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The NATO-Turkey Relationship: Envisioning Future Prospects Amidst Growing Rifts

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Contents

About the Authors	4
The NATO-Turkey Relationship: Envisioning Future Prospects Amidst Growing Rifts	6
Appendix: The NATO-Turkey Relationship According to Policy Experts	15
Endnotes	17



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The NATO-Turkey Relationship: Envisioning Future Prospects Amidst Growing Rifts

Introduction

There is nothing more damaging to a security alliance than its members being at odds. In recent years, Turkey and France have found themselves clashing on multiple fronts, which has threatened the cohesion in NATO. The French premier has not shied away from criticizing Turkey's post-2016 democratic backsliding, while Ankara has become one of the most vocal opponents of France's norms on secularism that restrict religious expression in public. These tensions carry over to geopolitics. Over the last year, for instance, France has intensified its support for Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, over competing claims to the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In Libya, France has yet to cease military support to the Haftar faction, a rival government in the east of the country, in defiance of the UN-recognized governmental group that Turkey favors.¹ Geopolitical disputes such as these have prevented the two security allies from reconciling for the sake of NATO unity and integrity - an objective that is critical for the survival of any security alliance.

The Turkish-French case is only one of many examples of how Turkish interests have come into odds—in a significant way—with its NATO allies, and even the NATO secretariat itself, in recent years. How should NATO member states and the organization itself cope with these issues? Are there ways to resolve the underlying conflicts of interests that are resulting in these fractures in the transatlantic alliance? Do these international political disputes interact with other fractures in the Turkey-NATO relationship to destabilize NATO cohesion?

This policy paper identifies what we consider to be the core problems in the NATO-Turkey relationship. These issues threaten NATO cohesion, make the alliance vulnerable to threats from competitors like Russia, and weaken cooperation among member countries. Ultimately, solving these problems is necessary for NATO to achieve its central aims: maintaining collective security and international stability. We start with a brief overview of all the issues we discuss. This is followed by a detailed description of the issues and opportunities for reconciliation

and resolution. The goal of this policy memo is to convince the NATO secretariat and Turkish leaders and diplomats to take the necessary, if also difficult, steps toward revitalizing the Turkish-NATO relationship and successfully navigating the threats that obstruct this objective. Since NATO does not have the authority to issue sanctions on individual member states, our policy paper does not discuss whether or not NATO members should sanction Turkey. Instead, we offer extensive commentary on other actions NATO can take to address the key issues that threaten the alliance. After discussing each issue area, we make actionable recommendations derived from our research. Our methods include interviews with both Turkish and American experts, a survey fielded in English and in Turkish to solicit the perspectives of policy experts across ten countries, and extensive secondary-source research.

An Indispensable Relationship At Risk

Turkey remains an important contributor to the NATO alliance and its collective security goals. While there are some that question the continued value of Turkish participation in NATO, we argue that Turkey still has a constructive role in the alliance.² Proponents of Turkey's indispensable position in NATO frequently mention its role as NATO's "Southern flank." Since 1954, Turkey's Incirlik Airbase has housed US B-1 Bombers providing a critical component of NATO's nuclear deterrent. Moreover, the US role in defeating ISIS in 2015 depended heavily on US access to this base, which the US and Turkey operated jointly.³ Other facilities also demonstrate Turkey's continued importance to NATO. Konya Base serves as the forward operating base for NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control Force. Izmir Base is home to NATO Land Command Forces, and a US radar facility is located in Kurecik. Finally, Turkey's participation in "non-Article 5 missions" including in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Afghanistan has been fundamental to their execution. Turkey has substantial historical and cultural cache in these regions that other members of NATO lack.



NATO neither has another country which can substitute for this role, nor can it afford to lose this advantage to regional rivals like Russia and Iran. Fissures in the NATO-Turkey relationship signal to Russia and Iran that there may be an opening for further extending their influence across the Middle East. Furthermore, even if the net contributions of Turkey to the alliance were de minimis, there is a strong reason to keep Turkey in the alliance. It is conducive to NATO's interests to have some influence on Turkey through the organization compared to the limited influence NATO would have on a non-member Turkish state. At the present moment, and for the purposes of this paper, we accept the prevailing perspective that it is better for both NATO and Turkey that the NATO-Turkey relationship is improved and Turkey remains a member state of the alliance. Yet, given the challenges the alliance faces, how should NATO leaders proceed?

Identifying NATO-Turkey Policy Priorities: Research Methodology

As Turkish-French disputes, discussed above, demonstrate, one of the roadblocks to a strong Turkey-NATO relationship is the inevitable conflicts of interest between Turkey and its NATO allies, particularly France, the United States, and Greece, as well as with the NATO Secretariat itself. Given the complexity of the interdependent nature of intra-NATO relations, it can be difficult for NATO member states to make progress in resolving problems in one area without disturbing the balance of interests in others. For the sake of analytic clarity, we compartmentalize our analysis of each issue area, recognizing the interlinkages among them that could limit their short-term actionability. We thus conceptualized three distinct areas in which NATO-Turkey policy priorities could be pursued.

1. Turkish domestic political issues;
2. Turkey's relationship with Russia and;
3. Intra-NATO conflicts between Turkey and other NATO member states.

To identify specific, actionable issue areas in the domain of each of these policy priority areas—areas in which our research could assess the potential for policymakers to make a tangible impact—we used two criteria: their significance to NATO leadership and Turkey; and the possibility of reconciliation and resolution.⁴ To evaluate the extent to which

the myriad of issues facing the Turkish-NATO relationship meet these criteria, we interviewed experts from Turkey and the United States, Turkish government representatives, and NATO officials. We also conducted a bilingual survey among experts of Turkish origin and American analysts in US-based think tanks, experts from Turkish think tanks, and NATO experts in 8 other countries in Europe and Middle East. One question asked respondents to rank threats to NATO in order of importance and immediacy and elicited their opinions on the recommended course of action for NATO to navigate these issues. The results of the survey are summarized in the accompanying infographic.⁵

Based on this analysis, we identified the three following issues as focus areas where policymakers are best positioned to promote cooperation. First, in the policy priority area of Turkish domestic issues, we look at indications of democratic backsliding. Second, in the area of Russo-Turkish relationship, we look at the acquisition of the S-400 missile system and navigating the relationship in areas of conflict. Third, in the policy priority area of intra-NATO conflicts, we look at the conflict between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean and other bilateral disputes. In each of the following sections, we define the problem NATO policymakers face, present the evidence we have found for how the issue is developing, and offer our recommendations NATO leaders could pursue to maintain NATO cohesion balanced against national interests.

Policy Priority Area 1: Turkish domestic political issues

Democratic Backsliding within Turkey

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has increasingly operated with limited democratic checks. Many emergency laws enacted after the failed 2016 coup that have shifted Turkey away from many democratic discourses and practices. One metric that highlights the weakness of democratic norms in Turkey is the fact that it is the only NATO ally listed as "Not Free" by Freedom House, receiving a 16/40 for Political Rights and a 16/60 for Civil Liberties.⁶ This reflects domestic realities in the country that threaten the relationship between other members of NATO, which holds democratic governance as a founding principle of the alliance, and Turkey as well. However, there are concrete policy solutions that NATO member states can encourage and



promote within the domestic space in Turkey to ease tensions in their relationship. Turkey and NATO can take actionable steps to revitalize the Turkey-NATO relationship and address the threat of democratic backsliding at the domestic level.

Recommendation I: Establish a Center of Excellence for Democratic Resilience

NATO can establish a Center of Excellence for Democratic Resilience focused on supporting and strengthening the local democratic institutions within Turkey and all NATO countries. NATO 2030, an alliance plan that addresses the ways that NATO can efficiently operate, mentions that this is an actionable step that member nations can take to reaffirm the commitment to NATO and democracy.⁷ This center would bolster visible international support for the democratic institutions in the country and signal to other NATO countries that Turkey is still invested in the values tied to the organization.

Recommendation II: Joint Condemnation of the Uyghur camps in China

NATO and Turkey can also revitalize their relations by pushing for a joint condemnation of the Uyghur camps in China. Given the strengthening China-Turkey relationship over the years, with high levels of Chinese investment in the Turkish economy, Erdogan is put in a tough position: condemning the Uyghur camps would likely threaten his relationship with China. Yet, this relationship has also caused controversy and opposition within Turkey itself, where opposition leaders are utilizing national pride in Turkish identity to increase opposition to Erdogan's rule.⁸ In order to not only improve his standing within Turkey, but also improve ties between NATO member states and Turkey, a joint statement condemning the actions of the Chinese government would be a step forward in balancing appearances: distancing Turkish interests from China can help mend NATO relations and be a domestic win for Erdogan. This would help Erdogan signal Turkey's commitment to NATO institutions, rebalance Turkish ties with NATO and China, and support human rights abroad. If this action were taken rapidly, it could also divert some attention away from President Biden's recent acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide. In its opposition to the US' recognition, Turkey highlights

human rights abuses that took place during the Armenian Genocide which targeted all local populations, including some Turks. A joint condemnation of the current human rights violations of the Uyghur population will solidify the American stance and commitment towards condemning abuses across the spectrum and lessen the budding tensions between the US and Turkey. While NATO does not have to play an active role in this reconciliation between the US and Turkey, plummeting bilateral tensions between the two countries can help NATO focus on other discrepancies within the NATO-Turkey relationship.

Recommendation III: NATO, US, and EU to apply pressure in the wake of human rights violations in Turkey

Finally, NATO and the US can utilize their relationship with the EU to apply pressure to Turkey when it comes to human rights violations. Specifically, using economic and diplomatic incentives like trade deals and offering other benefits to Turkey, NATO can pressure Turkey and Erdogan to follow through with addressing many human rights issues. Turkey has cracked down on protests, withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention, changed its domestic judicial structure, reduced due process, and imprisoned journalists. Economic incentives through the EU could pressure Turkey into compromise on some anti-democratic actions. A specific demand of the EU could be Turkish agreement to the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights to release Osman Kavala, one of Turkey's most prominent philanthropists and civil society activists, given his wrongful arrest on accusations of "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order of Republic of Turkey."⁹ This would be another signal that Turkey is able to follow through and protect human rights within the nation, even if as a result of external pressure. These solutions address concerns of a dwindling relationship between NATO and Turkey through cooperation. Rather than a hardliner, aggressive approach with Turkey, these address concerns from NATO about domestic issues occurring within the country.

Policy Priority Area 2: Turkey's relationship with Russia

Acquisition of the Russian S-400



system: A deal-breaker for NATO?

More than anything else, NATO experts and observers cite Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system as their most immediate and foremost concern about the NATO-Turkish relationship. Because this move has played a crucial role in estranging Turkey from its Western allies, it will be one of the hardest issue areas to deal with. Among the experts on Turkish and NATO policy we surveyed, a significant plurality (36%) considered it to be the most significant threat to a strong NATO-Turkey relationship. Turkey's decision to turn to Russia instead of agreeing to contract for American Patriot missiles dealt a significant blow to its security partnership with NATO.

But, a NATO official from Turkey, whom we interviewed, echoed what we identified as the popular Turkish perspective: Turkey was compelled to make this choice when it failed to receive an adequate offer from the United States. When the offer came, it resembled an ultimatum Turkey did not want to base the deal on.¹⁰ Turkey emphasized its stance of valuing a relationship with the United States on equal footing and felt that the offer for the Patriot system did not embody that.¹¹ We also interviewed an official with privileged access to intra-NATO politics who confirmed the official US position according to which the US claimed to have expressed clear willingness to share the Patriot missile systems with Turkey despite Turkey's initial preference for consulting with China and later, Russia.¹² Both countries' justifications remain the same, leading to the diplomatic impasse that stands still today. Our research suggests that NATO leadership and leaders of member states treat the issue of interoperability of the Russian S-400 and American F-35 with utmost gravity and little flexibility. How might NATO and member-state leaders resolve this impasse?

Recommendation I: Deescalate the tension by de-linking NATO and US demands on missile systems from other issues facing the alliance and relationship with Turkey

There is a strong tendency among NATO members to dwell on the reasons and allegations rather than moving towards a resolution because of another problem: there is domestic pressure on the Turkish government to initiate operation of the S-400 system for which the parliament

approved a hefty budget. At the same time, the US Congress is no less unforgiving in pressuring the government to sanction Turkey for a move not befitting a critical security ally. For these reasons, it is important to isolate the subject of S-400 from other factors contributing to Turkey's estrangement and worsening NATO-Turkey relations.¹³ This could be done by de-linking NATO and the United States' demands regarding the missile system with other issues facing the NATO-Turkey relationship to ensure that unnecessary hurdles are not created in pursuit of other objectives.

Recommendation II: Engage in a Dialogue on the Lack of Interoperability Between the Missile System and NATO Systems

NATO, and more vociferously the United States, has made it clear that interoperability between the S-400 and NATO systems is neither possible, nor tolerable. Our recommendation advises policy makers to focus on the 'feasibility' aspect rather than plain disapproval of Turkey's decision which is less fruitful. Turkey must be convinced that because of the insurmountable threat of Russian espionage and technical infeasibility, the two systems cannot operate together. The US must accept that the S-400 is here to stay. Instead of spending resources and time on investigating Turkey's motivations for turning to Russia in the first place, a better NATO-Turkey relationship is likely to emerge from looking to the future. To counter the damage, Specifically, initiating a dialogue on drafting a plan for the missile systems that outlines how the two systems will be dealt with now that the S-400 has been acquired by Turkey. This dialogue should be based on the technical aspects of interoperability rather than political rhetoric so that it is clearly established among the parties whether or not it is practical and feasible to have interoperability.

Such talks can be carried out quietly. This need not be a public or declarative event with "megaphone diplomacy." Rather, private negotiations involving experts who can engage in a dialogue not constrained by political considerations can help identify paths forward.¹⁴ While this will send a meaningful signal to Russia and help restore cooperation in the alliance, NATO must ensure that it delivers a message of disapproval and caution to Turkey too. It is also important that actors involved resist the temptation to use these talks for political goals as the dialogue will be private and as



non-political as possible.

There is a need to attain the critical balance between conveying NATO's strong disapproval to Turkey and demonstrating flexibility to resolve this issue. One way to do so is to lay strict foundational conditions during interoperability discussions that ensure that the technical NATO systems present in Turkey are not jeopardized to Russian espionage. Operating NATO-standard and Russian systems simultaneously is a concession neither NATO, nor the United States is willing to extend to Ankara unconditionally. At the same time, the domestic position of President Erdogan heavily depends on putting the expensive Russian missile systems to use where required.¹⁵ This is because President Erdogan needs to prove the efficacy of his decision to purchase these systems from Russia in order to satisfy domestic opposition to his foreign policy. In addition to that, Erdogan had to seek budgetary approval of his parliament, including political opponents who might leverage this issue to pursue political ends. Hence, it must be made clear to Turkey that although NATO acknowledges its complicated position domestically and internationally, integrating the S-400 with NATO systems is simply not an option because it is technically unfeasible within accepted NATO interoperability standards, as opposed to being politically unacceptable.

Recommendation III: NATO Concessions and Alternatives

A second tier of negotiations will have to include some flexibility on NATO's part, specifically which concessions it is willing to make in order for Turkey to navigate domestic pressure and to potentially dispose of the S-400 systems. One way of doing so involves action on part of the United States which was proposed in the US Senate.¹⁶ The US could purchase the S-400 system from Turkey, thereby gaining access to the technology and also alleviating the financial pressure on Turkey of operating the systems. Although this would offer some relief to Turkey, it would be extremely difficult to navigate if Turkey wants to maintain a working relationship with Russia while being in the Western alliance. This action is also outside NATO's domain so while it can encourage such proposals by the United States, it should concern itself with facilitating and allaying Turkish concerns. Other concessions could include offering Turkey military alternatives to strengthen its security while working together to dispose of the systems. This may also involve Turkey

granting access to NATO to the Russian technology but this will only be possible if such a desire is matched by an offer that satisfies Turkey's security-based and financial concerns. Such an agreement should be based on Turkey's need to fulfill its responsibilities towards the NATO alliance, rather than a hardline approach that irks President Erdogan, who has repeatedly shown non-cooperation in the face of coercive tactics¹⁷ and this has been successfully exploited by Russia.

New Opportunities for Turkey and NATO in the Black Sea and the Caucasus

Despite Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 system, NATO leaders and allies should look to deepen NATO's engagement in those issue areas where Turkey and Russia favor divergent outcomes. In the vicinity of the Black Sea, NATO member states can build upon the Turkish-Ukrainian bilateral relationship to form a Black Sea Maritime Patrol, while also placing greater emphasis on the Russian-perpetrated human rights violations against the Crimean Tatars. In the Caucasus, NATO can take advantage of Turkish army-building expertise to expand its partnerships in the region, with Turkish ties to Azerbaijan providing an important route for such engagement. NATO efforts in the Caucasus can also help provide a possible long-term opening to addressing the territorial dispute in Nagorno-Karabakh. These steps will allow NATO to help reinforce Turkey's critical position in the alliance while also addressing and confronting malign Russian activities.

Recommendation I: A Permanent Black Sea Maritime Patrol

A good starting place for these efforts is a focus on Russian actions in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea. Following the 2014 Russian military intervention in Ukraine, NATO suspended all "civilian and military cooperation" with Russia.¹⁸ In the period since 2014, Turkey and Ukraine have substantially strengthened bilateral defense cooperation.¹⁹ This has included a number of arms deals that have increased Ukrainian military capabilities.²⁰ Turkey is motivated to undertake such partnerships by the threat of Russian dominance in the Black Sea following the annexation of Crimea, as well as the desire to increase support in the United States by aligning with a perceived US ally.²¹



NATO can leverage this bilateral cooperation to form “a permanent ‘Black Sea Maritime Patrol’” that would integrate the capacities of both NATO members and non-members like Ukraine.²² Ongoing NATO operations in the Mediterranean Sea could serve as an effective blueprint for this undertaking.²³ Given that such multilateral deterrence involving Ukraine would be perceived as highly provocative in Moscow, NATO should initially focus on providing active, but low-visibility support to joint Turkish-Ukrainian patrols. This could work by building upon current NATO deployments, including the positioning of US naval assets and Spanish fighter aircraft to the Black Sea region this past January.²⁴ Moreover, by initially framing these patrols as an outgrowth of bilateral Turkish-Ukrainian relations, NATO allies would be empowering Turkey to lead this Black Sea patrol, helping to further embed Turkey in the alliance. In short, while NATO should encourage the growth of this bilateral relationship, it should nevertheless do so with an eye towards opportunities to assimilate Turkish-Ukrainian ties into a larger NATO framework in the Black Sea region.

Recommendation II: Addressing Human Rights in Occupied Crimea

An additional aspect of the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea has been the mistreatment of the Crimean Tatars. The Crimean Tatars are a “Turkic-speaking” Muslim ethnic group with a long history of facing state-backed persecution.²⁵ The Crimean Tatar community has vocally opposed the Russian occupation of Crimea, generating an intense and well-documented campaign of persecution carried out by the Russian authorities.²⁶ Critically, Turkey is home to a large and active Crimean Tatar diaspora, possibly numbering six million individuals.²⁷ Turkish diplomats at multilateral venues such as the UN Human Rights Council have therefore spoken out against the Russian treatment of this ethnic minority.²⁸ The plight of the Crimean Tatars has even impacted the Russo-Turkish bilateral relationship, with President Erdogan negotiating with Russian President Putin to secure the release of two prominent Crimean Tatar leaders arrested by Russian authorities.²⁹

In interviews, American and Turkish experts have emphasized the possibility of deeper intra-NATO coordination in addressing these Russian-perpetrated human rights violations against the Crimean Tatars.³⁰ NATO already has a well-established pattern of condemning Russian transgressions of basic human rights

protections. For example, in September 2020, NATO issued a strong statement in the aftermath of the Russian use of a nerve agent to poison opposition politician Alexei Navalny.³¹ Taking such a public stand against the persecution of the Crimean Tatars can not only help to raise the international profile of the issue, but can also assist in further driving a wedge between Russia and Turkey. This would need to be conducted carefully to avoid any appearance of hypocrisy given the state of human rights in contemporary Turkey and its continued denial of the Armenia Genocide. Despite these possible hurdles to focusing on the plight of the Crimean Tatars, this process of identifying an issue area where narrow Turkish foreign policy interests align with the broader NATO mission should serve as a roadmap to reinforcing Turkey’s position within the NATO alliance.

Recommendation III: Deepening NATO Partnerships in the Caucasus

Beyond the Black Sea, developments in the Caucasus provide an additional opening for buttressing Turkey’s already important role as a NATO ally. This may initially seem counterintuitive, as the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region demonstrated many of the divisions that exist within the alliance. As Turkey provided Azerbaijan with immense material support, French President Emmanuel Macron vocally condemned Azerbaijan’s military efforts and spoke out against such Turkish assistance.³² Press outlets warned that internal dissension with respect to the conflict in the Caucasus “risks another crisis in NATO.”³³

Even so, the very outbreak of renewed fighting over the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh further highlights the important role that NATO can play in the former Soviet sphere. Despite the existence of numerous post-Soviet territorial disputes across Eastern Europe, NATO expansion following the end of the Cold War has played a crucial role in ensuring that newly independent nations eschew revanchist aims.³⁴ Though further NATO enlargement, especially in the Caucasus region, seems politically infeasible, deepening NATO engagement with Armenia and Azerbaijan may prove an important step toward ultimately settling the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Even if the resolution of this territorial dispute seems unlikely in the near future, increasing the quality and quantity of NATO’s partnerships in the Caucasus is important given Russia’s renewed



role in the region. The fact that Russia brokered the ceasefire agreement ending this Second Nagorno-Karabakh War only highlights the necessity of additional NATO cooperation with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Such engagement, though complicated by the internal NATO divisions that emerged during the renewed fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, would nevertheless require Turkish support. As previous Azerbaijani participation in NATO operations under Turkish command demonstrates, Turkey can serve as a useful conduit for NATO engagement with Azerbaijan. To ensure that cooperation with Azerbaijan and Armenia accounts for the political sensitivities of member states, partnership programs should focus on defensive capabilities and disaster-relief capacities. This could be modeled upon pre-existing patterns of partnership. For example, NATO already cooperates with both Azerbaijan and Armenia on emergency preparedness and disaster response issues.³⁵ Similarly, NATO has supported cyber defense initiatives in Azerbaijan and the disposal of decommissioned military equipment in Armenia.³⁶ Leveraging Turkey's ties to Azerbaijan and the ties of other member states to Armenia could help to determine what additional projects NATO can support in these two nations. Undertaking cooperative projects in Azerbaijan and Armenia simultaneously could help to militate against objections from certain member states (i.e. possible Turkish objections to partnerships with Armenia). With Turkey's assistance, deepening these NATO partnerships could also help to produce possible avenues to reaching a settlement in the quarrel over Nagorno-Karabakh, emulating the role NATO has played in preventing territorial-dispute related hostilities in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. Moreover, in the short term, such cooperation could cut against a larger Russian presence in the Caucasus.

Recommendation VI: Leveraging Turkish Army-Building Expertise

Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in part reflects the success of the support NATO has provided partner nations.³⁷ Azerbaijan has participated in various NATO partnership programs since it achieved independence, and Azerbaijani forces have operated under Turkish command in NATO military operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan.³⁸ Though member states such as France may be deeply concerned regarding Azerbaijan's recent military successes, developments in the Caucasus are proof positive of the

effectiveness of NATO partnership programs. For better or for worse, Azerbaijan's capture of Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrates how "a military from the former Soviet Union can achieve the alliance's standards through an army-building process led by Turkey."³⁹

In light of the role Turkish army-building played in securing Azerbaijan's military successes, NATO members should look to further engage Turkey by leveraging this expertise. NATO allies should look to identify ways to integrate Turkish knowledge and best practices into ongoing NATO training missions in Iraq, the African Union, and elsewhere.⁴⁰ Such expertise would also be useful in furthering NATO's efforts to confront a resurgent Russia, bolstering its cooperation programs in partner nations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Policy Priority Area 3: Intra-NATO conflicts between Turkey and other NATO allies

Eastern Mediterranean Issues

Since Turkey and Greece became NATO member-states in 1952, the two countries' long-standing disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have been a recurring source of intra-alliance conflict. NATO's core interest in this region is preventing military escalation between these two allies. Currently, there are three main areas of contention between Greece and Turkey vis-à-vis the Eastern Mediterranean: competing sovereignty claims over islands in the Aegean Sea, the extent of their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and the future of Cyprus.

In our expert survey, there was a wide distribution of opinions about which of the two states contributes most to impeding the resolution of these issues. We asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with two statements, one of which identifies "Turkish intransigence" as the obstacle to de-escalation of diplomatic and military conflicts between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean, the other of which identifies "Greek Intransigence" as the obstacle to the same. Notably, very few respondents provided an extreme response, absolving or condemning either of the countrys' behavior. In fact, just over half (eight out of 14) of the respondents indicated "Neither Agree nor Disagree" or "Somewhat Agree" in response to both questions. The lack of extreme responses in our results indicates that experts could conceive that



both countries can play a role in the resolution of Greek-Turkish issues. NATO can help facilitate a resolution to these conflicts by promoting itself as a forum for dialogue between Turkey and Greece and support military deconfliction efforts in the region. There is also a potentially unique role for NATO in providing an incentive for the amicable reunification of Cyprus.

Recommendation I: Serving as an Unofficial Forum for Dialogue and Creating an Inter-ally Dispute Committee

Resolving the two nations' competing sovereignty claims is particularly fraught because of their place within deeply held nationalist narratives on both sides. At the time of writing, exploratory bilateral talks between Greece and Turkey are under way to resolve their overlapping territorial claims.⁴¹ However, given that similar talks have occurred more than 60 times since 2002, all parties should temper their expectation for a breakthrough. NATO is unable to force a compromise between Greece and Turkey on these matters, but it can try to serve as an honest broker.

Historically, NATO's leaders and the other member states have tried to take a neutral position in these clashes. Official neutrality will remain the best policy, especially if both sides cling to maximalist demands. At the same time, NATO leaders have successfully intervened diplomatically to reduce tensions between the two countries in the past. Most recently, Secretary General Stoltenberg successfully helped establish a deconfliction mechanism between the two nations' militaries operating in the region in late 2020.⁴² Secretary General Stoltenberg's efforts demonstrate a central priority for NATO, creating conditions that will prevent any military exchange between the two countries (accidental or deliberate). While these efforts are critical for holding the alliance together, NATO leaders should do more to push both sides toward negotiations.

It can also provide a venue for the two countries to communicate their positions regularly in the North Atlantic Council (NAC). NATO's leaders should also consider establishing a permanent Inter-ally Dispute Committee operating under the NAC. Such a committee might also be useful for resolving other conflicts among member-states by providing a designated venue for frank and regular conversation.

Recommendation II: Pursue a NATO Presence in Cyprus

Since 2004, the Greco-Turkish conflict over the status of Cyprus has had the additional effect of hampering effective NATO-EU collaboration. A combination of rules for both organizations coupled with Turkey's opposition to the Greek Cypriot Republic of Cyprus joining NATO's Partnership for Peace Program prevents NATO from sharing security information with the EU.⁴³ The EU's requirements that all member states must be present when discussing security matters is unlikely to change. Any effort by NATO to change its own rules for security information sharing to accommodate the Republic of Cyprus in EU consultations would likely face strong opposition from Turkey within the North Atlantic Council. Thus, the only permanent solution for NATO to this information sharing impasse is to support efforts toward creating a unified Cyprus.⁴⁴ NATO leaders might be able to push along the reconciliation process between the two Cypriot governments and their sponsors by promising to offer NATO membership to a unified Cyprus. NATO members might allay the security concerns of both parties on the island by allowing both Greek and Turkish forces to stay there. But, rather than being there only for mutual deterrence, these forces would also enhance Cyprus's security in the region. Even if a unified Cyprus is untenable, NATO could still pursue a permanent NATO presence on the island. Such a presence would likely benefit the alliance due to its strategic location and reduce the possibility of inter-community violence. In order to mollify lingering concerns on behalf of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots and remain neutral toward the ownership claims of both, there would likely need to be a balance of NATO forces in both of the historically separate parts of the island.

Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean between Greece and Turkey has deep historical roots. It is unlikely that these issues will ever be fully resolved. Luckily, they need not be fully resolved for NATO to fulfill its strategic mission. Therefore, the principal goal for NATO in the region should be to vigorously seek to prevent a military confrontation between the two allies while supporting longer-term reconciliation efforts on sovereignty claims and the future of Cyprus.

Kurdish Militias in Syria - Turkey and the United States



At Odds

Improving Turkey's bilateral ties with the United States is crucial for a better Turkey-NATO relationship. One area of conflict in this regard is the relationship the United States has with Kurdish militias in Northern Syria. Some of this relationship guides NATO's policy on Kurdish militias, too. Just as Russo-Turkish arms cooperation that threatens NATO defence systems are a primary "red line" concern for NATO leadership, Turkey seems equally inflexible in its position on NATO's treatment of People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel - YPG), the militant wing of the Kurdish nationalist group Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - PYD) that operates in the Rojava region of Northern Syria. Because of YPG's links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê - PKK), which is a designated terrorist group by Turkey and the US, Turkey wants NATO to make a clear declaration by also labelling the YPG a terrorist group. In 2019, Turkey refused to support NATO's plan for the Baltics and Poland unless it backed Turkey on the YPG matter.⁴⁵ These actions notwithstanding, the U.S./NATO position remains...

Recommendation I: Private dialogue on YPG and affiliate groups

NATO has avoided taking an explicit approach towards YPG and affiliate groups. Secretary General Stoltenberg has repeatedly stated that individual NATO allies have varied opinions on the status of the group.⁴⁶ The United States has collaborated with YPG in defeating ISIS in Syria, while Turkey alleges that YPG has facilitated terrorist groups in Syria and has engaged in attacking civilians in the region as well as threatening Turkey's border security. European countries that are NATO allies have also not denounced YPG and have largely chosen to disassociate themselves from any public declarations. This is one area of contention where NATO leadership could try to reassure Turkey with diplomatic support for its efforts to protect its borders.

However, this will be extremely cumbersome to navigate for the United States as supporting Turkey unconditionally on its position on Kurdish militants would be synonymous to abandoning former allies. Secretary General Stoltenberg has also tried to gear the focus towards the common enemy - ISIS - instead of announcing NATO's declarative stance on YPG. There is no short-term or easy solution to this problem. Turkey and the United States may each want to reap the benefits of this problem's resolution, but neither seems willing to compromise on their respective positions.

Due to low possibility of reconciliation in this area, consistent with our criteria for focus areas within each policy priority domain, seeking long-term solutions to issues over Kurdish militia groups should not be among the top priorities on the NATO-Turkish agenda. As the Biden Administration looks to reduce the US footprint in the broader Middle East, it can make it clear to Turkey privately that it does not foresee a sustained presence on the ground in Syria. However, it is unwilling to completely abandon its erstwhile partner. Because these issues are of predominant importance for Turkey, the US could engage in a high-level private dialogue to demonstrate to Turkey its commitment to not let this issue serve as an impediment to its otherwise shared goals with Turkey in the NATO context. Regardless of any progress made in this bilateral dispute, NATO should itself remain neutral. As long as an issue does not clearly threaten NATO's core security interests, NATO should strive to serve as a neutral honest broker between its member states. In this way, NATO can facilitate reconciliation and advance collective security.

Conclusion

Turkey's relationship with NATO has never been smooth, but in recent years the relationship has deteriorated in key areas. Arresting the current backslide in relations is critical given the continued value that Turkey brings to the alliance through its geostrategic location, sizable military forces, and army building expertise. NATO's leaders should meet these challenges with a measured, yet vigorous response. Our recommendations for NATO's leaders provide the contours of that response across key areas. Alarmist worries that Turkey is on the verge of falling out of the alliance underestimate the extent to which NATO and Turkey continue to benefit from Turkey's participation in NATO. At the same time, Pollyannaish optimism that these disputes do not have the potential to damage the operation of NATO are unwarranted. It is unrealistic to assume that the relationship between Turkey and NATO can be made fully uncontentious, but there are opportunities for reducing tension and making the relationship and the alliance as a whole more functional as a force for collective security and peace.

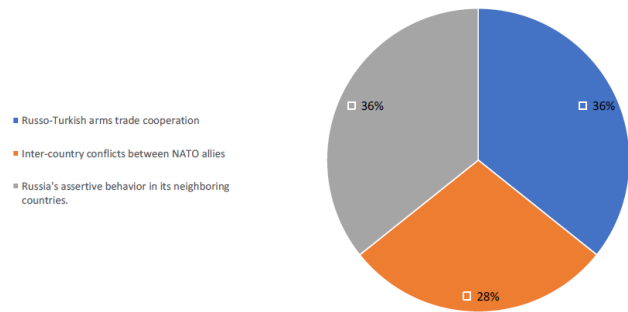


Appendix: The NATO-Turkey Relationship According to Policy Experts

This data was gathered from a survey of policy experts that we identified who have knowledge of NATO, European Defense, and Turkey. Respondents from the U.S., Western and Eastern Europe, and Turkey were included.

NATO Cohesion

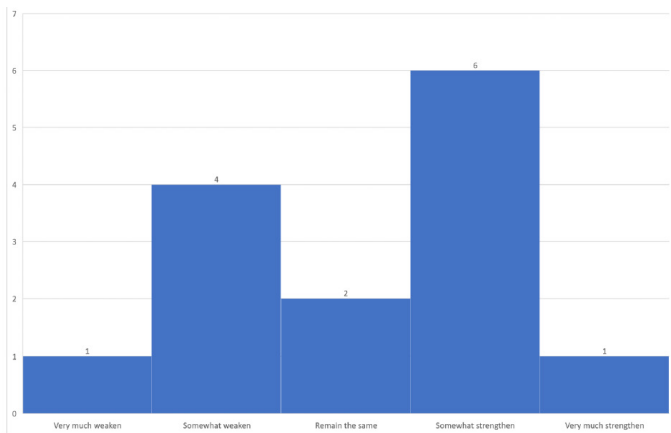
Figure 1: The Most Threatening Issue to NATO Cohesion According to Policy Experts



Note: The following issues were not ranked first by any respondent:

- Russo-Turkish conflicts of interest in the Caucasus;
- Proposals for intra-E.U. military cooperation that decrease U.S. influence in Europe.

Figure 2: If NATO leaders were to actively mediate between allies engaged in diplomatic or strategic conflicts with Turkey, how would it impact Turkey's relations with NATO in the long run?



Assigning Blame for Greco-Turkish Conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean

Figure 3: De-escalation of diplomatic and military conflicts between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean is impeded by Greek intransigence

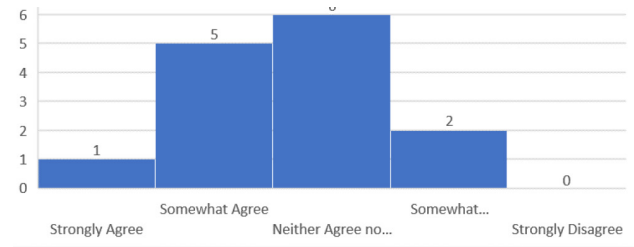
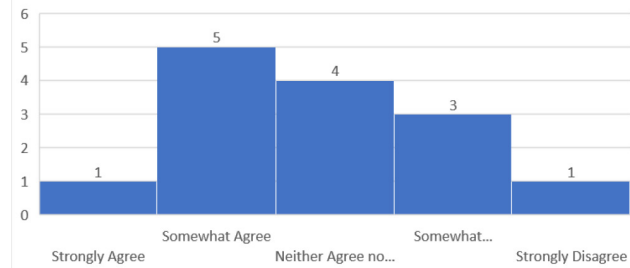


Figure 4: De-escalation of diplomatic and military conflicts between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean is impeded by Turkish intransigence





Other Trends and Challenges Facing NATO, Turkey, and Other Members of the Alliance

Figure 5: The Trump administration largely focused on strategic issues in its relationship with Turkey. If the Biden administration puts human and civil rights concerns in Turkey at the forefront of U.S. bilateral relations with Turkey, how would it impact Turkish relations with the West in the long run?

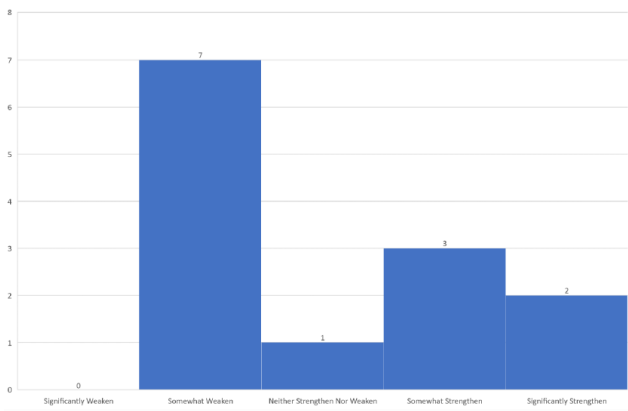
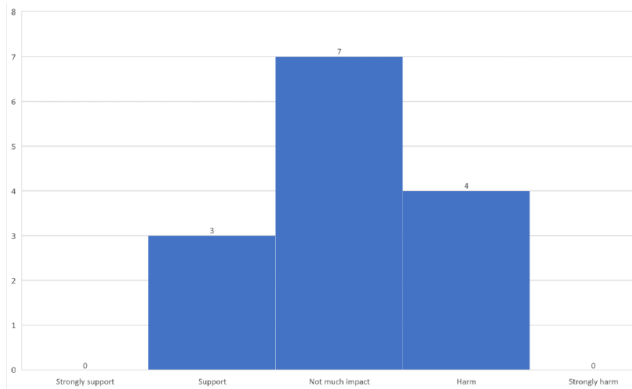


Figure 6: In October 2020, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated, when discussing the conflict in Nargorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, that “NATO is not part of this conflict”. Turkey actively supported Azerbaijan with weapons, materials, and training. In your opinion, did Turkey’s actions in support of Azerbaijan harm or support the achievement of these goals?





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