

A TURKISH PERSPECTIVE ON NATO 2030 AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ALLIANCE

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Change and adaptation against the backdrop of a pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on our lives in the past year by exposing the vulnerabilities of our interconnected world and is slated to cast its shadow further into 2021 and beyond.

The Munich Security Conference published a special report referring to it as a “Poly pandemic”,¹ given its multifaceted implications. A single, deadly virus has obliged us all to adjust our ways of life and daily routines. Hopefully, we will be able to reclaim some of these back in the future, but the genie is out of the bottle and inevitably, there will be lasting consequences.

An immediate outcome of the sudden and destructive onslaught of this virus was that it dictated change and adaptation. The ability to adapt according to circumstances, and even better, to have the foresight and flexibility to do so in a

timely fashion has always been a critical asset for survival. Covid-19 presented itself as the ultimate test in this regard. The unprecedented pace in which developments are taking place today has added an even greater premium on successfully managing paradigm shifts. This has always been of particular relevance for security policy and NATO, which likes to brand itself as an Alliance that strives to prepare for the future² and remain relevant through continuous transformation.

In this endless cycle of change, NATO has held on to its cornerstone principles of solidarity, unity, and cohesion. When required, it has also navigated occasional fissures among its own ranks.

The stakes are especially high today, mainly because of two reasons:

1 Sophie Eisentraut, Luca Miehe, Laura Hartmann, Juliane Kabus, “Poly pandemic: Special Edition of the Munich Security Report,” Munich: Munich Security Conference (MSC), November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.47342/CJAO3231>.

2 NATO: READY FOR THE FUTURE Adapting the Alliance (2018-2019), https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_11/20191129_191129-adaptation_2018_2019_en.pdf.

First- the security landscape is extremely complex and fraught with traditional and newer forms of challenges, all of which are exponentially magnified in scope and speed by the advent of disruptive technologies. In the words of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg³, “we are in an era where bytes and big data are as important as bullets and battleships.” NATO must not only harness technology and innovation to stay ahead of such developments, but it also needs to complement this with the highest degree of internal cohesion and unity, thereby buttressing its ability to take time sensitive, consensus-based decisions. These will be critical for the Alliance to remain relevant against all security challenges, including those that increasingly present themselves under traditional thresholds, and that are of hybrid nature.

Second- various signs of discord within the Alliance have been manifesting themselves for some time now, burden-

ing its resilience. This internal stress test has come in many forms, from the undue depiction of NATO as obsolete⁴, with its implications for transatlantic relations, to an ill-conceived portrayal of it as being brain-dead⁵. We have also witnessed simmering bi-lateral disagreements and tensions, which have in some cases involved my own country, Turkey.

The combined need to address such an increasingly unpredictable and evolving security landscape and manage various forms of internal discord is no easy task. NATO has displayed agility in its military adaptation through various tangible steps such as the increased readiness, presence, and sustainability of its forces; better burden sharing; the establishment of new headquarters; and comprehensive efforts to build Alliance resilience, including in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. This trend needs to be mirrored in the political dimension, where experience has shown that there is room, and an imperative for improvement.

NATO 2030 and the Reflection Group

During their meeting in London at the end of 2019, NATO Heads of State and Government invited⁶ Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to initiate a reflection process to further strengthen NATO’s political dimension including consultation. Acting on this call, the Secretary General initiated a process that he coined NATO 2030⁷, purposefully described⁸ as being aimed at, “making a strong Alliance, even stronger” for the next decade and beyond.

This was crafted as a comprehensive endeavor seeking not only official inputs from Allies, but also contributions from numerous other vectors such as experts, political bodies, and civil society. Such broad outreach was designed to tap into the views and opinions of different stakeholders, and to

concurrently instill a broad sense of ownership particularly among Allies, and in their own right, among NATO’s Partners.

When launching NATO 2030⁹ in June 2020, the Secretary General declared the effort as an opportunity to reflect on where we see NATO ten years ahead, and outlined three forward looking goals for the Alliance: 1. To stay strong militarily; 2. To be more united politically; 3. To take a broader approach globally.

Among different lines of effort, he also appointed a Reflection Group comprising ten experts¹⁰, including Ambassador Tacan Ildem from Turkey. This Group finalized its input to

3 NATO in 2030: Adapting to a New World, Carnegie Europe, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/12/03/nato-in-2030-adapting-to-new-world-event-7496>

4 Donald Trump Says NATO is ‘Obsolete,’ UN is ‘Political Game’, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/02/donald-trump-tells-crowd-hed-be-fine-if-nato-broke-up/>

5 Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead, The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

6 London Declaration, North Atlantic Council, London, December 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm.

7 NATO2030, <https://www.nato.int/nato2030/index.html>

8 Secretary General launches NATO 2030 to make our strong Alliance even stronger, JUN 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176193.htm.

9 NATO 2030: Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on strengthening the Alliance in a post-COVID world, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBtpSod-TPA&feature=emb_title

10 Group of Experts, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/11/pdf/201125-nato2030-experts.pdf

the process in the form of a comprehensive report¹¹ named “NATO 2030: United for a New Era,” containing 14 main findings, elaborated on through 138 detailed recommendations.

The Secretary General had mandated the Group to work on ideas geared toward reinforcing Alliance unity, solidarity, and cohesion; increasing political consultation and coordi-

nation between Allies; and strengthening NATO’s political role and the relevant instruments to address all security challenges. As the co-chairs of the Reflection Group explained¹² while introducing their report, the Group’s main point of departure was that NATO’s political strength had in time lagged behind its military prowess and that this gap needed to be remedied.

A Renewal of Vows Among Allies: The Turkish take

Alongside a multitude of ideas on forecasted trends in international security for the decade to come, the report also takes a bold introspective look at NATO. It identifies the existence of internal strains within the Alliance and underlines the critical importance, yet increased difficulty of maintaining cohesion in the face of a growing number of challenges, to which, according to the report, different weights are attributed by different Allies.

Clearly, there are risks associated with such a potentially centrifugal dynamic that could bear on NATO’s most coveted asset, its resilience. It could, for example, impair time sensitive consensus-based decision making and entail a collective vulnerability. The report contains several suggestions to address this internal strain, with a view to consolidating the transatlantic Alliance for what is described as “an era of strategic simultaneity,” characterized by multiple, interconnected, and concurrent threats in different domains.

Turkey would be among the first to argue that in view of such an increasingly complex security paradigm, all Allies need to live up to NATO’s core principles, and not least to the requirements of solidarity. Rekindling NATO’s musketeer spirit would be a welcome step for Ankara, who in many respects considers the onus to be on other Allies. This assertion may trigger the raising of skeptical eyebrows in quarters more familiar with a fashionably merciless portrayal of Turkey, increasingly characterized by criticism. Yet it is a genuine sentiment in Turkey that has developed incrementally through real experiences. Despite substantial polarization in the domestic political scene, it is also a sentiment that transcends political divides and is shared by Turkish society at large.

On numerous critical issues, ranging from existential ones like its fight against terrorism, to the spill-over effect of instability in Iraq and Syria, Turkey believes its calls for solidarity and support have not been sufficiently heard.

The fight against terrorism

Terrorism in all its forms a manifestations has been identified by NATO leaders as a persistent and shared threat. The report confirms this assessment by referring to terrorism as one of the most immediate, asymmetric threats to Allied nations and citizens and argues for the need to explicitly integrate this as a cross cutting line of effort into all three of NATO’s core tasks- namely collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. This idea, coupled with a continuous updating of relevant strategies and policies would help ensure that NATO is able to match the needs of this evolving threat, which for good reason is a leading one in the Turkish eye. To the extent that this is achieved, and Allies can duly harmonize their national policies and actions in a manner fully consistent with the principles of Allied unity and solidarity, NATO’s resilience would record a significant boost in the Turkish domain.

Syria

Syria is a related, particularly exemplary case in point when examining the implications of a self-serving deviation from NATO’s core principles and how this can trigger broader fissures within the Alliance.

The cozying up of the United States and some other NATO Allies to elements in Syria that are inextricably linked¹³ to ter-

11 NATO 2030: United for a new era, NOV 2020, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

12 NATO in 2030: Adapting to a New World, Carnegie Europe, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plnwq2hTbxc&t>.

13 US defense chief admits PYD, YPG, PKK link, Kasim Ileri, 2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/us-defense-chief-admits-pyd-ypg-pkk-link/563332>.

rorist organizations came at the expense of Turkey's security interests. Turkey's frustrations over the creation of such an existential challenge on its border that effectively flourished by virtue of outside intervention were neglected. The calculation that Ankara's frustrations could be contained and managed was wrong from the beginning. It seems that neither the degree of Turkey's inevitable indignation, nor the reactionary game changing steps Turkey undertook, including through cooperation with influential actors on the ground like the Russian Federation and Iran were foreseen. In this process of alienation, Turkey was labeled as "having chosen a wrong trajectory," with insufficient regard for the fact that blatant indifference to NATO Ally Turkey's security concerns was the tipping point.

The problem was aggravated further when NATO's plans pertaining to defending Turkey were blocked by the same Allies because of this problem. Silent diplomatic efforts to find a reasonable solution to this stalemate were fruitless and the blockage of the plan dedicated to Turkey went unnoticed in the public domain at the time. Yet, Turkey's ensuing linkage of the endorsement of all defense plans pertaining to the Baltics and Poland with that of her own quickly made it into the public domain and caught the headlines¹⁴ in the run up to the 2019 NATO Leaders' meeting in London. It was captioned as yet another example of "disruptive behavior" by Turkey.

Defense industry (un)cooperation and the S400 acquisition

Turkey is also confronted with problems in its defense industry cooperation with Allies, and blockages on partaking in EU defense capacity related efforts, despite EU commitments to that end.

Turkey's acquisition of the S400 air and missile defense system from the Russian Federation for example is often presented as a symbol of Turkey's estrangement by choice from NATO. However, there is a long, painstaking background¹⁵ to this decision, arguably with many missed opportunities and enlightening lessons. The main problem was that the

necessary convergence between Turkey's expectations and its Allies' ability to source this need never fully materialized. Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby's recent statement¹⁶ that "Turkey had multiple opportunities over the last decade to purchase the Patriot defense system," overlooks this critical aspect. The devil is often in the details in these types of offers. Moreover, the process was often burdened by politics. This may have been the reason why it took the United States a fateful 17 months to respond to Turkey's official letter of request in August 2017, to purchase the Patriot system. Notably, this was before the S400 procurement deal had been sealed with the Russian Federation. Moreover, Turkey had delivered its request to the United States only 24 hours after then Secretary of Defense James Mattis had asked Turkey to do so, with the promise that Turkey would promptly receive an appealing offer. While this is all in the past and it is more important now to chart a constructive way forward between Turkey and its Allies, Turkey's decision to opt for the S400 system needs to be seen and treated in the proper context. It is the perfect example to a sequence of events in which circumstances dictated the outcome.

The effects of such a dilemma seem to have been inherently considered and reflected in the Reflection Group report under the section on emerging and disruptive technologies, where the need for technology sharing among Allies is meaningfully addressed in the context of "Alliance cohesion." This consideration, together with the goal of further instrumentalizing NATO as the main platform for transatlantic collaboration in ensuring that Allies retain their collective technological edge can hopefully create the conditions in which Allies can in practice primarily rely on each other for their needs.

The last-minute decision of the Trump administration to impose CAATSA sanctions¹⁷ on Turkey in relation to its S-400 acquisition, however, contravenes the logic behind this objective. The United States made an ostensibly deliberate distinction¹⁸ between its decision to impose sanctions and the need to maintain the military capabilities and combat

14 Exclusive: Turkey holds up NATO military plans over Syria dispute - sources, Rbin Emmott, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-turkey-exclusive/exclusive-turkey-holds-up-nato-military-plans-over-syria-dispute-sources-idUSKBN1Y01W0>

15 OPINION - How Turkey's NATO allies 'successfully' advertised S-400?, Dr. Can Kasapoglu, MAR 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-how-turkey-s-nato-allies-successfully-advertised-s-400/1423785>

16 Biden Extends Ban on Turkey Buying F-35 Stealth Fighter, Defense One, FEB 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/business/2021/02/biden-extends-ban-turkey-buying-f-35-stealth-fighter/171896/>.

17 Authorizing the Implementation of Certain Sanctions Set Forth in the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act

18 CAATSA Section 231 "Imposition of Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries", DEC 2020, <https://gr.usembassy.gov/caatsa-section-231-imposition-of-sanctions-on-turkish-presidency-of-defense-industries/>

readiness of Turkey. But in practical terms, this does not alleviate the ultimate implications and meaning of this step that is inconsistent with the true nature of an Allied relationship.

Turkey's appeals on such matters have at best garnered meager expressions of rhetorical understanding in Allied capitals, with no concrete effect. This is not a picture that Ankara can easily come to terms with, especially given Turkey's longstanding legacy within NATO and the fact that notwithstanding such problems, it continues to be among the top contributors to the Alliance's operational commitments and finances.

Is Turkey to blame?

Ironically and in stark contrast to this accumulated sense of resentment pervading Ankara, some members of the Alliance point their fingers at Turkey on mostly the same issues. In fact, some even go so far as to depict Turkey as a "problematic Ally," which in at least some cases, seems to be a convenient means to settle other scores. The same scenario is being followed in the European Union with a special focus on the Eastern Mediterranean, and with greater ease in the absence of a Turkish voice.

France particularly stands out in this regard, with unsurprising support from Greece. This collaborative effort seems to be part of an attempt to portray Turkey as the main subject matter behind the need to enhance coordination and consultation among Allies, thereby hoping to taint some of

Turkey's policies and actions that are unwelcome for both countries because of a variety of their own reasons.

This construct was also probably strategized as a means for Paris to obscure its traditional resistance within NATO to have a wider debate on security matters at Council level and within the relevant committees, thereby in effect deliberately curtailing the role of the Alliance. One would hope that the recognized need to strengthen the political dimension of NATO and the call in the Reflection Group report to reaffirm the role of the North Atlantic Council as a genuine forum for consultation on major strategic and political issues would put an end to such obstructionism.

An occasionally visible tendency particularly among a limited number of "Euro-centric" Allies to mobilize a seeming EU caucus within NATO is something else that merits consideration in the context of NATO 2030 and the goal of enhancing the Alliance's political dimension. This attitude contradicts the very essence of a political-military Alliance that finds strength in its unity and solidarity. It could potentially serve as an entry point to target NATO's resilience, if allowed to flourish. The same consideration applies to EU member states who hold out the "EU solidarity" and "political unity" cards in the context of disagreements with Turkey. Pitting EU solidarity and unity against an Ally, at the expense of the same principles that constitute the cornerstones of their shared NATO membership is an oxymoron, any way you look at it.

Forecast

Multifaceted foreign policy

Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu recently described¹⁹ Turkey's foreign policy in today's multi-polar world as being realistic, without the hamstrings of outdated templates. He maintained the importance of Turkey's membership in NATO (and its forestalled bid for EU membership) and went on to add that notwithstanding its established ties with the "western world," Turkey considered its relations with all actors, be they from the "west" or the "east," to be valuable. He used historic and current examples to highlight the fact that Tur-

key has never seen these relations to be mutually exclusive from one another.

This is a brief and insightful depiction of Turkey's multi-faceted foreign policy orientation, which can be expected to continue. In a way, it also displays the tight rope Turkey sometimes needs to walk on in an era when Turkey is pressured by a multitude of imminent security concerns from all directions.

In Ankara's view, some of these challenges are at times compounded by the actions of its own Allies, obliging Turkey to look elsewhere for solutions. To the extent possible, such divergences among Allies should be prevented in the future. Enhanced transparency, timely intelligence sharing and open, institutionalized dialogue can help. The culture of cooperation among Allies needs to be revamped both through better use of bi-lateral contacts, and of NATO as a platform for exchange on all matters of concern. The findings of the Reflection Group corroborate this need and to the relief of many Allies, the Biden administration seems intent on rekindling this tradition.

Continued strong contributions to NATO

The security landscape and at times incongruent order of priority among Allies are such that Turkey may continue to be faced with dilemmas and difficult choices in the forthcoming period. Ankara will naturally be guided by its national interests. Its decisions, however, can be expected to be tempered, among other things, by its membership in NATO and its relationship with its Allies.

This is confirmed by past experiences and reflected in statements of leading Turkish officials who makes it abundantly clear that Turkey will not shy away from calling out its Allies for their untoward actions, or from taking remedial measures on the ground when compelled to do so, but that it will nevertheless continue to live up to its commitments within NATO and strive to maintain cordial relations with all Allies. Turkey's occasional criticism and outspokenness of what it perceives to be unfair and wrong actions on the part of its Allies should therefore not be misconstrued as an inclination to distance itself from NATO. It should rather be seen as a function of realpolitik in action.

Turkey will maintain its trajectory of substantial contributions²⁰ to the Alliance, as demonstrated through new and important undertakings such as its assumption²¹ of the lead of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) from the beginning of 2021. This is a critical enabler for NATO's deterrence and defense efforts, comprising a Turkish contribution of over 4000 troops (complemented with over 2000 contributions from other Allies), as well as state-of-the-art equipment,

entailing a significant investment on the part of Turkey. In its longer-term commitment plans, Turkey is lined up to assume leadership of NATO's Warfighting Corps Headquarters, as well as the Maritime and the Air Component Commands of the NATO Response Force in 2023 and 2025 respectively.

Such commitments by Turkey, together with its track record in allocating critical assets to NATO and its active involvement in NATO's operations and missions, including in Afghanistan where Turkey has pledged to stay for as long as the Afghan people deem it necessary, speak for themselves. They also constitute the best answer to the occasional, unfounded questioning of Turkey's role and place within the Alliance.

Calibrated Collaboration with the Russian Federation

Turkey critics often point to its enhanced relations with the Russian Federation and the S400 acquisition to substantiate their skepticism about Ankara's choices. There is also abundant speculation²² on the future of this relationship.

To a certain extent such questioning is understandable, yet Turkey is not the only Ally having to manage the contention of its NATO membership and its interest in maintaining collaborative relations with the Russian Federation.

The bottom line for Turkey is that it does not see a zero-sum game in this equation and is confident of its ability to live up to its NATO commitments, while having collaborative relations with the Russian Federation in areas of mutual interest. The logic of this approach is not much different from the one outlined by Jake Sullivan, the National Security Adviser of the Biden administration, who listed numerous challenges he sees in relations with the Russian Federation, but also spoke of their readiness to collaborate with Moscow in areas of mutual interest such as arms control, and cited examples of cooperation between the two countries even during the Cold War.

Maybe the most revealing description of the nature of Turkey's relationship with the Russia Federation was recently made by President Putin²³ when he argued that in the pursuit of national interests, it is sometimes necessary to insist, and

20 Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, OCT 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_178528.htm

21 Turkey takes charge of NATO high readiness force, 30 DEC 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180627.htm.

22 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2021, International Crisis Group, DEC 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2021>.

23 Turkish President Erdogan is 'man of his word': Putin, DEC 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkish-president-erdogan-is-man-of-his-word-putin/2080630>

at other times to make compromises, and went on to cite President Erdoğan as someone who pushes for his country's interests and with whom he has often had disagreements.

Turkey will work with Russia when and where necessary, and it will at the same time try to manage differences. Concurrently, in the NATO context Turkey will maintain its long list of contributions to collective deterrence and defense efforts. Turkey will not deviate from its firm support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its rejection of the unlawful annexation of Crimea, and will work to enhance bilateral relations with Kyiv, including in defense industry. It will also continue to stand behind Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations and defense capacity building efforts and sustain its contributions to regional security as a Black Sea littoral Ally, including by providing over %60 of the maritime picture there.

The breadth of Turkey's interaction with Russia as a neighboring country, as well as the responsibility it shoulders in terms of a security provider within the Alliance are both formidable and need to be examined in their entirety for a healthier understanding of where Turkey stands. Piecemeal

assessments will be incomplete and misleading.

There is a similar degree of complexity around the S400 acquisition. In addition to the views expressed earlier in this paper, it should be stated that Turkey did not acquire this system to distance itself from its Allies or from NATO. Turkey's Allies, likewise, should not instrumentalize it to purge Turkey.

By not over-reacting to the imposition of CAATSA sanctions, Turkey has displayed its readiness to find a manageable way forward with the Biden administration. Similar to the way in which German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas expressed in the context of Nord Stream 2, this is a sovereign decision and Turkey will not be amenable to any suggestion that seemingly tarnishes its sovereignty.

Creative thinking and realistic, well-intentioned diplomatic efforts will be necessary to manage, and hopefully overcome this challenge. This is something that Turkey and the United States, as longstanding Allies can achieve, irrespective of any degree of disagreement that may prevail between them.

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