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June 2025

The Future of NATO

*Strategic Ambiguity: Turkey's Complex
Role in NATO's Evolution*



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Introduction

Since joining NATO in 1952, Turkey has assumed a key role in the Alliance's south-eastern flank. Its security posture during the Cold War was characterized by steadfast alignment with NATO's defence and deterrence strategy against Soviet expansionism. Turkey firmly established itself as a reliable ally through joint military exercises and intelligence-sharing, as well as by hosting American nuclear warheads and military bases. Turkey's foreign and security policy remained mostly defensive and inward-looking, with minimal military engagement beyond its borders – with the exception of the 1974 invasion of Cyprus, which temporarily strained intra-Alliance cohesion. The post-Cold War era, however, marked a turning point. Turkey's participation in NATO-led peace-building missions in the Balkans and Kosovo signalled the beginning of a more outward-oriented posture. Over the past two decades, Turkey has redefined its strategic orientation, adopting a foreign policy that is more autonomous, interest-driven, and aligned with its regional ambitions. This represents a clear shift from its historical alignment with the West, marking a new phase in its foreign and security policy.

Since the 2010s, Turkey's aspirations for an autonomous foreign policy and its efforts to increase its regional influence have led to tensions with NATO allies. The following three structural changes have played a part in making Ankara's relationship with NATO more complex: 1) conflicts and wars that have destabilised Turkey's immediate neighbourhood, 2) the country's autocratisation, which challenges NATO's ideational foundations such as democracy, civil liberties, and the rule of law, and 3) the rapid advancement of Turkey's defence industry. These developments have reinforced the perception among some NATO members that Turkey is drifting away from the Alliance's normative and strategic consensus. In this context, Turkey's power projection in its neighbourhood, its strategic relationship with Russia, and its pivot to China have been perceived as undermining the security interests of NATO allies, leading many members to label Turkey as an unreliable partner.

Meanwhile, Ankara has begun to see NATO through a more pragmatic lens – as one of several strategic pillars, rather than the primary anchor of its security policy. This leads to tensions in relations in several regards. First, Ankara perceives a significant divergence between its own threat perceptions and those of other NATO members. Second, Turkey asserts that its security concerns are not adequately addressed by its allies. Despite these frustrations, NATO remains Turkey's core security umbrella. Turkey has the second largest armed forces in the alliance after the United

States and is among the top ten contributors to the NATO budget.¹ In 2024, it invested 2.09 per cent of its GDP in defence² and hosts several NATO headquarters and training centres in various Turkish cities. Turkey participates in NATO's ongoing operations as required and plays an active role in the fight against terrorism, including in NATO's mission in Iraq, where it is training Iraqi forces.³

Overall, Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy and its increasingly unilateral actions have led to a degree of estrangement within NATO. Turkish think tanks broadly acknowledge this trend, yet offer competing narratives about its causes, implications, and the appropriate strategic response. On the one hand, government-critical, "transatlanticist" think tanks and institutes,⁴ such as the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) and the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), regard the country's recent isolation as partly self-inflicted. They emphasise democratic backsliding, a more confrontational diplomatic style, and Ankara's misalignment with transatlantic norms as root causes. While recognising Turkey's geostrategic significance in the context of the dramatically changing international order, they advocate for policy recalibration and reinvestment in Euro-Atlantic frameworks to rebuild trust and cohesion.

In contrast, pro-government, "multipolarist" think tanks, such as the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) and the Center for Strategic Research (SAM), interpret Turkey's strategic detachment from NATO as both inevitable and necessary. According to this camp, the post-Cold War international order no longer serves Turkey's evolving security needs, especially in the face of insufficient support from NATO on issues such as counterterrorism and border security. From this vantage point, Turkey's regional assertiveness and engagement with non-Western actors – such as BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – are portrayed not as deviations but as adaptations to a multipolar reality. Despite their differences, both camps endorse Turkey's integration into transatlantic and European security frameworks, but their visions for NATO's future diverge. While transatlanticists favour a normative reintegration into Western security frameworks, multipolarists advocate a transactional, interest-based engagement grounded in strategic autonomy and flexible partnerships.

Turkey's Threat Perceptions

Turkey's threat perceptions have long diverged from those of its NATO allies, shaped by its geographical exposure to a volatile neighbourhood and the perceived entanglement

1 www.setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2022/02/U001En.pdf (accessed 2.2.2025)

2 www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf (accessed 2.2.2025)

3 www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_230766.htm (accessed 3.2.2025)

4 This analysis mainly focusses on two camps of think tanks in Turkey: *transatlanticists* and *multipolarists*. While the former group is mainly government-critical, the latter group is pro-government. In contrast to the first study by Göğüş, the present study does not classify think tanks in terms of nationalists versus liberals, but rather as transatlanticists versus multipolarists (Göğüş 2021: 72–79). In the paper, the focus will be on SETA and EDAM, two institutions that specialise in security and foreign policy issues and publish intensively on NATO and Turkey relations.

of internal and external security threats. Conflicts and civil wars in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, have created significant instability and a power vacuum along Turkey's immediate borders. However, the primary security concern for the Turkish state has been the conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish military.

As the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and many experts assert, the Kurdish conflict has undergone a process of regionalisation in the last decade, with the Turkish borders becoming a site of activity for hostile militant organisations, such as the PKK in Iraq, the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Turkey considers the YPG as a terrorist organisation due to its links with the PKK, which the US and the EU also designate as a terrorist organisation. Turkey's NATO allies have provided military training and weaponry to the YPG, a key partner in the fight against ISIS in Syria. However, the Turkish government and society have perceived this as detrimental to their country's national security. Ankara has thus accused the US and European allies of not adequately understanding and addressing its security concerns within the Alliance. This sentiment was echoed in a recent survey of the Turkish public in which 55 per cent of the respondents viewed the US as a threat to peace and security in Europe, with 56 per cent also perceiving Russia as a threat, followed by China (44 per cent).⁵

The differences in threat perceptions between Turkey and its NATO allies have exacerbated Turkey's sense of neglect by its Western partners, thereby accelerating the search for a "non-Western" identity and independent foreign policy (Göğüş 2021: 72f.). Turkey's leadership is of the opinion that the liberal world order established in the aftermath of the Cold War has come to an end. The prevailing sentiment in Ankara is one of disquiet with the existing international order, in which the West continues to wield a dominant influence, with marked political and economic inequalities in the global system. Ankara, like other middle powers in the Global South, is therefore demanding a greater say in international affairs.

Turkey's immediate neighbourhood remains a critical locus of security challenges that shape its foreign and defence posture. These include an increase in refugee flows, the proliferation of armed non-state actors, regional economic volatility, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Against this backdrop, Ankara has adopted an increasingly assertive military strategy, intervening unilaterally in northern Syria and Iraq to contain perceived threats from the PKK and affiliated groups, and to prevent new refugee influxes.⁶ While NATO allies have disapproved of these interventions, Turkish officials have defended them as essential to safeguarding national sovereignty and domestic stability.

Turkey's regional projection has expanded beyond its southern borders, extending to military and security engagement in Libya, Somalia, and Qatar. This assertive foreign policy has coincided with tensions with NATO partners, particularly Greece and France, arising from airspace and maritime disputes. Disputes over maritime jurisdiction between Greece and Turkey have escalated, leading to a confrontation in the eastern Mediterranean, with Cyprus and France siding with Greece. Turkey has perceived France's deepening defence partnership with Greece, which includes arms sales and a bilateral mutual defence clause, as a deterrent to Turkey. These confrontations reflect the broader dilemma on NATO's southern flank, where Turkey's regional ambitions and its unilateral security actions increasingly collide with the interests of other member states, further contributing to perceptions of Ankara as an unpredictable partner.

The failed coup attempt in July 2016 marked a decisive rupture in Turkey's domestic politics and its relations with Western allies. The Turkish government held Fethullah Gülen, an exiled cleric residing in the US until his death in October 2024, responsible for orchestrating the attempted coup and designated his network – which they refer to as "FETÖ" – as a terrorist organisation. While NATO allies swiftly condemned the attempted coup, Ankara perceived the Western response as insufficiently supportive and, in some cases, as tacitly sympathetic to the perpetrators. This perception deepened the Turkish leadership's suspicions toward its Western partners.

Today, Turkey faces increasing global uncertainties, including the escalating geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the conflicts in Syria, Gaza, and various regions of Africa. Turkish policymakers emphasise vigorously that a multipolar global order is emerging and that Turkey is trying to adapt to this new geopolitical environment by enhancing its "strategic autonomy", a term denoting the country's considerable capacity to act independently and maintain a balance between the Western alliance, Russia, and China. The country's growing military strength, as evidenced by the size of its armed forces and a thriving arms industry, enables Turkey to flex its muscles as a regional power and pursue its geopolitical and ideological objectives with greater assertiveness.

Turkey's ambition to exert influence over global politics is evident in its growing military and economic presence from the Black Sea to the eastern Mediterranean, extending to the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and even Africa. This positions Turkey as a significant actor in the EU's immediate neighbourhood and within its geopolitical radar. In pursuing its national interests, Turkey exhibits a nuanced approach to foreign relations, engaging with diverse partners and maintaining a multifaceted alliance structure while

⁵ The public opinion poll, FES Security Radar 2025, was conducted in September 2024, i.e., prior to Trump's second term.

⁶ For Turkey's military activism, see the visualisation project of CATS: www.cats-network.eu/visualisations/visualising-turkeys-foreign-policy-activism.

cultivating relationships with Western nations. Through strategic utilisation of flexible coalitions and transactional partnerships, Ankara navigates adroitly through the newly emerging global order. Turkey's engagement in the Astana process and 3+3 format in the South Caucasus serve as exemplary cases in point that have involved Turkey, in collaboration with other external actors, aiming to "manage" the conflicts and accommodate the competing interests of the parties involved.

Turkish think tanks hold divergent perspectives on Turkish positioning in the international order, yet they largely concur with the Turkish government's threat assessments. Researchers from pro-government, multipolarist SETA regard Russia and China as less significant threats to Turkey, while underscoring the direct threats posed by the PKK, the YPG, and FETÖ. Similarly, experts from government-critical, transatlanticist EDAM assert that "the terrorist organisations such as the PKK, the YPG pose serious threats to Turkey" (Ceylan/Ildem 2021; Kasapoğlu 2019; Kasapoğlu/Ülgen 2018). Both of these groups' analyses of global security challenges also refer to the climate crisis, terrorism, cyber threats, and irregular migration (SETA 2025; Gisclon 2024) in a manner consistent with the official line.

The prevailing consensus among pundits on Turkey's strategic orientation is that it is ambivalent about aligning with either the Western or non-Western bloc. Multipolarist think tanks posit that NATO allies left Turkey to fend for itself when it was confronted with threats from Russia, Iran, and terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq along its borders (Ataman 2022; Duran 2022b; Yalçın 2017). Turkey was thus compelled to assume responsibility for its own security and act autonomously. In contrast, transatlanticist think tanks, such as EDAM and IPC, have highlighted that Turkey's autocratic turn and its "misguided" strategic orientation, specifically its strategic pivot towards the non-Western world, resulted in diplomatic isolation and even triggered a governance crisis (Aydin-Düzgit/Kutlay/Keyman 2025; Ülgen 2024). However, this camp argues that the Turkish government has recently adopted a more prudent approach to autonomy in its foreign policy.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment for Europe's security order, with consequential ramifications for Turkey-NATO relations. Turkey pursues a balancing act between Russia and NATO, which until recently gave rise to scepticism among European NATO members, who questioned Turkey's reliability as a partner. Conversely, Turkish experts contend that Turkey's commitment to NATO remains unwavering, notwithstanding the discrepancy in threat perceptions. This perpetual bond of security interdependence, which endures even when there are political divergences and differing priorities, has been confirmed by the latest geopolitical developments, mainly the

war in Ukraine, Trump's return to the US presidency, the unknown fate of Gaza, and the situation in Syria after the downfall of the Assad regime.

Turkey and Russia Relations: Flexible Alignment and Managed Tensions

Turkey's evolving relationship with Russia has long been a point of contention within NATO. Even prior to the war in Ukraine, Ankara's strategic overtures toward Moscow – most notably its 2019 acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defence system – triggered a significant backlash. This decision resulted in US sanctions and Turkey's suspension from the F-35 fighter jet programme, reinforcing NATO's perception of Ankara as an unpredictable partner.

Despite fundamental strategic divergences in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus, Turkey and Russia have maintained a functional, if asymmetrical, partnership. Turkish analysts from both transatlanticist and multipolarist camps agree that the bilateral relationship is largely driven by leadership-level pragmatism, especially the rapport between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Vladimir Putin. Their mutual dissatisfaction with the West has, at times, served as a catalyst for deeper coordination. As Ülgen (2024) asserts, "Turkey's relationship with the West has historically been a decisive factor in shaping its ties with Russia. When its Western partnerships faltered, Ankara often pivoted toward Moscow to bolster political ties and rejuvenate economic relations."

The nature of the relationship between Russia and Turkey has undergone a slight shift since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, Western sanctions have increased Russia's reliance on Turkey, as it has not joined its Western allies in imposing sanctions against Russia. However, they have not resulted in a substantial change in their asymmetrical relations or engendered a more equitable partnership. Rather than viewing Russia as a direct threat as NATO does, many Turkish pundits perceive Russia as a competitor and a risk factor for Turkey and advocate striking a balance between Russia and the West.

The true impact of Turkey's balancing act is best observed in the deepening of economic cooperation with Russia. While think tank experts from both multipolarist and transatlanticist camps emphasise the importance of trade and energy ties with Moscow, they also strike a cautionary note about Turkey's overdependency on Russia for its energy needs.⁷ Güler (2025: 57) from multipolarist SETA claims that strategic economic cooperation with Russia will continue, but the preferred long-term objective is to curtail reliance on Russian natural resources. In a similar vein, Sinan Ülgen (2024) from transatlanticist EDAM posits that the nuclear energy

⁷ Russia supplies 49 percent of Turkey's energy needs, largely through sales of gas. It is also the largest source of Turkey's imports, accounting for \$45.6 billion in 2023. See: Poyrazlar (2024).

partnership has the potential to further cement Russia's role as a critical player in Turkey's energy sector.⁸

In a recent report on the military balance between NATO and Russia, Kasapoğlu (2024) from EDAM contends that Russia counts on a prolonged war to “wear down Ukraine and the West”. He states that sustaining the war “depends on a stable wartime economy footing, a resilient defense industry, and three principal warfighting capabilities: artillery, heavy armor, and manpower”. Kasapoğlu assesses that NATO enjoys overall superiority over Russia but that the “Russian military has local superiority over NATO's forward presence in Eastern Europe”. SETA experts do not assess Russia's military strength, but they emphasise the central role of Turkey in NATO's strategy of deterring and defending Alliance territory (SETA 2025).

Although there is not much discussion among Turkish experts on the subject of hybrid threats emanating from Russia, Yesiltas (2022) from SETA emphasises, without specifying further details, Turkey's status as a leading nation among NATO's member states in terms of its preparedness to confront and address the challenges posed by hybrid threats. However, transatlanticists claim that Turkey has been subjected to hybrid attacks not only from Russia, but also from terrorist organisations. Consequently, they contend that Turkey needs to develop an awareness and understanding of hybrid threats and coordinate with its NATO allies.

Broadly speaking, Turkish analysts of all persuasions agree that Ankara seeks to avoid direct confrontation with Russia. Many advocate a NATO strategy that balances deterrence with diplomatic engagement – a stance that mirrors Turkey's own preference for flexible alignment and managed tension rather than overt rivalry.

Between Opportunity and Competition: Turkey's Evolving Ties with China

Turkey's relationship with China is another prime example of the country's balancing act between different global powers. While security cooperation remains limited, Ankara views Beijing as an indispensable economic partner and has sought to deepen ties through trade, infrastructure, and investment partnerships. The strategic alignment is predominantly economic and diplomatic, centred on technology transfer, connectivity projects, and institutional engagement in multilateral platforms.

One such avenue has been Turkey's engagement with the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Since first expressing interest in 2013, Ankara has participated as a dialogue partner and signalled its willingness to upgrade its status, including interest in full membership.⁹ Although

no formal accession process has been launched, Turkish officials continue to portray the SCO as a complementary – rather than an alternative – platform to Euro-Atlantic structures, in keeping with Ankara's broader multi-alignment strategy.

Among Turkish think tank experts, there is a consensus that the intensifying US–China rivalry presents both risks and opportunities. Experts emphasise China's role as a technological giant and economic powerhouse and argue for Turkey to strengthen its relations with China. However, opinions amongst multipolarist and transatlanticist think tanks on Turkey's flexibility in its foreign policy diverge. Multipolarist analysts, such as those at SETA, praise Turkey's flexibility in engaging with China and view its multi-alignment as a strategic necessity. Transatlanticist voices caution that deeper ties with Beijing could complicate Ankara's standing within NATO and the EU (Ülgen and Umarov 2025). Yet both camps agree that China's growing global role cannot be ignored and that Turkey should seek to shape – rather than resist – the emerging order.

Policy experts have increasingly acknowledged latent competition between Turkey and China in third regions, particularly in Central Asia and in Africa. In the context of escalating tensions between the US and China, and the concomitant fragmentation of the global order, SETA (2025) experts have argued that this dynamic will engender structural challenges and impose limitations on middle powers such as Turkey. In this regard, transatlanticist think tanks address an unspoken rivalry between China and Turkey in regions such as Central Asia and Africa (Ülgen and Umarov 2024). Both China and Turkey see Africa as a crucial market for their goods and services, as well as a source of critical natural resources. In the last decade, both countries have emerged as significant actors on the African continent and their own economic and strategic interests have occasionally collided. Concurrently, Turkey is also strengthening its influence in the economic, political, security, and cultural spheres in Central Asia. The establishment of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has served to strengthen Turkey's regional influence, which is evident in the organisation's growing prominence as a platform for Turkey's expanding activities in the region. While Turkey's influence cannot be directly compared with that of China, Ankara is perceived to hold strategic advantages for the future thanks to its historical ties to the region (Ülgen and Umarov 2024).

The Southern Dimension of NATO Security: Turkish Perspectives and Alliance Cohesion

The decisions taken at the NATO Summit in Washington in July 2024 explicitly addressed the repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for NATO's southern neighbour-

⁸ Russian outlet Rosatom is building a nuclear power plant in southern Turkey, Akkuyu.

⁹ www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-07-05/nato-ally-turkey-seeks-membership-in-china-led-sco-says-erdogan.

hood, in particular on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Africa, including on migration, food and energy security.¹⁰

Multipolarist SETA contends that Turkey plays a prominent role in NATO's southern neighbourhood and acts in accordance with the Alliance's objectives. Aslan (2025: 48) further argues that Turkey's strategic location has served NATO's surveillance and rapid response capabilities in the shadow of the Russia-Ukraine war and developments in the MENA. Ildem (2024:1), from the transatlanticist EDAM, emphasises the importance of maintaining NATO's 360-degree approach to deter and defend against all threats and challenges coming from any direction, including the fight against terrorism. He argues that support by some allies for terrorist organisations such as the YPG, which he claims is linked to the PKK, jeopardises the unity and cohesion of the Alliance (ibid: 3). Not surprisingly, the same critique also comes from multipolarist think tanks.

Think tanks from both multipolarist and transatlanticist camps endorse NATO's 360-degree threat perception. While this convergence may reflect different strategic premises, it underscores a shared interest in expanding NATO's focus beyond the Russian threat. For EDAM and IPC, the emphasis is on institutional coherence and shared burden, whereas SETA and SAM advocate for greater NATO recognition of threats originating in the south, particularly terrorism and state fragility.

The War in Ukraine and Turkey's Strategic Position in European Security

In the Turkish expert discourse, there is a broad consensus that Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point in the European security order. The war reinforced Turkey's long-standing NATO threat assessments, while also triggering a recalibration of Turkish foreign policy. This change was not a full strategic pivot towards the West, rather a more nuanced balancing act between deterrence, diplomacy, and regional influence. In concrete terms, Ankara took several steps to re-emphasise its role within NATO. It immediately denounced Russia's invasion – as it did when Crimea was annexed – closed the Turkish Straits to military vessels under the Montreux Convention, and expanded military support to Ukraine by delivering Bayraktar drones and defensive systems. At the same time, Turkey refused to participate in Western sanctions, maintained trade and energy ties with Moscow,¹¹ and positioned itself as a potential mediator between the warring parties. These actions reflect Ankara's preference for pragmatic dual engagement over exclusive alignment.

However, Turkey's ambivalence became particularly visible during the debate over NATO enlargement. While welcoming Finland's accession, Ankara initially blocked Sweden's membership, citing Stockholm's alleged leniency toward PKK-affiliated groups and "FETÖ" members. President Erdoğan also linked Turkey's approval of Swedish membership to broader strategic concessions, most notably the agreement by the US to transfer F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. For pro-government analysts, this was framed as a legitimate assertion of national security interests and transactional diplomacy within the Alliance (Duran 2022). In contrast, transatlanticist experts criticised the linkage as damaging to Alliance solidarity and reputationally costly for Turkey (Ülgen 2024, Kasapoglu 2024).

In the expert community, it is widely acknowledged that Ukraine has emerged as the most obvious theatre of conflict between the West and Russia. While both transatlanticist and multilateralist camps acknowledge Russia's invasion of Ukraine as illegal, they use different rhetoric. The transatlanticist experts claim that Moscow is acting in contravention of its commitments to respect the territorial integrity of a sovereign country (Ildem 2025; Ülgen in Demir 2022), whereas pundits within the multipolarist think tanks refer to the Russian view of the war as a "special military operation".

Ankara has also strengthened its strategic and defence partnership with Ukraine, which has become a critical partner in the development of Turkey's growing domestic military industry. At the same time, Ankara has positioned itself as a key mediator, maintaining open channels with both Kyiv and Moscow. Ankara's mediation ability was best evidenced by Turkey's role in the 2022 grain deal and in prisoner exchanges. The think-tank community has expressed staunch support for Ankara's diplomatic efforts. One of Turkey's most significant moves has been its vocal support for Ukraine's NATO membership.¹² This stance is not merely symbolic, but is a strategic bet on Ukraine's long-term survival as a counterbalance to Russian power, especially in the Black Sea. Pundits from both camps assert that Turkey has been fulfilling its collective defence obligations since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and is prepared to adapt to further requirements determined by NATO.

Both transatlanticist and multipolarist analysts in Turkey agree that Ankara's posture in the war in Ukraine is driven by a combination of geopolitical pragmatism and hedging. While they differ in their assessment of Turkey's long-term strategic orientation, both camps acknowledge that Russia's war against Ukraine has restored some convergence between Turkish and NATO interests – particularly regarding deterrence against Russia.

10 www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm (accessed 17.2.2025).

11 Turkey's merchandise exports have almost doubled in the 2021-2023 period, see: www.statista.com/statistics/1308355/turkey-share-of-exports-to-russia/.

12 www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-urges-realism-on-ukraine-s-nato-bid-cites-security-concerns/3491590.

The Trump administration's plan to resolve the Ukraine through a bilateral approach with Russia has significantly reshaped the debate on European security. Like its European allies, Turkey recognises the need to realign its security interests in response to shifting transatlantic relations. While Ankara officially avoids criticizing the US administration – hoping to preserve its defence partnership – it remains concerned about the potential repercussions. In a recent speech, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan emphasized that “reducing dependency on the U.S. will make Europeans – and all of us – more resilient to economic and geopolitical crises”.¹³ When it comes to security guarantees for Ukraine, Ankara has adopted a wait-and-see approach, closely monitoring US-Russia-Ukraine talks before making any commitments.

The Turkish government fears that the outcome of the war in Ukraine may be determined solely by the US and Russia, sidelining regional actors like Turkey. Additionally, Ankara is alarmed by the prospect of an expanded Russian presence in the Black Sea and the potential fragmentation of NATO.

Navigating NATO's Future: Turkey's Role in a Shifting Global Security Landscape

The Turkish debate on the future of NATO and Turkey's role within it is determined by Ankara's particular threat perceptions and its understanding of strategic autonomy. Turkish think tanks agree that Turkey will never relinquish NATO's unique security umbrella, but will continue its balancing act between the West and non-West. SETA expert Aslan (2025: 49), for instance, claims that “Turkey will remain committed to NATO's vision, goals, and objectives despite accusations of ‘pivoting to other directions’ by malicious individuals and organisations.”

Multipolarist institutions, such as SETA, argue that Turkey's autonomous foreign policy is a necessary adaptation to global multipolarity and Western inconsistencies. They frame Turkey as a sovereign actor that simultaneously contributes to NATO and deepens relations with Russia, China, and other non-Western powers. This camp supports a transactional approach to NATO – focused on security returns, flexible partnerships, and operational burden sharing. In contrast, transatlanticist analysts highlight that Turkey's drift away from NATO norms – particularly its democratic backsliding and hedging behaviour – has weakened its credibility and diplomatic standing (Özdemir 2022; Üzümcü/İldem/Ceylan 2021). They call for an institutional realignment with Euro-Atlantic frameworks and stronger emphasis on shared values and rules-based cooperation.

The divergence among Turkish experts extends to assessments of the transatlantic relationship under US leader-

ship. The return of the Trump administration is viewed by Turkish analysts with cautious pragmatism. Multipolarists (SETA 2025) anticipate a more transactional environment, in which Turkey will continue balancing its NATO obligations with its autonomous policy agenda. Transatlanticists however advocate for closer cooperation between the EU, NATO, and Turkey in regional and multilateral frameworks to counterbalance Washington's growing unpredictability (Ülgen 2024).

The war in Ukraine has introduced some important convergences between Turkey and the West, in particular in terms of strengthening Turkey's role as a security provider against Russia (Coşkun et al. 2024). In light of the challenges to the European security order posed by the Trump administration, both the Turkish leadership and experts claim that there is an increasing need for a comprehensive dialogue between the EU and Turkey concerning European security and broader foreign and security policy cooperation.

Summary

A comparative analysis of the Turkish expert discourse on NATO's future reveals a persistent but nuanced tension between strategic autonomy and institutional alignment. While Turkey remains committed to NATO, its evolving regional ambitions, domestic political shifts, and multi-alignment strategy have reshaped its engagement with the Alliance. The Ukraine war has temporarily renewed Turkey's security convergence with the West, but competing narratives – particularly between transatlanticist and multipolarist perspectives – continue to influence Ankara's approach.

The **Russian threat** to NATO has become more prominent in Turkish discourse, with policymakers aiming to prevent escalation while maintaining diplomatic channels with Moscow. This approach positions Ankara as both a deterrent and a potential mediator in a strategy of “managed confrontation”. Although security cooperation with **China** remains limited, Turkey views Beijing as a crucial economic partner and seeks to strengthen trade, infrastructure, and investment ties. Meanwhile, within Turkish debates, the **Southern neighbourhood** in the NATO is widely considered the primary security concern for both Turkey and Europe, largely due to the persistent threat of terrorism.

Despite experiencing significant crises and security challenges over the past two decades, Turkey has maintained its NATO commitments. This resilience in relations stems from several factors, including Turkey's strategic location, substantial military and economic support from NATO allies, and the broader political and economic benefits of

¹³ www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-urges-realism-on-ukraine-s-nato-bid-cites-security-concerns/3491590 (accessed 29.3.2025).

aligning with Western institutions (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Aksu, 2024). Moving forward, Turkey is expected to continue pursuing an independent foreign policy driven by a multi-alignment strategy while preserving its NATO identity.

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The Future of NATO – Country Report Turkey

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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