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14. ABSTRACT
Assuming that the elements of convergence between Turkey and the West are still greater than those of divergence, this work asks why Turkey has developed conflictual relations with the West. The analysis starts with an overview of the role that the Arab Spring has played in the evolution of Turkish foreign policy. The second element of analysis is the influence that Erdogan's understanding of politics has on the Turkish conduct of foreign policy. The focus on Turkey's behavior in Syria, in the Eastern Mediterranean, and within NATO shows the negative impact that the different threat perceptions between the US, the EU, and NATO have on the relations between Turkey and the West. Erdogan's conduct of foreign policy based on aggressive nationalism and personal diplomacy further increase the friction with the West. This paper suggests that the increasing divergences with the West could increase Turkish isolation and create a dangerous void that Russia can progressively fill to harm the cohesion between Turkey and the Western allies.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AN ASSESSMENT OF TURKEY'S STRAINED RELATIONS WITH THE WEST
AFTER THE ARAB SPRING**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

LCDR PARIDE EPIFANI

AY 2020-21

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Executive Summary

Title: An assessment of Turkey's strained relations with the West after the Arab Spring

Author: LCDR Paride Epifani, Italian Navy

Thesis: The analysis of divergent threat perceptions after the Arab Spring and the effects of Erdogan's authoritarian drift on foreign policy reveal that these two factors determine the strained relations between Turkey and the West.

Discussion: The Arab Spring has been a catalyst for many of the security and political issues that have an impact on the strained relations between Turkey and the West. The Syrian conflict is a paradigm of how the different threat perceptions between Turkey, the EU, and the US have increased the strained relations between Ankara and the Western partners. The Turkish prioritization of the fight against Kurdish terrorism has clashed with the US support to the YPG in Syria to defeat ISIS and the EU concerns for immigration. Regarding Turkey-NATO relations, the Turkish security interests have diverged from the NATO Strategic Concept that is mainly focused on deterrence against Russia. Additionally, Erdogan's interpretation of politics based on populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism has influenced the conduct of Turkish foreign policy and exacerbated the tensions between Turkey and the West. Erdogan's nationalism in the Eastern Mediterranean disputes with the EU, the use of personal diplomacy in the S-400 issue between Turkey and the US, and Erdogan's ambivalent approach to NATO have complicated the dialogue between Ankara and the West.

Conclusion: The future of Turkey-West relations remains uncertain. The formal alliances and the strategic partnership between Turkey and the West have not avoided an increasing anti-Western drift by Turkey. Erdogan has leveraged Turkey's threat perceptions for domestic support instead of building trust with the West, sacrificing the potential cooperation with the Western allies on common security issues like terrorism, the defense of NATO borders, and the management of the Syrian refugees. Conversely, Western actors have often underestimated Turkey's security priorities. The West should be seriously concerned about the impact of the strained relations with Turkey. The divergences with the West can determine Turkish isolation and create a void that Russia can progressively fill as it has already happened in Syria. Russia has consistently shown its ability and intent to exploit any sign of weakness and division in the West to challenge more effectively individual Western countries. The application of this strategy can be successfully applied within all Turkey's alliances and partnerships with NATO, the US, and the EU. For this reason, it is important to start defusing the most relevant sources of division and conflict that involve Turkey and other Western countries.

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Preface

The Command and Staff College (CSC) has represented a great opportunity to gain knowledge about the Great Power Competition, China, and the Indo-Pacific theater, as topics of increasing interest and major concern for my colleagues of the US Armed Forces and all the international partners. However, in the fulfillment of the international spirit and mutual knowledge fostered in the Marine Corps University, I have always felt the need to share my interests and concerns about the behavior of international entities that gravitate toward the Italian areas of national interests, but that represent current and future challenges for the US and many other international partners and allies.

Under this premise, I have decided to conduct research on Turkey and its increasing anti-Western drift. This work is dedicated to all my fellow CSC students that have shared their knowledge and interests during this exceptional year because I believe that this paper on Turkey's strained relations with the West is the result of the intellectual curiosity and knowledge that flourishes within the CSC and the Marine Corps University. So there is no greater luck and gratitude for having been able to receive the assistance of my second reader Dr. Jorge Benitez and my mentor Dr. Sinan Ciddi, the best academic professors I could have met to speak about my topic.

My special thanks go to my military and civilian faculty members, Col. Brian McLean, Dr. Claire M. Metelits, and Dr. Lon Strauss, for having always encouraged me to share my experiences and my culture as an added value for all the other students of Conference Group One. I also want to thank all the Leadership Communication Skills Center staff and the librarians for the invaluable assistance received during the research and revision process.

To my precious wife Cora and daughter Sara, I thank you for all the patience whenever I have not been able to dedicate my time to you for the achievement of this project.

Introduction

Turkey is widely recognized as a key actor in European and transatlantic security, because of its strategic geopolitical position and its long-standing relationship with the Western alliance.¹ However, the relations between Turkey and the other Western partners have been increasingly deteriorating during the last decade. The objective of this work is to understand the rationale behind Turkish conflictual policies with the EU, the US, and NATO, though Turkey still maintains close ties with the West and often deals with the same security issues as the West.

The year 2020 closed with a negative assessment of European Union-Turkey relations, made by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, in the aftermath of the last European Council of the year. Borrell's words like "tit-for-tat dynamics" and "downward spiral" give the idea of the deterioration of the relations between the EU and Turkey.² The EU Council highlighted the strained relations with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, condemning Turkey's engagement in "unilateral actions and provocations," and the escalation of Turkish rhetoric "against the EU, EU Member States and European leaders."³ On the table, there were the "Turkish unilateral and provocative activities" in the Eastern Mediterranean, like the unauthorized drilling activities in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone, and the unilateral steps regarding the Cyprus problem. Among the proposals of the European Council, there was the EU's intent to promote a multilateral conference on the Eastern Mediterranean and to coordinate with the United States on matters relating to Turkey.⁴ Although there are many expectations that the transatlantic cooperation between the US and the EU can be more solid under Biden's new administration, hence enabling a multilateral dialogue with Turkey, also the US is dealing with a negative trend of the relations with Turkey.

The relations between the US and Turkey have been deteriorating during the last ten years on several aspects, although many political commentators highlighted the good personal relations between Turkish President Erdogan and US President Trump, confirmed by the mutual statements of appreciation.⁵ The main obstacles to the US-Turkey relations regard the US support in Syria to the YPG (People’s Defense Units)⁶ for the military operations against Isis and the Turkish purchase of the Russian missile air-defense system S-400. On both issues, the US applied also economic and financial sanctions in response to Turkish actions. In October 2019, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) took action against two ministries and three senior Turkish Government leaders after the start of the Turkish “Operation Peace Spring” in Syria against YPG strongholds along the border with Turkey.⁷ In December 2020, the US Department of the State imposed sanctions on the Republic of Turkey’s Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) through the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for the Turkish procurement of the S-400 surface-to-air missile system.⁸ Additionally, this decision followed Turkey’s suspension from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter acquisition and partnership.⁹ The consequences of the Turkish military engagement against the YPG in Syria and the acquisition of a high-tech Russian weapon system have also tested the relations of another key element of the Western security system like NATO.

The relations between NATO and Turkey, which is a key NATO member and has the second-largest military of the Alliance, suffered from all of the issues highlighted so far, and the manifestations of these tensions mirror those between NATO and Turkey in many ways. The images of Joint Russia-Turkey patrols along the M-4 highway in northwest Syria in 2020 (Figure 1) clash with the high military tension in Europe between Russia and the NATO Baltic states.¹⁰



Figure 1: Joint Russia-Turkey patrol along the M-4 highway in northwest Syria

Source: News: Turkey, “Turkey, Russia holds second joint patrol on Idlib’s M4 highway,” HürriyetDailyNews.com, March 23, 2020, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-russia-hold-second-joint-patrol-on-idlibs-m4-highway-153205>.

The Turkish assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean has constantly increased the military and diplomatic tensions against other NATO partners and EU countries like Greece, and France.¹¹ Regarding the Turkish S-400 acquisition, NATO repeatedly warned that this weapon system cannot be interoperable with the integrated NATO air defense system, while the US government is concerned that sensitive data of the F-35 could be gathered by Russians during the implementation of the missile system.¹² Besides the pure military implications, Turkey’s choice to pursue the acquisition and the live-fire testing of the Russian system, despite the US offers for different solutions and alternatives to the S-400¹³ has questioned the trust between Ankara and the other NATO allies.

All these brief hints about the difficult relations between Turkey and the West obviously provide a partial picture that does not consider other elements of tension and the Turkish instances. However, they highlight that all the key western actors, the EU, the US, and NATO are together

involved in a harsh confrontation with Turkey on security matters. Using the words of Oya Dursun-Özkanca, “Turkey’s relations with the West are at an all-time low,” and what is alarming compared to the physiological divergences between international partners is “the frequency and intensity” of the disagreements.¹⁴For this reason, this work deals with the assumption that is reasonable to wonder whether Turkey is drifting away not only from some specific western countries and institutions but from all the West.

The second assumption, supported by the literature review of the relations between Turkey and the West in the last decade, is that Turkey, despite the strained relations with NATO, the US, and the EU, still maintains strong relationships with all these entities, based on common economic interests and security objectives. If on the one hand, this is a common conclusion between scholars, on the other there are different interpretations about the reasons behind Turkey’s challenging behavior with these three international entities.

Many scholars have extensively covered the elements of friction between Turkey and the West, often recalling the conflicting interests, but at the same time highlighting the common ground especially on security matters. Without disregarding the tension between Turkey and the US, NATO, and the EU, this work assumes that the elements of convergence between Turkey and the West are still greater than those of divergence. Consequently, the main question of this work is as follows: Why has Turkey, despite similar security issues as the West, decided to take actions and policies in conflict with those of the Western partners? The analysis of divergent threat perceptions after the Arab Spring and the effects of Erdogan’s authoritarian drift on foreign policy reveals that these two factors determine the strained relations between Turkey and the West.

The first step is to introduce the historical and cultural process in which Turkey has started to develop conflictual relations with the West in the last decade. The analysis of the role of the Arab

Spring in developing Turkey's threat perceptions can help to understand why Turkey pursues policies that diverge from the Western allies and partners, resulting in strained relations with the EU, the US, and NATO.

The Role of the Arab Spring

Since this paper is focused on Turkey and its difficult relations with the EU, the US, and NATO, it is necessary to provide a background discourse about the key role that the Arab Spring has played as a catalyst for many of the security and political issues that have an impact on the strained relations between Turkey and the West. Back in 2011, in the middle of the Arab Spring, scholars were observing whether Turkey could be a role model for the other Arab countries and play a positive role for all the Middle East in cooperation with the West.¹⁵ A decade later, the Turkish foreign policy shows that stronger cooperation between Turkey and the West has not happened. On the contrary, the security challenges that stemmed from the Arab Spring have gradually deteriorated the relations between Turkey and the West and increased the divergence based on a different perception of threats.

Considered as one of the most important events in the Middle East since WWII, the Arab Spring has affected in many ways the relations between regional Muslim countries and extra-regional powers with interests in these regions.¹⁶ When the Arab Spring started with pro-democracy protests and the request for reforms, many in the West saw Turkey as a positive model for all the Arabic countries. Since 2002, under the rule of the AKP, Turkey was able to achieve impressive economic results that paired with "the AKP's stated commitment to the rule of law, transparency, and accountability."¹⁷ This positive trend brought Turkey on the path of liberal democracy and reinforced the idea that Turkey could be a model of the successful combination of Islam, secularism, and democracy.¹⁸

The idea of Turkey as a role model for other Islamic countries was perceived not only by the West but also by many other Islamic countries. Between 2002 and 2009, the democratic gains in Turkey were similarly followed by greater regional cooperation and deeper integration with the EU due to a foreign policy inspired by liberal principles.¹⁹ At the same time, Turkey had also started to tighten stronger relations with the Middle East countries, according to a policy based on “zero problems with neighbours,”²⁰ one of the key principles of Ahmet Davutoğlu who was considered the author of the AKP foreign policy. According to Davutoglu, it was a Turkish interest, as a Muslim nation, to promote peaceful relations in the Middle East, including also economic integration.²¹ Before the Arab Spring, Turkey took advantage of this policy, and it managed to achieve and develop stronger economic and trade relations with the Middle East and North African countries.²² For some scholars, the combination of economic growth, democratic reforms, and international recognition of Turkey’s transformation by the West was also an indicator of the increasing Turkish soft power in the Middle East.²³ Many Islamists in Middle-East countries saw Turkey and the ruling AKP party as a model for the successful combination of political Islam and modern democracy, with Erdogan claiming in 2011 that the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring were inspired by the Turkish example and its democracy.²⁴ However, the evolution of the Arab Spring was going to change Turkish foreign policy, and it can be considered a significant divide that opened a new season of Turkish foreign policy characterized by a more ideological approach to the Middle East.

The reason for the shift in Turkish foreign policy usually goes back again to the influence of Davutoglu’s thinking. The idea that the fall of the regimes boosted by the Arab Spring could generate a belt of Muslim Brotherhood governments inspired by the Turkish-AKP model was part of the ambitious and ideologically driven project of Ahmet Davutoglu and the

Arab Spring represented a clear opportunity for Turkey to lead a new course for the Middle East, closing the historical period of a “Western-imposed order.”²⁵ Though, the most important consequence of the Arab Spring for the evolution of the Turkish-West relations was Turkey’s decision to abandon the policy of the “zero problems with neighbors” and to start pursuing a more assertive foreign policy calling for regime change like in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. In particular, the Turkish military involvement in the Syrian conflict is a key element of the discourse about the strained relations between Turkey and the West in the last decade, because of the divergent perceived threats regarding issues in the Syrian Civil War.

However, before starting the analysis of relations between Turkey and the aforementioned Western entities, it is necessary to provide an overview of another aspect of Turkish politics that can help to understand why the foreign relations between Turkey and its Western allies are increasingly deteriorating. The issue is the current conduct of Turkish foreign policy influenced by Erdogan’s interpretation of domestic policy based on populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism.

Erdogan’s Populism and Personalism

Davutoglu's thinking is certainly important to understand the Turkish foreign policy after the Arab Spring. It is a necessary starting point to understand how Turkey reacted to this historical event and how it struggled to manage its outcomes, especially in Syria. Despite the fact that Davutoglu was recognized as the “chief architect”²⁶ of the transformation of Turkish foreign policy by the AKP, it would be reductive to search out the reasons for the Turkish anti-western drift in Davutoglu’s foreign policy theories. The first reason is that Davutoglu’s Pan-Islamist agenda for the Middle East could not transform from theory to practice and “collapsed” when the Arab Spring “turned sour and the region became embroiled in chaos.”²⁷ Moreover, Davutoglu’s

vision of a new leading role of Turkey in the former Ottoman area of influence, in place of the Western-imposed order doesn't necessarily mean to conduct an anti-Western policy. Lastly, even admitting the presence of anti-Western rhetoric in Davutoglu's thinking, his influence in the AKP gradually decreased first with his resignation as a Prime Minister in 2015, and later with the exit from the AKP in 2019. Davutoglu, once one of the closest allies of Erdogan as his foreign policy advisor, Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, and eventually Prime Minister, is today a critic of the AKP's policies.²⁸ For these reasons, to better understand today's strained relations between Turkey and the West, it is necessary to go beyond Davutoglu's influence and look to structural elements of the recent AKP's foreign policy.

The current harshness of Turkish foreign policy toward the West is believed to also mirror the way Erdogan and the AKP political elite conceptualize politics. According to this view, populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, as characteristics of the current Turkish politics, further deteriorate the strained relations between Turkey and the West. Scholars have defined different stages and periods of the AKP's domestic and foreign policy, but the most important element is that there is a parallelism between the progressive anti-Western drift and progressive democracy's involution. For example, some have highlighted four stages of the AKP's domestic policy that started with the "normalization and reinstatement of civil governance (2002–2007)" and evolved to a stage of "de-secularization, de-democratization, re-securitization, and shift to authoritarianism (2011–2016)."²⁹ In the same fashion, others have defined three phases of the AKP's foreign policy: "the phase of liberal internationalism characterized by a commitment to the EU and multilateralism (2002–2007); the phase of civilizational expansionism characterized by an overly confident, pan-Islamist, and expansionist foreign policy (2008–2014); and the current phase of ultranationalism, anti-Westernism and the reprioritization

of containment regarding the Kurdish issue.”³⁰ A brief introduction on the populist, nationalist, and personalist policies of AKP’s politics will help to understand the negative impact that they can add to Turkey-West relations.

Populism, both as an ideology with the dichotomy between “the people” and “the elite”, and as a “political strategy and “discursive style,”³¹ has been a recurrent tool in the AKP domestic policy that can be easily translated into the foreign relations. The domestic contraposition between “us,” the AKP electoral base, vs “the other,” - media, academia, and civil society- supporting Kemalist secularism has been a recurrent theme since the early times of the AKP.³² The same logic can be also applied in foreign relations, like the claims that there is always “the other,” either foreign western powers or internal enemies sponsored by the West, behind the Gezi Park protests in 2013 or the failed coup in 2016.³³

Populism can also reinforce nationalism when the identification of an external enemy helps to promote the contraposition between the proud Islamic Turkey and Western powers. In 2015 Erdogan, referring to the EU accession process said that “it is not important to us whether they accept us or not. In fact, we are testing Europe. Are they able to digest the membership of a state with a Muslim population? Are they against Islamophobia or not? If they are, they must accept Turkey. Otherwise, the EU will prove the claims that it is a Christian club.”³⁴ The already strained relations between Turkey and the US for the American support to the Kurds in Syria have been furtherly exacerbated by the Turkish exploitation of increasing anti-American feelings. Some Turkish officials accused the U.S. of supporting terrorism,” while Erdoğan even threatened to target US troops in Kurdish-held areas if they didn’t withdraw from the Turkish area of operation in Syria.³⁵

Erdogan's domestic authoritarianism is an additional element of friction in Turkish foreign relations with the West. The weakness of institutions like the legislative branch or the party system in favor of a Presidential system can have a negative impact on the conduct of foreign policy for two reasons. First, the de-institutionalization of Turkish politics enables a centralized decision-making process that reduces the importance of the Foreign Ministry bureaucracy and "inter-agency consultation."³⁶ In addition to this, the Turkish bureaucracy has been increasingly politicized, through the selection or promotion of personnel loyal to the party's ideology.³⁷ Particularly after the failed coup in July 2016, the AKP's "grip over the state apparatus" has been achieved through systematic purges conducted not only within state institutions (judiciary, military, and bureaucratic), but also against the press.³⁸ According to some scholars, today the Turkish National Security Council still maintains the monopoly of the definition of national security, but the AKP after having cleansed the NSC from the influence of the military elite, now rules the NSC and has "a free hand to determine the framework of national security."³⁹ Additionally, like the military elite used the NSC to define the security threats that justified the value of the military in the political system, today the AKP shapes the security threats through the National Security Council (NSC) to consolidate its power base.⁴⁰ For some scholars the major characteristic of Erdogan's style is the prioritization of domestic politics over foreign policy, using "international relations primarily as an instrument to expand and energize his constituency."⁴¹ This system helps to understand the importance of security issues for Erdogan since the determination of domestic and foreign threats is functional for sustaining political power.

Second, the authoritarian drift enables a foreign policy based on personalism that can result in negative outcomes with the West. Personalism in Turkey, intended as the emphasis on

Erdogan's leadership, is usually considered a rising characteristic of Turkish domestic politics fostered by the combination of a Presidential system, the preponderance of executive over limited parliamentary oversight, and the erosion of the rule of law.⁴² However, recent political science studies have highlighted the correlation between personalist authoritarian leaders like Erdogan and the conduct of foreign policy.⁴³ According to this view, personalist authoritarians are "more aggressive abroad, they are also often unpredictable actors, [and] with limited constraints on their power, personalist leaders are capable of carrying out volatile policies."⁴⁴ Many today look at Erdogan's Turkey as "a single man regime,"⁴⁵ in line with a conception of leadership based on an authoritarian leader who can make decisions above others' will, due to a consolidation of power around Erdogan that "does not allow for any institutional framework in conducting foreign policy."⁴⁶ Additionally, Erdogan's use of personal diplomacy under these conditions represents another potential element of friction with the West.

For example, a personalistic approach to foreign policy makes relations with a deeply institutionalized and consensus-based entity like the EU more difficult, and the adoption of personal diplomacy by Erdogan can foster the approach to similar leaders like Putin or increase miscalculation like with the former US President Trump.

After the description of the Arab Spring's impact on Turkish foreign relations in the last decade and the interpretation of Erdogan's foreign policy, it is now possible to combine these two levels of analysis to show that the different threat perceptions between Turkey, the EU, the US, and NATO play a key role in the strained relations between Turkey and West. For any divergent threat perception, it is also possible to show that the nature of Erdogan's foreign policy is always in the background developing additional elements of friction between Turkey and the West. The first topic is about the different threat perceptions between Turkey and the EU.

Turkey- EU Relations

Kurdish threat versus Immigration

The different perception of threats after the start of the Arab Spring has been a key element of the strained relations between Turkey and the European Union. Particularly in Syria, the identification of completely different security threats has left Turkey and the EU without any common priority on which converge. On the one hand, Turkey after having failed to overthrow Assad's regime, has been increasingly involved in the Syrian quagmire to repel the threat of Kurdish activism. The possibility of a Kurdish state close to Turkish borders is considered a major threat to Turkish territorial integrity, and the threat of an independent Kurdish entity in Syria is even bigger than the one in Iraq.⁴⁷ Amid the Syrian Civil War, the main Turkish security threat has become the rise of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military arm, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers linked to the PKK. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the PKK terrorism was responsible for the death of more than 40 thousand people since 1984.⁴⁸ On the other hand, following the humanitarian emergency created by the displaced Syrian population, the main security threat perceived by the EU has been represented by immigration.

For Europe, the civil unrest that followed the Arab Spring increased dramatically the flow of refugees and migrants from North Africa and the Middle East. The perception of illegal immigration as a major security concern has been surely encouraged by the rise of far-right and nationalist parties. In Italy for example, the presence of *Lega Nord* in the Italian Government, a far-right and populist party oriented toward a harsh anti-immigration policy, questioned for many weeks the participation of Italy in the NATO coalition against Gaddafi's regime. Italy feared that NATO's air campaign and the fall of the Libyan dictatorship would have brought a surge of the

migration flow, disrupting the positive results achieved with a deal on immigration with Gaddafi. These fears were well-founded, and in 2011 the flow of migrants from Libya to Italy and Europe spiked again. However, the best evidence of how the refugee crisis was a major issue for the EU is given by the instrumental use that Turkey did of the EU-Turkey deal on refugees.

Through a Joint Action Plan in 2015 and a deal on refugees called the “EU-Turkey Statement” in 2016, the EU tried to stem the flow of refugees in the European countries with the collaboration of Turkey. According to Oya Dursun Ozkanca, Turkey, which had adopted an open-door policy for the Syrian refugees, successfully exploited the refugees' threat with issue-linkage bargaining strategies to “extract significant benefits” from the EU. For example, Turkey managed to re-open its accession process to the EU and the VISA liberalization negotiations for its citizens.⁴⁹ Additionally, to reinforce the gains and get other “concessions” from the EU, Turkey used compellent threats and blackmail strategies.⁵⁰ Erdogan and other Turkish officials were well aware of the EU sensitivity on migration, and they constantly leveraged it with explicit threats like “open the floodgates to Europe.”⁵¹

Eventually, in 2020 Erdogan “opened the doors”⁵² to Europe after a massive humanitarian crisis raised in Idlib, northwestern Syria. The situation deteriorated when in 2019 the Syrian government launched an offensive, heavily backed by the Russian military, to retake the control of the rebel stronghold in Idlib. When thousands of displaced people started to flee from the region toward the Turkish border, Erdogan announced that the refugees were free to proceed to Europe, creating instability at the Greek and Bulgarian borders.⁵³ Despite the fact that the refugee problem has become a serious concern also for Turkey, which hosts 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees,⁵⁴ the events of Idlib show the different prioritization of the refugees' problem between Turkey and the EU. After the events in Idlib, the EU has continued to

externalize the problem of the refugees offering monetary aids in exchange for the management of the refugees within the Turkish border. Turkey has made some proposals to mitigate the problem of the Syrian refugees, but immigration doesn't seem to be perceived as the biggest threat.⁵⁵ Since 2018 Turkey has rather made instrumental use of the refugees (“weaponization of refugees”⁵⁶) to avoid the EU critics about the Turkish military offensive in northern Syria, and at the same time to compel the NATO and European military help in Syria.⁵⁷

Erdogan's behavior about the refugees and the indications that Turkey is seeking help to maintain “safe zones”⁵⁸ in northern Syria reinforce the idea that Turkish priorities are driven by the threat of a Kurdish independent region close to its southern borders. Despite the fact that many of the Turkish security issues related to terrorism and refugees in Syria are a real concern also for Europe, Erdogan's instrumentalization of immigration has only fostered strained relations with the EU. On the other side, the EU has mostly tried to manage the refugees' problem outside its borders, without trying to find a way to cooperate with Turkey on other security issues. Unlike the disputes over Syria, the next issue regards security concerns that directly involve many EU countries, particularly those facing the Mediterranean. The increasing tension of the last years in the Eastern Mediterranean has been characterized by Erdogan's aggressive foreign policy that has often hindered the dialogue.

The Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and Erdogan's Nationalism

The recent Turkish assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean is another aspect of the tensions with Europe. But it is also an example of the populist and nationalist approach to foreign policy by Erdogan. Turkey has started engaging in provocative actions toward Greece and Cyprus, like the seismic surveys and drillings conducted by the Turkish research vessel, the *Oruc Reis*, on disputed continental shelves in the Mediterranean.⁵⁹ Additionally, Erdogan, thanks

to the military support for the AL-Serraj government in Libya, has reached an agreement for an EEZ that threatens the internationally recognized claims on the maritime boundaries of Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt.⁶⁰ Some scholars have highlighted the energy issues behind the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, while others agree that it is mostly about sovereignty.⁶¹ The fact that Turkish officials and media identify the national initiatives in the Mediterranean with the rhetoric concept of “*Mavi Vatan*,” which means “blue homeland,” supports the idea of a confrontation in the Mediterranean linked to sovereignty.

The concept of “blue homeland” is ascribed to former Turkish Rear Adm. Cem Gürdeniz. Besides claiming the importance of promoting maritime policies and the defense of the territorial waters, Gürdeniz is ideologically anti-western and nationalist.⁶² He also blames Greece for its long-standing alliance with the US and western Imperial Powers, which intend to undermine Turkey’s sovereignty, and he contests Greek energy claims in the Aegean and Mediterranean seabed.⁶³ The nationalistic rhetoric behind “blue homeland” reinforces the populist and nationalist drift of Erdogan’s foreign policy.

In 2019, Turkish media showed a picture of President Erdogan in front of a map titled “Turkey, Blue Homeland” (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Erdoğan in front of a map of *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland)

Source: Panagiotis Savvidis, “Blue Homeland theorist renames the Aegean to ‘Sea of the Islands’,” *Greekcitytimes.com*, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/02/27/blue-homeland-aegean-sea-islands/>.

The map, located in front of the visitor’s book of the National Defense University in Istanbul, depicted Turkey’s maritime borders “stretching across the Greek islands of the eastern and southeastern Aegean and even into the Cyclades.”⁶⁴ This area of 462,000 square kilometers claimed by Turkey “denies any continental shelf or exclusive economic zone to Cyprus and many of Greece’s Aegean islands.”⁶⁵ In the same period, the Turkish presidency released a promotional video that celebrates the anniversary of the 1538 naval battle of Preveza in which the Ottoman fleet defeated that of a Christian alliance assembled by Pope Paul III for supremacy in the Mediterranean.⁶⁶ The video, which contains elements of nationalism, Islamism, and martyrdom, ends with some images of President Erdoğan, and it is considered an explicit reference to the “blue homeland” narrative.⁶⁷

Many observe that Erdoğan’s posture in the Mediterranean is one of the populist tools used to translate a nationalist and aggressive foreign policy to gain and maintain the domestic consensus.⁶⁸ Additionally, the way Erdoğan deals with the maritime disputes in the

Mediterranean shows the tendency to prefer an antagonist approach and to set new rules based on straightforward bilateral agreements. This style of foreign policy clashes with the institutionalized approach of the EU and makes the dialogue more difficult. The antagonist approach by Turkey is often based on the nationalist and populist rhetoric against Greece, a practice reinforced by the strategic domestic alliance with the nationalist National Movement Party. This behavior hinders the mediation by the UE since Turkey refuses any dialogue until all Greek pre-conditions are removed, and calls on EU to be impartial.⁶⁹

Lastly, Erdogan's maritime deal for the definition of Turkey's and Libya's extended Exclusive Economic Zones with the UN-recognized Libyan Government of the Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj (Figure 3) has been widely criticized.



Figure 3: Turkey's and Libya's extended EEZ

Source: Anthony Skinner, "Erdogan Unlikely to Back Down in Mediterranean Despite Oil and Gas Glut," *Washingtoninstitute.org*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogan-unlikely-back-down-mediterranean-despite-oil-and-gas-glut>.

The deal is based on a memorandum-of-understanding that lacks details, and Greece defines this attempt on the borders as "absurd" since it doesn't take into consideration Crete.⁷⁰ The decision to "subvert existing maritime boundaries with a precedent that disrupts the internationally recognized claims of other states,"⁷¹ with a deal signed after the military

intervention in Libya as a proxy country, represents the current trend of Erdogan's foreign policy in clear contrast with the institutional approach of the EU.

Turkey-US Relations

YPG Threat versus ISIS

The previous chapter showed that the divergence between Turkey and the EU after the Arab Spring has increased over different security issues. On the Turkish side, the security threat posed by the Kurds had to be fought on the Syrian terrain with military means, while on the EU side the immigration threat had to be kept out of the EU through monetary aids and control of the borders. Hence, Turkey and the EU have never found a common ground upon which to build some kind of cooperation.

Regarding the relations between Turkey and the US in Syria, the situation could have been potentially different. As reported by Ahmet T. Kuru, when the turmoil in Syria began to rise, Turkey had three options: "1. Backing civilian opposition in addition to encouraging peaceful, civil disobedience; 2. Supporting military opposition with its military capacity as an assurance to avoid massacres; 3. Supporting military opposition with a North Atlantic Treaty Organization guarantee to avoid massacres."⁷² In all of these options and particularly the second one, which was the option eventually chosen by Turkey, there was potentially room for cooperation with the US. Instead, both countries have oriented their military and political efforts according to a different threat perception: for Turkey this means opposition to Kurdish independence, and for the US this means opposition to the propagation of ISIS. Unfortunately, the ways and means to fight these two threats were bound to collide on multiple aspects.

The main reason for the contrast between Turkey and the US is the American support to the Kurds in Syria against ISIS. Turkey has also complained about the US decision to not

intervene directly against Assad, since the Turkish also aimed to overthrow the Syrian regime. However, after the successful intervention of Russia and Iran in support of Assad, the containment of the Kurds in Syria has become the Turkish priority. The discord between Turkey and the US is specifically about the Syrian Kurdish fighting force of the YPG, which started to cooperate with the US in 2014, and was later provided with American weapons supplies and military training.⁷³ As already mentioned, for Turkey this military cooperation is totally unacceptable for two reasons. First, the YPG is credibly considered part of the PKK, which is also on the US list of terrorist organizations. Second, the YPG is affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has declared the goal of establishing a Kurdish State.⁷⁴ From the Turkish point of view, the latter outcome could result in the rise of a safe haven for Kurdish terrorists and into a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. This argument is in part reasonable, but it is also a powerful instrument of Erdogan's "rhetoric of conspiracy and threat" that leverages on Turkish "deep sense of insecurity" for foreign and domestic threats.⁷⁵ Such an outlook can easily reinforce an increasing anti-Americanism based on the idea that the US policymakers support Kurdish territorial claims in Syria and threaten Turkish security.⁷⁶

The dispute over the YPG is apparently without a solution because the US and Turkey consider it a strategic variable for opposing reasons. Turkey officials consider the YPG at the same level as the PKK; hence, according to this evaluation, the YPG is a legitimate target of the Turkish war against terrorism.⁷⁷ Conversely, the US has backed the YPG because it is considered the most effective and combat-proven military organization against ISIS.⁷⁸ The Turkish counterargument is that the fight against ISIS cannot justify the US choice to support the YPG, because the PKK is an "existential threat"⁷⁹ for Turkey. In a speech in 2017, Erdogan was very explicit in his accusations against the US support to the YPG, saying that Washington was giving

“weapons for free to a terror organization,” adding that the US supplies were being used by the YPG to “encircle us from the south.”⁸⁰

The incompatibility of the US and Turkish threats perception is also remarkable for another reason. When Turkey officially declared to fight ISIS in Syria, the convergence on the same US strategic objective didn't bring any significant rapprochement between the two ‘allies’, because Turkey's security priorities remained substantially different. The issue is the controversial Turkish behavior against ISIS.

Until 2015, there were indications of a Turkish ‘soft approach’ against ISIS.⁸¹ The relations between Turkey and ISIS were complicated by the Turkish “open-door” policy adopted until 2013 towards every armed group, including Al-Qaeda affiliates that could fight against the Syrian government, indirectly supporting the Turkish objective to remove Assad's regime. This policy implied Turkey as the “primary conduit for would-be mujahedeen to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq.”⁸² Following ISIS's hostile actions against Turkey in 2014 and early 2015, Ankara eventually decided to openly fight ISIS.

Initially, Turkey and the US seemed to be able to cooperate together thanks to the common effort against ISIS. In February 2015, Turkey and the US signed an agreement to train and arm Syrian opposition fighters to fight against ISIS militants.⁸³ However, since the beginning, there have been different views between Turkish and US officials regarding the composition of the rebels to train and the objectives of the anti-ISIS coalition.⁸⁴ According to Turkey, the rebels had to target not only ISIS, but also the Syrian regime, while the Pentagon confirmed that the target was only ISIS.⁸⁵ During the following years, the Turkish military operations in Syria have further highlighted the different objectives of Turkey and the US. From the US point of view, the Turkish military commitment against Isis has been always considered

as subordinate and functional to the fight against the YPG and the PKK. Consequently, the Turkish prioritization of the fight against Kurdish terrorism and the strong US support to the YPG as an anti-ISIS asset has continued to foster mutual distrust.

So far Turkey has conducted three major combat operations in Syria (Figure 4): Euphrates Shield (2016-2017), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019).



Figure 4: Turkish major combat Operations in Syria

Source: News/Middle East, “Mapping the targets of Turkey's new military operation in northern Syria,” *TRTWorld.com*, December 14, 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/mapping-the-targets-of-turkey-s-new-military-operation-in-northern-syria-22487>.

In all these operations the Turkish objective to eliminate the ISIS threat was often a pretext to fight the YPG. Although US officials were always informed of the launch of Turkish military operations, the relations between Turkey and the US remained difficult. During the operation “Olive Branch” the main argument against Turkey was that the Turkish activities against the YPG slowed the US operations against Isis.⁸⁶ Even during Operation “Peace Spring,” when the Isis threat seemed to be less relevant for the US, the tension between Turkey and the US remained high. Officially, the scope of the Turkish operation was to “create a free zone in

north-east Syria free of YPG and terrorists and allow the return of Syrian refugees in the area.⁸⁷

On this occasion, US President Trump's impulsive behavior toward Turkey probably helped to increase uncertainty and mistrust. First, Trump tacitly approved the Turkish operations in Syria by withdrawing US troops from North-East Syria. US officials widely criticized this move because it exposed the YPG to the offensive actions of Turkish troops and implied the betrayal of the most effective US ally against Isis.⁸⁸ When Trump wrote a letter threatening severe economic sanctions against Turkey if their militaries would go after the YPG, the operation had already started and Turkish Presidential officials remarked that "President Erdogan received the letter, thoroughly rejected it and put it in the bin."⁸⁹ Accordingly, the military Operation "Peace Spring" proceeded regularly, and it ended with two ceasefire agreements with the US and Russia that have left many open questions about the achievements.

According to Turkish officials, Turkey has reached the objective of creating a safe area free of YPG terrorists, though not as big as initially planned.⁹⁰ Instead, many in the US Congress and Pentagon have been critical of the US results because the vacuum left by the US withdrawal has weakened the YPG in case of a resurgence of Isis and pushed the Kurds in Syria toward the influence of Russia and Assad.⁹¹

The situation in Syria remains really unstable, so as the relations between Turkey and the US. During the Trump mandate, the relations with President Erdogan were overall positive, as evidenced in the above mentioned agreements on Turkish military activities in Syria. Conversely, some observed that Trump's handling of Turkey's activities has not been beneficial for US interests in Syria.⁹² From the point of view of the US-Turkey relations, the next section will show that the personal diplomacy between Erdogan and Trump has not achieved positive outcomes.

Personal diplomacy and the S400 dispute

The adoption of personal diplomacy by Erdogan is due to political and personal factors. Scholars highlight that this style of diplomacy, particularly adopted in crisis time, has become very common among national leaders that try to leverage personal relations to solve difficult problems between States.⁹³ The current Turkish political structure presents many favorable conditions for the preponderance of personal diplomacy over more classic and institutionalized diplomatic channels. The Presidential system empowers Erdogan with “a leading position in decision-making” and gives him “the final word on most policy matters.”⁹⁴ This applies also to foreign policy decisions, due to modifications to the foreign policy decision process. The “deinstitutionalization of foreign policy making in Erdogan’s Turkey” has reduced the value of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which is now reduced to “an implementor of decisions taken in the presidential palace.”⁹⁵ The other existing structures of Turkish foreign policy like the Security and Foreign Policy Committee, the National Security Council (NSC), and the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), are not hierarchically organized and all report directly to the President, who maintains the monopoly of the decisions and often relies on a “selected” circle of trusted consultants.⁹⁶

The adoption of personal diplomacy takes also into account the personal qualities of Erdogan. Aylin Ş. Görener and Meltem Ş. Ucal have conducted a study on Erdogan’s personal traits and leadership style employing the Leadership Trait Analysis technique. The results showed that Erdogan “scores high on belief in the ability to control events,” which results in a “subjectively perceived ability to have the desired effect on outcomes in the political environment.”⁹⁷ According to the study, leaders like Erdogan “tend to dominate decision-making, preferring to organize a centralized decision-making structure that situates [themselves]

at the top.”⁹⁸ This analysis matches the type of decision process adopted in foreign policy and adds further favorable conditions for the adoption of personal diplomacy.

The dispute over the Turkish adoption of the Russian missile defense system S-400 is an interesting example of the challenges of personal diplomacy because President Trump is also recognized as a leader that extensively adopts personal diplomacy.⁹⁹ Some have given a positive evaluation of Erdogan’s personal diplomacy with Trump, arguing that the personal relations between them during the S-400 dispute are a successful case of personal diplomacy. Erdogan’s decision to blame the Congress more than Trump regarding the opposition to the S-400’s acquisition, and the belief that one-to-one talks with the American President convinced him to support Turkey’s interest would have helped to ease the tension and preserve the dialogue.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, it is believed that the use of personal diplomacy between the two leaders has improved misperceptions on both sides, and encouraged Erdogan’s confidence in the feasibility of the S-400’s acquisition, opening a new chapter of the difficult relationship with the US.

The issue of the S-400 acquisition represents a political failure both for Turkey and the US. Turkey’s necessity to acquire an efficient air defense system responds to a real security concern for the defense of Turkish territory from aerial and missile attacks. The defense of Turkey, as a key NATO member in the Middle East and the Caucasus region, should also be a serious concern for all the other members. The volatile security environment around Turkey, characterized by wars and instability in the neighboring countries (Armenia, Iraq, and Syria) and the necessity to defend the Turkish soil from air threats, has always been on the agenda of Turkish politicians, diplomats, and military personnel.¹⁰¹ Until 2017, the Turkish need for an effective air defense system has been characterized by ad-interim solutions, like the deployment of the NATO Patriots battalion along the Syrian border in January 2013,¹⁰² and the failed Turkish

attempt to purchase a Chinese system¹⁰³ for the strong opposition of NATO and the US.

Eventually, in 2017, Erdogan decided to purchase the Russian S-400 system, claiming that the attempt to acquire the US Patriot system had failed because the selling conditions didn't meet the Turkish demands for technology transfer and co-production agreements.¹⁰⁴

Similar to what occurred for the Chinese system, US and NATO officials tried to warn Turkey that the S-400 was not compatible with NATO's Integrated Air Defense System, with the additional risk that Russian technicians could gain sensitive information about the stealth technology of the F-35.¹⁰⁵ However, despite the US sanctions and the suspension of the Turkish F-35 partnership, in 2020 Turkey started test firing the S-400, a decision that has questioned "Turkey's commitments as a U.S. and NATO ally."¹⁰⁶ Some observe that all the process of the S-400 acquisition has been "unnecessary, avoidable and bizarre."¹⁰⁷ From a merely tactical perspective, military experts have raised many reservations about the real effectiveness of a Russian system that would need to work in a stand-alone mode because of the incompatibility and lack of integration with other NATO systems, and the small number of units acquired.¹⁰⁸ But the real issue is political and diplomatic, since one may wonder why a valid security issue of a strategic NATO ally has eventually turned into a decision that put at risk the Atlantic cohesion.

The analysis of the personal relations between Trump and Erdogan and the trust in the persuasive value of personal diplomacy by the two leaders can be part of the answer. Many have criticized Trump's behavior toward Erdogan, starting from the decision to congratulate him for the success of the Presidential referendum in 2017, which was instead largely criticized as a sign of the authoritarian drift of Turkish policy.¹⁰⁹ However, this action helped to reset the relations between Erdogan and the US presidency, after Turkey alleged US involvement in the 2016 coup

during the Obama administration. Some observe that Trump's affinity for Erdogan and Ankara's use of personal relations to achieve the Turkish interest came into play during the S-400 crisis.

According to the common practices of personal diplomacy, the two leaders frequently have tried to solve the issue through phone calls and meetings.¹¹⁰ In 2019, Erdogan called President Trump to push back against the threat of sanctions by the US Congress on the S-400, leveraging on the infringement of the president's executive power by the Congress.¹¹¹ The contents of the call and the following reactions by Erdogan and the Minister of Defense showed the wrong messaging that can result from direct talks on such sensitive issues. For example, the Foreign Affairs Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu reported that "Trump admitted himself on the phone that the U.S. made the mistake not to sell Patriots to Turkey and he promised Erdogan that he will take care of the issue."¹¹² This statement contrasted sharply with the position of many US officials. The same year at the G20 summit, Trump publicly remarked on Erdogan's reasons for the S-400 acquisition by recalling the failure to sell the US Patriots during the Obama administration.¹¹³ During the same summit Erdogan stated that after talks with the US President, US sanctions on the S-400 would not happen.¹¹⁴

The S-400 saga shows that the reciprocal use of personal diplomacy between Erdogan and Trump did not lead to any of the typical benefits of personal relations between heads of state because it was neither useful as a "crisis communication tool" nor did it increase the "actor's ability to understand and identify the issue at hand."¹¹⁵ Conversely, direct talks between the two leaders, the mutual belief of being able to convince the interlocutor, and the lack of trust in the traditional diplomatic experts increased miscalculation and misperceptions on both sides. Ultimately, Erdogan probably had the feeling that he could acquire the S-400 disregarding the real consequences of its actions, while Trump was not able to properly signal the gravity of the

purchase of a high-tech missile system by a NATO ally. The last relations to be examined are those between Turkey and NATO, and it is important to highlight that the dispute over the S-400 is only one manifestation of a deeper divergence regarding Turkey's perceived threats coming from the neighboring countries and the current NATO stance on the Russian threat.

Turkey-NATO Relations

Turkey's Regional Threats versus NATO Strategic Concept

The concern about the Turkish anti-Western drift includes also the strained relations between NATO and the West. In comparison with what occurs with the US and the EU, apparently the different threat perceptions between Turkey and NATO should not be a major issue. On the contrary, they prove to be also in this case a decisive factor of divergence. Turkey is a NATO member; hence, it is a country that in the NATO decision process based on consensus has the same weight as any other members. Additionally, article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty allows member countries to bring an issue to the attention of the North Atlantic Council (Council or NAC – NATO's principal political decision-making body) and discuss it with the Allies.¹¹⁶ Consequently, any NATO member can bring to the attention of all members any concern regarding "the territorial integrity, political independence or security" of the threatened party. It is important to note that since 1949 the article 4 has been invoked six times, five of them by Turkey between 2003 and 2020.¹¹⁷ Except for the first request of consultation in 2003, all the remaining calls have been directly related to the events in Syria. On some occasions, after the art. 4 consultations in 2012, NATO answered Turkey's calls with the deployment of Patriot missiles, after Syrian shells had hit Turkish civilians and a jet had been shot down by Syrian Defense Forces. This simple statistic is an indication of NATO's importance for Turkey regarding security threats and shows how Turkey has been on NATO's front line during the last decade.

However, Turkey's exposure to threats in NATO's southern border has not consolidated the alliance between Turkey and NATO. Turkey's behavior after the Arab Spring and a substantial difference in threat perceptions between Turkey and all the other NATO members are helpful to interpret Turkey's divergence from NATO.

Amid the Arab Spring, Davutoglu wrote an articulate report of NATO's transformation and Turkish strategic role in the Alliance. Besides considering NATO "a solid symbol of Turkey's Western vocation," he highlighted that Turkey has "a multidimensional foreign policy with goals of maximum integration in the neighborhood, involvement in nearby regions, and development of ties in areas such as Africa, Asia and Latin America."¹¹⁸ According to Davutoglu's ideological approach to the Arab Spring, Turkey considered itself and NATO as a strategic "promoter" of both regional and global peace and security.¹¹⁹ This kind of optimistic view still relied on Davutoglu's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" and the aspiration to play a key role in the Middle East. However, the violent evolution of the Arab Spring in Syria and the foreign policies adopted by Turkey shifted the Turkish foreign policy to a condition that many call "problems with all neighbors" or "zero friends."¹²⁰ Turkey's military assertiveness in the Middle East and Libya has exposed Ankara to multiple threats and increased the number of hostile states and non-state actors. The Turkish involvement in the Syrian war has become the most evident display of this dangerous environment, and it has marked the beginning of Turkey's isolation from the NATO allies. The mentioned disputes over the S-400 system, the fight of YPG and PKK versus the US coalition commitment against ISIS, and the rapprochement to Russia in Syria for the control of the Syrian Kurds, are all the results of the Turkish policies in Syria based on different threat perceptions with the West and consequently with the NATO countries.

However, regarding NATO and Turkey from a broader point of view, there is another important element of friction that goes beyond the Syrian conflict.

Turkey's exposure to the Mediterranean and the Middle East after the Arab Spring highlights a different threat perception within NATO on a political and strategic level. Turkey's military intervention in Libya, Syria, and Iraq shows that the current Turkish security priorities and challenges are oriented to the so-called MENA (Middle East-North Africa) region.

Erdogan's interventionism in this region, based on political domestic calculations and short-term threats, seems to not have taken into account the unanimity decision process of the NAC, leaving Turkey more and more isolated in its military engagements in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. Unlike the military intervention in Libya in 2011, when NATO answered to the UN Security Council Resolution with Operation Unified Protector and Turkey gave its contribution within the NATO frame, today the hypothesis of a NATO military intervention in Syria beside Turkey is hardly imaginable. The Russian military presence in Syria is one of the main reasons for NATO's reluctance to directly being involved in Syria, also considering that Russia has vetoed any UN Security Council Resolution that could set the same conditions that enabled the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011.¹²¹

Moreover, the Turkish focus on the MENA region highlights different threat perceptions that also take place in NATO's strategic priorities. The last NATO Strategic Concept¹²² has been promulgated in 2010, before the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria. The three core tasks are collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Some have observed that until the Russian invasion of Crimea, the last two concepts remained the prevailing one.¹²³ However, since 2014 NATO's priority and main efforts have shifted decisively toward deterrence against Russia and the provision of article 5. This major shift in NATO policy has marginalized the

importance of NATO's southern border and the contrast to complex issues like terrorism and political instability. Unfortunately, this situation creates the condition for decreasing the importance of Turkish security concerns and external threats. Today, most of NATO's planning and material resources are involved in the defense of the Baltic States, and of the north-east flank through air policing missions and high readiness forces (Readiness Action Plan) that drain most of NATO's resources in Europe.¹²⁴ Additionally, it should also be considered that the current NATO deterrence in the Baltics is still considered insufficient since NATO wargames in the Baltics generally predict the Russian ability to reach the Baltic capitals within sixty hours from the invasion.¹²⁵

Currently, there are no indications that NATO's strategic priorities to deter Russia will change in the near future. NATO's posture is going to remain heavily weighted in the north-east flank, leaving less space for Turkey's initiatives to involve the NATO European partners in its security priorities. In addition to this, Erdogan's aggressive rhetoric with neighboring NATO Mediterranean countries like France and Greece deprives Turkey of potential allies to balance NATO commitments in the MENA region.

Erdogan's ambivalent approach to NATO

The diplomatic relations between Turkey and NATO show the ambivalent behavior of Erdogan who has used both institutional channels and personal relations with individual NATO countries. NATO like the EU is deeply institutionalized, leaving less space for the adoption of personal diplomacy and nationalistic rhetoric. The NATO decision process encourages a formal approach to the numerous NATO organizations, agencies, and military and civilian structures. From this point of view, Erdogan has exploited the NATO consultation mechanisms, as it has been shown by the use of Art. 4. Turkey has also tried to target NATO and the US with

boundary-breaking behavior.¹²⁶ On several occasions, Turkey has denied NATO and US access to the Turkish *Incirlik* airbase as a compelling threat for the military support to the Kurds in Syria.¹²⁷ In another circumstance, Ankara denied the access of German parliamentarians to the same airbase as a response to a German resolution that recognized the Armenian Genocide.¹²⁸ Moreover in 2019, amid the Turkish military operations in northeast Syria, Erdogan used the rights of Turkish NATO membership to threaten the use of the veto against the defense plans for the Baltic States and Poland.¹²⁹ Although Erdogan was probably aggrieved by the criticism from some NATO members, particularly France, about Turkish military incursions in Syria, it is interesting to note how far Erdogan went with his provocations against the NATO allies.¹³⁰ It has to be considered that this threat came during the 70th NATO Anniversary, regarding a strategic NATO decision for Russia deterrence, while Turkey was cooperating with Russian forces in Syria.

On other occasions, Erdogan has chosen hostile personal relations to verbally attack NATO allies. One of Erdogan's favorite targets has been French President Macron. The tension between France and Turkey has been constantly high for conflicting interests in Libya, the strong French support to Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean disputes, and the Turkish role in Syria. In 2019, after Macron had questioned whether NATO was "brain dead" referring to the lack of NATO strategic cohesion, Erdogan replied with the phrase "I'm addressing Mr. Macron from Turkey and I will say it at NATO: You should check whether you are brain dead first."¹³¹ In 2020, the confrontation shifted to the religious level after Macron warned about the possibility that some Muslim elements could propagate beliefs against the value of the Republic. Erdogan's reply was again really direct when during a speech he said that "Macron needs treatment on a mental level."¹³²

Regarding the confrontation between Turkey and Greece, there is a long history of enmity and mistrust, but the renewed tension in the Eastern Mediterranean both at sea and in the air between the Turkish and the Greek Armed Forces signals the umpteenth escalation of tension between the two countries.¹³³ In 2020 both countries agreed on the establishment of a bilateral military de-confliction mechanism after technical meetings at NATO headquarters that also included a direct hotline to reduce the risk of unintended incidents and accidents.¹³⁴ However, the tension between Turkey and Greece has remained high. According to his leadership style, Erdogan has launched many messages through public speeches. In 2020, during the opening ceremony of a hospital in Istanbul, Erdogan warned Greece about the territorial claims in the Mediterranean with the following words: “they’re either going to understand the language of politics and diplomacy or in the field with painful experiences.”¹³⁵

Erdogan’s behavior with NATO shows that the Turkish leader has used a pragmatic approach. On the one hand, he has leveraged the Turkish NATO membership to promote the Turkish interests through an institutional approach exploiting NATO diplomatic channels and decision-making processes. On the other, according to a personalistic conduct of foreign relations and the nationalistic use of foreign policy for domestic purposes, he has often engaged the leaders of NATO allies through public speeches to reinforce the image of a strong leader. However, in both cases Erdogan has additionally estranged important NATO Turkish allies in the Mediterranean region and increased Turkish isolation. It is believed that in the long term Turkey’s estrangement from NATO allies in the Mediterranean region could play against the Turkish security interests. Only the political cohesion in NATO’s southern flank could help Turkey to claim greater attention for its security threats in cooperation with the other NATO allies in the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the strained relations between Turkey and the West through what is considered the main element of friction between Ankara and the UE, the US, and NATO. The focus on threat perceptions helps to find a common thread that links Turkish security issues with the divergences with the West. The Arab Spring has become an important watershed in Turkey's threat perceptions that have effects on all the Western actors, which in turn have reacted to the changes in the Middle East and North Africa with different security priorities. The incompatibility that arises from different threat perceptions has increased the distance between Turkey and the West.

The ties existing between Turkey and the Western allies have not avoided an increasing anti-Western drift by Turkey, despite room for greater cooperation on common security issues like terrorism, the defense of NATO borders, and the management of the Syrian refugees. For this reason, this paper has tried to understand why the existing relations between Turkey and the West have not facilitated dialogue and cooperation. The suggested answer has been that the transformation of Turkey's domestic policy into an authoritarian state has implied a de-institutionalization of the Turkish foreign policy. The combination of a populist, nationalist, and executive-oriented leadership by Erdogan has favored the adoption of a foreign policy that is instrumental for the domestic support of the AKP leadership. Erdogan's personal diplomacy and nationalistic rhetoric have consequently leveraged Turkey's threat perceptions for domestic support instead of building trust with the West, sacrificing the potential cooperation with the Western allies.

The future of Turkey-West relations remains uncertain. Many highlight that Turkey still has strong ties with the West even on security issues, but the West should be seriously concerned

about the impact of the strained relations with Turkey. The divergences with the West can determine Turkish isolation from the West and create a void that can be progressively filled by Russia as it has already happened in Syria. Russia has consistently shown its ability and intent to exploit any sign of weakness and division in the West to challenge more effectively individual Western countries. The application of this strategy can be successfully applied within all Turkey's alliances and partnerships with NATO, the US, and the EU. Turkey itself experiences the effects of this division in Syria, considering that the Turkish cooperation with Russia often seems unbalanced toward Russia's interests. If the elements of friction with Turkey continue to increase, it can be expected that Russia will continue to gain influence in areas that are of strategic interest to the EU and the US.

For this reason, it is important to start defusing the most relevant sources of division and conflict that involve Turkey and other Western countries. One suggested area of concern regards the resolution of the Greek-Turkish dispute over Cyprus. The clash over political, territorial, and maritime claims linked to this island probably represents the emblem of cross tensions between Turkey, multiple NATO allies, and the EU. In this context, also considering the potential exploitation of these divisions by Russia, it should be in the US interest to resume an active role in the resolution of the Cyprus problem.

Endnotes

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