

## **QUAD, AUKUS and the American Pivot to Asia: Implications for Turkey and a case for recalibration**

**Alper Coşkun** | Ambassador (R)

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## QUAD and AUKUS: America's new favorites

The American tradition of confusing acronyms lives on. Nowadays we are acquainting ourselves with QUAD<sup>1</sup> and AUKUS<sup>2</sup>, two acronyms that currently top the charts in Washington D.C. and have thereby generated global interest.

QUAD, which is short for Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, is the older of the two. It was born in the form of maritime co-operation between the US, India, Japan, and Australia in the wake of the devastating 2004 tsunamis in the Indian Ocean. Over time, it evolved into a security dialogue platform and has now come into the limelight under the Biden administration, which seems intent on utilizing it to blunt Chinese ambitions considered detrimental to US interests.

AUKUS, on the other hand is a novel trilateral format for security cooperation, comprising Australia, the UK and the US. Its undeclared subject matter is China. AUKUS made a marked debut with the bitter and somewhat emotional re-

sentment it triggered in France for multiple reasons, notably culminating in the calling back<sup>3</sup> of the French Ambassadors in Washington D.C. and Australia.

The origins of the US decision to pivot to Asia date back to the Obama<sup>4</sup> era. The Biden administration, which has identified systemic rivalry with China as a matter of overriding geo-political concern is now operationalizing this through more concrete steps.

American officials point out the complexity of the challenge China poses by concurrently highlighting the adversarial, competitive, and cooperative dynamics that are at play. Analysts see these latest developments as more than a simple pivot and more akin to traditional containment and balance of power considerations. In any case, the US pivot is actual and moving ahead, with its implications becoming increasingly visible.

1 Sheila A. Smith, *The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know*, CFR, 27 May 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/quad-indo-pacific-what-know>

2 Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS, 15 September 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aukus/>

3 Jim Acosta, Kylie Atwood and Maegan Vazquez, *France recalls its ambassadors to the US and Australia over new national security partnership*, CNN, 18 September, 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/17/politics/french-ambassador-to-the-us-recalled/index.html>

4 Kenneth G. Lieberthal, *The American Pivot to Asia*, Brookings, 21 December 2011. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>

## NATO and the transatlantic link: rhetorically central to US interests, but incrementally relegated to the back burner

President Biden is reputed to be an avowed advocate of NATO and the transatlantic link. His stated determination to prioritize relations with NATO Allies and to act in a consultative, cooperative spirit to advance shared interests was welcome news for Allied capitals reeling from the Trump era. That was the upbeat spirit in which the NATO Summit in June 2021 took place and forceful language was adopted against China in the communique<sup>5</sup>. That, however, didn't eliminate divergences<sup>6</sup> of opinion among Allies, as vividly exemplified in French President Macron's statement the very same day, pointing out that "NATO concerns the North Atlantic, whereas China does not."

In hindsight, maybe the most dramatic precursor to this challenge was manifested much earlier, in the hurried decision of the European Union to conclude a trade deal with China<sup>7</sup>, right before the Biden administration took office. This revealed early on the difficulty of forging a unified transatlantic stance against China and prompted reactions<sup>8</sup> from the Biden team. While the deal was later frozen by the European Union and is hitherto stalled, there is no doubt that this experience left a bitter aftertaste in Washington D.C.

High expectations for transatlantic relations during the Biden era took another blow in the context of the Afghanistan debacle<sup>9</sup>. As much as the Biden administration has tried to downplay its corrosive effect and is focused on moving on and away from this momentous event, US credibility and confidence in its leadership have taken a toll.

This unexpected rocky trajectory in transatlantic relations have now taken a further and potentially even more unpredictable turn with the announcement of AUKUS, which has left France fuming<sup>10</sup>, raising the specter of a rift<sup>11</sup> within NATO. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen rushed to France's support by referring<sup>12</sup> to "a lot of open questions" about the AUKUS deal and "the unacceptable treatment of a member state," while French national EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton urged<sup>13</sup> Europe and the United States to "pause and reset their broken relationship."

Clearly, the celebratory feelings in Washington D.C., London and Canberra did not resonate with Paris. Albeit unapologetically, the United States quickly shifted into damage control mode. President Biden took the initiative to call President Macron and the two sides agreed on a joint statement<sup>14</sup> aimed at appeasing France with the American admission that enough pre-consultation before announcing AUKUS had not taken place and recognition of the French and European role in the Indo-Pacific.

This may have tempered emotions in Paris for now, but it is just the beginning as far as France is concerned. The clue to what next should be expected was laid in the same statement, where the United States agreed to recognizing "the importance of a stronger and more capable European defense."

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- 5 Brussels Summit Communiqué, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm)
- 6 David M. Herszenhorn and Rym Momtaz, *NATO leaders see rising threats from China, but not eye to eye with each other*, Politico, 14 June 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-leaders-see-rising-threats-from-china-but-not-eye-to-eye-with-each-other/>
- 7 Steven Erlanger, *Will the Sudden E.U.-China Deal Damage Relations With Biden?*, The New York Times, 6 January 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/world/europe/eu-china-deal-biden.html>
- 8 Jake Sullivan, Twitter, 22 December 2020. <https://twitter.com/jakejsullivan/status/1341180109118726144?s=20>
- 9 Alper Coşkun, *"Back to the future" for Afghans*, Diploması Koridoru, 21 August 2021. <https://www.diplomasikoridoru.com/alper-cokun>
- 10 Roger Cohen, *Macron Takes on U.S., a Big Gamble Even for a Bold Risk-Taker*, The New York Times, 20 September 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/20/world/europe/macron-us-submarine-australia.html>
- 11 Kim Willsher, *Aukus: France's ambassador recall is 'tip of the iceberg', say analysts*, The Guardian, 18 September 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/18/aukus-france-ambassador-recall-is-tip-of-the-iceberg-say-analysts>
- 12 CNN, *EU chief: Treatment of France 'not acceptable'*. <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2021/09/20/amanpour-ursula-von-der-leyen-aukus-eu-france.cnn>
- 13 Laurens Cerulus and Gavin Bade, *EU's Breton calls for 'pause and reset' in transatlantic relationship*, Politico, 21 September 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-chief-calls-to-re-set-broken-transatlantic-tie/>
- 14 Joint Statement on the Phone Call between President Biden and President Macron, 22 September 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/22/joint-statement-on-the-phone-call-between-president-biden-and-president-macron/>

## Considerations for Turkish foreign policy

At first glance, QUAD and AUKUS may feel like distant realities, but the new paradigm they represent in US foreign and security policy, as well as the implications of the rift with France are far from irrelevant for Turkey.

Ankara needs to consider how it may be affected by these and prepare itself accordingly. This would require an informed reading of the situation, complemented by the development of policy options. It is with this understanding that the following observations and recommendations gathered under five main headings have been formulated:

**1. US Pivot:** The US commitment to Turkey's immediate region is decreasing. While this may at first glance imply a concurrent diminishing interest in Turkey, if Ankara plays its hand wisely, it can conversely aggregate a premium on its own policies and actions.

By de-prioritizing its focus on this region, the US is challenging regional actors to shoulder the burden of ensuring security and stability. Turkey is a country with respectable potential in this regard, as exemplified by its leading role in hosting displaced people in need, and its counter balancing effect on the Russian Federation in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus.

However, the image<sup>15</sup> of Turkey as a disruptive actor has been more widespread than news of its constructive contributions to regional security. Turkey needs to effectively counter this harmful perception. It can do so by better calibrating its official rhetoric, policies and actions in the region.

A sustained, whole of government effort to this end, together with continued efforts to maintain the calm in the Eastern Mediterranean, mend fences with regional actors such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as with Israel would be prudent.

Turkey can leverage traction in these efforts in its engagement with the Biden administration, including potentially for example, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where they share the vision of a two-state solution.

The objective need to fine tune its foreign policy has ostensibly been recognized in Ankara, at least to some degree, given the measured and more conciliatory posture Turkey has assumed since the end of 2020. This rational course should be continued systematically, and not be forsaken, including in the run up to the presidential and parliamentary elections currently scheduled for 2023.

**2. NATO, transatlantic relations and European defense:** Despite numerous problems and disillusionments Turkey has with some of its Allies, its NATO membership is an invaluable asset. The same holds true for Turkey's contributions to the Alliance. Contemplating the alternative by imagining Turkey outside of NATO is a useful way to fact check this assertion. Indeed, Turkey<sup>16</sup> would face a significantly greater number of challenges as a non-NATO country, and NATO<sup>17</sup> would simply be weaker.

France can be expected to drag its fight over AUKUS into NATO. This may present an untimely challenge for the cohesion, unity and in fact the future of the Alliance, particularly just as work on NATO2030<sup>18</sup> and the new Strategic Concept are picking up speed.

The Afghanistan debacle had already rekindled the debate over the need for European strategic autonomy. As France prepares to assume the European Union Presidency in 2022, it will now be tempted more than ever to seize the moment to advance this ambition that it has traditionally spearheaded.

As a non-EU European Ally, Turkey will have an important stake in this potentially divisive debate. Safeguarding the US commitment to NATO, preserving the role of the Alliance as the primary forum for transatlantic discussions and ensuring that aspirations to strengthen defense capabilities within the EU do not come at the expense of Turkey or NATO will be among Ankara's primary objectives.

As previously pointed out, we already see signs that the Biden administration may be more inclined than ever to entertain aspirations for European strategic autonomy, particularly to remedy the fallout of AUKUS.

15 Sinan Ülgen, *Get Ready for a More Aggressive Turkey*, 2 July 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/02/turkeys-foreign-policy-is-about-to-take-a-turn-to-the-right/>

16 Ahmet Üzümcü, Tacan İldem, Fatih Ceylan, *NATO'suz Türkiye*, EDAM, February 2021. [https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/210217\\_NATOsuzTürkiye.pdf](https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/210217_NATOsuzTürkiye.pdf)

17 Dr. Can Kasapoğlu, *The Day After Turkey's Exodus From NATO: Why The West Should Be More Serious Than a Romantic Comedy Cliche About Turkey Leaving The Alliance*, Turkish Heritage Organization. <https://www.turkheritage.org/en/nato-resource-center/nato-publications/the-day-after-turkeys-exodus-from-nato-9593>

18 NATO 2030: MAKING A STRONG ALLIANCE EVEN STRONGER. <https://www.nato.int/nato2030/>

If this is proven true, Turkey will face some tough negotiations. A central consideration for Ankara will be its interests on Cyprus and its understandable reluctance to allow NATO to officially engage with a regime it does not recognize.

Turkey would be better served by not passively waiting for this debate to come to its feet, and to take the fight to the other side with some innovative thinking on how to preserve its policy of non-recognition of “Cyprus,” while allowing for increased practical cooperation between NATO and the EU. Otherwise, it risks being labeled as the problematic link in NATO-EU cooperation, as has been the case in the past.

The problem there is that Ankara has practically exhausted all conceivable creative solutions in this regard. Since re-hatching old ideas and arguments, as valid as they may be, will no longer suffice, policy makers in Ankara will have to take a hard look at how their core priorities can be preserved. This will have to be done in a strategic mindset, and be informed by new realities such as Brexit, technically putting the UK on the same boat as Turkey in the face of European defense, and the fact that US reluctance to support European strategic autonomy may be diminishing. Part and parcel to this debate will be creative solutions to unblock Turkey’s involvement in EU defense and security related undertakings.

This will be no easy task. Methodically speaking, an inter-agency assessment under the coordinating leadership of the Foreign Ministry to strategize a fresh approach to this coming fight would be in order. But even more importantly, the objective of this exercise and parameters of what may be done should first be determined at the highest political level, so as to preclude inevitable inter-agency bickering.

It is next to impossible to devise palatable new solutions on this matter. Yet, the search needs to continue, particularly because of the reasons cited above.

One idea could be for Turkey to consider allowing full-fledged interaction between NATO and the European Union

on all matters of shared concern, which would entail the participation of “Cyprus” as well, but strictly under the condition that “Cyprus” is referred to as “the Greek Cypriot Administration” in all NATO documents and joint meetings. While imperfect and certain to be disliked by all interested parties, this method would arguably safeguard Turkey’s legal viewpoint. Moreover, given other venues such as the European Union or the Council of Europe, where Turkey already finds itself in the same plenary setting with “Cyprus,” this would not constitute a new practice. On the contrary, introducing the use of “Greek Cypriot Administration” to a multilateral platform would constitute the novelty. Lastly, this would also mark the end of the oxymoron habit of occasionally holding “informal” NATO-EU meetings, which is the code deployed when “Cyprus” participates. This was a something that Turkey had exceptionally agreed to in the past as a sign of good will, but that has increasingly been pushed by others as almost the norm and at Turkey’s expense.

On another note, while considering its leverage points before the expected heated debate on European defense and NATO-EU relations, it may make sense for Ankara to examine another issue. That has to do with the feasibility of breathing life into the idea of jointly developing an air and missile defense system with the Italian and French consortium, EUROSAM<sup>19</sup>. This could potentially yield benefits in Turkey’s relations with France (and Italy) and could also be used as messaging, particularly to the United States, to allay fears that Turkey may purchase yet another system from the Russian Federation.

Initial studies on this idea had been completed but President Macron<sup>20</sup> had opted to shelve the idea in reaction to developments in Syria. It may now be the right time to reconsider the project, given that France may see virtue in going forward with it in the aftermath of ANKUS to generate a success story for its national defense industry. Since the other theoretical candidate is the Patriot system, eliminating the American option could also be a feel good moment Paris would not want to miss.

19 Merve Seren, *An Alternative Vendor for Turkey’s Missile Defense: Eurosam’s SAMP/T*, Politics Today, 2 August 2019. <https://politicstoday.org/an-alternative-vendor-for-turkeys-missile-defense-eurosams-samp/>

20 Selcan Hacaoglu, Firat Kozok, Ania Nussbaum, *Turkey Pushes Macron to Allow Purchase of Missile System*, Bloomberg, 25 September 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-25/turkey-pushes-macron-to-allow-purchase-of-missile-defense-system>

**3. Democracy and human rights:** Turkey needs to polish its democracy and human rights record without further delay. Hollow pronouncements and packages will no longer save the day. Ongoing debates within Turkish society bring to the fore many issues that require urgent consideration, ranging from the need to chart a political path for peacefully addressing the Kurdish issue, to addressing challenges to media freedoms and free speech.

Meanwhile, dark clouds are gathering for Turkey in Strasbourg, home to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), where Turkey's refusal to abide by rulings on the cases of activist Osman Kavala and former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party Selahattin Demirtaş risks triggering what is known as the "infringement procedure."

ECHR is the independent judiciary arm of the Council of Europe, and this dynamic within the ECHR could technically result in Turkey's expulsion from the Council of Europe. Experts<sup>21</sup> rightfully point out the importance of the Council of Europe for Turkey, also as one of the three main pillars defining its international standing, together with its membership in the United Nations and NATO.

Avoiding a potential rupture in this relationship is critical for Turkey's national interests in many respects. Turkey has a longstanding legacy of engagement with the Council of Europe, where it has experienced difficult times, but has always managed to navigate challenges in a manner that has at the end served the interests of its people and society at large. The same wisdom should prevail today so as to ensure that Turkey's international standing and reputation are not tarnished, and that its hand is not unnecessarily weakened at this time in which it is confronted with numerous significant challenges.

**4. Climate change:** Turkish President Erdoğan recently announced<sup>22</sup> that Turkey would proceed to ratify the Paris Agreement on climate change. Albeit belated, this is a welcome step that will empower Turkey before the upcoming

COP26 meeting in Glasgow and eliminate adverse effects on its image in this critical area.

More importantly and from a practical point of view, with shared support for the Paris Agreement on all sides of the political divide in Turkey, its speedy ratification can be a meaningful starting point for Turkey to increase its activism in this field and to begin vigorously integrating climate change considerations into its foreign and security policies. Turkey should build momentum in this field by prioritizing climate change as a leading theme in its international engagements and thereby import its proactive stance on the matter into its own brand name.

Turkey recently held its first high level dialogue<sup>23</sup> with the European Union on climate and is interested in acquainting and harmonizing itself with the "Fit for 55%" package and the European Union's carbon tax policies. Concrete progress there would in effect constitute an important validation of the EU strategy of presenting<sup>24</sup> these regulations as incentives, rather than restrictive measures, and would of course also help preclude any disruption in Turkey's critical trade and economic engagement with the European Union by accelerating its transition to green solutions.

Universal political support and the increased sense of awareness among Turkish youth lend themselves well to such efforts and can serve as a strong basis to work from at the international level. A visible and useful initial step could involve updating Turkey's national action plan<sup>25</sup>.

It is in Ankara's interest to present the diversified and widespread nature of Turkey's ability to bring added value when confronting contemporary challenges by venturing outside the antiquated, narrow scope of security. Climate is one such powerful area. Sustained and meaningful efforts from a country like Turkey that boasts its ranking as 12th on a global scale in the use of renewable energy will not go unnoticed in Brussels or Washington D.C. and can enrich Turkey's image. This would in turn reflect positively on other areas of priority for Ankara.

21 Erdoğan İçsan, *Hukuk ile siyaset ilişkisi ve AİHM kararlarının uygulanması*, T24, 21 September 2021. <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/erdogan-iscan/hukuk-ile-siyaset-iliskisi-ve-aihm-kararlarinin-uygulanmasi,32532>

22 AA Canlı, Twitter, 21 August 2021. <https://twitter.com/AACanlı/status/1440391908082085892?s=20>

23 Frans Timmermans, Twitter, 16 September 2021. <https://twitter.com/TimmermansEU/status/1438535932752367622?s=20>

24 Virtual fireside chat with Frans Timmermans: The European Union's new path forward on climate, YouTube, 23 September 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BpOD7PgsnM&iist=PLl8opBOZocxCDkIQR1bqftal2qjA7R2Vv&index=3>

25 REPUBLIC OF TURKEY CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN 2011 – 2023. [https://webdosya.csb.gov.tr/db/iklim/editorosya/iklim\\_degisikligi\\_eylem\\_plani\\_EN\\_2014.pdf](https://webdosya.csb.gov.tr/db/iklim/editorosya/iklim_degisikligi_eylem_plani_EN_2014.pdf)

**5. China:** Turkey is not an active player in Southeast Asia and its stance on China is comparatively closer<sup>26</sup> to that of its western European allies, than it is to the US.

Ankara does not seek confrontation with Beijing and seems less wary of the risks associated with bi-lateral cooperation and engagement, including in areas such as telecommunications and 5G technologies. The depth of China's pocket, irrespective of associated unwritten costs, continue to tempt Ankara to the extent that it purposefully seems to remain muted on the sufferings of the Uighurs.

That said and notwithstanding this calculated posture that Ankara currently assumes, Turkey can still bring added value to efforts geared at offsetting the risks associated with overreliance on China in various areas. And as far as Ankara's potential hesitations are concerned, this can be done in a manner that does not need to be presented as deliberately competitive or confrontational.

EU countries provide over 50% of the foreign direct investment in Turkey<sup>27</sup>. Coupled with the roughly 15% that comes from the US and the UK, as well as its customs union and intense trade relations with the European Union, Turkey's organic link to western economies and the inherent potential for increased synergy becomes clear. The complex integrated functioning of Turkey's economic cooperation with the European Union also benefits from the complementary

## Conclusion

In general terms, this study is an attempt to display by example, that even seemingly distant developments matter and that this is particularly true for a country like Turkey, that has complex interests and ambitions, including beyond its immediate neighborhood.

It took the US pivot to Asia and developments around

nature of Turkish industry in relation to that of Europe. Conversely, the Turkish and Chinese economies are less complementary, and more competitive, while the 30 billion US Dollar trade volume is hugely in favor of China.

These factors make Turkey a natural candidate to help build western resilience through diversified supply chains and the establishment of robust and reliable value chains. A strong and credible show of interest on the part of Turkey in this area could resonate both in Brussels and in Washington D.C.

Albeit at a much smaller scale than China, Turkey's industrial production capacity, its growing technological<sup>28</sup> innovation base and its demand driven economic growth create an appealing mix. Should Turkey be able to complement this picture with a stronger sense of confidence in the rule of law in the country and a positive trajectory in the overall state of democracy and human rights, the beginning of a positive dynamic could be within reach.

Such a trajectory would benefit Turkey on a number of fronts. Besides the economic benefits of increased trade and investments in Turkey, it would also translate into political capital for Ankara in its dealings both with Europe and the US, that again would facilitate advancing Turkey's interests in other areas.

AUKUS as its starting point and went on to distill potential consequences for Turkey, with calls for action in various areas. Policy suggestions have all been premised on the understanding that while Turkey has complex interests and should rightfully pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy mostly defined by its national interests, it continues to be an integral part of what is commonly referred to as the western world.

26 Altay Atlı, *Making Sense of Turkey's Rapprochement with China*, GMFUS, 2018. <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/On%2520Turkey%2520-%2520Making%2520Sense%2520of%2520Turkey%2527s%2520Rapprochement%2520With%2520China.pdf>

27 Türkiye'de Uluslararası Doğrudan Yatırım, <https://www.invest.gov.tr/tr/whyturkey/sayfalar/fdi-in-turkey.aspx>

28 Daily Sabah, *Turkey gets its first 'decacorn' as Trendyol's valuation hits \$16.5B*, 9 August 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/tech/turkey-gets-its-first-decacorn-as-trendyols-valuation-hits-165b>



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