

HCSS Security

Turkey's Recalcitrance and NATO's Nuisance

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Peering into the Crystal Ball

Turkey, a longtime NATO member once at the doorstep of joining the European Union, is treading its own path concerning defense and political decision-making in the international arena. Does this align with or undermine NATO's priorities and compliment or contradict Turkey's role as a NATO member? This snapshot explores three scenarios concerning Turkey's future and its position towards NATO.

Losing U.S. Leadership

In 2012, the United States' (U.S.) pivot to the East became official policy, a decision that left Europe to fend for its own safety and security.¹ With French president Macron calling NATO brain dead in November 2019 and American President Trump loudly advocating for more European financial commitment to defense, the relations between Europe and the U.S. became increasingly tense.² Open dislike between some European leaders and President Trump and the U.S. decision to reduce the amount of U.S. troops in Germany, as punishment for Germany's lacking defense expenditures, further deepened the wedge between Europe and the U.S.. It was a reminder that reliance on U.S. military support is no longer obvious. When President Trump voiced his doubts about U.S. commitment to the NATO alliance, especially regarding its role in providing Europe's defense, in concert with his degradation of international institutions, U.S. credibility declined. This had negative impacts on the U.S. leadership role within NATO (and to some extent globally as well).³ The recently inaugurated Biden administration will not bring European Defense back on the U.S. agenda.⁴ This works in Turkey's favor, giving it the leeway it desires to advance as a self-proclaimed regional leader and to choose its own course in the Eastern Mediterranean arena.⁵ While Turkey is a pivotal part of NATO's strength and deterrent potential, its behavior increasingly contradicts what NATO stands for, causing tension with NATO and EU partners.

¹ Kenneth Lieberthal, 'The American Pivot to Asia', *Foreign Policy*, 21 december 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/21/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

² Global Business Outlook, 'Trump, NATO and European Defence Spending', *Global Business Outlook*, 17 november 2016, <https://www.globalbusinessoutlook.com/trump-nato-and-european-defence-spending/>.

³ Katie Rogers en Apoorva Mandavilli, 'Trump Administration Signals Formal Withdrawal From W.H.O.', *The New York Times*, 22 oktober 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-who.html>; BBC News, 'US to Withdraw 12,000 Troops from Germany in "strategic" Move', *BBC News*, 29 juli 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53589245>; Hady Amr, 'In One Move, Trump Eliminated US Funding for UNRWA and the US Role as Mideast Peacemaker', *Brookings*, 7 september 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/07/in-one-move-trump-eliminated-us-funding-for-unrwa-and-the-us-role-as-mideast-peacemaker/>; Stewart Patrick, 'Donald Trump's Disjointed and Misleading UN Address', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 september 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/donald-trumps-disjointed-and-misleading-un-address>.

⁴ Efi Koutsokosta, 'Europe "not off the Hook" with Biden on Defence Spend, Says Rasmussen', *euronews*, 19 januari 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/01/19/europe-not-off-the-hook-with-biden-on-defence-spending-says-former-nato-chief-rasmussen>.

⁵ Walker Joshua, 'Turkey's Regional Leadership in the Middle East: Principle or Realpolitik?', *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 21 maart 2011, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/turkeys-regional-leadership-middle-east-principle-or-realpolitik>.

Depending on Turkey

Turkey has for a long period of time played a crucial role in NATO's deterrence strategy as the first European nation to facilitate U.S. nuclear arms on its soil in 1961.⁶ Today, Turkey continues to hold considerable strategic value for the NATO alliance for a myriad of reasons.⁷ The NATO alliance depends on access to key military bases in Turkey to bolster its deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. It also relies on critical intelligence sharing with Turkey, to support its counter terrorism and counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East and beyond. In addition, Turkey has the second largest army in the alliance, and the biggest in the eastern hemisphere of NATO, without which NATO's military power would be greatly reduced with enormous repercussions on its deterrence credibility. Turkey also hosts the largest number of refugees fleeing conflict in Syria and Iraq, lifting a heavy burden of NATO's European partners' shoulders. But Turkey also profits from being a NATO-member, albeit arguably to a lesser extent. Turkey benefits from Western military know-how and NATO's interoperability standards that make the alliance's military compatible and able to carry out complex operations. This Western security umbrella protects Turkish security and enables it to hedge its bets in volatile regions and to advance its geopolitical maneuverability. In addition, Turkish firms make billions of dollars in military contracts that would be lost should Turkey leave the NATO orbit.⁸ While both NATO and Turkey benefit from the alliance these interdependencies have been unable to deter competition between Turkey and NATO, and as a result, relations have become sour and increasingly complex.

⁶ Barton J. Bernstein, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?', *Political Science Quarterly* 95, nr. 1 (1980): 97-125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149587>.

⁷ Camilla Bernardi, 'A Farewell to the West? Turkey's possible pivot in the aftermath of the July 2016 Coup Attempt' (The Hague, Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2017), 5, <https://hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/A%20Farewell%20to%20the%20West%20%28Turkey%20case%20study%29.pdf>; Tim Sweijss e.a., 'Why are Pivot States so Pivotal? The role of pivotal states in regional and global security' (The Hague, Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), 2014), 11, https://hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/Why_are_Pivot_States_so_Pivotal__The_Role_of_Pivot_States_in_Regional_and_Global_Security_C.pdf.

⁸ Iyad Dakka, 'Turkey and NATO May Be at Loggerheads, but They Still Need Each Other', *World Politics Review*, 18 december 2019, <https://111f3ba6dc414209b980802ea03ea4fd.pages.ubembed.com/63a409ff-9a67-4b28-855e-949fc746cac8/d.html?closedAt=0>.

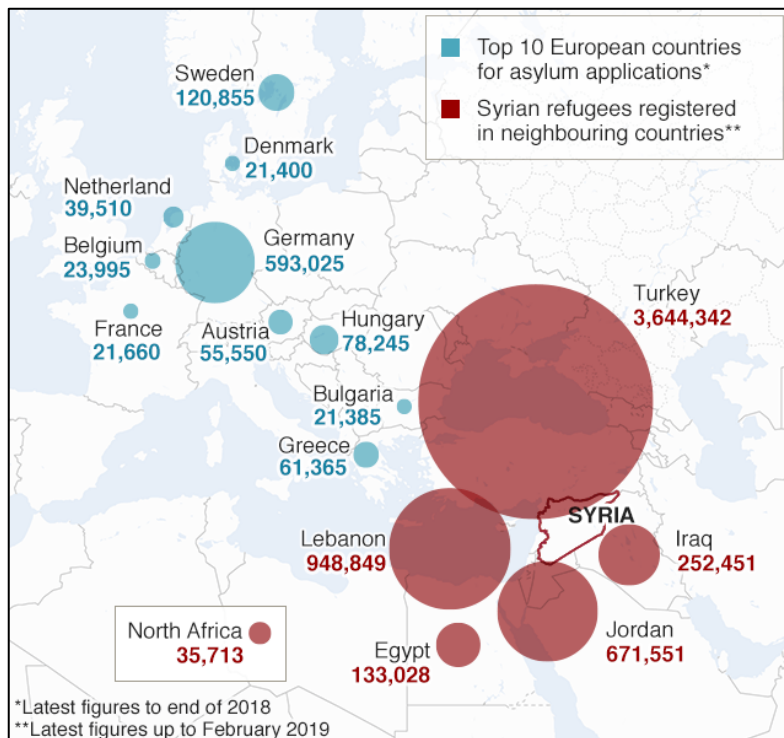


Figure 1 Syrian Refugees in Europe and Middle East/North-Africa (Eurostat/UNHCR)⁹

Going Turkey's Way

Tensions between Turkey and its NATO partners are not new and have waxed and waned for over forty years. After Turkey's 1974 invasion of Northern Cyprus (or protection of Turkish strategic interests, in Turkey's view) the relationship with Greece, Turkey's NATO neighbor, and the NATO alliance began to deteriorate rapidly and have continued to be tense since. In the recent past, Turkey-NATO relations deteriorated for several reasons.

- The recent activities by Turkey's three drilling vessels Fatih, Yavuz and Kanuni and exploration vessel Oruç Reis in contested waters in the Eastern Mediterranean, renamed (by Turkey) the Blue Homeland, provoked both Turkey and Greece to partake in military actions just short of war.¹⁰ Even NATO partner France reacted by sending two Rafale fighters and a La Fayette-class frigate to the region to deter Turkey from further military aggression.¹¹

⁹ Maha Yahya, 'Syrian Refugees: The People Who Want Four Things before They Go Home', *BBC News*, 5 april 2018, sec. World, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-43578469>.

¹⁰ Daily Sabah, 'Turkey's 3rd Drillship Kanuni to Set Sail in Eastern Mediterranean Soon', Daily Sabah, 17 augustus 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkeys-3rd-drillship-kanuni-to-set-sail-in-eastern-mediterranean-soon/news>; Aykan Erdemir en Philip Kowalski, "'Blue Homeland' and the Irredentist Future of Turkish Foreign Policy', *War on the Rocks*, 30 september 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/blue-homeland-and-the-irredentist-future-of-turkish-foreign-policy/>.

¹¹ Sudip Kar-Gupta, 'France Sends Two Fighter Jets, Frigate to Eastern Mediterranean amid Tensions with Turkey', *Reuters*, 13 augustus 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-turkey-idUSKCN2590XZ>.

- Europe's refugee deal with Turkey, supported with 6 billion Euros, is a burden to the EU that Turkey employs in strategic ways in order to put pressure on the EU to concede to Turkey's demands.¹² For instance, in February 2020 refugees in Turkey were falsely told by Turkish authorities that the EU border with Greece at the Pazarkule border crossing near Edirne was opened for them.¹³ This was a move by President Erdogan to put pressure on the EU to support Turkey's fight in Syria.¹⁴
- Turkey's activities in Syria have also strained relations with the U.S.. Turkey's activities, which President Erdogan sells as a fight against Kurdish terrorists, contradicts U.S. efforts to train Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) fighters to fight against the Islamic State terrorist organization active in the region. Turkey's involvement in Syria has also strained relations with Russia, Syria's long-time supporter. The tensions do not end there.
- After many years of unsuccessful negotiations with the U.S. to acquire the Patriot medium-long range air defense system, Turkey turned to U.S.'s foe, Russia, to purchase Russian S400 'Triumph' Air Defense System.¹⁵ This added fuel to the fire and further exacerbated tensions between the U.S. and the West on one side and Turkey on the other. Although it may seem that Turkey and Russia collude more often than they are aligned, the reality is that even with lingering mutual distrust, pragmatism, and a shared view of their respective states' role in the geopolitical theatre, Erdogan is closer to Putin than to other leaders in the NATO member states.¹⁶
- Turkey's support for Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) was widely condemned. Turkey's support is primarily an attempt to secure access to resources such as natural gas and maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean. It seeks to prevent Libya from failing under sway of other powerful nations involved, including France, Russia, Egypt, and the UAE, which would seriously undermine Erdogan's geostrategic, economic, political, and ideological interests in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁷ Turkey sees Libya as the gate to gain influence over the Mediterranean Sea and to gain access to natural gas, much needed to support Turkey's crippling economy. It also offers opportunities for Turkish national companies to gain a foothold in the Libyan market and to garner support for its political and ideological stance

¹² European Council, 'EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016', Council of the European Union, 18 maart 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>; Paul Schram en Rianne van der Linden, 'Heeft de Vluchtelingendeal Met Turkije Nog Toekomst?', Eén Vandaag, 11 augustus 2016, <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/heeft-de-vluchtelingendeal-met-turkije-nog-toekomst/>.

¹³ Ghaiith Abdul-Ahad, "Just Run": On the Turkey-Greece Border as Refugees Try to Break Through', The Guardian, 2 maart 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/just-run-on-the-turkey-greece-border-as-refugees-try-to-break-through>.

¹⁴ Ian Bremmer, 'What Happens Next with Europe's Latest Refugee Crisis', Time, 8 maart 2020, <https://time.com/5798139/what-happens-next-with-europes-latest-refugee-crisis/>.

¹⁵ Rachel Ellehuus en Jim Townsend, 'The Tale of Turkey and the Patriots', War on the Rocks, 22 juli 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/the-tale-of-turkey-and-the-patriots/>.

¹⁶ Jarron Kamphorst, 'De ijsjesdiplomatie van Poetin en Erdogan: oprechte vriendschap of cynisch pragmatisme?', Trouw, 30 september 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/gs-b1489657>.

¹⁷ Ezel Sahinkaya, 'Why Is Turkey Involved in Libyan Conflict?', VOA News, 4 juni 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/why-turkey-involved-libyan-conflict>.

through strengthening regional actors tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey's alleged sending of Syrian mercenaries and arms in support of the GNA and maritime deal with President Serraj to lay claim on Libyan waters is fiercely opposed by NATO partners including France and Greece.¹⁸ Turkey's support for Serraj by supplying drones and air defense also violates the United Nations (UN) arms embargo on Libya, worsening already tense relations and distrust.¹⁹

- Turkey's most recent meddling in foreign conflicts lies in its open support for Azerbaijan in its fight in Nagorno-Karabach in which Turkey is accused of sending Syrian 'freedom fighters' as mercenaries in support of the fight on the Azerbaijan side with highly technologically advanced unmanned air vehicles.²⁰
- In addition to these foreign adventures, Turkey holds military presence in Iraq, Yemen, and Qatar and has put democratic institutions in Turkey under control of the Muslim Brotherhood.²¹
- Perhaps Turkey's biggest move against the West is its increased cooperation with China. Turkey currently forges new and strengthens existing relations with China, which is geographically distant enough to avoid contested border disputes and offers ample opportunity to build economic ties and strengthen Turkey's economy. In this regard, China might be a natural partner for Turkey. Greater Turkey-China relations would enable Turkey to decrease dependence on Western partners and enable China to turn Turkey into a vital part of its Belt and Road Initiative.²² Although tensions remain (for example on the question of Uyghurs), growing economic ties can already be observed.²³ China is currently Turkey's second-largest import partner (after Russia), investing \$3 billion in Turkey between 2016 and 2019. When relations further deepen and expand, especially in the field of security cooperation, a new era with new thinking on NATO and EU relations with Turkey will take place. Turkey has even joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an observer.²⁴ After the

¹⁸ Tuvan Gumrukcu en Daren Butler, 'Turkey Signs Maritime Boundaries Deal with Libya amid Exploration Row', Reuters, 28 november 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya-idUSKBN1Y2131>.

¹⁹ Edith Lederer, 'Experts: Libya rivals UAE, Russia, Turkey violate UN embargo', AP NEWS, 9 september 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-north-africa-qatar-libya-united-arab-emirates-20a2ad9c585f40ec291585dbf8e9ed22>; Sahinkaya, 'Why Is Turkey Involved in Libyan Conflict?'; Ruth Michaelson, 'Turkey and UAE Openly Flouting UN Arms Embargo to Fuel War in Libya', the Guardian, 7 oktober 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/07/turkey-and-uae-openly-flouting-un-arms-embargo-to-fuel-war-in-libya>.

²⁰ Bethan McKernan, 'Syrian Rebel Fighters Prepare to Deploy to Azerbaijan in Sign of Turkey's Ambition', The Guardian, 28 september 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/28/syrian-rebel-fighters-prepare-to-deploy-to-azerbaijan-in-sign-of-turkeys-ambition>; Dominic Evans, 'Turkey Deploying Syrian Fighters to Help Ally Azerbaijan, Two Fighters Say', Reuters, 28 september 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-turkey-syria-idUSKBN26125A>.

²¹ The Media Line, 'Erdogan's Thuggery and Turkey's Future', The Media Line, 17 augustus 2020, <https://themedialine.org/mideast-mindset/erdogans-thuggery-and-turkeys-future/>.

²² Marshall Lerner, 'China to the Rescue in Turkey?', The Diplomat, 3 juli 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/china-to-the-rescue-in-turkey/>; Gözde Yilmaz en Nilgün Eliküçük Yıldırım, 'Authoritarian diffusion or cooperation? Turkey's emerging engagement with China', *Democratization* 27, nr. 7 (2020): 1207.

²³ Tolga Bilener, 'Turkey-China Relations: Ambitions and Limits of the Economic Cooperation', French Institute of International Relations, oktober 2020, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/asia-vision/turkey-china-relations-ambitions-and-limits-economic>; Areeb Ullah, 'Turkey Accused of Deporting Uyghurs Back to China via Third Countries', Middle East Eye, 27 juli 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uyghurs-china-turkey-accused-deporting-third-countries>.

²⁴ Selcuk Colakoglu, *Turkey And China: Political, Economic, And Strategic Aspects Of The Relationship* (World Scientific, 2021).

failed coup in 2016, Turkey even halted its activities to help Uyghurs and stopped providing travel documents to Uyghur seeking to flee oppression by the Chinese government.²⁵

The above-mentioned actions by Turkey contradict with the NATO alliances' core vision. The Turkey-NATO relationship is increasingly complex, and as a result its future trajectory remains uncertain. Erdogan's actions set Turkey on the agenda as a decisive power that in turn, enable him to reinstate a feeling of patriotism to the Turkish constituency. Regarding Turkey's future vis-à-vis NATO, three future trajectories are worth considering.

Three possible futures for Turkey vis-a-vis NATO

1. Turkey will leave NATO to strive for regional leadership and maintain on its course towards building an Ottoman Empire 2.0 or *Pax Ottomana*.
2. Turkey meddles on and follows its current path and will remain a part of NATO, but with an outlier position and tense relations with other NATO member states.
3. Turkey shies away from its 'alleingang' and becomes a reliable NATO partner that adheres to NATO's values and principles.

Scenario I. Turkey grows more recalcitrant, leaves NATO, and follows its own path.

Turkey continues to take bold actions that contradict NATO's position in world affairs with little regard for its NATO partners. Turkey recognizes its bargaining power vis-à-vis NATO partners as a benefactor to the alliance more so than a benefiter like most other member states. Turkey is aware that NATO is unable to oust Turkey from the alliance somewhat regardless of its behavior for strategic, political, and legal reasons (the NATO treaty does not provide any provision for the suspension of membership rights or the expulsion of an ally).²⁶ Turkey decides to take the one-sided decision to say goodbye and leave the alliance. Erdogan's considerable leverage over its NATO partners provide little incentive to cooperate and instead strengthen the conviction that Turkey's security interests are best secured through autonomous action, rather than

²⁵ Abdullah Ayasun, 'Uyghurs Wary of Turkey's Pending Extradition Deal With China', *The Diplomat*, 7 januari 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/uyghurs-wary-of-turkeys-pending-extradition-deal-with-china/>.

²⁶ Aurel Sari, 'Can Turkey Be Expelled from NATO? It's Legally Possible, Whether or Not Politically Prudent', *Just Security*, 15 oktober 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/66574/can-turkey-be-expelled-from-nato/>.

relying on a divided and weakened alliance.²⁷ Turkey therefore no longer seeks to be the East-West bridge and instead aims to become a recognizable power in its periphery.²⁸

Scenario 2. Turkey maintains NATO membership but on its own terms.

Turkey's ambitions to become a major global power will be halted amid its bleak economic situation and dwindling domestic support.²⁹ Instead, Erdogan will (albeit unwillingly) focus on short-term advantages versus long-term ambitions for regional and perhaps global dominance. Turkey will choose to cooperate with NATO and the EU to the minimum extent necessary without abandoning its own strategic objectives. It has learned that it can behave as it pleases internally if it serves NATO partners (and the U.S. in particular), externally. Turkey will continue to test its boundaries and from time-to-time hold NATO hostage to its domestic concerns. This has already begun to show, for example, in Turkey's recent hold from approving NATO's response plan for securing the Baltic states pending NATO's recognition for Turkey's claim that the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) pose a serious threat to Turkey's national security.³⁰ In this scenario, both NATO and Turkey stand to benefit some and to lose some.

Scenario 3. Turkey concedes to its NATO partners.

Turkey is forced to put its ambitious plans to expand its influence on hold due to the worsening economy, domestic instability, and weakened popular support for Erdogan's Justice and Development party as the population begins to feel the consequences of Erdogan's current policy. To maintain a favorable situation that garners popular support for Erdogan and his political party, Erdogan has no alternative than to back track its current crash course with other NATO member states and scale down its foreign adventures. Turkey recognizes NATO's critical role for Turkey to achieve its strategic interests and exerts efforts to rebuild severed relations with its NATO partners.³¹ This trajectory is likely to follow the ending of the Erdogan-era, or it will be the reason to end the Erdogan era and instigate a possibly violent Turkish regime change. Both situations will have considerable effect on Ankara's relations with NATO and the EU and, depending on who the next leader is, may offer opportunities for reconciliation.

²⁷ Antoine Got, 'Turkey's Crisis with the West: How a New Low in Relations Risks Paralyzing NATO', War on the Rocks, 19 november 2020, <http://warontherocks.com/2020/11/turkeys-crisis-with-the-west-how-a-new-low-in-relations-risks-paralyzing-nato/>; Iain Macgillivray, 'What Is Turkey's Endgame in Libya?', The Interpreter, 4 september 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-turkey-s-end-game-libya>.

²⁸ Macgillivray, 'What Is Turkey's Endgame in Libya?'

²⁹ Dogan Taner, 'Erdogan's "New Turkey" Narrative Is No Longer Selling', Middle East Eye, 29 september 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-erdogan-narrative-not-selling>.

³⁰ Rachel Ellehuus, 'Turkey and NATO: A Relationship Worth Saving', Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2 december 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-and-nato-relationship-worth-saving>; Got, 'Turkey's Crisis with the West'; Irish John en Joanna Plucinska, 'NATO Puts Defence Plan for Poland, Baltics into Action, Officials Say', Reuters, 2 juli 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-baltics-turkey-idUSKBN24320B>.

³¹ Ellehuus, 'Turkey and NATO'.

What direction will Turkey and the Alliance go?

Domestic instability in Turkey for economic and political reasons, exacerbated by the global Covid-19 pandemic, will at least temporarily halt Turkey's ambition to transform itself into a regional power to create a *Pax Ottomana*. A complete return to NATO compliance is not foreseeable under the leadership of President Erdogan as his popularity is strongest amongst nationalistic Turks that are unaccommodating to NATO's demands and would not easily abandon Turkey's current ambitions.³² From Erdogan's perspective, bending to NATO and the EU would mean losing face, popular support, and ultimately his position as president of Turkey. On the other hand, NATO will be reluctant to deny the strategic importance of keeping Turkey within the NATO alliance. Turkey's large, strong, and willing military and strategic geographical location that provides NATO access the Black Sea and airbases like Konya and especially Inçirlik with its stash of nuclear weapons for deterrence, are compelling arguments to keep Turkey within NATO. NATO will refrain for as long as possible from pressuring Turkey to leave the alliance as the disadvantages of losing Turkey still outweigh its advantages.

A key factor determining Turkey's domestic and foreign policy is the state of Turkey's economy.³³ According to a recent poll, Turkey's lackluster economic performance the past year has had a political impact and contributed to the decline of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) popularity, that has fallen from 43% to 31% in August 2020.³⁴ While the Turkish population's low favorable opinion on NATO (lowest among 16 of the 29 member states), this is not the only determinant of Turkey's foreign policy. In the medium-to-long term, economic stewardship remains a salient issue.³⁵ Although in the short term, a worsening economy may push Erdogan to pursue a more assertive foreign policy to distract attention from the economy, this will not be sustainable. Maintaining domestic support in the medium-to-long term will require Erdogan to focus on improving the economy.³⁶ Since the Turkish economy is heavily integrated

³² Stephen Flanagan, Anika Binnendijk, en Alireza Nader, 'Turkey's Nationalist Course Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army' (Santa Monica, United States: RAND Corporation, 2020), 1, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2589.html; Jovanovski Kristina, 'Erdogan's Nationalist Push Finds New Ground', The Media Line, 14 juli 2020, <https://themedialine.org/by-region/erdogans-nationalist-push-finds-new-ground/>; Max Hoffman, 'Turkey's President Erdogan Is Losing Ground at Home', Center for American Progress, 24 augustus 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/08/24/489727/turkeys-president-erdogan-losing-ground-home/>; Selim Koru, 'Erdogan's Turkey and the Problem of the 30 Million', War on the Rocks, 4 juni 2020, <http://warontherocks.com/2020/06/erdogans-turkey-and-the-problem-of-the-30-million/>.

³³ Aaron Stein, 'The New Turkey: Making Sense of Turkish Decision-Making', Atlantic Council, 2017, <https://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/new-turkey/>.

³⁴ Sinan Ülgen, 'A Weak Economy Won't Stop Turkey's Activist Foreign Policy', Carnegie Europe, 6 oktober 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/10/06/weak-economy-won-t-stop-turkey-s-activist-foreign-policy-pub-82935>.

³⁵ TRT World, 'Why Do a Majority of Turks Have an Unfavourable View of NATO?', Why do a majority of Turks have an unfavourable view of NATO?, 13 februari 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/why-do-a-majority-of-turks-have-an-unfavourable-view-of-nato-33733>; Moira Fagan, Jacob Poushter, en DC 20036USA202-419-4300 | Main202-857-8562 | Fax202-419-4372 | Media Inquiries, 'NATO Viewed Favorably Across Member States', Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, 9 februari 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-member-states/>.

³⁶ Luigi Scazzieri, 'Can the EU and Turkey Avoid More Confrontation?', Centre for European Reform, 10 augustus 2020, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/can-eu-and-turkey-avoid-more-confrontation>; Soner Cagaptay, 'Turkey's Imperial Foreign Policy: Vision vs. Reality', The Washington Institute, 6 mei 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy>

with the economy of the EU, Erdogan cannot afford to break ties with its European partners, many of which are also in the NATO alliance.³⁷ The need for Turkey to improve, and sustain, its economic standing, offers substantial leverage to leaders concerned with Erdogan's maximalist ambitions.³⁸

As previously indicated, Turkey's course will be greatly influenced by its economic situation and domestic support to stay within NATO. Figure 2 below indicates the different courses for Turkey and how and when its posture vis-a-vis NATO might change. For reasons of convenience, we will look into the future in two steps of approximately 5 years each.

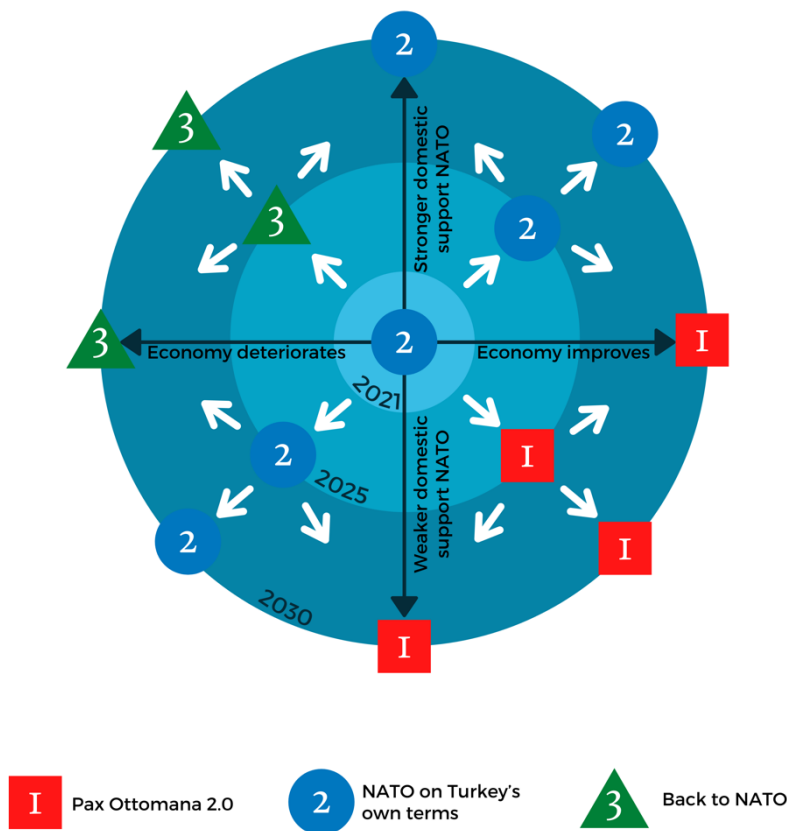


Figure 2 Three Possible Future Scenario's for Turkey

analysis/turkeys-imperial-foreign-policy-vision-vs-reality; Ülgen, 'A Weak Economy Won't Stop Turkey's Activist Foreign Policy'; Kadri Tastan, "Aid Diplomacy" Won't Solve the Economic Dilemma of Turkish Foreign Policy', Text, ISPI, 29 mei 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/aid-diplomacy-wont-solve-economic-dilemma-turkish-foreign-policy-26380>.

³⁷ Max Hoffman, 'A Snapshot of Turkish Public Opinion Toward the European Union', Center for American Progress, 27 september 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/09/27/458537/snapshot-turkish-public-opinion-toward-european-union/>.

³⁸ Tastan, "Aid Diplomacy" Won't Solve the Economic Dilemma of Turkish Foreign Policy'; Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, 'Keep Your Friends Close and Turkey Closer: EU-Turkey Relations', RUSI, 22 september 2020, <https://rusi.org/commentary/keep-your-friends-close-and-turkey-closer-eu-turkey-relations>.

If the economy improves and there is domestic support for NATO, Turkey is likely to maintain its current posture and stay in scenario 2 (north-eastern quadrant depicted in blue). If the economic situation further improves in five years, and Turkey is less dependent on NATO and western acceptance, it becomes more likely that Turkey will revert to scenario 1 (most eastern point represented in red).

If the economy deteriorates and support for NATO declines in the next five years, Turkey will stay in scenario 2 and remain within the alliance. In this case, Turkey profits more from maintaining its current posture than from leaving NATO. However, if this trend continues for the next 5 years, it becomes more likely that Turkey will leave NATO as its membership will have no added value for the economy anymore (southwestern quadrant and next the southernmost point, both depicted in red).

If the economy improves, but domestic support for NATO wanes, Turkey is likely to revert to scenario 1 and stay there. Once Turkey leaves NATO, a return within 5 years seems unlikely and out of order. With a downward economic trend and increasing domestic support for NATO, Turkey will revert to scenario 3, becoming a loyal NATO member, as can be seen in the northwestern quadrant (depicted in green). Other possible avenues are self-explanatory.

When is the time ripe for action?

Coming to a firm conclusion concerning Turkey's future is like looking into a crystal ball: the answer will be a loose prediction at best. Given all circumstances and problems concerned with Turkey leaving NATO, however, it is likely that the situation as described in scenario 2 will persist for now. Turkey will continue to be a nuisance to NATO under President Erdogan and seek to find cronies outside its own present and projected hemisphere of power, for which China is a logical partner. Both the OECD and IMF predict a careful and gradual economic growth for Turkey, making it likely that we will see a transfer to scenario 1 over time (see Figure 2).³⁹ Although it is not a preferred scenario from NATO's or EU's point of view (or even Russia's perspective for that matter) it seems the most logical route. Even with Erdogan's waning popular support, a change of direction is not expected as Erdogan's fieriest competitor Soylu is even more nationalistic and anti-Western than Erdogan.⁴⁰

³⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'OECD Economic Outlook, December 2020', OECD, 1 december 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/december-2020>; International Monetary Fund, 'Turkey and the IMF', IMF, oktober 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/TUR>.

⁴⁰ Hoffman, 'Turkey's President Erdoğan Is Losing Ground at Home'.

Now is the time for policy makers in NATO and the EU to prepare for a massive shift in the geopolitical power divide. It is time to think and reflect on the consequences of this shift and seek to balance them. Waiting for already developing trends and events to unroll further before responding to them impedes states' ability to exert influence and secure its interests. For years, Turkey has been NATO's elephant in the room. While everyone sees the problem, no one dares to tackle it. NATO needs to. To what extent these discussions will impact NATO and EU decision-making on the grounds remains to be seen. What is certain; both alliances cannot afford to remain paralyzed anymore if it wants to deter Turkey from undermining its interests.

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