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THE ROLE OF TÜRKİYE IN EUROPEAN SECURITY: A CHALLENGE OR AN OPPORTUNITY?

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The assumptions underpinning Europe's security since the end of the Cold War have been deeply shaken. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has reintroduced hard power and kinetic confrontation into the European equation. At the same time, the return of President Trump to the White House has prompted Europeans and NATO to reconsider burden-sharing, which has long tested the solidity of transatlantic unity. Meanwhile, global systemic competition, with the U.S.–China rivalry at its core, is reshaping global alignments; instability persists across the Middle East and North Africa; and emerging technologies are transforming both warfare and societal resilience.

Within this turbulent context, Türkiye occupies a unique position, geographically, politically, and strategically. It is a NATO Ally bridging Europe and Asia, a Black Sea and Mediterranean power, and a regional actor with global reach. Its foreign and security policy reflects the need to navigate a world where power is diffuse, alliances are flexible, and risks are interconnected.

Today, Türkiye is not just a flank state; it is a key actor whose decisions affect the security and prosperity of Europe and beyond. As the guardian of the Montreux Convention, Türkiye's enforcement of the relevant provisions of this legal

instrument has been essential for the ongoing war in Ukraine. Simultaneously, its mediation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative, instrumental in prisoner exchanges, and its hosting of three rounds of ceasefire and peace talks between Russia and Ukraine demonstrate Ankara's ability to act as a constructive diplomatic player when interests align.

Türkiye's foreign policy has adapted to a more fractured and competitive world. The era of unipolar dominance is over; we now live in a time of contested multipolarity, with shifting centres of power and declining norms. In this environment, Türkiye aims to balance strategic autonomy, albeit with noticeable limitations, with strategic alignment: maintaining flexibility to safeguard national interests while continuing to engage with its long-standing Western institutions, especially NATO.

This approach is not a departure from the West but an acknowledgement that influence in a multipolar world requires diversified partnerships. Türkiye not only fulfils its commitments as a member of NATO but also engages with the United States, the EU, and partners across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, keeping channels open even among adversaries. Its goal is to avoid rigid bloc politics and to act as a stabilising and mediating force across different geographies.

Türkiye's relations with the United States are vital to its Western alignment. This relationship consistently combined strategic cooperation with some serious political disagreements. Both countries share interests, such as supporting Ukraine in its existential struggle, fighting terrorism, and maintaining deterrence and defence through NATO. However, disagreements remain over several issues, most notably US support for PYD/YPG in Syria, an extension of PKK, which both Türkiye and the US consider a terrorist organisation; defence procurement, and

Türkiye's resentment about being targeted again by CAATSA sanctions after the bitter experience with the arms embargo of 1975; as well as differences over regional policies. Nevertheless, these disagreements do not eclipse the substantial daily cooperation through intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and NATO planning. The current challenge is to redefine this partnership in a more strategic, forward-looking manner, emphasising resilience across defence industries, supply chains, technologies, and energy security.

Within NATO, Türkiye remains indispensable to both European and transatlantic security. For over seventy years, it has contributed to NATO's core tasks, namely, deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security. It hosts key NATO facilities, from Allied Land Command in Izmir to the ballistic missile defence radar in Kürecik. It provides vital access to regions stretching from the Black Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean. Its armed forces, the second largest in NATO, are experienced, interoperable, and combat-tested. It contributes to all NATO operations and missions.

Equally, Türkiye's defence industry has become a significant source of influence. By producing drones, naval platforms, and missile systems for partners from Ukraine to Africa, Türkiye is emerging as a security provider, not merely a consumer.

Beyond NATO, Türkiye also strengthens Europe's wider security framework amid the ongoing Russian conflict in Ukraine. In energy, it acts as a crucial transit and hub nation, encouraging diversification through projects such as TANAP and TurkStream, and expanding its role as a centre for LNG terminals.

Türkiye's soft power also matters: its humanitarian outreach, cultural diplomacy, and management of migration flows. According to UNHCR, Türkiye is one of the largest refugee-hosting countries worldwide, currently hosting some 3.2 million registered Syrian refugees along with close to 222.000 persons of concern from other nationalities. This certainly help preserve regional stability and ease pressure on Europe.

Nevertheless, ambition must align with capacity. Türkiye's economy continues to face substantial pressure from various factors, including high inflation and budgetary and current account deficits. Domestic political polarisation and increasing criticism of practices that diverge from fundamental principles of democracy and the rule of law are challenges to keep in mind. Strategically, engaging simultaneously in the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa heightens the risk of overstretching. Institutionally, its EU accession process remains halted, and legitimate security concerns occasionally cause friction within NATO. Maintaining a balance in relations with Russia while preserving NATO unity remains a delicate task that has so far been managed without significant rupture.

For the EU, Türkiye thus represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Its geography, military strength, and energy role make it indispensable to European security, yet its pursuit of autonomy and democratic drift raises complex questions for the EU about engagement. The task is to move beyond transactionalism and develop a strategic framework that leverages Türkiye's potential while offering predictable cooperation and incentives for reform.

Even with EU accession talks effectively frozen, Türkiye's strategic importance remains. The EU must differentiate between Türkiye's once prominent but now

halted membership ambitions and its strategic cooperation with Türkiye. Its decision to exclude Türkiye—a littoral state and regional power—from consultations on the EU’s Black Sea Strategy demonstrates a shortsighted approach. Similarly, Greek and Greek Cypriot efforts to prevent Türkiye’s involvement in SAFE should be viewed within Europe’s broader need to develop advanced capabilities and fulfil its strategic responsibilities. The EU should strive to project a clear strategic vision to realise its claimed geopolitical role effectively; otherwise, it risks settling for “lowest common denominator” policies driven by the national interests of some member states. As a result, it will remain hostage to the outcome of Greek Cypriot accession to the EU, a consequence of Greece's 2004 blackmail following the rejection of the UN-brokered Annan Peace Plan for Cyprus in a referendum held in the south of the island. This accession has not only breached EU rules against admitting states with territorial disputes but also hampered progress on several issues, including elevating NATO-EU cooperation to a desired level.

Although no longer part of the EU, the United Kingdom’s strategic engagement with Türkiye remains vital for advancing the interests of both nations and strengthening European security. One can only hope that Prime Minister Starmer’s recent visit to Türkiye went beyond the narrow scope of the deal signed in Ankara on procuring Typhoon Eurofighter jets to address other important aspects of security cooperation that could bolster European security. Similarly, the visit of German Chancellor Merz to Türkiye is expected to open new avenues for cooperation in this regard, without being confined to a narrow transactionalism.

In summary, Türkiye’s foreign and security policy today combines both continuity and adaptation. It remains anchored in the Western alliance system while expanding its partnerships to reflect the realities of a multipolar world. Türkiye’s

role in European security is not peripheral or conditional—it is vital. The European security architecture cannot be effective without Türkiye’s active contribution.

Looking ahead, the challenge for both Türkiye and its partners is to rebuild confidence and ensure that policy differences do not overshadow shared strategic interests. A more inclusive and forward-looking dialogue with key partners, including the US within NATO and the EU, can align Türkiye’s pursuit of strategic autonomy with collective transatlantic security priorities.

Ultimately, Türkiye’s geography has always placed it at the crossroads of challenges, but its history and capabilities have also positioned it at the crossroads of opportunities and solutions.