

European Defense Integration: Can Turkey follow the UK's lead?

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has highlighted NATO's key role in European defense. However, concerns over Donald Trump's potential re-election—particularly the risk of cutting aid to Ukraine or weakening NATO's deterrence—are pushing European states to make an effort to bear more of the burden. To that end, many of them have either reached or surpassed the 2% threshold that they long pledged but failed to fulfill. They are also taking steps to bolster NATO's European pillar and ensure sustained support to Ukraine. Simultaneously, the European Union continues to build an autonomous defense capability to reduce reliance on the United States. With escalating geopolitical risks, there is a conducive environment for non-EU NATO countries like the UK and Turkey to participate more actively in European defense.

The UK Labour government's signing of a Joint Defense Declaration with Germany immediately after its victory in the July elections is a significant step in this regard that underscores the importance of reinforcing alliance ties amid increasing political uncertainty. The agreement holds particular significance as the UK and Germany, Europe's two biggest military powers with the largest defense budgets, are also the leading contributors of aid to Ukraine after the United States. Traditionally aligned with an Atlanticist foreign policy, the UK's recent announcement of its intent to sign a joint defense agreement with the European Union, similar to the one with Germany, suggests a willingness to recalibrate its defense cooperation with the EU. This development inevitably raises the question of whether the UK could serve as a model for countries like Turkey—a non-EU/NATO member—integrating into the European defense structure. While the EU views the UK as an ideal partner for collaboration in defense and security matters, the same cannot be said for Turkey due to longstanding political issues and strategic differences that complicate deeper cooperation.

In recent years, the negative trajectory of Turkey-EU relations has hindered Turkey's attempts to participate in the EU's defense mechanisms. Ankara has yet to receive a response to its 2021 application to join the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Turkish policymakers understandably expressed disappointment when the EU referred to Turkey as a "partner" rather than a "candidate country" in its Strategic Compass for Security and Defense, published in March 2022, which outlined plans for developing independent military capabilities. Yet remarks by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Joseph Borrell at the "Where is Europe Headed?" meeting in Spain in August suggest that the EU's view of Turkey has even further deteriorated, to the point of perceiving Turkey almost as a "rival."

Its geopolitical significance and military strength notwithstanding, Turkey is excluded from defense projects that could enhance the EU's security and support for Ukraine. A vital example of this was the veto of three EU member states (Greece, Cyprus, and France) of Ukraine's request to purchase Bayraktar TB2 drones and artillery shells from Turkey using EU funds. The EU's negative stance towards Turkey not only fuels anti-Western sentiment and EU skepticism within Turkey but also pushes the country closer to Russia and China, creating a vicious circle by further deepening the EU's mistrust of Turkey.

In response to the current deadlock in its relations with the EU, Turkey appears to have shifted its strategy. Turkish policymakers are now promoting a narrative that positions Turkey as an integral part of Europe, regardless of the outcome of its EU membership process. Within this framework, particularly in addressing defense-related challenges, Turkey has been actively working to bypass the EU's vetoes by fostering bilateral partnerships and joint ventures. However, these efforts focus more on industrial and commercial dimensions than security. In the long run, for Turkey to integrate into Europe's autonomous defense mechanisms—assuming both sides genuinely have this intention—the EU should reevaluate the political issues hindering Turkey's membership process in the context of current geopolitical risks. In turn, Turkey needs to take concrete steps to address and improve its negative image.

Conflicting Autonomy Agendas Between Turkey and the EU

Europe's quest for autonomy is not a new phenomenon. The foundation of the EU's strategic autonomy in the realm of security and defense can be traced back to the 1993 Maastricht Treaty.¹ Although the concept of "strategic autonomy" first appeared in the European Council's decision on European Security and Defense Policy in 2013, as a policy, it gained momentum after Donald Trump, who viewed the EU as an "adversary" and NATO as an "outdated" institution, was elected U.S. president in 2016. Since 2017, mechanisms such as PESCO, the European Defense Fund, and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) have been established within the EU, laying the groundwork for institutionalizing the EU's strategic autonomy process.

Turkey, on the other hand, has adopted a cautious stance towards initiatives aimed at strengthening NATO's European pillar and establishing a defense force independent of NATO due to concerns that these efforts could weaken NATO and marginalize Turkey in key decision-making processes. The Berlin Plus arrangements adopted in 2003 eased some of Turkey's concerns, enabling NATO members to support EU-led operations that did not involve NATO's full participation. Turkey became the fourth-largest personnel contributor to EU-led operations during this period, after France, Germany, and the UK. However, following the accession of Cyprus to the EU in 2004, the mutual use of vetoes by both sides increasingly strained cooperation. Nevertheless, Turkey continued participating in missions fostering close cooperation between NATO and the EU, such as the EUFOR Althea Operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004) and Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean (2016). In February 2024,

¹ This treaty not only established a common market alongside an economic and monetary union but also aimed to increase the EU's independence in defense by introducing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and reviving the Western European Union. At that time, defense policy was focused on transatlantic cooperation, but over time, it evolved to provide European states with relative room for maneuvering against the U.S.

Turkey, alongside Greece, joined the Sky Shield Initiative to bolster NATO's European air defense in response to threats emanating from the war in Ukraine.

Turkey has also expressed interest in PESCO, which it considers complementary to NATO's deterrence and defense, but its application remains on hold due to vetoes from Greece and Cyprus. Meanwhile, the UK, despite leaving the EU, was granted participation in PESCO in November 2022.

It is not solely political vetoes that hinder Turkey's defense cooperation with the EU. The European Defense Industry Strategy (EDIS), adopted by the European Commission in March 2024, encourages cooperation with "like-minded" non-EU NATO members, setting shared values and interests as key criteria. So, while nations such as the UK, Canada, and Norway are considered suitable partners under EDIS, Turkey's exclusion highlights a deeper trust issue. Over the past two decades, Turkey's drifting away from the Copenhagen criteria and its pursuit of an "autonomous foreign policy," marked by closer ties with Russia and China, has led to the questioning of its Western identity. Ankara's perception of the EU's biased stance in favor of Greece and Cyprus has also pushed it to search for alternatives. Thus, both sides bear responsibility for the current state of Turkey-EU relations. However, developments such as Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system and its mishandling of Finland and Sweden's NATO membership process have considerably undermined Turkey's reliability and predictability as a partner.

Similarly, Turkey's application for membership in BRICS and its intention to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization despite membership in NATO is not a demonstration of a truly flexible foreign policy but rather a sign of confusion among its decision-makers about the country's strategic orientation. This, along with mutual distrust and divergence in threat perceptions, will remain significant barriers to Turkey's integration into Europe's autonomous defense structure.

The Return of War to Continental Europe, Changing Threat Priorities, and Limited Capabilities

The ongoing war in Ukraine is pushing Europeans, who once saw the continent as a permanent island of peace and stability, to adapt to changing circumstances and engage in strategic planning to address mid- to long-term security risks. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), covering 14 European countries including Ukraine, 21% of respondents in Bulgaria believe that if the war in Ukraine ends, the Kremlin will continue its expansionist policies and attack another European state. This figure rises to 51% in Portugal. There is growing concern that Russia may test NATO's deterrence—through cyberattacks or targeting underwater fiber cables—if Donald Trump, known for his admiration of President Putin and skepticism toward the transatlantic alliance, wins the U.S. presidential election. Indeed, intelligence findings shared by U.S. sources on Sept. 6 point to the possibility of sabotage of undersea fiber-optic cables based on observed Russian military movements in the Baltic Sea.

While EU countries continue to provide military support to Kyiv in an effort to shift the balance on the ground in Ukraine's favor, they are also taking steps to reduce their long-term dependency on the U.S. for defense. EDIS, presented by the European Commission in March 2024, aims to boost the EU's competitiveness in the defense industry with the European Investment Bank's support while ensuring that defense equipment will be procured from member states.

However, the EU's current production capacity still falls short of current needs. The EU failed to produce the one million 155mm artillery shells it had pledged to supply to Ukraine by March 2024 using the capabilities of its member states and had to turn to non-EU sources. However, vetoes imposed by Greece, Cyprus, and France blocked purchases from Turkey. Interestingly, this incident paved the way for further collaboration between the U.S. and Turkey in replenishing the former's stockpiles, which shipments to Ukraine had depleted.

In March, the U.S. purchased 116,000 artillery shells from Turkey and a Turkish company (Repkon) set up three production lines in Texas to manufacture 155mm shells. Repkon will produce about 30% of the U.S. artillery stockpile by 2025. While it is unclear how many of these shells will be sent to Ukraine, this investment could open up opportunities for Turkish companies to export to Europe via the U.S.

The Facilitating Role of Third Countries

In Ankara, where policymakers have long viewed the EU's exclusionary stance towards Turkey as a “lack of strategic vision” and believe this attitude is unlikely to change soon, the idea of going around the EU veto through defense partnerships has been gaining strength for some time. In this context, Turkey's partnership with the UK, which maintains a much more positive dialogue than with the EU or U.S., stands out as an exception. The two NATO allies sharing similar views on regional issues have forged even closer cooperation in several areas, including defense, particularly following Brexit.

Turkey has been cooperating with British company BAE Systems since 2017 to develop its indigenous fifth-generation fighter jet (TFX-KAAN). In November 2023, the two countries signed a Statement of Intent to strengthen defense cooperation. While it is still too early to determine whether this accord will remove obstacles to the joint production of the TFX jet engine, the signing of these agreements indicates a mutual willingness to explore the potential for further cooperation. Turkish company Canik Holding's acquisition of British defense firm AEI Systems in 2023 is also seen as a step that could pave the way for exports to European markets. This merger placed Canik Holding among the world's top three producers of medium-caliber artillery shells. Similarly, the JETCO Protocol and Action Plan signed by the two countries in early 2024 is expected to encourage joint investment opportunities in third countries, especially in light of a possible update to the Free Trade Agreement.

In this respect, the UK's new chapter in its relations with the EU offers new opportunities for cooperation in the defense sector. Notably, Friedrich Merz, leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union, who is seen as a strong contender to win next year's

national elections, has a positive stance towards closer relations between the EU and the UK. This could help balance France's more reserved approach to defense cooperation with non-EU third countries. One of the topics discussed at the meeting in Ankara, where Turkish and British defense ministers gathered in 2023 to sign the Declaration of Intent, was the sale of Eurofighter jets. Turkey has long been interested in purchasing 40 Eurofighter Typhoon jets developed jointly by four European countries (the UK, Spain, Italy, and Germany). However, these requests have been stalled by objections from Germany. The UK is known to be engaged in efforts to convince Germany to end its opposition to Turkey's purchase of Eurofighters. Turkish officials, noting a positive shift in Germany's view of Turkey, expect a quick resolution. Approval of the Eurofighter sale would not only accelerate defense cooperation between these four countries and Turkey but could also pave the way for bilateral security agreements in the future.²

While diplomatic efforts to purchase Eurofighters continue, a comprehensive framework for economic cooperation with Germany, considered the EU's driving force, is underway. An initiative by the Turkish-German Business Council seeks to elevate economic cooperation between the two countries to a strategic partnership by promoting joint investments that leverage Germany's financial and technological strength alongside Turkey's geographic influence. The project, still in the planning phase, is also expected to include a defense industry component. It leverages Turkey's growing influence in Africa—a region that has become a global battleground in recent years—and is therefore seen not only as a means to boost mutual commercial gains but also a way to elevate Turkey's profile as an attractive partner. This partnership complements the EU's strategic vision, as it would counterbalance China and Russia's expanding influence in the region.³

2 Turkey is currently collaborating with Spain in the maritime sector. The Spanish company Navantia designed Turkey's first amphibious assault ship, TCG Anadolu, based on Spain's Juan Carlos I. In November 2023, Turkey signed an agreement with Spain to build a new-generation aircraft carrier. Navantia is intent on being a technological partner in both of these programs. Turkey is also engaged in defense cooperation with Italy. The two countries jointly produce the T129 Atak attack helicopter. Additionally, Turkey has a partnership with the Italian company Leonardo to meet its training helicopter needs.

3 An official speaking to the author on the condition of anonymity, Aug. 27, 2024, Istanbul.

Conclusion

In the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and Trump's potential re-election, there are differences of opinion within the EU regarding how risks and threats to Europe should be countered as the US commitment to European defense comes under scrutiny. Turkish decision-makers assume that the political issues that have led to an impasse in Turkey-EU relations (such as the Cyprus issue, maritime disputes with Greece, etc.) will not be resolved in the near future. Therefore, they tend to focus on projects to bolster Turkey's defense industry, positioning the country as an attractive partner for European states. By doing so, Ankara is seeking to capitalize on the divisions within the EU by shifting towards bilateral cooperation based on "mutual interests" rather than "shared values." This shift, in a way, applies the transactional (give-and-take) relationship model that has been prevalent in Turkey-EU relations for some time to defense cooperation on a micro level.

While these initiatives, which will develop the Turkish defense industry, are likely to generate income, they do not guarantee Turkey's integration into Europe's autonomous defense force. This is because defense cooperation is based on mutual trust. The EU's stance on Turkey's membership process, which Ankara views as succumbing to the political vetoes of member states, creates considerable disenchantment, to say the least. On the other hand, Turkey's democratic backsliding over the past two decades and its willingness to align with authoritarian countries like Russia and China that challenge the liberal democratic order deepen the EU's distrust. Although diplomats have been working to initiate a new round of peace talks to resolve the Cyprus issue, past experiences offer little hope for a successful resolution. Since neither the EU nor Turkey is expected to alter their policies in the foreseeable future, it is likely that EU-Turkey defense cooperation will continue primarily within NATO confines and through individual bilateral deals.

Recommendations:

In the scenario where Turkey is not included in Europe's autonomous defense force, it is recommended to Ankara that a policy emphasizing NATO's primary role in European defense be promoted and that closer relations be maintained with Atlanticist countries within NATO (such as the UK, Poland, Baltic and Nordic countries, and Eastern European countries).

In Turkey-EU relations:

- Establishing permanent structural institutions to serve as consultation platforms on security and defense issues,
- Participation in meetings (such as the informal meetings of foreign ministers, European Political Community Summits) to revive high-level strategic dialogue,
- Leveraging the facilitating role of third countries,
- Prioritizing traditional diplomatic channels while avoiding megaphone diplomacy,
- Emphasizing areas of cooperation to communicate the message that Turkey, independent of its leaders, remains an important ally in its region and beyond, and will continue to be so.

These measures will be instrumental in countering the negative perceptions about the country.



The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author.

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