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THE EU-NATO-TURKEY NEXUS

Transatlantic Desires vs. Neo-Ottoman Ambitions

Frederik Brekk

Summary

In the last few decades Turkey has gone from a reliable NATO ally and a hopeful EU candidate to a pariah within the transatlantic community. A change in policy towards Turkey is necessary in order to inspire a shift in behaviour from the wayward state. Doing so poses myriad challenges, however.

Key points

- Adopting a pragmatic approach, focusing on Turkey's economy, security, and regional ambitions, would likely yield optimal results.
- Cohesive and decisive action by the transatlantic community is critical to effectively engage with Turkey, particularly due to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's penchant for pitting states and actors against each other.

Introduction

In the last few decades Turkey has gone from a reliable NATO ally and a hopeful EU candidate to a pariah within the transatlantic community.¹ Joining NATO in 1952, Turkey has played a crucial role in projecting Western influence into the Black Sea and the Middle East, containing the Soviet Union (and later Russia), and nuclear deterrence.² Occupying a unique geographical position and home to NATO's second largest military, Turkey's importance within the alliance should not be understated and, beginning in the 1990s, Turkey's position between a warring Yugoslavia, revanchist Russia, and the home of a nascent Islamic terror threat (following 9/11), has made it *even more* vital (Szmigiera, 2021).³ At the time, some experts saw Turkey as a liability rather than what it truly was: an opportunity to promote the country as a reliable and allied mediator for strategic engagement with unstable neighbouring regions. Following the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power in 2002, with current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as Prime Minister and party leader, there were attempts to continue courting the EU, hoping to secure membership and funding. Talks stalled, however, which angered Turkish leadership and has weighed on Turkish-transatlantic relations ever since. The neglect or caution shown by the West towards Turkey has been latched onto by conservative and Eurosceptic elements within Turkish politics and anti-Western rhetoric has become a staple of Erdoğan and his cronies. Regardless, Turkey has become increasingly pragmatic, opting for a strategy of 'transactionalism' anchored to economic and security ambitions, and rhetoric should not be allowed to influence prospects of genuine cooperation (Stein, 2018).

This paper will explore the current transatlantic policy towards Turkey, why it has not provided the desired results, and propose a three-part solution aimed at countering Turkish eastward 'drift' by leveraging Turkey's prioritisation of its economy, security concerns, and desire to become a relevant regional power in the Middle East.

Current Transatlantic Policy

The transatlantic community's response to Turkey's behaviour in the last decade has been lacking. Rather than reigning in Turkey as hoped, it has only exacerbated the increasingly tenuous relationship between Turkey and EU/NATO members. This failure is primarily due to a strategy which prioritises punishment and ideological rhetoric over cooperation, neglects genuine Turkish security concerns, and misunderstands what drives Turkish foreign policy. The current policy has favoured sanctions, primarily focusing on the military sector.⁴

The West seems to struggle with two facets unique to Turkey as a NATO member – the first being the personalist dictatorship, à la Putin, which Erdoğan has been building (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011).⁵ No NATO

¹ In the context of this paper, the transatlantic community generally refers to the EU and NATO, but also takes into account bilateral state relations (e.g., Turkish-US relations).

² As of today, the US has 50 B-61 nuclear gravity bombs stationed in Turkey.

³ Top three NATO members in terms of personnel numbers: US (1,350,000), Turkey (440,000), and France (210,000).

⁴ The most publicised of which being sanctions following Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems and its subsequent ejection from the US F-35 fighter programme.

⁵ Personalist dictatorships are characterised by regimes in which all power lies in the hands of an individual, but differ from other types of dictatorships in their use of patron-client networks and informal politics. An example of this is Erdoğan's appointment of one son, Berat Albayrak, as head of the Ministry of Treasury and Finance, and another, Selçuk Bayraktar, is current CTO of Turkey's preeminent drone (and AI) company, Baykar Defense.

member currently has such a leader, but the alliance has insisted on engaging with Turkey under the belief that it is run by an archetypal European government. It is not only wrong to do so, but also unhelpful. If one were to travel through Turkey, they would notice a cultural quasi-war being fought between Atatürk and Erdoğan, usually in the form of flags and posters hung from balconies with one of the leaders' likenesses imprinted on them. Since the republic's founding, there has been a growing fanaticism, eventually becoming deeply ingrained in Turkish politics. The current president regularly leverages this fanaticism, in turn affecting both domestic and foreign policy goals.

The second is the elevated status Turkey is granted due to its unique geographical location. What makes Turkey such a vital country for NATO also makes it difficult to impose Western ideals on it – it is an amalgamation of eastern and western cultures, religions, beliefs, and histories. It is a crossroads between Europe and the Middle East – a blend of both continents. Treating such a country as if it is a standard European ally tends to be met with indignation from Turkish officials, and attempts to impose a Western-style democracy on a country which muzzles grassroots democratic activism is currently a futile endeavour.

Generally speaking, the current transatlantic combined policy towards Turkey offers few incentives to cooperate. Therefore, the West should not be surprised when Erdoğan's senior policy advisor claims they are seeking "outside the transatlantic box" cooperation' (Goren, 2018, p. 4).⁶

Turkey Today

Following the 2002 Turkish general election, the West jumped at the chance to promote Erdoğan as an ideal 'pro-reform, pro-West democrat' who would grow to become a close economic and security partner. Hopes that the Islamist AKP would become a more modern and moderate party were quickly replaced by a tacit understanding that Turkey would not become the reformed and level-headed partner the West had hoped. Additionally, Turkey began the 21st century with serious attempts at engagement with the West and a desire to finally join the EU, only to be rebuffed. Subsequently, Turkey turned eastwards in search of more reliable and like-minded partners, which it has increasingly found in China and Russia. In order to formulate the best policy solution, it is crucial to understand what drives Turkish foreign policy decisions.



Map Sources: UNCS, ESRI.
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Map created in Sep 2013.

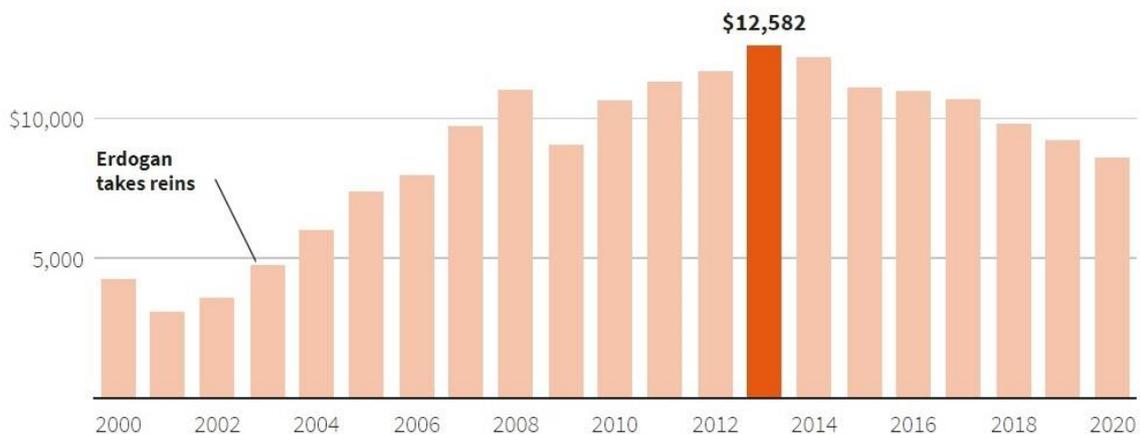
⁶ Turkey has held military exercises with both the Syrian army (April 2009) and Chinese air force (September 2010).

A Wavering Economy

In the first decade of AKP rule, Turkey's economy developed rapidly, with a focus on improved exports and infrastructure. Since then, corruption, instability, and assorted crises have stunted further economic growth, and Turkey is currently considered a middle-income country, with approximately \$9,150 GDP per capita as of 2019 (O'Neill, 2021). Ultimately, the government failed to pursue stable economic policies during its two decades in power. As a result, public opinion polling shows that '52.1 percent [of Turkish citizens list] the "economy/making ends meet" as their main concern' (Stein, 2018, p. 7). The Turkish economy is a subject Erdoğan personally, and regularly, concerns himself with, most evident in his habitual firing of central bank governors and finance ministers in recent years due to disagreements on his economic policies.

Turks' shrinking economic footprint

GDP per capita peaked in 2013 in dollar terms, reflecting a subsequent drop in Turkish prosperity



Note: Gross domestic product (GDP) in current prices
Source: TurkStat

As of 2017, the EU 'remained Turkey's largest source of foreign direct investment' (Stein, 2018, pp. 4-5). In response to a political dispute around the same time, Turkey's former Minister of EU Affairs, Ömer Çelik, reassured foreign investors, claiming that 'the private sector, business world, tourists and the people of the Netherlands are not part of the crisis' (Coskun & Karadeniz, 2017). There is a clear Turkish desire to preserve economic ties with Europe and wall off any political disagreements from economic developments. The Turkish public's negative opinion of the West, and its desire and need for the economic incentives which come with engagement with the region, help explain Turkey's mercurial behaviour.

The 'Kurdish Issue'

Since the 1980s, the Turkish government has been actively involved in armed conflict against Kurdish extremists. It is an area fraught with disagreements at home and abroad, but domestic terrorism remains a genuine threat to Turkish society, and should be treated as such. Since 20 July 2015, at least 5,464 people have been killed in clashes or terror attacks, of which 549 were civilians (International Crisis Group, 2021). While most of the violence occurs in the south-eastern region of Turkey, there

have been Kurdish attacks in western Turkey as well.⁷ According to the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index in 2020, Turkey placed 18th, with the next transatlantic state being the US, at 29th (Statista, 2021). If a similar threat was present in any other transatlantic state, the response would be markedly different and Turkey has therefore taken the initiative and moved against radical Kurdish elements it considers a threat. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey has labelled a terrorist organisation (as has the EU and the US), is the preeminent Kurdish extremist threat to Turkish citizens. Kurdish extremism has also been used to opportunistically eliminate Erdoğan's political opponents.⁸ AKP did initially seek engagement with Kurds but relented, partially due to pressure from its coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The prolonged struggle against radical Kurds has placed the issue at the centre of Turkish politics, with AKP often using it as a cudgel against more liberal politicians and policies. Whether the transatlantic community agrees with Turkey on whether Kurdish extremism presents an existential threat to larger Turkish society is irrelevant. The current Turkish government and its supporters perceive it as such, and therefore demand security guarantees and cooperation from its military allies in NATO, which should be provided, with conditions.

Regional Ambitions

Over the last two decades, Turkey has transformed into an unapologetically pro-Sunni and revisionist (i.e., 'neo-Ottoman') state (Bekdil, 2017). While this has been a cause for concern for some, it also presents an opportunity for the transatlantic community. Combined with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the vacuum left behind, Turkey is presented with a chance to establish itself as the preeminent regional power in the Middle East, becoming the transatlantic community's primary conduit through which engagement with the region is made possible. Turkey's ambitions in this regard are not likely to disappear. Rather than fighting it, further harming relations, the transatlantic community should encourage and embrace Turkish regional hegemony in the Middle East. The nature of Middle Eastern politics and its reliance on Sunni-Shiite divides makes Turkey (a Sunni-majority state) an ideal counterweight to Iranian (a Shiite-majority state) ambitions in the region.

Recent rhetoric about the threat the new Turkey-Russia 'nexus' poses to the West is exaggerated. Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin share a friendly personal relationship, but their relationship on the state level is one of tenuous 'transactionalism' – instances of engagement are opportunistic, and there is a distinct absence of long-term commitments, particularly in security. Russia's primary goal is destabilising both NATO and the transatlantic relationship more generally, and Putin's pragmatism, particularly regarding Turkey's southern and eastern neighbourhoods, appeals to Erdoğan. The nature of the two leaders' relationship can explain Turkey's increased engagement with Russia, but would also suggest it is not as irreversible or dangerous as some believe.

⁷ Ankara and Istanbul have also been targets of Kurdish extremist attacks, with 37 and 38 deaths, respectively ("Ankara bombing: Turkey strikes against Kurdish rebel PKK" and 'Istanbul stadium attacks: Kurdish TAK group claim attacks', 2016).

⁸ The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) had become too powerful and, in March 2021, Erdoğan began a process to ban HDP from Turkish politics on the grounds that it is a political front for PKK ("Turkey moves to ban pro-Kurdish HDP opposition party", 2021).

A Three-Pronged Strategy for Turkish Engagement

This paper proposes a three-pronged strategy leveraging Turkey's prioritisation of its economy, security concerns, and desire to become a relevant regional power in the Middle East. While doing so, policymakers must also be cautious about making decisions which would trigger a revival of Turkey's Sèvres Syndrome (Göçek, 2013).⁹

Economic Incentivisation

In a world where economic power is the primary channel through which influence is peddled internationally, strengthening economic ties between the EU/US and Turkey is an important pillar of developing a closer and more stable relationship.

As a candidate country, Turkey currently receives substantial financial assistance from the EU and has an economy heavily integrated with Europe's. The economic relationship between Turkey and the transatlantic community, particularly the EU, must be strengthened. Should the EU withdraw funding or place additional sanctions, Erdoğan would be proven right, confirming his supporters' suspicions of the West. Such decisions would only damage EU-Turkey relations further, provide the Turkish president with additional ammunition for his abrasive anti-West rhetoric, and push Turkey into the arms of less fussy partners, such as China or Russia.¹⁰

Further economic integration should be championed by the transatlantic community, particularly France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the US, as they currently make up more than 30% of Turkey's exports and almost 30% of Turkey's imports (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2020). In turn, Turkey should be encouraged to invest in, and engage with, its Middle Eastern neighbours – the EU and US could provide funds and experience in this endeavour. Promoting such a strategy would encourage a more economically interconnected Turkey and, as the EU project has proved, increasing regional economic integration raises both the threshold for war or conflict breaking out and the mutual costs of disrupting cross-border supply chains.

The EU must realise that while Turkey's full admission to the club is unlikely in the near future, that does not mean opportunities do not exist. The EU should establish a new title reserved for states which are not full EU members, but are provided certain benefits, with conditions.¹¹ If such a pilot project proves successful, additional states can be invited and the project expanded. Possible economic and political benefits could include:

- Improved or preferential trade deals
- Earmarked funds for Turkish economic and infrastructure development (nuclear power plants, entrepreneurship initiatives, etc.)
- Debt relief in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic

⁹ Sèvres Syndrome, originating from the Treaty of Sèvres which divided up the former Ottoman Empire following WWI, is the belief that Western powers are conspiring to weaken and carve up Turkey.

¹⁰ Turkey is currently a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and has vowed to forsake any hopes of joining the EU should they be granted full membership in the SCO.

¹¹ Such a strategy already counts French President Emmanuel Macron among its supporters, as well as others (Stein, 2018).

- Visa-free travel between Turkey and the EU/US

These benefits must be combined with conditions, the most ideal being ones which prioritise preserving progressive elements within Turkish politics and civil society. These conditions should be easier for Turkey to meet – as the stated short-term goal is *preserving* Turkish progressive elements, not expanding them – and would signal a more cooperative mentality from the EU.

It is worth noting that during economic downturns Turkey has shown an increased willingness to engage with more illiberal states, such as China and Russia, and opts for a more aggressive foreign policy. In contrast, during times of economic success, Turkey was concurrently engaging more with the transatlantic community. Under Erdoğan's first decade of rule, Turkey saw vast improvements in its economy and infrastructure, and he is likely attempting a similar strategy again with his recent mega-infrastructure project.¹² The EU would be wise to remind the Turkish president that his political success in his first decade was correlated with substantial EU engagement and a more open civil society.

Kurdish Détente and NATO

NATO's inadequate response to Turkey's security concerns has been detrimental to their relationship. The alliance must demonstrate that it takes Turkey's security concerns seriously, and is willing to assist. The primary driver of Turkish concern domestically is Kurdish terrorism in its south-eastern region. The 'Kurdish issue' has remained unsolved for decades, and, particularly for AKP, requires a difficult balancing act – it has cultivated a voter base which detests Kurds, but cannot placate the Kurds without changing their policy towards them. Additionally, the upcoming 2023 Turkish general election and AKP's reliance on MHP means that détente with Kurdish extremists may be difficult, at least until after the election. Supporting Turkish operations against Kurdish *insurgency*, and not regular Kurds, is a policy NATO can, and should, adopt.

In recent years Turkey has been concerned over the US arming of Kurdish militias, and with good reason.¹³ The US arming of mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan War and subsequent 'betrayal' of these militias provides ample evidence that it would be mutually beneficial for the transatlantic community to limit such activities. Doing so would demonstrate to Turkey that NATO understands its concerns and is attempting to remedy past mistakes, and would limit the number of armed militias roving Turkey's eastern border. Increased cooperation between Turkey and NATO countries' militaries and intelligence agencies in Turkey's south-eastern region could also help prevent, or at least mitigate, further attacks. Even if the insurgency continues, the gesture of increased support from NATO allies would go a long way in improving Turkish opinion of NATO.

At the same time, conditions which guarantee the safety of Turkish Kurds who are not involved in terrorist activities must be included. Given the substantial Kurdish diaspora in Europe, it is also necessary to avoid backlash in Europe. Possible examples include:

- Stationing of NATO observers in south-eastern Turkey
- Joint NATO-Turkey patrols in south-eastern Turkey and on its borders with Syria and Iraq

¹² This second infrastructure drive, however, will likely prove less popular, especially given its toll on smaller communities (where his voter base tends to reside) and the environment.

¹³ Examples of such militias include the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

- Economic and infrastructure development in Kurdish-majority areas in Turkey, aided by transatlantic funds and experience
- Adopting a policy of amnesty towards Kurds who abandon extremism

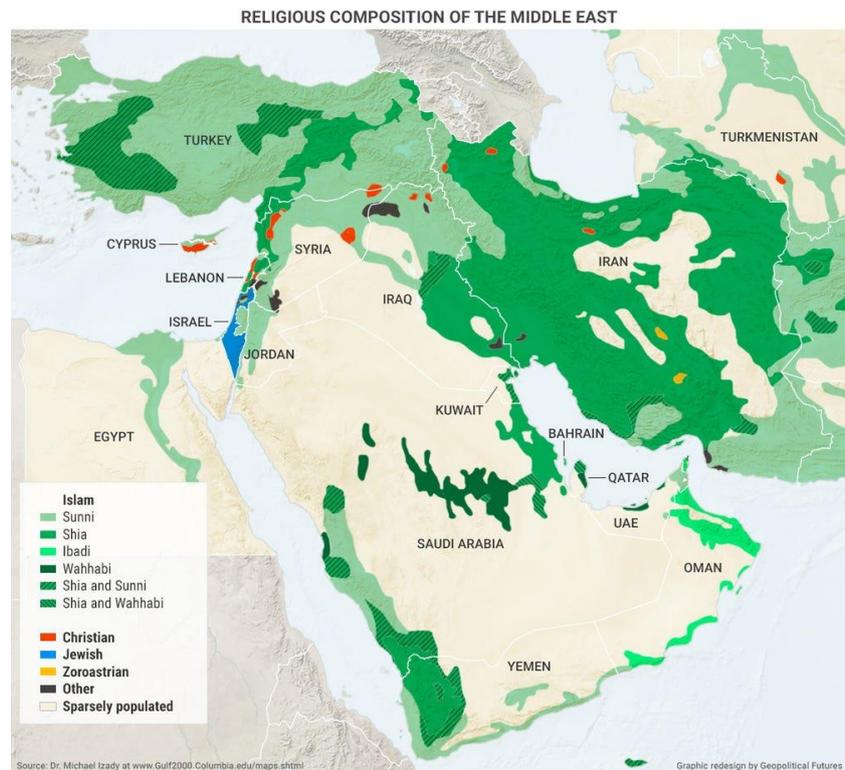
Turkey has also demonstrated a desire to be more actively involved in NATO operations. Turkey is a framework nation of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and is the current head of the task force (Stein, 2018).¹⁴ Turkish involvement in military exercises and operations, particularly in a leadership capacity, should be encouraged by NATO allies and additional opportunities for cooperation should be created. The establishment of a permanent Black Sea patrol group, based on NATO's Operation Sea Guardian, would create an opportunity for close cooperation between Turkey and its NATO allies, particularly Greece, with whom tensions have historically been acute (Tol & Işık, 2021). Such a patrol group could potentially include non-NATO partners in relevant exercises, such as Ukraine. This, in turn, would combat Russian influence in the region, particularly following its annexation of Crimea and the Russian navy's sabre-rattling in the Black Sea more generally.

Lastly, the issue of the S-400 missile systems purchased from Russia has been brought up repeatedly by Turkey's allies. It is considered a serious threat to the cohesion of the alliance's missile defence network, and Turkey has been requested to remove them. Given Turkey's desire for concrete leadership roles, NATO should add a stipulation to *future* Turkish leadership during exercises and operations – the removal of the S-400 systems. The alliance should also extend such a stipulation to all NATO members – purchasing and using military hardware from clear adversaries (i.e., China, Iran, and Russia) would preclude that member from any leadership positions until the situation is remedied. Otherwise, Turkey, or any other NATO member, may continue to take part in operations, but will not be offered a leadership role.

¹⁴ The VJTF is a 'spearhead force' created in 2014 within the NATO Response Force (NRF), and consists of approximately 20,000 troops ready to move within two or three days. Leadership changes on a rotational basis.

Ottoman Resurgence

Since the turn of the century, Turkey has displayed an increasing desire to become a relevant global actor and depart from its perceived treatment as a mere appendage by NATO allies (Cook, 2021). Turkey has a shared history with the Middle East. It is a Sunni-majority country in a region where the Sunni-Shiite divides often determine geopolitical allegiances, and it can interact with states and actors not necessarily available to, or eager to engage with, Western actors. The transatlantic community



should strive to engage with the region in cooperation with a mutually known and experienced mediator – Turkey.

A more pragmatic approach from NATO would make further Turkish engagement with Russia less tantalising. Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East would eventually come into conflict with Russia's, and cooperation between the two would likely dwindle. Promoting Turkey as a regional power would also put it into direct opposition with one of the transatlantic community's other adversaries in the region: Iran. Turkish hegemony is desirable as, otherwise, Iran – and Russia – are likely to fill the vacuum left by the US. Indeed, they are already regularly involved as arbitrators in Middle Eastern conflicts.¹⁵

The primary concern with a strategy of acquiescing to Turkish hegemony in the region is the possibility of Turkey taking advantage of its newfound status and influence to prioritise its ambitions over those of its transatlantic partners. The likelihood of this being realised to its full extent is unlikely, but it must be understood and accepted that increased Turkish influence in the Middle East would translate into more independent behaviour. The best way to counter this is to maintain as many ties as possible – including economic, security, and political – between Turkey and the transatlantic community, so that a full separation would cause irreparable long-term damage to all involved.

¹⁵ Most recently the Syrian civil war and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Lastly, the recent dispute between Turkey and Greece over territorial waters in the Eastern Mediterranean weighs heavily on NATO members’ interactions with each other. The dispute highlights a serious issue within NATO: its voting system. Every ally possesses a *de facto* right to veto any NATO issue if its demands are not met, which, in theory, should allow for all members’ concerns to be considered. In reality, however, the system becomes politicised and votes are held hostage as a result of disputes unrelated to the issue at hand. Such behaviour fosters a climate defined by an unwillingness to compromise and must be remedied. The consensus-based voting system is deeply ingrained in the alliance’s history and would be difficult to change, but it may be necessary given a recent spate of disagreements within the alliance. One disagreement focuses on burden sharing, with the agreed guideline being 2% of GDP per capita spent on the armed forces for each member (NATO, 2021). A new system, where votes are weighted based on how much of the 2% spending guideline is fulfilled would mean votes are influenced by how committed members are, rather than by unrelated motives.¹⁶ Implementing this system might prove difficult, as those who are not currently at the 2% guideline would likely veto such a change. Regardless, NATO’s voting system may be fair in theory, but in practise tends to be influenced by unrelated motives, and as such a change may be needed.

Defence spending by Nato countries in Europe as % of GDP



Source: NATO. Based on estimated figures for 2020 spending BBC

Lastly, a transatlantic policy for Turkey will fail if the EU and the US cannot act cohesively and decisively. If Turkey reneges on any conditions or agreements, the transatlantic community must immediately suspend related benefits and open discussions with Turkey about returning to the agreed arrangement. Erdoğan’s ability and desire to pit states and actors against each other is compounded by the EU’s recent lack of cohesion and indecisiveness in the face of crises. NATO members’ calls to kick Turkey out of the alliance may also limit progress – such rhetoric is inflammatory, doesn’t inspire a desire to change behaviour, and should be avoided if possible.

Conclusion

The three-pronged strategy proposed places considerable emphasis on compartmentalised and pragmatic engagement, but Turkey’s democratic hopes should not just be cast away. Preserving

¹⁶ With no additional benefits for spending more than 2% on the military, to avoid unfair additional influence for states such as the UK or US, who have outsized militaries.

Turkey's prospects for a more liberal and resilient political future, once the situation is more favourable, is essential for the state's long-term future as a transatlantic partner. Turkey's recent economic woes, Kurdish extremism, NATO's unique relationship with Turkey, and regional ambitions all offer opportunities for the transatlantic community to strengthen its relationship with Turkey, and possibly entice the wayward state back towards the West. Erdoğan's pugnacious rhetoric should be ignored, and transatlantic states must find areas of shared interest and promote them as areas for positive engagement.

Looking to the future, United States President Joe Biden, an advocate for strong transatlantic relationships, will find his hands tied when it comes to Turkey, and Europe is currently mired in internal political divisions of its own. The 2023 Turkish general election will likely cause further political division domestically, as well as instigate increased anti-Kurdish and anti-West rhetoric. Erdoğan may also opt for riskier behaviour (legally, diplomatically, and/or militarily) abroad to recover lost support at home. AKP's current domestic situation is tenuous – the economy has been struggling following the Covid-19 pandemic, and support for Erdoğan is waning.¹⁷ Should the next Turkish general election result in a shift in the political landscape, the transatlantic community's strategy for Turkey may change drastically, and a re-evaluation of the state's future will be warranted at that time. Until then, however, the transatlantic community must become more pragmatic towards Turkish engagement in the short-term, and enjoy their victories wherever they can.

¹⁷ Erdoğan has placed his re-election hopes on a \$325 billion infrastructure project spanning the next decade, which has received criticism at home. Inflation has been stuck in double digits for the past four years and unemployment is around 14%. Erdoğan has begun losing support in his voter strongholds (e.g., Rize), and support for AKP overall is below 30%.

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FREDERIK BREKK

The author of this paper currently works as an intern at the Institute for Politics and Society in Prague, Czech Republic. He is a student at University College London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), and will graduate with a double degree Masters in Politics and Security from UCL and International Relations in Eurasia from the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia in 2022. His academic and research interests include defence, security, Russian and Turkish foreign policy, and the Arctic.



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Martinská 2, 110 00 Praha 1



www.politikaspolecnost.cz



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