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The NATO/US-Turkey-Russia Strategic Triangle: Challenges Ahead

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I. Introduction

Turkey and NATO are experiencing a mutual crisis of confidence. Turkish policy makers lack confidence in NATO guarantees and fear abandonment—both prominent historical concerns. At the same time, policy makers within the alliance have begun to question Turkey's intentions and future strategic orientation, and how well they align with NATO's. One important factor contributing to this mistrust is Turkey's recent dealings with Russia. Turkey is trying to contain Russian military expansion in the Black Sea and Syria by calling for a stronger NATO presence at the same time that is seeking to diversify its security strategy by improving ties with Russia and reducing its dependence on the United States and NATO.

Turkey's contradictory stance is no more apparent than in its evolving policy regarding the Syrian civil war. The threat topography of NATO's southern flank reflects a complex web of state and non-state actors involved in asymmetric warfare. The Turkish shoot down of a Russian jet in 2015 highlighted the complexity and helped to precipitate military dialogue between NATO and Russia in Syria. Since then, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan seem to have overcome their strategic differences in their preferred outcome for Syria and have de-escalated the tensions following several rounds of peace talks headed by Russia, Turkey, and Iran and involving some, but not all, factions involved in the Syrian conflict.

Yet several important questions about Turkish security policy and its impact on Turkish-U.S./NATO relations remain. What are the security implications of Turkey's military actions on the southern flank? How is the continued fight against extremism in the region, including ISIS, likely to affect relations? And how should the West respond to Turkey's security ties with Russia, including the Russian sale of advanced military equipment to Ankara? The answers to all of these questions depend in part on whether Turkey's behavior with Russia in Syria is a tactical move or a strategic shift away from NATO. Understanding these dynamics is key to devising policies and actions to minimize security risks between the U.S., NATO, and Russia.

This paper argues that Turkey has economic and political interests in developing closer relations with Russia, but that these interests are not as strong as Turkey's strategic alliance with the West, and NATO in particular. Turkish policymakers, who lack confidence in NATO, are pursuing short-term security interests in Syria as a way to leverage Western acquiescence to their interests regarding the Kurdish populations in Syria and Iraq. These objectives, however, are not aligned with Russia's security objectives and do not add up to a sustainable long-term regional security strategy. In the short term, Turkey's contradictory approaches to relations with NATO and Russia are likely to lead to ambiguity and confusion in the regional security architecture, with Syria being the most visible example of this disarray.

To combat this approach, U.S. leadership and NATO should work to convince Turkey that the alliance takes Turkish security concerns in Syria seriously and to minimize the risks of Turkey's acts as a spoiler in the region. For instance, addressing Turkish concerns over Washington's arming of the Kurdish rebel group, the YPG, in northern Syria, will go a long way to resolving the key issue motivating Turkey's decision to partner with Russia.

The NATO-Turkey standoff

Turkey's fit in NATO has been questioned since the day in 1948 when Turkish officials told their American counterparts of Turkey's desire to join the alliance. During the Cold War, Turkey's vulnerability to a Soviet attack and Turkey's insistence on getting a formal security guarantee from the United States led U.S. officials to reevaluate Turkey's value to the alliance, particularly in denying the Soviets the control of the Turkish Straits. At the time, Turkish foreign policy prioritized NATO membership over involvement in the Middle East as a way to minimize security risks and maintain friendly and cautious relations with its neighbors. Turkey sought to establish itself as a trustworthy ally and based its defense planning and command structure around the alliance.

Despite their country formally joining NATO in 1952, Turkish officials lacked confidence in U.S./NATO security guarantees and reassurances absent domestic military deployments or concrete military agreements. These concerns have shaped Turkish policymakers' decisions and functioned as solidarity tests and as mutual confidence-breaking incidents. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Turkey feared that it had lost its defining role in the alliance. As such, in the 1990s, Turkey began to replace its exclusive orientation towards NATO with policies that engaged its Mideast neighbors to make progress on the Kurdish issue, water conflict with Syria and Iraq, and its need for economic expansion. Turkish security policymaking continues to promote engagement outside of NATO to enhance Turkish strategic interest.

When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power in 2002, Turkey pursued a cooperative-preventive security strategy that was consistent with the shift in NATO policies. When President Obama visited Turkey in April 2010, he referred to a "model strategic partnership," entailing additional instruments for regional stability to strengthen the NATO alliance through multilateralism.¹ Since then, the U.S.-Turkey relationship has been on a downward spiral, and Turkey has lost its interlocutor role in the region. The situation has been worsened by AKP leaders' ideological and value-driven orientation toward the Middle East, in which they seek influence beyond security, as well as by Erdogan's leadership style and escalatory rhetoric.

The divergence between Turkey's and U.S./NATO's definitions of threats has grown further due to Turkey's economic and political ambitions in the Middle East. As a showcase of the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Erdogan initially cultivated close relations with Bashar al-Assad. In 2009, visa restrictions were waived reciprocally and Syria was named a strategic partner. Yet, AKP policymakers were caught unprepared for the Arab Spring and the civil conflict in Syria. The war has destabilized the Middle East in general, leading to the development of terrorist groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS; refugee flows into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq; and humanitarian emergencies. All of these factors have isolated Turkey.

Turkey consistently called for a no-fly zone and ground operations to help stop the conflict, yet its entanglement in the Kurdish conflict, its sectarian politics in support of other Sunni groups, and its prioritization of Assad's removal over the fight against ISIS have led to major differences

¹ Namik Tan, "Turkish-US strategic partnership," *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 1, 2011.

with U.S. priorities in the region. The main test case of these differences was in Kobani in October 2014, when ISIS attacked the Syrian Kurdish border town and the U.S. helped save the town despite Turkey's concerns over U.S. cooperation with Syrian Kurds.²

In Syria, Turkey insists that the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is a direct affiliate of the Kurdish Workings Party (PKK) in Turkey. It heavily criticizes U.S. military cooperation with the PYD, and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG). In Iraq, Turkey initially partnered with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), yet the United States was concerned about Turkey training and equipping Kurdish *peshmerga* to fight ISIS as it partnered with Baghdad.³ Despite the 2017 KRG independence referendum, to which both Turkey and the United States were opposed, Turkey continues to support anti-ISIS operations as long as the YPG is not involved. This conditional approach has isolated Ankara further and led to its marginalization both in Syria and Iraq.

Turkish security policymaking within NATO also became more problematic as Turkey sought greater autonomy and as policy making shifted from military to civilian decision makers under the AKP government. Erdogan's call for a stronger domestic defense industry and for decreasing Turkey's dependence on NATO have led to heightened anti-American rhetoric. Turkey has also engaged in strategic dialogues with Russia and China, what Erdogan's senior foreign policy advisor calls "outside the transatlantic box" cooperation, and has compartmentalized its economic relations from Middle East security issues.⁴

In the meantime, the uncertainties and complexities of Mideast political and security dynamics, especially in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war, have raised the price of Turkish engagement. The AKP policy of "zero problems" has sent mixed signals to the region and ultimately undermined Ankara's role as a credible mediator. Turkey is also increasingly taking a lonely stance in its regional relations against the Gulf countries and Egypt, as evidenced by Turkey's decision to stand by Qatar and base troops in the country.⁵ Complicating matters further, is the purge in Turkish Armed Forces that followed the July 15th, 2016, failed coup attempt and divided the armed forces along conservative, Atlanticist, and Eurasianist lines.⁶ While these divisions have always existed, the makeup of the Turkish military has never been so uncertain.

As a consequence of the gulf between Turkey and NATO, an increasing number of policy makers and officials question whether Turkey still belongs in the Alliance. Opponents to Turkish membership argue that Turkey has been "reckless, repressive, and unreliable,"⁷ violating NATO's core values of democracy and human rights. Proponents argue that NATO still needs Turkey militarily. In Turkey, the concern remains that NATO is not doing enough to support Turkish security in Syria, and every possible slight is perceived as evidence of waning NATO

² Henri J. Barkey, "The Raqqa Imperative," *The American Interest*, April 8, 2016. An angry Erdogan asked: "Why is America interested in Kobani, oil, gold, diamonds?" Barkey, 2016, p. 29.

³ Barkey, 2016, pp. 32-36.

⁴ Gulnur Aybet, "Transatlantic Security, NATO, and Turkey," *Turkey Papers*, Wilson Center, March 2015, p. 15.

⁵ It is the first Turkish base in the Persian Gulf.

⁶ Metin Gurcan and Megan Gisclon, "What is the Turkish Military's Strategic Identity after July 15?," *IPC-Mercator Policy Brief*, September 2016, p. 3.

⁷ "Does Turkey Still Belong in NATO?" Room for Debate, *The New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

support. In November 2017, during NATO's Trident Javelin exercise in Norway, Turkish leaders Ataturk and Erdogan were erroneously depicted as collaborators with an enemy state.⁸ In response, Turkey pulled its troops from the exercise, and after apologizing for the mistake, NATO leaders have been trying to reassure Turkey. More generally, the lack of Turkish progress in the EU membership process has overshadowed its relations with European NATO partners.

Challenges to the Turkish-U.S. Strategic Partnership

The U.S.-Turkey relationship has historically played a dominant role in Turkey-NATO relations. Three current policy disagreements between the two countries are the primary source of pressure on the bilateral relationship: Turkey's concern with U.S. support for the PYD in the anti-ISIS coalition; Turkey's prioritization of the fight against the PKK rather than ISIS; and U.S. officials' increasing concern with freedom of speech and media in Turkey.

Another factor in the relationship has been the 2016 coup attempt and the U.S. refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen. Despite tension on this issue, Turkey hopes to maintain high-level military dialogues with the United States through defense partnerships.⁹ Potential roadblocks to this type of cooperation—U.S. barriers to defense exports, oversensitivity about technology transfer, and administrative delays—however, are ultimately detrimental to the strategic relationship and reinforce Turkey's perception that the U.S. doesn't value the bilateral relationship sufficiently.

Expectations of a "reset" in the bilateral relationship under Donald Trump have not materialized. In fact, the Trump administration's decision to officially arm the YPG in the ongoing offensive against ISIS has only exacerbated the central issue in the relationship. U.S. officials sought ways to reassure Ankara that the weapons would not be used against Turkish forces in the future and offered greater intelligence cooperation in Turkey's fight against the PKK.¹⁰ It has not been enough, however, to assure Turkey that the U.S. strategic partnership is sufficient to protect Turkish security interests in the long term. Indeed, President Erdogan has argued that providing arms to the YPG is a violation of the NATO treaty.¹¹

The bilateral relationship was further enflamed in May 2017 when President Erdogan's security detail attacked protestors outside the Turkish Ambassador's residence in Washington, D.C., during Erdogan's visit. The "Sheridan Circle" incident led to arrest warrants and to a congressional resolution condemning the Turkish officials involved. In response to the incident, the Trump administration blocked the sales of U.S.-made handguns and ammunition for use by Erdogan's presidential security forces. In October, both countries suspended issuance of all visas when Turkish authorities arrested U.S. consulate employees that they asserted to be Gulenists. The federal U.S. case against a Turkish-Iranian gold trader, Reza Zarrab, in New York City, and

⁸ "NATO Apologizes After Erdogan Pulls Troops over Norway Incident," *Military.com*, November 17, 2017.

⁹ The Turkish government claims that Fethullah Gulen, an imam who resides in Pennsylvania, is the founder and leader of the Fethullahist Terror Organization (FETO) and ordered the July 15th failed coup attempt in Turkey.

¹⁰ "U.S. Will Take Weapons from Kurds after Islamic State Defeat: Turkey," *U.S. News*, June 22, 2017.

¹¹ "Turkey to US: Providing arms to YPG violation of NATO rules," *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 25, 2017.

Hakan Atilla, a state bank official, for violating U.S. sanctions Iran, has also been a sore subject, with Erdogan bashing the trial as a U.S. plot to undermine Turkey, despite Zarrab's guilty plea.

Despite all this soreness in the bilateral relationship, U.S. military personnel and equipment continue to be deployed at Turkey's Incirlik Air Base as part of the fight against ISIS. The base also continues to house approximately 50 U.S. B-61 nuclear gravity bombs guarded by U.S. troops in underground vaults. Turkey has always used access to Incirlik as a political bargaining chip, but U.S. commitment to the base appears to be wavering some, too. Following the most recent visa crisis, some U.S. experts have advocated removing some of B-61s and reducing U.S. reliance on the base in the counter-ISIS operations.¹²

The Turkey-Russia rollercoaster

Beginning with the reign of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey and Russia have had a history of wars and deep mistrust. Despite historically seeing Russia as an "enemy," though Turkey has recently expanded its cooperation with Russia as a potential alternative to its troubled relationships with both the United States and NATO.

After the Cold War, Turkey was wary of Russia's political transition and how it would affect its relationship with NATO and its neighbors, such as Azerbaijan. As a show of good faith, in March 1991, then-Turkish President Turgut Ozal signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation with Russia, as well as a trade agreement.¹³ Russian efforts since to modernize its military, adapt its nuclear posture, and engage in the domestic political affairs of its neighbors (including Ukraine) have made Turkey wary of Russia. Yet, under the AKP, there has been a tacit agreement between the two to compartmentalize their geopolitical disagreements from economic and strategic interests, particularly in energy cooperation.

The first pillar of the countries' energy ties is the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, Turkey's first nuclear plant, which will be built, owned (up to 51 percent), and operated by Russia's Rosatom. The TurkStream natural gas pipeline, which is being built through Turkey to supply Russian gas to Europe and bypass Ukraine, is an important second element. (This second effort is seemingly incompatible with Western attempts to reduce Europe's reliance on Russian natural gas.)

Both countries also share some political traits. Both have high degrees of suspicion about the political motivations of Western countries, particularly in the Middle East. And both have increasingly authoritarian regimes, with Presidents Erdogan and Putin having built a close personal relationship. Under Erdogan, the geographical limits of Turkish political involvement have also expanded into Russia's Asian backyard. Erdogan has even said Turkey could be interested in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)¹⁴ led by Russia and China as an alternative to European Union membership.¹⁵

¹² "Some Urgent Questions About Turkey," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2017.

¹³ Mufti, 1998, p. 36.

¹⁴ SCO, originally called the Shanghai Five and renamed in 2001, was established in 1996 to demilitarize the border between China and the Former Soviet Union. SCO serves as a forum to discuss economic and security issues such as counterterrorism and illicit trafficking, stability in Afghanistan, as well as greater energy cooperation. Andrew

The emerging Turkey-Russia relationship, however, has not been immune to crises. Turkish-Russian relations were stressed by Russian annexation of Crimea because Turkey is particularly concerned with the Crimean Tatars. As noted earlier, Turkey also initially called for the removal of the Assad regime and heavily criticized Russia's military buildup in Syria. The countries have differed in their counterterrorism strategy: Turkey's main concern is Kurdish terrorism, and Russia's is political Islam and radical Islamist groups.

These disagreements were exacerbated by the November 2015 Turkish downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber along the Syrian-Turkish border. Putin labelled the act a "stab in the back." Turkish officials insisted that they repeatedly warned the Russian plane on the emergency channel that it had veered into Turkish air space; the Russians claimed that the jet was over Syrian territory when it was hit. In the aftermath of the incident, Turkey didn't rule out engaging additional Russian jets that violated its airspace. In response, Russia deployed S-400 anti-aircraft missiles at the Hmeimim airbase in Syria and established an "anti-access area denial" (A2AD) exclusion zone against the U.S.-led coalition and Turkey.

On the economic front, Russia suspended the reciprocal visa-free regime with Turkey, and banned imports from Turkey.¹⁶ Russia's economic sanctions targeted tourism on the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, Turkish construction firms in Russia, and imports of food products, in what became known as the "tomato ban." Potential disruptions in the Turkstream and the Akkuyu projects seriously concerned Turkish officials focused on energy security.

The tensions continued into 2016 when Turkey barred a Russian spy plane from performing an Open Skies Treaty over-flight.¹⁷ Turkish officials insisted that Russia consistently violated Turkish airspace despite repeated warnings and criticized both the Assad regime's and Russia's continued missile and rocket attacks against rebel-held towns near Damascus and Aleppo instead of ISIS targets.¹⁸ Russia denied the airspace violations and accused Turkey of trading oil with ISIS through Erdogan's family business and preparing for a military incursion into northern Syria following the Assad regime's Russia-backed offensive into Aleppo.

In response to the Turkish shoot down, the NATO foreign ministers agreed on a Turkish air defense package to enhance the alliance's air and naval presence, including maritime patrol aircraft and an AWACS platform in the eastern Mediterranean provided by German and Danish

Scheineson, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounders*, March 24, 2009, at: <http://www.cfr.org/china/shanghai-cooperation-organization/p10883>

¹⁵ Ihsan Dagi, "Turkey's quest for a Eurasian Union," *Today's Zaman*, January 27, 2013.

¹⁶ "Turkey's downing of Russian warplane- what we know," *BBC News*, December 1, 2015.

¹⁷ "Dangerous precedent: Turkey denies Russian observation flight along Syrian border," *RT*, February 3, 2016.

NATO-Russia Council Cooperative Airspace Initiative (CAI) directly connected Norway, Poland, and Turkey, and facilitated cooperation with the United States. The initiative halted in 2014 to the Ukraine crisis. See: Anya Loukianova, "Clouds of Suspicion: Airspace Arrangements, Escalation, and Discord in U.S./NATO-Russian Relations," *CISSM Policy Brief*, May 2016, p. 6.

¹⁸ "Missiles in Syria kill 50 as schools, hospitals hit, Turkey accuses Russia," *Reuters*, February 16, 2016. "Esed ve Rusya IHH'nin yardim depolarini vurdu," *TRT Haber*, January 10, 2016. "At least 65 Syrians Killed in Government Attack," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2015. "Turkey condemns attack on Syrian Turkmen village, summons Russian envoy," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 20, 2015.

ships.¹⁹ The new anti-missile defense NATO architecture included an extra deployment of Italian surface-to-air missiles in Turkey and an Arleigh Burke-class U.S. destroyer in the Black Sea.²⁰ The United States also deployed air-to-air combat aircraft to Incirlik. In response, Russia deployed at least one Iskander missile system to the Hmeimim Air Base in Syria in March 2016, as well as a K-300P Bastion-P anti-ship missile system that can accommodate Yakhont missiles.²¹

Turkey has used the bilateral track to restore relations with Russia and to end Russian sanctions on Turkish businesses.²² Erdogan's letter apologizing about the Russian jet shoot down was followed by a Putin-Erdogan summit in August 2016.²³ Even the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Ankara in December 2016 hasn't harmed the relationship. In fact, the economic cooperation has expanded to include the possible sale of advanced Russian military equipment to Turkey. In February 2017, Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik announced that Turkey and Russia had made progress in the potential Turkish acquisition of the S-400 air defense system.²⁴ As of January 2018, both Turkish and Russian officials claim that the S-400 acquisition is a "done deal" to be deployed in 2019.²⁵

The potential acquisition raises some fundamental questions: Would a Russian air and missile defense system protect Turkey against Russian air power and missiles? But, perhaps more importantly, it also revives questions about the interoperability of Turkish military systems with NATO. As Turkey chose a stand-alone S-400 system, it will not benefit from NATO's network-based Air Defense Ground Environment (NADGE) and satellite detection capabilities, which will significantly deteriorate the system's performance. The S-400 system could also contradict NATO's aerial assets and the identification, friend or foe (IFF) policy, whether it is NATO supporting Turkey in case of conflict or Turkey supporting another NATO ally. As such, NATO leaders have tried without success to discourage Turkey from the Russian purchase.

Turkey sees no contradiction in purchasing a stand-alone Russian system and in fulfilling its responsibilities as a NATO member. Yet its allies, United States in particular, might force the issue. Congress has already warned that Turkey's purchase of a Russian air defense system would violate U.S. sanctions against Russian defense and intelligence sectors and could impact U.S. security assistance and arms sales to Turkey.²⁶ In 2018, the U.S. Congress may decide to impose sanctions on Turkey.

To the degree that this conflict between NATO and Turkey leads to concerns that Turkey is weakening the alliance by eroding cohesion and solidarity, it clearly serves Russian strategic

¹⁹ "NATO agrees Turkey air defense package, seeks 'predictability,'" *Reuters*, December 18, 2015.

²⁰ "Spain to Stay with Patriots in Turkey, Italy Could Deploy Samp/T Missiles," *Defense News*, December 28, 2015.

²¹ "Iskander missile launcher spotted in Syria," *IHS Jane's 360*, March 30, 2016.

²² Trade volume was \$35 billion in 2014, but decreased 40% in the first 8 months of 2016.

²³ Gareth Jenkins, "Should the West Fear a Turkey-Russia Convergence?" Center on Global Interests, August 8, 2016.

²⁴ "Turkey mulls purchase of Russian S-400 air defense system," *Defense News*, February 22, 2017.

²⁵ Burak Ege Bekdil, "It is a done deal: Turkey plans to deploy Russian air defense system in 2019," *Defense News*, November 28, 2017.

²⁶ "Cardin: Turkey's Purchase of Russian missile system may trigger sanctions," *Politico*, September 14, 2017.

interests.²⁷ Meanwhile, by not taking a clear stance on the role of Kurds in the region, Russia keeps favor with Turkey and balances against the U.S.-NATO presence in the region. In the long term, a S-400 purchase would likely extend Turkey's dependence on Russia into the defense realm.

The Syria Conundrum

Focusing on how Turkey and Russia are using their partnership to solve their own immediate problems in Syria is a useful way of assessing the depth of the partnership. Though Russia was widely criticized for becoming involved militarily in Syria, Turkey has since warmed to Russian involvement in the region and quieted its insistence that "Assad must go." Indeed, following his August 2016 summit with Putin, Erdogan argued that the most important actor for bringing peace to Syria is Russia.²⁸

Russia has not substantively changed course in Syria to accommodate Turkish concerns. Russian communication channels with the PYD remain open, and Russia ultimately envisions significant autonomy for the Syrian Kurds in the future. The PYD has an office in Moscow as the "Western Kurdistan Representative," and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has pushed to invite the PYD to the Astana talks.

Turkey has nevertheless found cooperating with Russia more acceptable since Russia has not considered arming the PYD as the Americans have. It has supported Turkish efforts to limit the reach of Kurdish militias in Northern Syria, providing a more acceptable alternative to dealing with the Kurdish issue.

Russia and Turkey are also providing cover for each other in the context of the Astana peace talks. Though these talks have followed on the primary efforts to establish a Syrian peace process—those of the U.N.-backed biannual Geneva conferences and the Vienna Process led by the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—the Astana talks have arguably had the greatest impact to date. Under the Astana talks, Turkey and Russia agreed to deploy personnel in Syria's northern Idlib region as part of an effort to establish four de-escalation zones in Syria for at least six months.²⁹ The absence in this plan of the United States and the UN, as well as other key regional players including Saudi Arabia and Jordan, leave it fragile, but in the short term helps both Turkey and Russia achieve their immediate security objectives.

While Turkey and Russia are working together to address immediate challenges in Syria, the fundamental objectives of the two countries in the region are ultimately incompatible. The confusion over the January 2018 drone attacks on the Russian Hmeimim air base and Tartus naval facility proves the uncertainty in the relationship: Russia initially announced that the Turkish-backed rebels in Idlib attacked the facilities, then President Putin took back the

²⁷ Judy Dempsey, "Judy Asks: Is Turkey Weakening NATO?" *Strategic Europe*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 20, 2017.

²⁸ Hale Gonultas, "Will road to Moscow lead Ankara to Damascus?" *Al Monitor*, August 16, 2016.

²⁹ "Turkey, Russia, Iran working on Syria de-escalation mechanism involving US, Presidential Spokesperson Kalin says," *Daily Sabah*, June 22, 2017.

accusation the next day.³⁰ Turkey's main objectives relate to Turkish security from extremist threats and the Kurdish issue. For example, its cross-border Operation Euphrates Shield aimed to clear the border of both ISIS threats and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is led by the YPG. Throughout the conflict, Turkey has been aiming to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish corridor along its border, by not allowing the YPG to cross to the west of the Euphrates River. Initially, the U.S.-led coalition acquiesced to Turkish operations, and Russia formally approved them. However, Turkey's operations ultimately required coalition support and led to disagreement with both the United States and Russia before Turkey ended the operations in March 2017.

Russia's objectives are supporting the Assad regime and ensuring a strategic foothold in the region. Russia's formidable A2/AD capabilities in Syria are focused on avoiding new clashes in northern Syria, particularly in the air, and giving the Assad regime enough breathing room to consolidate political and security gains. Russia is also fundamentally interested in maintaining Turkish support for Russian maritime access to the Black Sea and the TurkStream pipeline project to supply Russian gas to Europe.

In addition to their misalignment of fundamental interests, Turkey and Russia's near-term cooperation in Syria faces severe challenges. The most immediate concern is the suspension of U.S.-Russian efforts to de-conflict flights over Syria and the general lack of U.S.-Russian bilateral engagement.

Turkey's attempts to play both sides of U.S.-Russian disagreements also seem unsustainable. For instance, how would Turkey respond if NATO became more actively involved in the Syrian civil war? It is hard to imagine Turkey actively participating, particularly if the NATO action countered Russian interests, yet it continues to support increased NATO patrols in the Black Sea as a way to counter Russia's presence there.

The Way Forward

At the heart of the NATO/US-Turkey-Russia strategic triangle is a central dilemma: Despite its recent cooperation with Russia and the exacerbation of its disagreements with the United States and NATO, Turkey's fundamental security interests are still more likely to be met in coordination with the latter than the former. Yet Turkey's quest for new security and political partnerships—other than NATO—has only fed into NATO and U.S. suspicions of Turkey's intentions and made them less likely to give Turkey the reassurances it desires.

It is past time for Turkey to take a critical look at the full range of its own security and political objectives and reflect on the best course of action. This analysis suggests that by recommitting itself to NATO policies, Turkey would improve U.S.-Turkey relations. Turkey's role and influence within NATO and the Middle East would also be elevated in a way it could never achieve through closer cooperation with Russia.

³⁰ "Putin tells Erdogan that he knows who was behind attack on Russia's Syria bases," *Daily Sabah*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/01/11/putin-tells-erdogan-that-he-knows-who-was-behind-attack-on-russias-syria-bases>

This is not to say that Turkey shouldn't continue to work with Russia on important security issues, particularly in Syria. Turkey, Russia, and NATO all share a range of security concerns, including the flow of refugees from the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Raqqa, humanitarian assistance to Syrians displaced by the conflict, and the flow of foreign fighters traveling through Russia and NATO countries. Indeed, all parties in the strategic triangle see Islamic radicalization as a common threat. By rolling back ISIS's territorial gains, the United States, Russia, and Turkey have damaged its capacity to organize and conduct attacks. These efforts have not been able to eliminate the remaining support for radical groups' in Syria and Iraq or the group's broader legitimacy. Moreover, differences in how the countries define terrorism and their prioritization of the threats, however, risk undercutting their efforts.

Encouraging better political and military coordination between NATO/U.S. and Russia in Syria, would be a good first step for Turkish policy makers to take toward solidifying their recent successes in the conflict. Turkey's current push for greater military involvement in the conflict does not appear to be welcome by any of the other parties involved. Turkey has a role to play in the deconfliction of military activities in Syria, but the bulk of this work should be managed through direct NATO-Russian interactions. Turkish policy makers would do well to facilitate these types of contacts.

This approach would also tacitly recognize that NATO remains the backbone of Turkish defense planning. As such, Turkey's military decisions should complement, not contradict, its commitment to the alliance. In return, the United States and NATO should be prepared to come up with additional reassurance mechanisms to reduce Turkey's threat perceptions in Syria and in the region. NATO's unwillingness to respond fully to Turkey's security concerns on the southern flank is likely to cause significant damage to the alliance over time. By working together to develop and implement a comprehensive Syria security strategy, the Trump administration and NATO leadership would be in a better position to solidify Turkey's role in the alliance and to protect the integrity of it more generally.

About the Author

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