

Policy

Brief

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Authors

Tanya Irwin-Bandula

Sanjida Amin



An Alliance in Trouble? Turkey and NATO in 2025

About the Authors



Tanya is a PhD student at the University of Toronto. Her research investigates insurgent group financing and governance, with a particular emphasis on the role of tax in rebel group behaviors and outcomes. Her research typically focuses on sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa. She has worked as a consultant and researcher on matters of governance and taxation for the World Bank, Danish Refugee Council, and International Centre for Tax and Development. Tanya is also the Executive Vice-President of the Toronto Chapter of Women in International Security-Canada.



Sanjida Amin is a PhD student at University of Toronto, where her research explores external intervention in intra-state conflicts, rebel organization and counterinsurgency. Her dissertation project examines the relationship between external intervention and organization of rebel groups. She is also the recipient of Ontario Graduate Scholarship in 2019.

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Introduction

This policy brief summarizes the findings of the “An Alliance in Trouble? Turkey and NATO in 2025” paper, which compiles the results from a foresight activity that was conducted on March 3rd, 2020. This policy brief presents the forecasted trends, weak signals, and wildcards from the workshop and discusses the implications of these predictions on Canadian security and defense interests.

The brief proceeds by providing background on Turkish-NATO relations, and especially recent challenges in this relationship. The predictions from the foresight workshop for Turkish-NATO relations in 2025 are presented, followed by their respective implications for Canadian security interests. Ultimately, the forecasting activity predicts that the most likely future for Turkey and NATO in 2025 will be a continuation of the status quo, meaning persistent unresolved issues surrounding the purchase of Russian arms, divergent approaches to the war in Syria, continued authoritarianism in Turkey, and continued resource disputes in the Mediterranean Sea. This outcome could potentially provide an opportunity for Canada to help mitigate tensions in the alliance. Canada should continue to monitor trends and developments to determine the best way to mitigate cleavages and tensions between NATO and Turkey.

Background

Turkish-NATO relations are at an all-time low point since the end of the Cold War. Four primary cleavages have increased tension between Turkey and other NATO members. First, from 2012 onwards Turkey has diverged from other NATO members regarding security priorities in the war against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. In particular, Turkey is concerned about the collaboration of NATO allies with the Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (YPG) in the fight against IS given the YPG’s connection to the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (KPP), which has been in conflict with the Turkish state since 1984.

Second, Turkey’s purchase of Russian made S-400 Surface-to-Air (SAM) systems in early 2017 has been considered by the US and other NATO members as a threat to security given the possibility of human and electronic espionage that could be introduced by integrating Russian arms into NATO infrastructure. As of April 2020, Turkey has not deployed the S-400s, nor made them operational, and the issue remains unresolved. Further, Turkish-Russian cooperation on bilateral trade, interdependence in the energy sector, and the shared perceptions of security threats could also damage Turkish-NATO relations (Bilgin 2015; Ozdemir and Guliev 2016; Şimşek et al. 2017; Yermekbayev et al. 2020). Though, given historical rivalry between Turkey and Russia, this partnership is likely to remain limited (Balta 2019; Svarin 2015).

Third, NATO members are concerned with the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Presidency, especially in light of recent “democratic backsliding” after the attempted coup d’état in 2016. Since then, Erdoğan has ratcheted up restrictions on any critics of the regime, and established ties with counterparts that are unconcerned with Turkish domestic problems (Çeviköz 2018).

Finally, Turkey is currently enmeshed in disputes over resource exploitations with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, in which France, Italy, and other NATO member EU states have sided with Greece on the matter. These tensions have placed an enormous amount of pressure on Turkish-NATO relations, and has cast uncertainty on the future of the relationship between Turkey and the Alliance.

Foresight Analysis

To account for the uncertainty in Turkish-NATO relations, a half-day foresight analysis workshop was hosted in Ottawa in March which brought together experts on Turkey and NATO from DND, GAC, the CAF, and academics from Canada, the US, and Europe.

Three possible scenarios emerge as probabilities for 2025. The most likely scenario is the continuation of the status quo, which would entail ongoing diverging security concerns and priorities between Turkey and NATO members; Erdoğan remains in power after the 2023 elections; the S-400 and Eastern Mediterranean issues remain unresolved; Turkey and Russia continue to cooperate on security matters; and Turkey does not withdraw from NATO. Expert participants from the Ottawa workshop expect that this outcome has between a 50% and 70% chance of occurring. This scenario also seems to be more likely given Turkey's decision to stay within NATO, especially when it has faced deadly setbacks in joining the EU or in its intervention in Syria (Devlen 2018; Aoudé 2020).

The worst case scenario is second most likely. This would entail an increased drift between Turkey and the Alliance, increased tensions regarding the Alliance's cooperation with the YPG in Syria, the closure of the Incirlik airbase, a military standoff in the Eastern Mediterranean, the blocking of key decisions by Turkey in the North Atlantic Council (NAC), joint Turkish-Russian military exercises in the Black Sea, the freezing out of Turkey from NATO intelligence and military exercises, a tightened grip on power by Erdoğan, and also the possibility that Turkey seriously considers withdrawing from NATO.

Finally, the least likely scenario is the best case scenario. In this case major points of contention are resolved, authoritarian measures are rolled back, and democratic reforms are introduced. Unfortunately, this scenario is unlikely to happen in the five-year time frame analyzed in this foresight activity, especially considering the increasingly volatile relationship between Turkey and the United States (Atmaca 2017; Cakmak and Güneysu 2013; Sayarı 2013).

The participants made predictions about the possibility of a weak signal of change that the US would re-engage with Ankara to ease tensions, with the majority saying it is "unlikely" and 25% indicating there is a 50% chance. Three wildcards were also posed to the group to predict their likelihood. Participants largely predicted that the resolution of key outstanding issues would not occur, but also that Turkey would almost certainly not withdraw from NATO. Though, predictions were uncertain and mixed regarding the chance of a leadership change in the 2023 Presidential elections, given the range of interfering factors such as estimations of the opposition's chances of success, the emergence of an intra-party challenger to Erdoğan, and the state of the economy.

Impact on Canadian Interests and Possible Canadian Responses

Given Canada's physical distance from Turkey, limited direct involvement in areas where Turkey is active, and trade levels outside of Canada's top-ten trading relationships, the stakes for Canada are highest surrounding the cohesion and functioning of NATO, and the impact of Turkish-NATO tension on Canada's closest allies, namely the US and EU NATO members. These impacts are second-order and will be felt most negatively if main issue areas are not resolved, or if Turkey withdraws from NATO.

Each of the three possible scenarios for Turkish-NATO relations in 2025 have varying impacts on Canadian interests. The default scenario of a continued status quo could paralyze decision-making in NATO; create decision-fatigue in the Alliance; increase resentment between allies; and could—if Turkey reduces its commitments to NATO—mean an increase in Canada's financial, personnel, and equipment contributions to NATO. Turkey's role in NATO activities in South Eastern and Eastern Europe is also crucial, in that a reorientation towards Russia will give rise to economic, social, and military instability in the area (Ene 2018), which would create additional commitments to the alliance from Canada in the future. The worst case scenario could paralyze NATO entirely, lead to a military encounter between Turkey and other NATO allies, and possibly lead to the breakup of the Alliance entirely. However, both of these scenarios could provide an opportunity for Canada to influence the situation by leveraging Canadian experience with conflict management as well as the better relations between Canada and Turkey when compared to the US and EU NATO member states.

Recommendations

Based on the projections derived from the foresight analysis group, Canada should continue to monitor signs and weak signals for any indication of change towards either the best, worst, or default scenarios. Given that the likelihood of improvement is slim, and that 2025 is projected to look exceedingly similar to the state of affairs today, Canada might consider investigating the possible conflict-mitigating roles it could play to defuse tensions in the alliance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Canada should continue to monitor the developments in Turkish-NATO relations, particularly as they relate to the weak signals, wild cards, and possible outcomes espoused in the foresight analysis summarized. This will help inform the appropriate strategy for Canada to minimize exposure to negative outcomes and mitigate negative impacts where possible.

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