

# TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH NATO & RUSSIA: A FOREIGN POLICY IMPASSE?

*Turkey's role and its commitment to NATO have frequently been questioned in Euro-Atlantic circles. A steadily growing relationship between Turkey and Russia in the last two years is a major concern for the North Atlantic Alliance and its members, particularly for the US. The question circling is whether Turkey is drifting apart from NATO and looking for a new kind of security relationship with Russia. Turkey's national defense strategy still relies fundamentally on its membership to NATO. Turkey's growing security concerns from the South, however, obliges the country to develop coordination with Russia to find a solution to the Syrian quagmire. If Russia and the US can develop a "modus operandi" in Syria, this may set an example for Turkey, too, and Turkey's relationships with NATO and Russia can complement one another.*

Ünal Çeviköz\*



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\* Ambassador Ünal Çeviköz is a retired diplomat, politician, and writer. He is currently the Vice President of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and a member of Parliament in the Turkish Grand National Assembly.

**J**uly will be remembered as a very critical month of 2018 in terms of its effects on international relations and developments in global security issues. The NATO Summit in Brussels between the 11th and 12th of July marked the continuation of disaccord between the two sides of the Atlantic, particularly on budgetary and financial matters. Following the NATO Summit, Helsinki hosted the meeting between US President Donald Trump and the Russian President Vladimir Putin, on the 16th of July. Lastly, at the end of July, Putin had a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the margins of the BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Turkey, a mid-size regional power and at the same time striving to revive its importance in international affairs as a reliable strategic actor, continues to draw the attention of the international community. A brief Erdoğan-Trump encounter on the margins of the NATO Summit in Brussels was expected to give new impetus to rehabilitating the sour relations between the two countries. Yet, Trump's unorthodox style of American foreign policymaking through social media proved to the contrary. In a crass tweet on July 26th, Trump warned that Turkey would face "large sanctions" unless the American Pastor Andrew Brunson, detained in Turkey on charges of espionage, was not released immediately. Ankara interpreted the tweet as an insult to its 70-year relationship with the US through the NATO alliance. Additionally, the tweet drew attention to the meeting between Erdoğan and Putin in South Africa during the BRICS summit—perhaps a sign of Turkey's chilly relationship with the US.

Turkey's role and its commitment to NATO have frequently been questioned in Euro-Atlantic circles. A steadily growing relationship between Turkey and Russia in the last two years is a major concern for the North Atlantic Alliance and its members, particularly for the US. Warmer relations between the Kremlin and Ankara have not permanently weakened Turkey's ties with NATO yet. Nevertheless, limited scholarly discussions in Turkey favoring some kind of affiliation to the "Eurasian Way" and disentangling from NATO cannot be underestimated. Is this a realistic option? Is Turkey drifting away from its Western allies and looking for alternative friends in the east? This article will address these questions from three different angles: Turkey's relations with NATO and its members, Turkey's relations with Russia, and Russia's relations with NATO.

### ***Turkey's Relations with NATO and Its Members***

Turkey's deteriorating relations with many of its allies in the Euro-Atlantic community over the last 15 years is no secret. In 2003, Turkey's parliament refused to authorize US troop deployment on Turkish soil to intervene in Iraq, which resulted

in a serious loss of trust and confidence between the US and Turkey. Under the Obama administration, both sides made efforts to repair the damage, but, to no avail.

Under the new administration of President Trump, Turkey's relations with the US continue to be undermined by a lack of communication. Both the US and Turkey suffer from the adverse effects of domineering, authoritarian, and seemingly uncompromising leaders, which impedes any chance of establishing a sensible and honest dialogue between the two parties. As far as Turkey is concerned, statements given to the press—mostly for domestic consumption—are also thought to be an appropriate way of sending signals to the international community. Under the circumstances, diplomacy is employed only for damage control in Turkey's bilateral relations.

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A similar code of conduct also affects Turkey's relations with its European allies. In 2017, tensions between Turkey and Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands escalated mainly because of Ankara's hawkish rhetoric. Tarnished relations with individual European countries negatively affect Turkey's relations with the European Union as a whole, as can be observed in the lack of progress made in Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU in the last few years. Many in Brussels and other European capitals believe that the EU should take further steps and suspend negotiations instead of keeping them frozen.

Relations with NATO, however, predate Turkey's relations with the EU. Although NATO is known to be a politico-military organization and many in Turkey think that Ankara joined NATO solely for security concerns in the aftermath of World War II, the Washington Treaty entails much more than just security. As underlined in the first paragraph of the Brussels Summit declaration issued on 12 July, NATO is an organization of collective defense, to “defend our indivisible security, our freedom, and our common values, including individual liberty, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.”

Turkey's bid to join NATO was in compliance with Turkey's western vocation, as championed by Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey. It is, therefore, not

a surprise that Turkey's accession to NATO and many other European institutions and organizations occurred in the 1950s, after Turkey became a multi-party system in adherence to its commitment to democratic values.

In spite of a strong commitment to NATO, starting in 2009, Turkey's foreign policymakers have had an inherent suspicion against NATO and Turkey's membership in the organization. As Turkey's foreign policy became increasingly ideological, advancing relations with the Middle East and Muslim countries became a priority and Turkey's membership in NATO came to be perceived as a liability and a hindrance to developing relations with the Arab world. In 2011, for example, during the Libyan crisis, then Prime Minister Erdoğan deemed a NATO military intervention in the country counter-productive. In 2016, many tried to link the thwarted coup attempt in Turkey to NATO, although NATO and all of Turkey's allies resolutely rejected such allegations.

Turkey's lack of confidence in NATO was further aggravated in November 2017 during Trident Javelin, a military computer training exercise in Stavanger, Norway when Atatürk and Erdoğan's names were depicted as "enemy collaborators."<sup>1</sup> The Secretary-General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg apologized immediately, but anti-NATO campaigners in Turkey did not fail to exploit this human error to renew arguments for Turkey's departure from NATO.

Finally, Turkey's decision to buy an S-400 missile defense system from Russia has constituted the most serious point of contention between NATO members and Turkey. Apart from its lack of compatibility with the already deployed NATO system which guarantees comprehensive air defense to Turkey, the Russian S-400 system raises serious concern because of its potential to create a duality in Turkey's air defense infrastructure, as well as the challenge it poses to NATO systems.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Turkey-US Tensions***

Turkey's relations with NATO cannot be evaluated in isolation from its bilateral relations with the US, which dates back to the early days of the Cold War. However, the Turkey-US relationship has been strained significantly in recent years. Current points of contention include the extradition issue of Fethullah Gülen, the detainment of American Pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey, the case on the violation of American sanctions against Iran by the Turkish Halkbank, as well as differences

<sup>1</sup> "NATO apologises to Turkey for war games blunders," *Al Jazeera*, 17 November 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/nato-apologises-turkey-war-games-blunders-171117174536708.html>

<sup>2</sup> Serkan Demirtaş, "S-400s becoming a more difficult issue for Turkey-NATO ties," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 14 March 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/serkan-demirtas/s-400s-becoming-a-more-difficult-issue-for-turkey-nato-ties-128699>

of opinion in finding an honorable exit from the Syrian quagmire. As to the latter, Turkey has been frustrated by the US' support for the Peoples' Protection Unit (YPG)—viewed by Ankara as a Syrian extension of the terrorist organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—in the fight against ISIS.

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Turkey's decision to buy S-400s from Russia is principally a NATO problem, which has transformed into a serious bilateral problem between Turkey and the US. When the Greek Cypriot administration announced its procurement of the S-300 missile defense system from Russia in 1997, Turkey's objection was strongly supported by the US and other NATO allies. Consequently, S-300s were not deployed on the Greek part of Cyprus but were deployed on another Mediterranean island, namely Crete, in Greece. This deal aimed to make the S-300 system idle and, consequently, it was never integrated into the NATO defense system. Today, Turkey's eagerness to procure the Russian S-400s is perceived as a discrepancy to its NATO commitments, and Ankara's attempts to justify this deal by calling attention to the S-300s in Greece is by no means considered a legitimate excuse by its allies.

As a result, Turkey's procurement of Russian S-400s remains a source of friction for Ankara's relationship with NATO, and particularly with Washington. To illustrate this, the US Senate immediately included the issue into its annual “National Defense Authorisation Act,” asked the US Defense Ministry to prepare a report on relations with Turkey, and blocked the sales of F-35 and F-16 fighters, Patriot air defense systems, and military helicopters to Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey could face US sanctions with the “Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act” passed in August 2017, which seeks to punish companies that do business with Russia's defense industry. Given the collection of grievances between Ankara and Washington, relations will have to be handled with care at a bilateral level, separate from Turkey's overall relations with NATO.

For its part, NATO has increased its attention to Turkey's immediate security concerns, which were more clearly addressed at the Brussels Summit this year than they were at the 2016 Warsaw Summit. For instance, the Brussels Summit declaration directly refers to Turkey's “growing security challenges in the South” and promises

Turkey the full implementation of tailored assurance measures.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the declaration emphasizes that the strength of the NATO Response Force has been increased and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force is ready to deploy on short notice. Furthermore, the US European Commander General Curtis Michael Scaparrotti held meetings with Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar in early August—an indication of NATO’s enhanced regard for Turkey’s security concerns.

In spite of these reassurances aimed at addressing Turkey’s security sensitivities, the country still maintains its military presence in northern Syria and has to demonstrate that its “growing security challenges from the South” are entirely related to terrorism and not to a potential confrontation with the Syrian regime. Turkey’s threat perception on its southern border is related to the PKK, which has been waging an insurgency against Ankara since 1984. Turkey’s allies have time and again expressed their support to Turkey in its fight against terrorism, and military operations conducted by the country in northern Syria have, on those grounds, not been challenged. However, Turkey’s prolonged military presence in northern Syria needs to be clearly justified as a requirement solely for the continued combat against terrorism, given the fact that Turkey has repeatedly confirmed its adherence to Syria’s territorial integrity. Pursuing a delicate balance in relations with the US and Russia simultaneously, therefore, is essential. Coordination with the US in Manbij and around the Euphrates basin is a corollary to that kind of policy. Continued cooperation with Russia in the Idlib de-escalation zone is similarly important. A convincing perspective given by Turkey to its commitment to Syria’s territorial integrity and to the withdrawal of its forces from the Syrian territory in due course will become elements of reliable foreign policy. This course of action would also reassure NATO about Turkey’s objectives.

### ***Turkey’s Relations with Russia***

Turkey has cultivated its relationship with Russia extensively over the last 15 years. In fact, Vladimir Putin was the first Russian President ever to officially visit Turkey in 2004. This visit also marked the beginning of Ankara’s attempts to boost trade between the two countries, as well as cooperation in counterterrorism. The visit in 2004 served to mutually reassure the two countries that they would not allow any subversive activities from their territories against one another. Turkey suspected that Russia was behind PKK terrorism and Russia suspected that Chechen separatism in the Northern Caucasus was financed by charities in Turkey. Putin’s visit to Turkey in 2004 resolved these mutual suspicions and prepared the foundation for developing a working relationship based on mutual trust and confidence.

<sup>3</sup> Sevil Erkuş, "NATO vows to protect Turkey’s southern border against threats," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 11 July 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/nato-vows-to-protect-turkeys-southern-border-against-threats-134461>

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Energy is the most important dimension of Turkish-Russian cooperation which began as early as 1987 when the first shipment of Russian natural gas was pumped into the Trans-Balkan pipeline. Today, energy cooperation between the two countries has developed extensively and with the opening of the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline under the Black Sea in February 2003, Turkey's dependence on Russian hydrocarbon exports increased overwhelmingly. In 2017, for example, Turkey's natural gas imports was a record high of 53.5 billion cubic meters and around 52 percent of those imports came from Russia. With almost 22 percent of Turkey's oil imports coming from Russia, this puts Turkey second after Germany in purchasing Russian natural gas exports.<sup>4</sup> Energy cooperation between Russia and Turkey also extends to nuclear energy: Russia is constructing Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, Mersin.

Growing dependence on Russian energy imports inevitably forces Turkey to diversify its energy mix through other foreign suppliers as well as use more coal and renewable energy sources. Although other import options are available, they are mostly complicated by various political factors, particularly due to the foreign policy pursued by Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey will continue to be sidelined in Mediterranean energy projects as long as the Cyprus problem remains unresolved and Turkey's diplomatic relations with Israel and Egypt remain strained. Therefore, Turkey continues to rely on Russian supplies.

Today, the Blue Stream pipeline operates at 60-70 percent of its capacity. In 2016, Turkey and Russia signed a bilateral agreement to build the TurkStream pipeline project which will connect Russian gas to Turkey under the Black Sea. The second line of Turkstream will direct Russian gas to Bulgaria and from there to southern European countries. With the TurkStream project Turkey, will become even more dependent on Russian gas exports.

Russia and Turkey are also strong partners in both trade and tourism. Turkey ranks in seventh place among Russia's trade partners while Russia ranks third. Additionally, Turkey's Mediterranean coast welcomes millions of Russian tourists each year.

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<sup>4</sup>“Gazprom sets record high gas exports to Turkey in 2017,” *Anadolu Agency*, 18 December 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energyterminal/natural-gas/gazprom-sets-record-high-gas-exports-to-turkey-in-2017/16013>

Despite a sudden drop in 2016, close to five million Russians visited Turkey in 2017 making Turkey the top vacation spot for Russians.

Intensified trade, tourism, and economic relations however, do not mean that Turkey and Russia align on issues related to foreign policy. Russia's assertive military intervention in the Syrian conflict starting in 2015 put it at odds with Ankara's priority to oust the Syrian leader, Bashar al-Assad. Russia continued to cooperate with the Syrian government in the fight against ISIS and other jihadist organizations.

There were a few incidents where Russian attacks against terrorist groups in northern Syria included some of the opposition groups supported by Turkey. Moreover, Russian air operations resulted in violations of Turkish airspace by Russian military aircraft. As Turkey's complaints against such violations were not met with a change of attitude by Russia, on the 24 November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian military aircraft which resulted in the death of two Russian officers. This incident caused a sudden rupture in bilateral relations. Yet, mutual interdependence compelled the two countries to find a rapid solution and prevented the further deterioration of bilateral relations. President Erdoğan's letter of apology submitted to Putin at the end of June 2016 facilitated the commencement of normalization in the bilateral relations.

Although Syria has pitted Turkey and Russia against each other, it has also become an issue for the two countries to find a common platform in their efforts to resolve the conflict. In this context, they jointly launched the "Astana Process" at the beginning of 2017. With the participation of Iran, this process has laid the groundwork for the establishment of four de-escalation zones in Syria in order to put into practice a sustainable cease-fire. One of those de-escalation zones is to be formed with the joint responsibility of Turkey and Russia. In an attempt to find a solution to the Syrian problem, Turkey and Russia have proposed bringing the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition forces around the same table to discuss the peace process going on in Geneva. By engaging both sides, Turkey and Russia can facilitate communication between the Syrian government and the opposition.

The Astana process developed into trilateral summit meetings between Russia, Turkey and, Iran whereby the three presidents met in Sochi in November 2017. This was followed by a meeting hosted by Turkey in Ankara in April 2018 and another meeting in Tehran Iran on 7 September. Russian-Turkish understanding in Syria, as well as mutually beneficial interdependence in the fields of energy, trade, and, tourism, have obliged Putin and Erdoğan to meet seven times in 2017. The frequency of these high-level meetings has drawn the attention of the international community, particularly that of NATO members and of the US.



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The perception of Turkey among NATO members and particularly of the US is influenced mainly by two important dynamics. The first has to do with the country’s ever-closer ties with Russia, which includes Turkey’s growing energy dependence on Russia, its desire to raise its exports to balance the negative trade volume, and the procurement of the S-400 missile defense system. Secondly, President Erdoğan’s push to replace parliamentary democracy with an authoritarian presidential government has raised alarm bells among NATO members about the backsliding of democratic norms. Coupled with the attempted coup and the subsequent imposition of a state of emergency, the election process involved the exploitation of nationalistic sentiments and strong anti-Western rhetoric to ensure electoral victory.

It is also important to underline that Turkey’s leaders establish easier and better relations with counterparts that are unconcerned with Turkey’s domestic problems. Western allies see Turkey as a country that must commit itself to shared democratic values and, therefore, consider its growing distance to such values as a point of major concern. Western states also criticize Russia because of its authoritarianism and lack of compliance with democratic rights and fundamental freedoms. For the West, criticism against Russia is viewed as a way to bring Russia to a democratic path. Western criticism against Turkey, on the other hand, stems from a responsibility of shared values necessary to keep Turkey within the community of democratic nations. Turkey finds it easier to maintain strong relations with Russia because Russia does not criticize Turkey and both countries feel they are victimized by western criticism.

Adding to the discord, Turkey has failed to establish fruitful and efficient cooperation and coordination with its allies, particularly with the US, regarding a solution to the Syrian crisis. All of these factors have widened the gap between Turkey and its allies, as well as have raised questions surrounding Turkey’s commitment to NATO.

Far-reaching scenarios based on such perceptions suggest that Turkey is drifting apart from NATO and is looking for a new kind of security relationship with Russia and Iran. Such hasty conclusions have to take into consideration that Turkey’s national defense strategy still relies fundamentally on its membership to NATO and the country’s ultimate goal is to enhance its integration with the European Union.

This does not oblige Turkey, however, to regard its relations with its eastern neighbors as an alternative to that of its Western counterparts; on the contrary, Turkey chooses to maintain both relationships as a means to enhance and complement its multi-faceted foreign policy vision.

In a time when an emerging loose and flexible multipolar system affects international organizations and their internal homogeneity, mutually reinforcing transactional relations will become a new feature of foreign policy. Turkey's relations with Russia, in that context, should not be interpreted as a deviation from NATO.

### *Russia's Relations with NATO*

It is evident that Russia and NATO continue to see each other as adversaries; the reference to Russia in the Brussels Summit declaration is indicative of this: "Russia's aggressive actions, including the threat and use of force to attain political goals, challenge the Alliance and are undermining Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based international order."<sup>5</sup>

The Brussels Summit declaration contains other direct references to Russia in its successive paragraphs. Compliance with the obligations surrounding the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) is also mentioned along with a call on Russia for constructive engagement with the Vienna Document, Open Skies Treaty and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. The threat Russia poses to NATO is boldly and explicitly pronounced throughout the declaration.

Russia's perception of NATO has largely remained unchanged since the Cold War era. Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the transformation of eastern Ukraine and the Donbass region into a military control zone are all justified under the pretext of defense against so-called NATO assertiveness.

In spite of the fact that NATO and Russia have been able to co-sign the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997 and the Rome Declaration in 2002, they have been unable to make effective use of the NATO-Russia Council formed on the basis of these two documents. On the contrary, both sides continued to develop deterrence postures, arguably to prevent war, but mainly as a way to get a competitive advantage. Today, this race does not guarantee stability. In the event of a crisis, the continuation of deterrence and defense capabilities can make the outbreak of conflict very likely as those deterrence postures themselves have become sources of increasing mutual threat perceptions.

<sup>5</sup> Brussels Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, 11 July 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm)

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The Helsinki Summit on 16 July 2018 between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin was seen as an important opportunity for the beginning of a new era of détente. Although there was no joint communiqué at the end of the summit, their joint press conference was revealing.<sup>6</sup> Still, there are many pending issues between the US and Russia which will need to be resolved, such as Russian meddling in the 2016 election, US sanctions against Russia, a myriad of energy issues, the annexation of Crimea and Ukraine, as well as the future of the INF Treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty which is set to expire in 2021.

Syria, on the other hand, promises to be a good opportunity to ease tension between Russia and the West. If Russia and the US can develop a *modus operandi* in keeping the Syrian and the Israeli forces separated, as well as maintaining the Iranian militia on the Syrian territory at a respectable distance from the Israeli border to ensure Israel’s security, they will have achieved significant progress. For the moment, Russia does not show any desire to challenge Iran or directly ask the withdrawal of Iranian supported militia from the Syrian territory. Moreover, US-Russia deconfliction mechanisms used in Syria could develop into facilitating increasing political-military and military-military communication channels between NATO and Russia.

In this context, Syria also becomes an important testing ground for resolving Turkey’s apparent dilemma between its Western commitments and its flourishing relationship with Russia. If Russia and the US can keep Syrian and Turkish forces separated and maintain the PYD/YPG at a respectable distance from Turkey’s border to ensure Turkish security in northern Syria, similar to the arrangement in south-west Syria and the Israeli border, Turkey’s relationships with NATO and Russia can complement one another.

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<sup>6</sup> Reid Standish, “What it was like to attend that Trump-Putin Conference,” *The Atlantic*, 17 July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/trump-putin-cable-news-carnival/565400/>

### ***Conclusion***

Turkey's increased cooperation with Russia has become a major source of concern among its Western allies. Many in the West question whether Turkey is drifting away from NATO and its commitments to western values, ideals, and principles.

However, Turkey's developing relationship with Russia is not necessarily a challenge to its membership in NATO. Although Turkey's relations with NATO and its members have fluctuated, Turkish defense strategy still fundamentally relies on its membership to NATO. On the other hand, relations with Russia form an important feature of Turkey's attempt to diversify its foreign trade and commercial relations. In this context, energy is a major dimension of the relationship between Moscow and Ankara because Turkey heavily depends on energy imports from Russia.

Turkey's cooperation with Russia in Syria is also a result of its basic security requirements at its border and primarily to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian problem. Turkey's relations with NATO and its individual members could be positively balanced with its burgeoning relationship with Russia if the global bipolarity between the US and Russia finds a viable mechanism in Syria. Such a mechanism will also encourage the growth of a stable communication line between NATO and Russia.