violating the Turkish air space angered Ankara and raised significant question marks regarding the reliability of its NATO partners (Bekdil, 2015). While NATO announced its intention to improve Turkish air defences following the downing of a Russian jet by Türkiye in November 2015 (Emmott, 2015), the escalation of Russian military activities in the Baltic Sea in the same period increased the demands among allies to move NATO back to its founding mission: blocking Russian (Soviet) expansion into Europe (Bölme, 2016, p. 137). Given the revival of the importance of Europe’s defence, the European allies did not want to be dragged into war due to Türkiye’s own engagements in Syria.

The prolonged crisis between Türkiye and NATO entered a new phase when Ankara announced in December 2017 that it would acquire Russian-made S-400 missile systems to renew its air defence. NATO allies were stunned by this decision. Due to the lack of an effective air defence system, whenever Türkiye was under threat of missile attacks from the

East, it had to bring a request for protection to the NATO Council, and often, such requests from Türkiye were accepted only partially or unwillingly by its allies after much debate. Besides, only a few members had this capacity, and deployments of missile defence systems were hard to sustain and expensive to maintain over a long period of time (Townsend, Ellehuus, 2019). Although the ‘Missile Shield’ of NATO was on the way, Türkiye’s airspace would be unprotected until the project became fully operational, which meant at least a decade. Moreover, large parts of Türkiye’s eastern and south-eastern districts would not be covered by NATO’s shield (Kibaroglu, 2019, pp. 167–168).

After Türkiye’s attempts to collaborate with the allies on missile systems failed, Ankara started negotiations with Russia. Buying this kind of system from Russia, which had been considered a growing threat since the 2008 Russia-Georgian War, was perceived as being in conflict with the Euro-Atlantic security and defence architecture by the allies (Kibaroglu, 2019, pp. 161–163). After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO suspended all civilian and military cooperation with Russia, and Russia’s aggression and intimidation towards its neighbours was described as a ‘threat’ that challenged the international order and NATO’s democratic values for the first time since the end of the Cold War (Stoltenberg, 2015). According to US and NATO officials, buying a defence system worth billions of dollars from Russia was unacceptable and might not only cause Turkish dependency on Russia, but also would pose a risk of a leaking of sensitive information about NATO assets (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). Washington’s reaction to Ankara’s decision was harsh; it first suspended Turkish participation in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program, then imposed sanctions under CAATSA 231 to the Turkish Defence Industry in 2020 (Pompeo, 2020).

Since July 15th, 2016’s coup attempt in Türkiye, the relations of Ankara had been strained with both sides of the Atlantic. America’s and Europe’s slow response in condemning the coup, and Türkiye’s belief that Washington was reluctant to extradite Gulen, the cleric accused of being the mastermind behind the coup attempt, increased tensions. Also, criticisms of some Western countries about democratic backsliding further strained relations (Gürsoy, Toygür, 2018). While Türkiye has accused the allies of ignoring or even supporting the groups it considers terrorists, such as the Gülenist movement, PKK, and PYD/YPG, Western allies have sharply criticised the Erdoğan administration for leading away from the founding values of NATO, such as the safeguarding of freedom, the principles of liberal democracy and individual liberties, and the rule of law (BBC, 2017b; Hill, 2017). Feeling left alone, the AKP government

adopted an “eye for an eye” policy based on using its veto power as political leverage to force its allies into changing their policies on Türkiye’s security concerns and regional priorities, at the risk of a complete rupture of Türkiye’s relations with the West. Türkiye’s growing deployment of military force for its security interests also decreased the relevance of NATO for Turkish security in the minds of Turkish elites. On the one hand, Türkiye sought to build its security outside of NATO at the expense of conflict with alliance members. On the other, it turned the alliance into a political bargaining platform on which to impose its security concerns. In 2017, Türkiye vetoed NATO’s cooperation with Austria, which had criticised Türkiye’s domestic policy after the coup attempt and announced its intention to block Türkiye’s bid to join the EU (BBC, 2017a). In 2019, during a NATO Summit, Ankara rejected NATO’s military plan for defending Poland and the Baltic states in the event of a Russian attack unless NATO allies recognised PYD/YPG in Syria as a terrorist organisation (Dimitrova, 2019, p. 1). Finally, in May 2022, following the US’ decision to lift sanctions on YPG/PKK-held territories in Syria (Aydoğan, 2022), President Erdoğan announced that Türkiye would veto Finland’s and Sweden’s bids to join the NATO after Russia invaded Ukraine unless the two Nordic nations stopped supporting PKK and the Gülenist movement and harbouring their members (Lukov, Murphy, 2022). This last move of Türkiye demonstrated how threat perception and the security priorities of Türkiye significantly differ from all the allies even when the Russian threat glued the ‘transatlantic split’ and united both sides of the Atlantic. Türkiye’s value for the alliance once again became the subject of debate in Western countries.

Conclusions

In her article published in 1989, Diana Johnstone describes NATO as “ostensibly multilateral, often merely the framework for bilateral relations in which the United States is the commanding partner” (Johnstone, 1989). This description also fits the nature of Türkiye’s relations with NATO. In the aftermath of the Second World War, NATO had provided a platform for Türkiye on which it institutionalised its relations with the US, which it considered a key actor in shaping Türkiye’s Western identity and guaranteeing its security. The military nature of US-Turkish strategic relations had determined Türkiye’s role in the alliance during the Cold War years, and the questions some European allies had raised in relation to Türkiye’s identity and the defence of Turkish territories had been suppressed by the US unless Ankara challenged US policy, as was the case in the 1964 Cyprus Crisis.

During the Cold War years, Türkiye's role as a barrier against Soviet expansion and its military strength in the Middle East & the Mediterranean made Türkiye an irreplaceable member of the NATO in accordance with US military planning. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet threat, disagreement emerged among the members on the role of Türkiye in the new security environment, causing fears on the Turkish side about losing its strategic importance in the eyes of the Western security community. In spite of that, Türkiye maintained its role as a valuable ally to the US in the 1990s, especially in the Middle East. Given that the US dominated much of the post-Cold war transformation of the alliance, this meant an influential role for Türkiye. On the other hand, the questions of European allies on Türkiye's value in Western defence and their hesitation to respond to Türkiye's security demands created distrust in the minds of Turkish officials about NATO's credibility. Furthermore, Türkiye's status as an indispensable partner of NATO, which is maintained through its strategic and military alliance with the US, was shaken after the 2003 Iraq War. While differences in interests and values between the US and Türkiye became more visible in the 2010s, Türkiye failed to secure the support of the alliance's European members to fill the gap left by waning US support.

The crisis between Türkiye and other NATO members in the last decade stemmed partly from a lack of consensus within NATO on a "common threat" and "collective security." Although allies tried to mitigate these problems via concept papers during the 1990s, debates over NATO's aim, commitments, use of force, and burden-sharing caused a split between the two sides of the Atlantic, creating sub-groups consisting of members with similar national interests. While Türkiye distanced itself from Europe in this process, it could not maintain its traditional strategic military partnership with the US due to conflicting security and foreign policy priorities. The disagreements in Turkish-American relations peaked with the Syrian War followed by the coup attempt in 2016, and Türkiye felt abandoned by its allies in dealing with the emerging national security issues. Under the rule of the AKP, which rejected the Kemalist westernisation paradigm and did not see NATO as part of Türkiye's identity, the alliance also lost its traditional meaning in Türkiye's defence community and turned into a political bargaining platform to prevent Türkiye's isolation on security and foreign policy issues. While Ankara's "veto policy" made Türkiye more problematic and a less reliable ally in the eyes of its NATO partners, it meant the end of Türkiye's long-time policy of obtaining security in return for being a staunch and credible member of the alliance. Türkiye no longer strives

hard to be a reliable ally, yet it continues to rely on two assets that still make it valuable to the alliance: its strategic location, and its strong army against the rising threat of Russia (Kelly, Chalfant, 2022). It means that Türkiye will continue to be the subject of debate in near future.

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