

THE IRAN WAR: FRACTURE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND NATO

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The war being waged against Iran should be interpreted not merely as a military conflict, but as a reflection of a deeper transformation within the international system. Beyond what is unfolding on the ground, the leadership style guiding this process is prompting a reassessment of the nature of relations among NATO allies and the functioning of the global order. In such a context, could the NATO Summit in Ankara become a turning point?

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The war against Iran can no longer be explained solely through military successes presented to the public. As the war has continued for more than a month, a leadership crisis, transatlantic divergence, and the erosion of the international order are unfolding simultaneously at a deeper level. This picture points to a “structural rupture” in the international system; the issue is no longer just the war itself, but the resilience of the order—and even the resilience of disorder.

In this framework, the most prominent factor is the erosion in the leadership profile of the United States as a global power. The decisions taken and messages conveyed by Washington increasingly reinforce the perception that it is moving away from a predictable, institution-based foreign policy approach toward practices that strain the limits of rationality. President Donald Trump’s rhetoric and sudden policy shifts are creating a serious trust deficit not only among rivals but also among allies.

This situation once again demonstrates that leadership is not only about the use of power, but also about credibility and predictability. What we are facing today raises questions not about the United States’ military capacity, but about the mindset guiding its use.

A Vacuum in Global Governance

Another striking aspect of the Iran war is the weakness of global governance mechanisms. International institutions, particularly the United Nations, are unable to play a decisive role in managing the crisis. The UN, with its passive and ineffective posture, appears almost paralysed, silently signalling that in its current form it may not be functional in any future international order.

Competition among major powers weakens the capacity for collective action, while crises are increasingly managed through ad hoc and fragmented responses.

In this context, the Iran war can be seen as the latest concrete example of the collapse of the rules-based international order. In an environment where power politics replaces rules, crises inevitably become more unpredictable and harder to manage.

The Battle of Perceptions and the Question of Legitimacy

Another dimension, as important as military developments on the ground, is the ongoing battle of perceptions. The parties are not only fighting for military superiority but also for legitimacy in the international public sphere—though that legitimacy has, under current conditions, largely lost its meaning.

One of the key challenges facing the United States is the increasing questioning of the international legitimacy of its policies. Divergences among allies and rising criticism from the Global South make this legitimacy problem more visible.

The weakening of legitimacy indirectly limits the effectiveness of military power, since sustainable outcomes ultimately depend not only on force but also on a broadly accepted political framework.

At the same time, the Iran war—becoming intertwined with the war in Ukraine—is paving the way for the emergence of new regional and global power balances. Countries in the region are increasingly aware of the risks of over-dependence on major powers and are seeking alternative balancing strategies. The search by Gulf countries is just one example.

In this process, flexible partnerships, multilateral cooperation models—often referred to as “minilateralism”—and regional security arrangements are gaining importance. However, it does not appear easy for such efforts to produce stable structures in the short term.

A Silent Dissolution of the NATO Alliance?

The Iran war has also brought to the surface tensions that have been building within the North Atlantic Alliance. These tensions do not manifest as an open rupture but rather as a more subtle and gradual divergence. While disagreements have existed within NATO since the 1956 Suez Crisis, allies have managed to preserve unity in defining and pursuing alliance priorities. This time, however, the test stems from the dismissive attitude of the U.S. President toward NATO.

In such a context, allies are reluctant to align directly with the U.S. approach, instead adopting a more cautious and distanced stance. This reflects not only differing assessments of military operations against Iran but also deep unease about unpredictability in U.S. decision-making.

Another notable issue concerns NATO’s institutional identity. There is a growing perception among allied capitals and publics that NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte is not maintaining a balanced position among allies, as expected in an organisation based on consensus. Criticism suggests that he appears overly aligned with the policy priorities of a particular ally (the United States). Engaging a U.S. administration led by Trump—whose reactions can be abrupt and contradictory—and steering it toward a constructive path while maintaining internal alliance balance is not an easy task for any Secretary General. Indeed, during Trump’s first presidency, when I served as NATO Assistant Secretary General, I observed how Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg acted with great care—almost like a “tightrope walker”—to harmonise differing approaches, and managed to do so without causing discomfort among allies.

In such an environment, it is important to prevent concerns about a “silent dissolution” of the Alliance from gaining strength. While a categorical breakdown is not imminent, there is clearly an erosion of trust and a growing strategic distance between a major ally and the rest.

Turkey, NATO, and Strategic Restraint

Despite three Iranian missiles being intercepted by NATO’s ballistic missile defense system while heading toward Turkish airspace, Ankara maintained its composure and refrained from invoking Article 4 of the Washington Treaty, which provides for consultations among allies. Poland, by contrast, swiftly invoked Article 4 following airspace violations by Russian drones last year. It should also be recalled that Turkey has been the ally that most frequently invoked Article 4 in NATO’s recent history, particularly following the airspace violation that led to the downing of a Russian warplane in November 2015 and developments related to the conflict in Syria (at the time, the Obama administration was in office in the United States).

Turkey’s current stance can be interpreted as strategic restraint. In such a complex geopolitical environment, calm judgment rather than immediate reaction is the right approach. It is natural for Turkey to avoid the transformation of this war into a broader NATO–Iran conflict and to work toward preventing such an escalation. European allies share this perspective, as demonstrated by their reluctance to align with Trump’s efforts to draw them into the war. In this context, Ankara’s efforts—together with regional actors—to de-escalate tensions through diplomacy are appropriate.

The Importance of the NATO Summit in Ankara

The critical factor that will determine the fate of the NATO Summit at the level of Heads of State and Government, to be held in Ankara on 7–8 July, will be the stance of Donald Trump. His remarks such as “NATO has done nothing” are not only harsh but also ironic. This is because, prior to the war launched by the United States, together with Israel, against Iran, it is abundantly clear that Washington did not consult its allies in determining the critical steps it would take in the Middle East—a region that lies outside NATO’s area of responsibility as a regional organisation. Therefore, it is not possible to accept an attempt to involve allies in such a war—launched on its own initiative (with the encouragement of Israel, a country outside NATO)—in a *fait accompli* manner.

The stark contradiction is this: Washington acts unilaterally, yet at the same time accuses the NATO Alliance of being ineffective for not supporting it. It is a further oddity that throughout Trump’s discourse, NATO is presented almost as if the United States were not a member of it. It is not difficult to infer that whenever Trump says “NATO,” he often refers to Europe (most likely the European Union, with which he is ideologically at odds). Such an approach risks reducing the Alliance from a collective defence structure to a platform expected exclusively to contribute to U.S. power projection. However, realities on the ground point to a different situation. It is observed that other allies—including Türkiye, which is geographically close to the crisis region—have generally acted in a more cautious, strategic, and realistic manner. In other words, while military power may be concentrated in Washington, strategic reasoning is increasingly being shaped in the capitals of other allied countries. The divergence in approaches among allies—fuelled by the uncertainty and

unpredictability of the policies pursued by the Trump Administration—leads to an erosion of trust, which has always been the source of the unity and cohesion aimed at within the Alliance. The question that arises is whether the summit in Ankara can reverse this trend.

It should be recalled that summits attended by Trump as President have generally been short, narrowly focused, and lacking in strategic depth. His relatively short attention span has undoubtedly played a role in this. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the Ankara summit were conducted in a similar format. Likewise, it would be realistic to expect that the summit declaration, as seen in examples from Trump's presidency, would consist of only a few paragraphs. Naturally, whether developments in the Iran war might prevent Trump from attending the summit will remain another question occupying minds.

All these constraining factors do not render the summit insignificant. On the contrary, if managed properly, this summit could become one of the rare opportunities for NATO to redefine its minimum common denominator. The role of the host, Türkiye, which has a vested interest in the success of the summit, is critical. Ankara should contribute to shaping the outcomes of the summit both through preparations within NATO and through timely consultations with key allied countries in bilateral and multilateral formats. In this context, for many allies, a key expectation will be the strong reaffirmation of commitment to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. This is because the antidote to the current crisis of confidence is not only military capability, but also shared political will.

At the same time, it is necessary to credibly demonstrate NATO's "360-degree" approach, which ensures preparedness against threats and challenges from any direction. Any message that does not jointly address the war in Ukraine, the Iran crisis, and developments in the Middle East will remain incomplete. Emphasising collective action and solidarity in the fight against terrorism—one of the primary threats identified alongside Russia in NATO's Strategic Concept, and a key concern for Turkey—will of course be important in strengthening the 360-degree approach.

Another factor that should not be overlooked is the impact that the course of the Iran war will have on the atmosphere of the Ankara summit. If the conflict escalates by that time, divisions will deepen; if tensions are brought under control, the ground for compromise will expand.

Naturally, as claimed in some speculative media reports, if Trump were to attempt at the summit to initiate a procedural debate suggesting that allies who do not raise their defence spending to 5 percent of GDP should not be able to participate in key decisions and activities of the Alliance, this would eliminate the chances of success for the summit. One can only hope that Trump does not pursue such a course of action. Of course, the Ankara Summit alone cannot resolve the transatlantic crisis of confidence. However, it could represent a tangible step toward "enhancing resilience" on the path to rebuilding the international system. Otherwise, even if it can be argued that NATO's lifespan will outlast that of Trump and similar administrations, the internal risks facing the Alliance may grow even further.

Conclusion

The Iran war is not merely a military conflict but a multidimensional crisis affecting the core dynamics of the international system. It exposes weaknesses in leadership, alliance cohesion, and global governance simultaneously. What we are witnessing is not just a regional war but the signs of a reshaping global order. The decisive factor will not be military developments alone, but how international actors respond to this transformation. If current trends deepen, the world will become more fragmented, more unpredictable, and more fragile in terms of security.

In this context, with proper diplomatic preparation and careful political guidance, the NATO Summit in Ankara could offer an opportunity to mitigate the disruptive effects of this systemic fracture and to reaffirm the fundamental common ground among allies.