

TURKEY, NATO, AND THE FUTURE OF THE TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP IN A DECLINING LIBERAL ORDER

Until recently, Turkey was seen by the West as more of a “functional” ally, one defined by its geographical and military assets, rather than a strategic partner. However, due to the dire security challenges that it has faced in the past decade Turkey has evolved into a “self-help” state that is more self-sufficient, provides for its own national security priorities, and balances its relations between major powers and regional actors to find the best fitting solution for itself. At this time, the policies of some NATO and EU member states have made life increasingly difficult for Turkey in a tough neighborhood. The crisis of an assertive Turkey has led some NATO allies to follow a policy choice of isolating Turkey, while expecting it to bear the burdens of a turbulent region as well as its contributions to the Alliance. In actual fact, a more regionally proactive, rising economy that is also a global trading state is a far better fit for the liberal world order. To view Turkey as a revisionist power like Russia and China would be erroneous. While the latter two strive to create a new world order, Turkey would like to see its place in a revised liberal order, one that is more just and equitable. On that note, Turkey has much to contribute to a revised liberal world order; however, it has to be understood on its own terms, and not dictated to.

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2 022 will be the seventieth anniversary of Turkey's entry into NATO. NATO itself recently celebrated its own seventieth birthday in 2019. The fact that an alliance has endured this long must be because NATO has always been more than an Alliance. In fact, even at its very inception in 1949 when it was formed for the sole purpose of deterring a Soviet invasion into Western Europe, NATO was more than NATO. A post war order was built on a transatlantic relationship, embodied and consolidated under the protective umbrella of a military alliance at the heart of a western system consisting of a variety of institutions which ranged from the IMF, the World Bank to the GATT. NATO in this sense has been part of an "ambitious set of political and cultural relations that, while concentrated in western Europe and the North Atlantic, have as their aim the reconstruction, intensification, and perpetuation of a post-war world order."¹

An Alliance by definition has to be built against something. Therefore, since NATO was part and parcel of a post-war liberal order, nevertheless, it was not just the alliance but also the liberal order itself that required an "other" for its own survival and existence. The "other" at the inception of this post-war order was the Soviet Union, which collapsed in 1991. Then came the long decade of the global West against international terror after September the 11th and the singling out of rogue or failed states harboring what might be elements of those terror cells, whether virtual or actual. The triumphalism of the 1990s, at first held the hope of a truly effective international collective security system, where NATO as an alliance or members of the alliance in concert with regional or other powers would undertake military intervention for the sake of humanitarian causes or for the sake of restoring international law or order, such as the Gulf War of 1991 and the intervention in Bosnia in 1995 followed by an intense state building and peace enforcement role for NATO in that country. The NATO intervention—under the pretext of Responsibility to Protect—in Libya in 2011 was although a continuation of this new found collective security mission, it nevertheless ended in a fiasco because neither NATO or any other group of the "willing and able" followed up the intervention with state and peace building. This left a tarnished footprint not just for NATO but the liberal order that it served a part of because, frankly, after the spectacular interventions of the 1990s, expectations about what NATO or a coalition led by Western leadership could do in maintaining order and upholding values and norms were at the best running high. But the 1990s was an exceptional period where a resurgent Russia and China were not yet on the scene. If anything, Russia, until the intervention over Kosovo, had been quite cooperative in Bosnia and even stayed on the sidelines during the Gulf War of 1991. Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008 and its subsequent annexation of Crimea

¹Bradley Klein, "Beyond the Western Alliance, the Politics of Post-Atlanticism," in Stephen Gill (ed.), *Atlantic Relations Beyond the Reagan Era* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989) pp. 201-2.

in 2014, followed by the mutual ending of the INF Treaty, after repeated Russian violations, has left quite a different scene than the one of unchallenged Western leadership in the 1990s. It has also left the Alliance and transatlantic relations with deeper wounds within itself, starting with openly public disagreements over the Iraq war of 2003.

Over the years the biggest challenge for the Alliance has been the increasing divide in security priorities and threat perceptions. Perhaps alliance cohesion at times like this require a new vision resetting. Yet, it has been over a decade since NATO announced its last strategic concept—a document that is supposed to give it a sense of direction and purpose for the next decade. Not only is the 2010 document now completely out of date and irrelevant, the challenges are not so much security concerns of allies themselves but a rapidly shape shifting global order. This has left a trail of half-baked interventions across the Middle East from Syria to Libya, where ensuing chaos has seen the West as an exacerbating factor to instability rather than the projector of stability as it once aspired to be. At this juncture, an idea, although not a new one, has been floated once more. The West is now seeking to consolidate an “alliance of democracies” against autocratic regimes. Under this widely normative guise, the main purpose here is really to join hands with a number of Asian states most notably South Korea and India against a resurgent China and Russia. Although it may seem to be a value driven exercise, it is one driven simply by geopolitical rivalry.

Which brings us to the question: Where was Turkey throughout these fascinating transformations of NATO and the liberal order of which it was a part of over the years? For much of the Cold War, Turkey was what one might call a functional ally. Functional because of its useful assets of having a large army and a convenient geostrategic location. Although Turkey was an indispensable component of NATO’s Southern Flank during this time and took place in all NATO operations and exercises, it nevertheless never quite became that strategic partner, the game changer, the shaper of ideas and vision. Therefore, its very belonging in the transatlantic core of a wider liberal order was technocratic and largely based on military technocracy, as this belonging was solely security driven. After the Cold War, Turkey continued to participate in what had become NATO’s new missions of humanitarian intervention and state building in the Balkans and also in Afghanistan, but its belonging to the West, was still driven on these technocratic terms. Turkey in the last two decades has undergone a remarkable transformation that not only redefines its role and future in the transatlantic alliance but also in a struggling liberal order. Turkey has become somewhat of a unique model of a state, one that is more self-sufficient, less reliant on global supply chains, more assertive in its region, able to

take its security priorities and economic interests into its own hands—a “self-help” state, but one that is nevertheless a trader state in a liberal global economy that seeks to increase its trade volume with all partners around the World. So, in essence, a state that is grounded in independence and self-sufficiency but builds its strength on interdependence through trade.

No wonder Turkey is becoming more of a paradox that is difficult to read by its erstwhile allies: Turkey has broken out of the box that contained all its previous definitions. This is why ironically while some of Turkey’s allies are lamenting that the “old” Turkey used to be so pro-West and the new one has “strayed from the fold”, in actual fact they have got it completely wrong. The “old” Turkey belonged less in the West, because it was never a part of the normative and strategic transatlantic core—the core of western Europe and the United States that was embedded in a common culture of norms strengthened by a joint strategic decision-making network. Turkey was the technocratic ally that took part in the day to day running of things within the alliance. If anything, as a global trading state, today, Turkey is more suited to its place in the liberal international order than before. But Turkey’s allies have not become accustomed to this change. They do not feel comfortable that their previous functional ally has now become somewhat of a voice in its own right.

Turkey has emerged as a “self-help” state because of the dire security challenges that it faced in the past decade, including terror attacks on its soil emanating from the vacuum enabling terrorist groups to thrive in neighboring Syria and Iraq, as well as the unprecedented burden of hosting most of Syria’s refugees, the terrible coup attempt that took the lives of many Turkish citizens, and having its sovereign rights in the Mediterranean threatened before its very eyes, all add up to the largest number of security challenges Turkey has ever had to face in such a short period of time. For most of this time, Turkey faced these challenges alone, without much help from its allies. **If anything, cornering Turkey, the state with the largest coastline in the Mediterranean, from pursuing its rights, and the aiding and abetting of a terrorist organization, responsible for many attacks within Turkey, across the border in Syria was done by the hands of some of Turkey’s allies. This is a far more serious situation than alliance cohesion or differing threat perceptions between allies.** And right at this juncture of events, we also find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, while tensions in the Mediterranean over the equitable sharing of resources are rising, the refugee crisis is far from over and threatens to worsen, there is no end in sight to the unending Syrian conflict, instability in Iraq ensues, and the future of the Middle East peace process, if there is still one, looks as dire as ever. The looming threat of terrorism has not gone away. All of these issues are of common concern Turkey and its allies. This is a very complicated picture, not only about

where Turkey stands in the alliance and the liberal order at large, but also existentially about where the alliance and the liberal order itself are going in a rapidly changing world.

NATO's Perpetual Adaptation

For much of the Cold War, NATO was an alliance of sixteen countries, all sharing a common threat and a purpose of maintaining the deterrent value of an integrated military structure. Its core purpose was one of collective defense, an attack against one was an attack against all. In the 1990s it enlarged and started to engage in collective security operations most notably in the Balkans. Its involvement in Afghanistan could be described as a new form of collective defense one that was no longer confined to the borders or the territory of NATO member states. Afghanistan was outside the geographical area of NATO but essentially an Article 5 mission after September 11th. Of course it was also different from the collective security missions in Bosnia and Kosovo. The Balkans were essentially peaceful by the time NATO troops went in. In Afghanistan, by contrast, instead of one mission, there were several missions: peacekeeping and post conflict reconstruction combat and counter-insurgency.

These new requirements brought on by the new era of “borderless collective defense” also heralded in a rapid transformation and internal adaptation of the Alliance.² The operational adaptation of the Alliance, although a challenge, was relatively straightforward in comparison to the political and normative challenges that lay ahead. During this time, NATO had to become accustomed to stabilization missions far away from the traditional defense perimeter of NATO, which also brings together political, military as well as economic tools. Afghanistan showed that these missions were becoming more complex, more distant, and more dangerous. Throughout this time, as enlargement ensued, the importance of building partnerships was also a consideration of importance for NATO. Training and capacity building, another area where NATO could offer its expertise in military matters to partner countries would enable the creation of a ring of stability on NATO's periphery. Thus, becoming accustomed to new missions, building partnerships, and improving its own capabilities to meet operational challenges away from its home base, NATO had in fact plenty to chew upon from 2000 onwards. This meant that at least during this time with the preoccupation of managing “damage limitation” after the transatlantic fallout over the Iraq war in 2003, and the day to day implementation of strengthening capabilities and reaching out to partner states, NATO was not ex-

² Gülnur Aybet, “The NATO Strategic Concept Revisited: Grand Strategy And Emerging Issues,” in G. Aybet and R. G. Moore (eds.), *NATO in Search of a Vision* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), pp. 35-50.

pected to develop a grand strategy. Somewhere between its ongoing missions and attempts to keep up with a rapidly changing security environment, NATO was losing the normative and political side to what made it more than a military alliance to begin with.

This is the main reason that beyond the day to day running of the Alliance machinery from ongoing operations to defense planning, NATO's biggest challenge is differing threat perceptions and security priorities among allies and a lesser agreement on the norms and values that supposedly hold the Alliance together. In fact, the organization has become largely a technocratic one where everyone is now behaving like a functional ally. After all, the last time NATO came up with a Strategic Concept was in 2010. These documents are supposed to lay out the direction of NATO for the next decade. Yet we are almost nearing the end of 2020 and there is no study in place for a new strategic concept. Instead it would seem that a group of experts have recently been appointed by the Secretary General to reflect on how to further strengthen NATO's political dimension.

On the other hand, even the last Strategic Concept of ten years ago was largely a compromise document between an emerging "two tier Alliance", a Missile Defense system that had been painstakingly agreed upon, and a commitment to reconcile borderless and in area collective defense. All of which seem irrelevant to the pressing security problems faced by allies today. Even the "two tier alliance" between territorial collective defense and NATO's missions beyond the Euro-Atlantic area seem in the distance, since Russia's resurgence in the region after its annexation of Crimea has brought territorial defense closer to the attention of most allies, not just those who share a close geographic proximity to Russia. However, although the strategic concept of ten years ago concluded on the theme of assuring allies that wanted territorial defense and promising dynamic engagement beyond the territory of the Alliance as the only means to secure alliance cohesion, today, alliance cohesion is more damaged than before³

This is because not only has the alliance struggled to maintain a common purpose among an ever growing number of member states—today the alliance is an organization of thirty countries, increasing differences in security priorities, and threat perceptions are making it difficult for allies to converge around a single threat or a number of identifiable threats listed in the same priority order. Yet, the number of challenges that have arisen since NATO's last strategic concept compel allies to work together.

² NATO, "Strategic Concept 2010," 19 November 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82705.htm?

NATO has to find new tools to deal with these new set of challenges. So far, it is still utilizing the same methods of the 1990s. For example, while the alliance has to find the means to deter, defend, and defeat if necessary, a resurgent Russia which has emerged as a formidable adversary with modernized forces and high tech weaponry, it is not enough just to match Russia's capabilities. NATO at the same time needs to find new ways to engage a new Russia. The NATO-Russia Council, created at a time when Russia was looked upon as another partner country and when Russia was relatively weaker in comparison to today, is remarkably still in existence although it is hard to see its effectiveness on NATO-Russia relations also given the increasing infrequent nature of the meetings. A new forum for dialogue might be needed and certainly a new approach.

Another challenge to NATO is the continuing instability in the South of its borders, fragile states, terrorism, crime, humanitarian crises, and the large influxes of migration and displaced people. So far NATO has approached the problems of the South with capacity building and training programs tailored around the various partnership schemes it has with a variety of countries in the region. While NATO cannot be responsible for solving all the ills of the region, capacity building and training are only panaceas if the root causes of instability are not addressed. Rather than reaching out as a technocratic expertise hub from the outside, NATO can pool together the diplomatic initiatives of its members to better support regional schemes and inter-regional relations to further stability. Again, here there is a need for a fresh approach beyond technical training support to partners.

A new set of thinking and approaching new challenges with new tools is also required closer to the home front. Since September the 11th, Article 5 type threats are no longer confined to military responses. Attacks against the infrastructure of member states, including the power infrastructure, IT networks, communications, pipelines, and transport, require a planning and preparedness that does not necessarily involve army maneuvers or military exercises. To reflect this new way of thinking, at the London Leaders Summit in December 2019, NATO declared space as one of its operational domains. Since NATO is reliant on satellites and space enabled services which are civil/commercial as well as military, space becomes an increasingly important domain. Additionally, the increasing use of drones, data processing, and the growth of hypersonic missiles and missile defense systems all make space increasingly contested and therefore more vulnerable.⁴

⁴ NATO London Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3-4 December 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm

Another area that is a new challenge for NATO is hybrid warfare. NATO has pledged to deter and defend against cyber tactics that undermine the security and societies of its member states. Both cyber attacks and hybrid warfare require a different approach from classical military preparedness. Both make the legitimacy and effectiveness of response planning challenging. Hybrid warfare refers to use of non-state actors and the utilization of unconventional and conventional warfare with other non-military modes of operation in novel and unfamiliar ways. Non-state actors are uncharacteristically using greater capabilities with military sophistication and expanding the battlefield beyond the military realm, placing greater emphasis on the use of non-military tools. This can provide asymmetric advantages to non-state actors over militarily superior state security services. This can include a coordinated use of terrorism and organized crime. Another advantage of hybrid warfare is the ambiguity it entails, giving plausible deniability through the use of proxies and non-attributable force. Hybrid warfare also makes use of elements of information warfare. All of this makes coordination of a response to hybrid warfare all the more difficult. In this sense, hybrid warfare is tailored to fall below the threshold of war and even make the response by military means irrational.⁵ For NATO, this poses a dilemma as this constitutes a threat that falls below the Article 5 threshold. Deterrence against hybrid threats is more challenging, as they are multifaceted and could lead to increased polarization prevalent in Western societies. However, deterrence against hybrid warfare can be gradually built up by “credible attribution of the source; naming and shaming; proportionate responses that do not escalate but show that hybrid attacks will be consistently answered and in a collective and united way.”⁶

Another area that NATO is perpetually adapting itself is a very old issue that has been around since the 1960s—that of burden sharing. The unequitable bearing of defense costs between European members and the US has for a long time been an issue of contention in American domestic politics. Burden sharing has been a bi-partisan issue of long standing in the US that has preceded the current Trump administration’s very vocal laments over the issue of late. European states have constantly promised to correct the inequitable balance in defense expenditure, but this response has been slow and sometimes very difficult to realize given public pressure and electorate sensitivities on the issue not to mention economic pressures. Yet an increasingly affluent Europe that has repeatedly been unable to provide for its own defense has been a constant source of resentment on the other side of the Atlantic. The Defence Investment Pledge agreed at the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, has led to

⁵ Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud and Patrick Cullen “What is Hybrid Warfare?” *Norwegian Institute for International Affairs*, 2016, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep07978>

⁶ Jamie Shea, “NATO at 70: an Opportunity to Recalibrate,” *NATO Review*, 5 April 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/04/05/nato-at-70-an-opportunity-to-recalibrate/index.html>

real increases in defense spending but many European allies are still beneath the 2 percent of GDP as promised.⁷ Turkey is one of the NATO members close to achieving this target, with a defense expenditure of 1.89 percent of GDP.

As security challenges diversify, NATO has also got to address the issue of capabilities. This has been on the agenda since the Prague Summit of 2002. While the issue back then was enabling rapidly deployable military assets to operational areas beyond NATO member states' territories, the issue of capabilities today focus on a broad view of capability requirements to meet new threats such as cyber warfare, threats to vital space assets, terrorism, border security, data manipulation, the protection of critical infrastructure, and crucial supply chains.⁸

Even great power rivalry is not about a military stand off as it was during the Cold War. At the London Leaders Summit in December 2019, NATO states acknowledged that they needed to recognize China's growing international influence, which presents opportunities and challenges that the Alliance needs to address together.⁹ China's advances in artificial intelligence, bioengineering, and 5G connectivity are among these opportunities and challenges which face the West now. China's increasing investments in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East are presenting dilemmas for the EU in its relations with the US. Like Russia, how the Alliance approaches a rising China also needs to be reconsidered. A new approach that is dynamic, engaging, and deterring needs to be formulated. How far China's rising influence is going to be a divisive factor in the Alliance also needs to be considered.

Ever since the 1990s, NATO's adaptation has by and large been reactive and outward looking. This has been about building capabilities to go further out of area, rapidly engaging in operations that fall outside of NATO's core task of collective defense for its members. It has been about enlargement and building partnerships, all in an effort to turn NATO into a security community that is constantly expanding and "projecting stability" through membership or capacity building, thus having more "like-minded" countries around its periphery and around the globe. The nature of NATO's new challenges requires it to look more inwards in the coming period, and an effort to answer the key questions of innovative approaches to new threats and engaging rising powers as well as different threat perceptions among allies. **It is going to be a time of getting NATO's own house in order rather than spreading its know-how and normative experience.**

⁷ NATO Wales Summit Declaration, 5 September 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

⁸ Shea, "NATO at 70."

⁹ NATO, "London Declaration."

Turkey and NATO: From Functional Ally to Self-Help State

Ever since Turkey joined NATO in 1952, Turkey's place within the transatlantic core of a liberal order was securitized. In this sense, **Turkey's "belonging" to the West was framed in terms of security and military capabilities; its Western identity in the transatlantic relationship was never questioned because it was part and parcel of a "Western bloc"**. However, NATO was also part of a wider post-war liberal order where collective defense became the tool for defending a way of life through an institutionalized, inter-dependent set of relations. Therefore, NATO's normative role enabled the alliance to be framed not just in terms of security but also of identity.

When that Western bloc ceased to exist, Turkey's identity within this normative framework fell into a gray area. The 1990s were difficult times when Turkey's relationship with both Europe and the US continued to be strained, with different security priorities between Turkey and its transatlantic partners and the European Union's intransigent snubs at Turkey's bid for membership. As the EU tried to create a European Security and Defence Identity or Policy, with little consideration for third parties, this left Turkey isolated as the only NATO member being cornered out of future plans for Europe's security, even though as the cornerstone of NATO's Southern Flank during the Cold War, Turkey as a NATO member had protected that very same Europe from a Soviet threat to its borders. Therefore, it is not the first time that Europe has sought to isolate Turkey. **Today, Europe is playing a similar game in the Mediterranean.**

Until recently, Turkey was seen by the West as more of a "functional" ally, one defined by its geographical and military assets.¹⁰ During the Cold War, it was a crucial component of NATO's Southern Flank against the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1990s, Turkey continued to contribute to Alliance operations in peace-building roles. Turkey's contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, where it took on the command of the mission more than once, has been quite significant. Meanwhile, Turkey continued to contribute to the ongoing missions in the Balkans—the Kosovo Force (KFOR), the Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR), and its follow-on mission led by the EU, EUFOR Althea.

Despite being a very active NATO member, Turkey's role in the transatlantic relationship was somewhat ambiguous. During the Iraq war of 2003, the legal, strategic, and normative arguments over the war between France, Germany, and the US en-

¹⁰ Gülnur Aybet, "Turkey Between the Transatlantic Partnership," in Roger Kanet (ed.) *The United States and Europe in the Changing World*, December 2009, pp. 141-62.

tirely ignored the position of Turkey—the only NATO ally sharing a border with Iraq.¹¹

The confusion of Turkey’s NATO allies continued during the 2007 crisis, after the escalation of PKK attacks against Turkish armed forces emanating from Northern Iraq, when the Turkish parliament passed a resolution authorizing a military incursion into northern Iraq. It shifted the US position of “damage limitation” in its relations with Turkey, to a more proactive concern for Turkey’s security interests in the region. **It was a telling episode over the influence of Ankara’s hard power on Western perceptions of Turkey.**

Although from 2009 onwards the US paid lip service to seeing Turkey more as a strategic partner, this never materialized in the real sense. Further turmoil in the region followed by bad and inconsistent nondecisions on the part of the US, led to increasingly divergent security concerns between Turkey and its NATO allies.

Both Syria and Libya have been issues of contention from the start of the conflicts in both countries. Turkey was initially not supportive of an intervention in Libya under an ad hoc coalition led by France and the United Kingdom with support from the United States. It was only after political control of the operation came under the North Atlantic Council that Turkey became an active participant in Operation Unified Protector, though it did not play a direct aerial combat role.

At the time, a NATO operation was undertaken without much consideration for the aftermath, which is why Turkey initially voiced reservations over such an operation. The repercussions of the intervention in Libya have had much wider consequences beyond Libya. **Much of what has essentially been wrong about transatlantic policies toward Syria has been due to an inevitable outcome of NATO’s Libya operation in 2011.** It was after the consequences of brutal regime change in what started as a Responsibility to Protect humanitarian intervention under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, that hardened the resolve of Russia and China never to support a UN sanctioned, Western-led intervention that led to regime change in the region again. This has led to the UN Security Council being in deadlock over Syria ever since.

Yet, throughout this time, Turkey continued to work with NATO in trying to alleviate the conditions for bearing the worst of the fallout from the Syrian conflict on its

¹¹ For examples of “missing” Turkey in the transatlantic debate in 2003, see: Dieter Mahnke, Wyn Rees, and Wayne Thompson, *Redefining Transatlantic Security Relations: The Challenge of Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Phil Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe and the Crisis over Iraq* (New York: MacGraw Hill, 2004); Ronald Asmus, “Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2003, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2003-09-01/rebuilding-atlantic-alliance>

very long border with that country. In 2012, Turkey requested the deployment of NATO Patriot air defense systems to defend its territory against a possible missile attack from Syria. Turkey also called on emergency NATO meetings invoking Article 4 twice over cross border incidents during the Syrian civil war.¹² The deployments of the Patriot batteries occurred soon thereafter. Six Patriot batteries provided by Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States were followed by the deployment of Spanish patriots and military personnel in January 2015 to replace the two Dutch batteries. Yet all of them save the Spanish battalion have now been removed just as the border has become increasingly dangerous for Turkey. This brings us to the question as to why Turkey was left with no choice but to take matters into its own hands in Syria?

Turkey's security priorities from the very beginning have been very clear:

- Establish a safe area and a no fly zone protecting civilians and prevent a massive influx of refugees and displaced people.
- Curb the influence of PKK affiliated groups in North of Syria and the rise of radical elements, both of which later proved to be deadly threats to Turkey's security.
- Maintain the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria, preventing the establishment of statelets arising from the chaos of the civil war. Yet Turkey's NATO allies did nothing and in some cases aided the emergence of these very circumstances that Turkey wished to avoid under all circumstances.

Turkey's first cross border operation into Syria took place in August 2016. For some time DEASH had mounted many terror attacks in Turkey, including attacks in Istanbul, Ankara, Elazig, and Gaziantep. It was after the attack in Gaziantep that Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield to clear the presence of DEASH on its border. At the end of the operation, Turkey had cleared over 2,000 km of territory from DEASH and neutralized over 3000 DEASH terrorists. This was more than any one member of the Coalition against DEASH had achieved singlehandedly in such a short period of time. The international coalition against DEASH emerged after Allies agreed on limited airstrikes on DEASH targets in Iraq and Syria at NATO's Wales Summit in 2014.

Yet despite the fact that Turkey was the one country that suffered most from DEASH attacks, and did more than any other country in the coalition against DEASH to rid the terrorist organization from its borders, without any help from its allies, as if

¹² Article 4 of the Washington Treaty states that: "The Parties will consult whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of any of the Parties is threatened." See: NATO, "NAC Statement on the shooting down of a Turkish aircraft by Syria," 26 June 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_88652.htm

adding insult to injury, it was also wrongly accused by some of its allies for aiding and abetting foreign fighters joining DEASH. Criticism was also forthcoming in Turkey's initial refusal to open Incirlik airbase for coalition airstrikes. However, in the past, Incirlik was always used only for logistical or humanitarian mission augmentation, not combat missions. Despite this, Turkey agreed to open Incirlik for coalition airstrikes against DEASH in July 2015. In actual fact Turkey officially declared DEASH a terrorist organization in October 2013 and deported thousands of foreign persons and refused entry to many more suspected of having links to DEASH. It also established "Risk Analysis Centers" in 2014 at all international airports as well as bus and train terminals between cities deemed to be at risk for transit of terror suspects. The area of Operation Euphrates Shield in the North of Syria today boasts a semblance of stability and safety in the midst of a grave conflict. Turkish security forces have trained and supported local security forces, establishing security and building of the damaged infrastructure including roads, hospitals, and schools. Local councils are supported in maintaining law and order and today around 2 million inhabitants live in the area cleared from DEASH. Turkey takes care of 4.5 million of Syria's 6.5 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Syria, and these include people living within the Euphrates Shield area. This is not counting the near 3.7 million refugees who are taken care of in Turkey. Therefore, while safeguarding its national security from cross border terrorist attacks, Turkey has also not neglected the humanitarian aspect of its operations in Syria. If anything, the areas cleared from terrorists in Syria by Turkey are precisely what Turkey asked its Allies to do from the beginning of the war: to create safe havens for IDPs, refugees, and local people.

As the war in Syria carried on, Turkey continued to suffer from terrorist attacks on its territory originating from Syria. The PKK's Syrian affiliates, the YPG and PYD aided and abetted many attacks in Turkey using the bases in Syria as a spring board. The PKK is recognized as a terrorist organization by the EU and the US. However, its Syrian offshoots are not. Despite this, the thousands of tunnels that were discovered after each operation, running from under the border from Syria into Turkey—some as wide enough to allow the transit of large trucks—speak for themselves: The bases across the border posed a serious national security threat to Turkey. As PKK attacks in Turkey increased through 2016, including attacks in Ankara and Istanbul, that left hundreds of civilians dead, Turkey commenced Operation Olive Branch in Afrin, in the north west of Syria in January 2018.

The objective of Operation Olive Branch was to prevent the YPG from supplying arms and fighters to PKK terrorists based in Turkey's Amanos mountains in Turkey's southern Hatay Province. Many PKK terrorists who were trained in the use of

explosives and ammunition were dispatched to the Amanos Mountains from the YPG stronghold in Afrin. By the time the Afrin operation ended, Turkey was also able to sever the PKK presence in the Northwest of Syria with those PKK/YPG strongholds East of the Euphrates, thus preventing the emergence of a contiguous corridor controlled by a terrorist group, stretching across its 917 km border with Syria. That in essence would have posed an existential security threat to Turkey. The Afrin operation removed that threat.

However, the existence of the terrorist group continued to threaten Turkey from its strongholds East of the Euphrates. Supported by the US, the YPG had by now settled in for the long haul, gradually transforming itself into an autonomous entity, armed to the teeth, sitting on Turkey's border. The support given to the YPG by the US was on the pretext of using it to defeat DEASH. Yet the US refused to undertake the Rakka operation with its NATO ally, Turkey, and chose to work with a terrorist group instead. Turkey has always insisted, ever since this erroneous decision was made, that one cannot fight one terrorist group by arming another. This constituted a national security threat for Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey wanted to clear this area with a depth of 20-30 km to enable at least some of the 3.7 million refugees it was hosting to return to Syria into a safe environment. In fact, Turkey repeatedly consulted with its Allies in various forums and bilateral meetings about its plans to construct housing for the returnees in this area as well as means to generate livelihoods in the area. It was somewhat unbelievable that Turkey's NATO allies throughout this time not only showed any empathy toward Turkey's essential security concerns about the existence of terrorist groups on its border, but also maintained an insouciant attitude toward Turkey's gross burden of housing nearly 4 million refugees.

As a result, in October 2019, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring in the East of the Euphrates. The operation was suspended after agreements reached with the United States and the Russian Federation on the clearing of the YPG from the entire area of the East of Euphrates including the provision of joint patrols. Although Turkey's initial objective was to clear 444 km of the border East of the Euphrates, today it controls around 120 km from Ras al Ayn to Tel Abyad. It has not been possible to see a complete withdrawal of the YPG from some of the remaining areas either. Nevertheless, Turkey accomplished what it said it would do, and prevented the establishment of a YPG-held corridor across the length of its long border in Syria. At the end of the operation 4000 tunnels running from Syria into Turkey were unearthed. If the YPG and PYD were minding their own business in Syria, what explains the existence of so many tunnels running into Turkey? Yet despite this, the loudest objections to Turkey's three operations in Syria came from its NATO allies.

Turkey-Russia Relations

Turkey's relations with Russia have been another issue of contention between Turkey and its NATO allies. Lately American and European objections to the Turkish purchase of the Russian air defense system, the S-400 have made headlines.

While Turkey's transatlantic partners have their own dilemmas in confronting Russia, for Turkey, the Russian relationship has gone from compartmentalized limited cooperation to strategic cooperation particularly in Syria. Turkey's compartmentalized relationship with Russia involved cooperating in areas where there was mutual interest while leaving issues of contention outside the door. Turkey and Russia had different interests where the Syrian regime came into question. Still, this did not stop Russia agreeing to construct and operate Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu near Mersin. Neither did this stop the realization of the Turkish Stream which would consist of a second pipeline to Turkey in addition to existing Bluestream, with a gas hub to Europe on Turkish-Greek border.

Turkey diverged from its NATO allies when it did not team up with the EU and the US to impose sanctions against Russia. On the other hand, Turkey balanced its position vis-à-vis Russia and its NATO allies during the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 by its strict adherence to the Montreux convention. Even with the Ukraine crisis and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea, Turkey was able to maintain the compartmentalized relationship with Russia. At NATO's Wales Summit in September 2014, the allies agreed to adopt a "Readiness Action Plan" primarily to respond to Russia's intervention in Ukraine and to plan for possible intervention beyond. This was followed in 2015, with the NATO decision to create a spearhead" high readiness joint task force from within the NATO Response Force. Turkey is expected to take over the command of this spearhead force in 2021. Yet, in all other areas, the Russia-Turkey relationship is still ticking on. As long as NATO forces do not have to confront Russia in an Article 5 situation, the impact of Turkey commanding the NATO spearhead force is not likely to have a strong impact on Turkey-Russia relations.

The relationship with Russia transformed from one of limited compartmentalized cooperation to increasingly converging regional interests. The turning point came after August 2016, when Turkey launched its first operation into Syria, enabled by Russia stepping aside. Russia's tacit support to Turkey's operations in Syria led to both countries seeking increased regional initiatives for a diplomatic solution, after the dismal repeated failures of the Geneva process. The first meaningful ceasefire in the conflict was achieved after Turkey, Russia, and Iran got together in December 2016. Shortly after this in January 2017, the Astana Process on Syria began, involving the three countries as guarantor states. The Astana process and the Sochi sum-

mits between the three have always complemented the Geneva process. Turkey as a NATO member has been able to negotiate with the two regional countries on the ground in Syria as well as taking part in the UN-led Geneva process, and actively shaping the direction of the conflict by being an active player on the ground. **NATO countries ought to have seen this as an asset for the alliance rather than disapproving of Astana and Turkey's operations into Syria.** The Astana format also enabled the negotiation of the de confliction zones. Although Syrian regime advances aided by Russian airpower have swallowed up most of the deconfliction zones and Idlib, remaining the last one has so far been very difficult to maintain, Russian Turkish cooperation still exists, in joint patrols that are still taking place along the M4 highway as part of the ceasefire agreed to by Russia and Turkey on the 5th of March this year. The fact that these patrols are still ongoing despite the fact that many Turkish soldiers were killed by regime fire in February, after the Assad regime repeatedly violated the Sochi agreement reached between Russia and Turkey in 2019 to preserve Idlib as a deconfliction zone, means that **both Russia and Turkey want to control the damage where their interests clash, and maintain the areas where they converge in Syria.**

Another area where Turkey Russia relations have caused much tension in NATO is the S-400. Before Turkey went ahead with the purchase of this air and missile defense system, it has had a long-standing crucial requirement for a national air and defense system that it has been seeking to fulfil ever since this gap in its capabilities became all the more evident during the Gulf War of 1991. This made Turkey aware that it was largely defenseless against missile threats from neighboring countries. Acquiring its own missile defense capabilities became an imperative for Turkey after 1991. Apart from having a system that was state of the art and reliable, the advantages of technology transfer were also highly desirable. Which is why Turkey's Under Secretariat for Defence Industry announced a co-production tender for an air and missile defense system in January 2013. A previous tender for an "off-the-shelf" bid had been cancelled to meet Turkey's technology transfer demands. Turkey considered the Chinese company CPMEIC's bid as well as the US Raytheon and Lockheed Patriot system and the Italian-French Eurosam consortium's SAMP/T. The US did not offer any technology transfer, the SAMPT/T gave a long overdue delivery date that did not suit Turkey's purposes and the negotiations, and the Chinese company dragged on with little progress. At the end, Turkey opted for the S-400 because it provided the best option to meet Turkey's current needs as they stand. This does not mean that further down the road Turkey may not consider other options, however, for now, there is no question of giving up the S-400 for an alternative. The objections of the US to Turkey's purchasing of the S-400 system has reached as far as suspension of Turkey's participation in the F-35 joint strike fighter

program and the imposition of sanctions threatened by Congress. The US has repeatedly sought to frame this issue as a NATO matter, whereas the NATO Secretary General has said that allies are free to make their own defense procurement choices while voicing concern in areas of interoperability and alliance cohesion.¹³ On the whole, Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 is not a NATO matter, it is a bilateral issue between Turkey and the US, and only because of the latter's concerns about the F-35 program. Turkey repeatedly offered the setting up of a technical committee to look into the matter of compatibility of hosting the F-35 and the S-400. This has been declined by the

Burdens and Challenges: Turkey's Role in NATO

On the other hand, Turkey hosts the radar of the NATO missile defense system approved at NATO's Lisbon summit in 2010. As the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty ceased to exist as of September 2019, the NATO missile defense system is going to be more crucial than ever. Turkey's role in maintaining this system by hosting the crucially placed radar component will undoubtedly emphasize the role it continues to play in the alliance.

Turkey continues to contribute to a variety of important NATO tasks, from the training mission in Iraq, to the hosting of NATO AWACS surveillance aircraft in Konya in support of the Global Coalition to defeat Daesh, and its ongoing contribution to the NATO missions in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and the Bosnia. NATO for its part tried to come to Turkey's aid at a time when it faces dire security challenges, by enhancing AWAC flights over Turkish territory. The deployed NATO Patriot systems down to one battery are not sufficient to meet Turkey's security challenges but nevertheless are a symbol of the Alliance's commitment to Turkey.

Turkey, to some extent, is still a functional ally in the background with its day to day contribution to NATO missions and operations. In this sense, **Turkey does not have a contention with the Alliance itself, but rather the policies of some member states that have made life increasingly difficult for Turkey in a changing and tough neighborhood.** Many times, Turkey has been left on its own to fend for itself. Turkey did not become a self-help state overnight, but it did acquire the skills to become one out of necessity, rather than choice. As a consequence, one can see a chain of events where one policy begets the other. Such is the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. **A policy choice by some NATO allies to isolate Turkey, while they expect it to bear the burdens of contributing to the Alliance, is not fair but**

¹³ NATO, "Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu," 6 May 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_165854.htm

also counterproductive and not very wise. Expecting Turkey to bear the brunt of the region's problems, 3.7 million refugees to start with, but at the same time denying its rights to the common resources of the region, is unrealistic. Expecting Turkey to bear the burden of hosting nearly 4 million refugees indefinitely without seeking a solution to the problem across the border in Syria, and objecting to Turkey's incursions to open some space for the return of some of the refugees, is not a sustainable policy. It is bound to hit a wall at some point and recently it has. **All these erroneous policies have helped transform Turkey into a self-help state, that is more self-sufficient, provides for its own national security priorities, balances its relations between the major powers and regional actors to find the best fitting solution to serve its interests, and enhances its national defense industry so it is less reliant on others.** As a result, Turkey is less resembling of the functional ally it once was. This has added further tension in its relationship with NATO allies, who find it increasingly difficult to find a more novel approach to engaging Turkey. However, the picture is not as pessimistic as it seems. While certain circles among the proponents who wish to preserve a liberal world order would like to see Turkey isolated and removed from the transatlantic alliance because it no longer "fits in", on the contrary, a more regionally pro-active, rising economy that is also a global trading state fits far better as a player in the liberal world order than one consumed with internal struggles, weak decision-making, a weak manufacturing industry, and complete reliance on imports. **Turkey has much to contribute to a revised liberal world order, but it has to be understood on its own terms, and not dictated to.**

Wither the Liberal Order and the Idea of an Alliance of Democracies

How does the transatlantic core of a liberal order deal with an ally that is increasingly self-sufficient, seeks self-help where international institutions fail to meet its needs, and turns to regional and global cooperation where its interests coincide with other actors? The key question, one that is being forced into the thinking of EU and NATO member states over the recent crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean is: Where does the US and Europe see itself in its relations with such a country? One thing that is sure is that it is not the same country as it was before. Therefore, there is a need for the definition of new parameters in Turkey's relationship with the transatlantic core.

As pointed out earlier on in this article, Turkey was never a part of the construction and reconstitution of the liberal international order. To paraphrase Dean Acheson, it was not, "present at the creation."¹⁴ Of course, it had a place in this security architecture as a member of NATO, and an aspiring member of EU, but its relationship

¹⁴ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969).

with the transatlantic core was defined as a functional ally not as a true strategic partner. Turkey's belonging was shaped by its attributes of having a unique geostrategic location and the second largest army in NATO. Whereas in the last two decades, as a fast growing economy and a trading state, it has become more immersed in the practices of a global liberal order than before. Its place in the liberal order is less predominantly defined in terms of security as security priorities between Turkey and its allies have differed during this time.

If we define being an actor in the liberal order in terms of identity or construction of identity, then some analysts say the Turkey of yesteryear was more akin to being a member of the club of a liberal order, but today's Turkey is not. This is a very simplistic view which is problematic. The Turkey of yesteryear was never a member of this club but a functional ally that became part of a liberal order by default. Today's Turkey is more in the caliber of what you would call a strategic partner.

It would be wrong to say that belonging to a liberal order, albeit as a functional participant, has not benefitted Turkey since it joined NATO in 1952. The post-war liberal order has been an exceptionally good and beneficial system, creating a semblance of order after World War Two, and turning the ages old war system of Europe into a peace system. In this sense, the EU has been one of the most remarkable projects in history. The post-Cold War era was also very beneficial to countries in the Euro-Atlantic area, as the liberal order through institutions inherited from the Cold War projected stability into the post-communist space.

Today one of the reasons the liberal order has lost its charm for other countries and regions outside the transatlantic core is the fact that the liberal order has become tarnished through the practices or policies that were carried out by those who created it. From foreign interventions to selective implementation of norms were it suits them. Among these practices have been regime change by force and removing regimes is not quite compliant with the idea of a Western-led liberal order. The liberal order always had a certain quality of "oughtness" about it: "The World ought to look like this" and so forth. Even as far back in the writings of George Kennan, there is an "oughtness", for example how Kennan writes about the Soviet Union and how it "ought" to conduct itself like this, as a "government among governments".¹⁵ Oughtness has a certain danger about it when you apply hard power to implement it. It is not a bottom up process of inclusion into a liberal order, but a top down imposed one which unfortunately has included military interventions to unseat regimes that are deemed to be non-compliant with the values or norms dictated by a transat-

¹⁵ George F. Kennan, "America and the Russian Future," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1951, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/1990-03-01/america-and-russian-future-1951>

lantic core. That is when the liberal in liberal world order ceases to be. It becomes a system of imposed norms—it goes against the very thing that you are trying to build.

Challenges to the Liberal Order

Today, the challenges to the liberal order can be summed up in two areas. The first of these is great power rivalry and the resurgence of Russia and China. The second of these involve transnational threats such as pandemics, climate change, and financial crises, all of which are events beyond the control of an individual country or group of countries. We also need to think of two challenge areas are interlinked. For example, has the coronavirus, which is a transnational threat, exacerbated US-China rivalry?

However, the main challenges to the liberal order are more likely to come from within, not outside of it. The first of these challenges will be the conflict between those who wish to protect the liberal order and new mercantilists. Both are emerging from the transatlantic core—in Europe and North America, not from other regions such as the Middle East, Asia, or Africa. This is a challenge from within. Unfortunately, the intellectual drivers behind the preservation of a liberal order are still as inward looking as they were in the 1990s. In a recent article, John Ikenberry states that “to renew the spirit of liberal internationalism, its proponents should return to its core aim: creating an environment in which liberal democracies can cooperate for mutual gain, manage their shared vulnerabilities, and protect their way of life.” This still assumes, just like in the 1990s, that there is no world beyond the transatlantic core.¹⁶ It is when the liberal club becomes an exclusive club, that the problems start. Whereas the 1990s saw a triumphant liberalism, today we are seeing an increasingly aggressive defensive liberalism that is going against the very principles it seeks to preserve.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned that the West is seeking to build an “alliance of democracies” against autocratic regimes. This may seem like a normative project, but it mainly involves fostering new and closer bonds with South Korea and India against a resurgent Russia and China. Therefore, it is not essentially a value driven exercise, although it may seem to be that way, but one driven simply by geopolitical rivalry. Ikenberry makes the point that Russia and China are freeriding on the benefits of a liberal order without adhering to its rules, “to prevent this sort of behavior, the United States and other liberal democracies need to reconstitute themselves as a more coherent and functional coalition.”¹⁷ The West against the rest.

¹⁶ G. John Ikenberry, “The Next Liberal Order The Age of Contagion Demands More Internationalism, Not Less,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-06-09/next-liberal-order>

¹⁷ Ikenberry, “The Next Liberal Order.”

Is this approach going to tackle the essential problems facing the world today, from pandemics to changing supply chains, refugees, unending civil wars, and poverty? **Is the West against the rest, although based on some very fine lofty rules and norms, really the best answer for a more just and equitable world?** And foremost, if this club is exclusive, not inclusive, how can it aspire to be truly global and liberal at the same time? After all, values need to grow bottom up in societies and cannot be imposed top down.¹⁸ There is also a certain element of narcissism, evident in last year’s Munich Security Conference, where participants lamented that the gravest danger facing the World today was “Westlessness”. Many around the World may not see it that way.

Those who perpetuate the liberal order are basically continuing the same mindset at its inception. The existence of this order always depended on the existence of an “other”. This usually came in the guise of an ideology. During the Cold War, this was communism. After the Cold War, the notion of “rogue states” and global terrorism emerged; sometimes, unfortunately, and erroneously, referred to as “Islamist terrorism” particularly after September 11. This was in essence all part of the same process since the great ideological struggles of the 20th century: fascism, communism—all against Western-led liberalism and free market economies. The liberal world order has always relied on an ideological struggle to justify itself. It established itself from the ashes of being a victor over fascism. It rose to the challenge as the main and only contender of communism. It then continued its “free world” mantle with singling out radicalism. And finally, states that supposedly strayed from its fold were labeled “authoritarian”. The liberal order has always needed the existence of an “other” to legitimize itself.

Yet, the danger lies in how the transatlantic core choose to single out who remains outside the club. With a lack of understanding as to what kind of a state Turkey has become, and with a further lack of vision as to what kind of states are likely to emerge after the COVID-19 pandemic, which is shaping state behavior as well as societies around the globe, one can deduce that this singling out may not be based on sound criteria.

Particularly after COVID-19, we are likely to see the emergence of a new kind of state, one with a certain degree of mercantilism but one that is constrained in its mercantilism because it cannot shut out international cooperation, but nevertheless

¹⁸ Edward Fishman and Siddarth Mohandas, “A Council of Democracies Can Save Multilateralism,” *Foreign Affairs*, 3 August 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-08-03/council-democracies-can-save-multilateralism>. Although the idea is not a new one, see Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeir, “Global NATO” *Foreign Affairs*, September 2006, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2006-09-01/global-nato>

seeks to subvert established modes of cooperation in the international system. A state which would bypass the power centers of globalization and the institutions which perpetuate these processes, one which seeks to be self-sufficient from the subordination to globalist institutions that dominate its international political and economic relations through conditionality, but at the same time continues to trade globally. Such states will set their own parameters on how they interact with other actors in the global economy. Turkey is emerging as such a state. Is this alarming for its allies? It should not be. We are at the juncture of a new set of historical events. The concept of power is also likely to change. It will not just be about material and normative power anymore, but those countries that are able to adapt quicker in changing times are likely to be more powerful. Whether we choose to think outside the box and learn new ways to engage old friends and adversaries or continue with an inward looking defensive ideological outlook is up to us. This choice is undoubtedly going to determine the future of NATO.