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**Author**

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## An Alliance in Trouble? Turkey and NATO in 2025

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## About the Author

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Dr. Devlen is interested in foreign policy decisionmaking under uncertainty, geopolitical forecasting and strategic foresight, and the foreign policies of Turkey and Russia. He is also a Senior Fellow at Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Ottawa and a “Superforecaster” for Good Judgment, Inc., a US-based geopolitical forecasting company. In the summer of 2019, he was Ozderdinc-Grimes Fellow at the Centre in Modern Turkish Studies at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs – Carleton University.

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## Abstract

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Turkey and NATO are at a crossroads. The relationship between Turkey and its NATO allies are at its lowest point since the end of Cold War. This paper aims to illuminate what the future of Turkey – NATO relations could look like five years down the road in 2025 and what alternative futures would mean for Canadian defence and security by building on a Delphi workshop in early March 2020 with representatives from DND, GAC, CF, as well as scholars working on Turkey from Canada, the US, and Europe.

Building on the insights of the workshop, this paper posits three alternative futures labeled as Muddling Through, Return to the Fold, and Breakup. The overall message, both from the workshop as well as from the three possible futures discussed above, is that the likelihood of improvement in this relationship is slim. The most likely future (Muddling Through) in 2025 looks exceedingly similar to the state of affairs today. Such a future would not be half as bad compared to the next most likely scenario, the Breakup, described above, where the survival of the Alliance in its current form might be in jeopardy. Furthermore, a brighter future for the Alliance looks very unlikely as such a scenario requires a reversal of the trends identified by the expert panel as well as fortuitous developments happening in the next five years, while avoiding wildcards that will make things even worse.

Canada has policy tools to reduce its exposure to the possible negative consequences of an even worse-case scenario. Canada can help to keep the disagreements between the allies within an acceptable range. Those disagreements on security priorities are based on real differences in threat assessments among the allies. But they are also a function of increasing distrust, suspicion, misunderstandings, and a lack of honest, open, sustained dialogue between Turkey and its NATO allies. It is in the amelioration of these obstacles to a working – not perfect – arrangement that Canada could make a difference and make both the Alliance and Canada more secure and prepared in an increasingly uncertain international system.

### Keywords

Turkey, NATO, Delphi method, forecasting, Syria, Russia

## Introduction

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“Turkey and its transatlantic allies are perhaps at the lowest point of their relationship since the end of the Cold War.”

Turkey and its transatlantic allies are perhaps at the lowest point of their relationship since the end of the Cold War. There are increasing calls for NATO to expel Turkey from the Alliance, despite the lack of such a mechanism. Turkey expressly went against the wishes and warnings of its NATO allies and purchased S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems from Russia in 2017 after a deal with the US about Patriot SAMs fell through. The allies disagree vehemently on the status and role of Kurdish YPG-backed SDF militia in Northern Syria. Most NATO members, starting with the US, see SDF as a crucial partner in the fight against the Islamic State (IS).

Turkey, on the other hand, feels betrayed by its allies and points out correctly that YPG, which is the backbone of SDF, is the Syrian affiliate of PKK -- a designated terrorist organization in most NATO countries, including the US and Canada -- that has been fighting against Turkey since the 1980s. The future of Turkey-NATO relations, and by extension the future of the Alliance, looks precarious.

This paper tries to illuminate what that future could look like five years down the road in 2025 by building on a Delphi workshop that was convened at the Centre in Modern Turkish Studies (MTS) at Norman Paterson School of International Affairs - Carleton University on March 3rd, 2020, with representatives from DND, GAC, CF, as well as scholars working on Turkey from Canada, the US, and Europe.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 provides a brief background to the current crisis between Turkey and its NATO allies. Section 3 explains the modified Delphi method used at the horizon scanning workshop. Section 4 discusses the findings of the workshop, and section 5 provides three alternative futures for Turkish-NATO relations (Muddling Through, Return to Fold, and Breakup) and the impact of each for Canadian defence and security, following the insights of the expert workshop. Section 6 concludes the paper.

## **Background**

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Turkey became a NATO member in 1952, admitted to the Alliance together with Greece. Throughout the Cold War, Turkey was a flank country, a crucial ally in NATO's southern flank, controlling the Soviet Union's access to the Mediterranean via the Black Sea and Turkish Straits. Turkey was also seen as an important element for limiting Soviet influence in the Middle East (Oran 2010; Aydin 2019; Yilmaz 2015).

The relations between Turkey and its NATO allies during the Cold War are not without their ups and downs or crisis. Most prominently, the United States imposed an arms embargo on Turkey in the aftermath of a Turkish military operation in Cyprus in 1974 (Oran 2010; Aydin 2019). European NATO allies also occasionally, however mildly, criticized Turkey's problematic record of democracy and human rights as the country experienced three military coups, almost one in every ten years (1960, 1971, and 1980) during the Cold War. However, in the bipolar world of the Cold War and an ever-present Soviet danger, those disputes were treated as disagreements "within the family." Turkey's place with the Alliance was not questioned and Turkey itself did not seek alternative security arrangements or questioned its civilizational choice, that is, being part of the West (Devlen 2018).

The end of the Cold War altered Turkey's strategic value. Initially, with the disappearance of the Soviet threat, some argued that Turkey was no longer a key ally. However, with the wars in the Balkans throughout the 1990s and after 9/11 with the war in Afghanistan, the allies once again perceived Turkey to be an important asset for NATO (Guvenc and Ozel, 2012). Turkey, which has the second largest army in the Alliance after the US, in return contributed to every NATO mission, in most cases substantially in terms of both personnel and equipment, since the 1990s. This continued after Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. But relations between Turkey and its NATO allies started to fray at the edges after the start of the civil war in Syria in 2012 and have deteriorated further since 2015 (Devlen 2018; Ozdamar and Devlen 2019; Kirisci 2019; Kinaçoglu 2019; Dursun-Ozkanca 2019).

# TURKEY AND NATO

# AN ALLIANCE IN TROUBLE?

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Turkey has contributed to every NATO mission since the 1990s. But relations between Turkey and its NATO allies started to fray at the edges after the start of the **civil war in Syria** in 2012 and have **deteriorated further since 2015**.

When the Cold War ended, some argued that Turkey was no longer a key ally. But with the wars in the **Balkans throughout the 1990s** and the war in **Afghanistan after 9/11**, the allies once again perceived Turkey to be an **important asset**.

There are **THREE** main issues of contention between Turkey and its NATO allies since 2015.

1

The different threat assessments regarding the war in Syria.

2

The decision by Turkey to purchase Russian-made S-400 SAM systems in early 2017.

3

"Democratic backsliding" or the increasing authoritarian tendencies in Turkey.

Another potential problem: In November 2019, Turkey signed an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) agreement with Libya in the Eastern Mediterranean disputed by Greece (a NATO ally) and Cyprus and challenged by the EU.



Figure 1: Turkey and NATO: An alliance in trouble?

“ There are three main issues of contention between Turkey and its NATO allies since 2015. The first issue is the different threat assessments regarding the war in Syria... The second issue is the decision by Turkey to purchase Russian-made S-400 SAM systems in early 2017... The third is the issue of “democratic backsliding” or the increasing authoritarian tendencies in Turkey.” ”

There are three main issues of contention between Turkey and its NATO allies since 2015. The first issue is the different threat assessments regarding the war in Syria. For all NATO members but Turkey, the primary threat emanating from the Syrian war was and is the rise of Islamic State (IS) and the terrorist attacks IS and its sympathizers carry out in the West. When Turkey did not prioritize the fight against IS but instead continued to pursue regime change in Syria after 2014, the United States started to provide military support, including aircover, first to the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in their fight against IS and then to YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) after October 2015 (Ozdamar and Devlen 2019). Turkey, on the other hand, perceived the rise of YPG/SDF as an existential threat to its national security as it maintains that YPG is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that has waged a war against Turkey since the mid-1980s (Ozdamar and Devlen 2019). PKK is designated a terrorist organization in Turkey, the US, the EU, and Canada. In late 2015-early 2016, Turkey's Syria policy switched from regime change in Damascus to border security and fight against terrorism, which for Turkey includes not only IS but more prominently YPG/SDF. Turkey's main concern became the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish entity in Northern Syria that is controlled by PKK-affiliated YPG/SDF (Ozdamar and Devlen 2019).



Turkey accused the US and other allies of supporting terrorism and ignoring Turkey's legitimate security concerns in Northern Syria. The close security cooperation between the members of the Western anti-IS coalition and SDF in Syria and Turkey's strong reaction to this partnership remains one of the central problems between Turkey and its NATO allies (Dursun-Ozkanca 2019).

The second issue is the decision by Turkey to purchase Russian-made S-400 SAM systems in early 2017 (Ulgen and Kasapoglu 2019; Dursun-Ozkanca 2019). The US and other NATO allies reacted strongly to this procurement decision, arguing that bringing in Russian-made weapons systems into NATO infrastructure would pose unacceptable risks, including electronic and human espionage, for the Alliance. "The US responded to Ankara's decision by suspending the delivery of the initial batch of F-35s" (Devlen 2019) and then suspending Turkey from the F-35 program. Further sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) are also possible and would have long-lasting effects on Turkish defence industry. "Turkey, on the other hand, claims that purchasing S-400s as a stand-alone system is a national decision" (Devlen 2019) and it would not jeopardize NATO systems. Russia delivered the first set of S-400 batteries to Turkey in July 2019, but they are still not fully deployed or made operational as of April 2020.

The third is the issue of "democratic backsliding" or the increasing authoritarian tendencies in Turkey. Starting with the constitutional amendments in 2010, "President Erdogan concentrated all the power in his hands through constitutional changes that transformed Turkey from a liberalizing parliamentary democracy to an increasingly authoritarian presidential system" (Devlen 2019).

After the failed coup attempt by Gulenists in the Turkish military in July 2016, the government engaged in widespread purges and travel bans not only against suspected Gulenists within the civil service (of which there were many due to infiltration by Gulenists into the bureaucracy over the years) but also against the government's critics tout court, which sped up the process of democratic backsliding. Turkey's NATO allies, particularly European allies, heavily criticized the Erdogan government and its authoritarian policies. "Erdogan perceived the criticisms from the US and EU as attempts to undermine his rule, leading to a circle of misperception and suspicion that undermines trust and dialogue between the parties" (Devlen 2019).

Apart from these three major points of contention between Turkey and its NATO allies, there is another potential problem on the horizon. Turkey signed an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) agreement with Libya in November 2019, creating a maritime border between Turkey and Libya. However, Turkey's EEZ claims in the Eastern Mediterranean are disputed by Greece and Cyprus. The EU expressed support for its members, Greece and Cyprus, in the dispute (Reuters, January 8, 2020). This adds to the simmering tensions between Turkey and Cyprus over the rights to offshore oil and gas explorations off the coast of Cyprus. Although Cyprus is not a NATO member, Greece is, and other NATO member EU states, most importantly France and Italy, are siding with Greece on this issue. This dispute over resource exploitation and maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean has the potential to escalate further in the coming years.

The next section describes the methodology used in a workshop on the future of Turkish-NATO relations, held in March 2020, that informs this paper.

## Methodology

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A half-day workshop, facilitated by Balkan Devlen, was convened at the Centre in Modern Turkish Studies (MTS) at Norman Paterson School of International Affairs - Carleton University on March 3rd, 2020 with representatives from DND, GAC, CF, as well as scholars working on Turkey from Canada, the US, and Europe. The purpose of this workshop was to harness the collective experience and knowledge of the experts at the workshop in a semi-structured way using a modified Delphi method with probabilistic estimates (as described below) as a horizon scanning exercise for exploring possible states of the world related to Turkey-NATO relations in the next five years.

The Delphi method, first developed by RAND in the 1950s, is a well-known forecasting methodology that relies on multiple cycles of estimation--deliberation--estimation by a group of subject matter experts to arrive at more accurate forecasts compared to individual forecasts by experts alone. In the classical application of the method, experts individually make anonymous estimations/forecasts on a given set of questions and provide a rationale for their answers. Once the initial answers are in, the average forecast (or median, or a plot showing the distribution of estimations) is displayed along with the rationales submitted by the experts. In some cases a facilitator summarizes the rationales (maintaining anonymity) instead of providing them verbatim. The experts are then asked to reflect on the rationales and the forecasts of the group and invited to revise their estimates based on the new information in the form of group average forecast or summary rationales. This (estimate--deliberate--estimate) cycle continues until a particular outcome (stable forecasts, predetermined number of rounds, consensus, etc.) is achieved.

Horizon scanning is a foresight technique and its purpose "is to identify developments that could fundamentally change or disrupt the issue or system that we are studying in unexpected ways. The challenge is to look for early signs or weak signals that change is occurring" (Policy Horizons). A typical horizon scanning activity would aim to identify existing trends, weak signals, and wildcards using a variety of tools such as desk research, interviews, expert panels, etc., and could take days or weeks depending on the subject matter.

The approach taken in this workshop was to use a modified Delphi method for horizon scanning purposes to produce insights into Turkish-NATO relations in a time- and cost-effective manner. This has been done in two stages: pre-workshop survey and the workshop.

Before the workshop, the participants were asked to anonymously fill out a brief survey one week prior to the date of workshop. The survey asked the participants to identify at least one, but no more than three events/developments for each of the following three categories: existing trends, weak signals, and potential wildcards. I have then collated the responses and selected a number of items to be discussed at the workshop. The number of items were limited due to time constraints and I have selected those trends, weak signals, etc. that have been identified by the majority of the respondents in similar ways.

On the day of the workshop, the participants were briefly introduced to the modified version of the Delphi method to be used during the exercise. The method used in the workshop was as follows. First, the participants were provided with the first item on the agenda (e.g. Trend #1) and were asked to anonymously estimate the likelihood of that trend continuing using an online app that could be accessed without logging in and from a smartphone. They were given the option to choose from one of the five options available:

- A. Almost certainly not (10% probability),
- B. Probably not (30% probability),
- C. Chances about even (50% probability),
- D. Probable (70% probability),
- E. Almost certain (90% probability)

Although asking participants to give precise probability estimates would have produced a more granular picture, probability bins using common verbalizations of those estimates in the intelligence community are preferred due to the heterogeneity of the group and their prior experience with probabilistic estimation or the Delphi method as well as time and resource constraints for providing such training prior to the workshop.

After the participants made their choices, the results were shown for everyone as a bar graph on the screen. Unlike the classical Delphi method, the experts were not asked to write down their rationale for the estimates.

Instead, once the results were shown, they were invited to articulate why they choose a particular option to the group for a few minutes, starting with those who are on the tails of the distribution (i.e. A and E). This was generally sufficient to get a conversation started among the experts in the workshop. After the discussion, the experts were invited to submit new answers. The results were shown again and the facilitator summarized the changes from the first estimates. Those who revised their estimates were given a few minutes to explain why they did so. The group then moved on to the next item (e.g. Trend #2). Due to time limits, only one round per item was done.

For the present trends, the experts were asked to estimate the probability of the trend continuing in the next five years. For the weak signals, they were asked to estimate the probability of that signal strengthening in the next five years. For the wildcards, they were asked to estimate the probability of that event (or a very similar event) happening in the next five years. The discussions were held under Chatham House rule to ensure open and frank discussion between policymakers and scholars.

In the second part of the workshop, the discussion switched to the impact of the aforementioned events/developments on Canadian defence and security. The participants were asked to rate the impact of each discussed trend, weak signal, and wild card on Canadian security and defence interests on a five-point scale (negative, somewhat negative, neutral, somewhat positive, positive) regardless



of how likely they thought the event/development under discussion would be. Due to time constraints, only one round of estimations was done per item.

The purpose of the second part of the workshop was to identify those events/developments that will matter the most for Canadian interests, thus moving from forecasting the future of Turkish-NATO relations tout court to strategic foresight for Canadian policymakers. Canadian policymakers then can focus on a subset of the events that matter for Canada and develop policies to decrease Canadian exposure to negative developments and encourage policies that would be beneficial to Canadian interests.

## TURKEY AND NATO

## THE DELPHI METHOD

A half-day workshop, held at Carleton University on March 3, 2020 with representatives from DND, GAC, CF, as well as scholars from Canada, the US, and Europe explored possible states of the world related to Turkey-NATO relations in the next five years. The workshop used a modified DELPHI METHOD.



The **MODIFIED DELPHI APPROACH** taken in this workshop was done in two stages: **pre-workshop survey** and the **workshop**.

One week prior to the workshop, the participants anonymously **filled out a survey**, asking them to identify at least one, but no more than three events/developments for each of the following three categories: **existing trends, weak signals, and potential wildcards**.

At the workshop, participants used an **online app** to estimate the likelihood of a trend continuing. After a **discussion of the group's results** participants were invited to submit new responses.

In the second part of the workshop, participants were asked to rate the impact of each discussed trend, weak signal, and wildcard on **Canadian security and defence interests** on a five-point scale (from negative to positive).

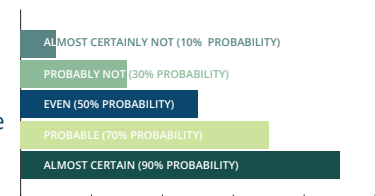


Figure 2: Turkey and NATO: The Delphi Method



Next section first summarizes the expert panel's assessment of trends, weak signals, and wildcards in Turkey-NATO relations and the likely impact of those developments on Canadian defence and security. Then it proceeds to identify three states of the world for Turkey-NATO relations in 2025 based on the previous discussion: Muddling Through, Return to the Fold, and Breakup.

### Workshop Findings and Analysis

In this section, I first summarize the expert panel's probability assessments regarding major trends, weak signals, and wildcards in Turkey-NATO relations in the next five years. I will then proceed to focus on those trends, weak signals, and wildcards that are identified as having the greatest negative and positive potential for Canadian defence and security. Lastly, I present three possible states of the world in 2025 as it relates to Turkey-NATO relations and discuss the implications for each world for Canada.

## *Trends, Weak Signals, and Wildcards*

Three major trends in Turkey-NATO relations have been identified and discussed in the workshop. The first trend is the divergent prioritization of key security challenges between Turkey and its NATO allies. The experts' overwhelming assessment is this trend would continue in the next five years. About 60% of them thought that it was probable (70% chance), while another 30% thought it was almost certain (90% chance). Here the key issue is the threats emanating from Syria, as pointed out in the background above, and particularly Turkey's frustration with Western support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by Kurdish YPG, an affiliate of PKK that has been waging a war in Turkey since the early 1980s and is designated a terrorist organization in the US and the EU. Furthermore, while most NATO allies perceive a resurgent and aggressive Russia as the most important short- to medium-term threat to the Alliance, Turkey adopted a more sanguine approach, choosing to compartmentalize its relations with Russia.

The second trend is the growth of security cooperation between Turkey and Russia. Here there is less of a consensus among experts on whether the current cooperation between Turkey and Russia, particularly on Syria, would continue. Half of the experts assessed the likelihood of this trend continuing to be about even (50%). The other half was equally divided between probably not (30%) and probable (70%). This suggests a greater uncertainty about the strength and the viability of the current cooperation trend between the two countries. Further debate revealed that most participants thought Turkish-Russian relations oscillated within a band and that the disagreement regarding this trend is about whether Turkey and Russia reached the upper bounds of that band or not.

The last trend is whether Turkey will become more authoritarian in the next five years. A plurality of the experts (44%) thought that the probability of this trend continuing is a coin flip (50% chance), while a close minority (38%) thought it more likely than not (70% chance). The discussion revealed that most of the experts in the panel were cautious, if not pessimistic, about the direction of Turkish democracy.

Among the weak signals identified in the pre-workshop survey, one particularly stands out. It concerns increasing attempts by the US to re-engage with Ankara or bring Turkey back to the fold due to the Turkish-Russian tensions in Syria in February 2020. There is a broader range of estimations among the experts on the probability of this weak signal strengthening over the next five years. A slight majority estimated that it is unlikely (between 10% and 30% chance) to be the case (55% of experts answered "probably not" or "almost certainly not"), while a quarter of them thought that the chances are even. A minority of experts thought that this is more likely than not (70% chance). This wider range of probability estimates was essentially the same in the first round of estimations prior to a lengthy debate between the experts. The ensuing discussion focused not on whether such attempts by the US would continue but whether they would be sustained and what their scope would be. The central contention was that such efforts require settlement of major differences between the US and Turkey, particularly regarding the Turkish purchase of Russian S-400 SAM systems, and, as we shall see below, the majority of experts assign low probabilities to that outcome in the next five years.

Wildcards are, by definition, low probability/high impact events and their precise shape is hard to pin down in an exact fashion. Based on the pre-workshop survey, we chose to focus on three of them during the panel discussions. They represent a positive, a negative, and a neutral (could be interpreted as either depending one's political preferences) wildcard for Turkey-NATO relations.

The positive wildcard is the resolution of key outstanding issues between the allies such as S-400 purchase and a rapprochement between Turkey and EU member states on the EEZ dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean in the next five years. The experts were evenly divided between "probably not" (between 10% and 30% chance) and "almost certainly not" (10% chance or less). Given that this is by definition a low probability event, half of the experts assigning between 10% and 30% likelihood of this happening is a sign of optimism.

The negative wildcard is the withdrawal of Turkey from NATO in the next five years. The experts were almost unanimous (95% of them) in estimating that this would almost certainly not happen (less than 10% chance). NATO does not have a mechanism for expelling members, thus withdrawal should be initiated by the leaving member itself. Experts pointed out that there is no benefit for Turkey in leaving NATO even if it is at odds with other allies, since sitting at the table, so to speak, itself provides leverage, especially when there is a disagreement with others in the alliance.

The neutral wildcard is the change of leadership in Turkey before 2025. The experts' responses suggested that this is not a true wildcard (low probability/high impact) since their estimates of the probability of a leadership change in Turkey ranges from "almost certainly not" (10% or less chance) to "probable" (70% chance). A slight plurality (40% of experts) estimated about even chances (50% probability), while for 35% of experts it is probably not going to happen (between 10% and 30% chance). One-fifth of the experts, on the other hand, see the change in leadership before 2025 as a probable (70% chance) development.



Figure 3: Turkey and NATO: In the next five years

During the discussion, it became clear that the experts' assessment revolves around different estimations of a few factors including their assessment of the opposition's chances of success in the next elections (in 2023), the emergence of an intra-party challenger to Erdogan, and the state of the economy in the run-up to the elections in 2023. Thus their estimates reflect a more holistic assessment of Turkish domestic politics and the way that will reflect on the future of current political leadership.

### ***Impact on Canadian Security and Defence***

In the last part of the workshop, the experts moved on to estimate the impact of the previously discussed items on Canadian defence and security on a 5-point scale, as described in the methodology section above. Due to time constraints, the discussions were limited and the experts could only provide one round of estimations. Therefore, the discussion in this section will be brief.

Turkey and Canada are not neighbors. Canada has limited direct involvement or interests in the regions where Turkey is a major actor, such as the Middle East, the Black Sea, or the Eastern Mediterranean. Trade between two countries, although increased in the last few years, is not high enough to be among top ten trading partners for both parties. NATO remains the primary contact point for Canada and Turkey. Thus for Canada, what matters is the impact of this rift between Turkey and its allies on NATO's cohesion and functioning.

**“ for Canada, what matters is the impact of this rift between Turkey and its allies on NATO's cohesion and functioning. ”**

Furthermore, Canada's closest allies, namely the US and the EU, have much deeper and closer relationships with Turkey. The repercussions of this intra-Alliance crisis are greater for them and it is through the effects on them that Canada will be

affected. In other words, the threat to Canadian interests is one of second-order effects, rather than a direct threat or a core security concern.

Therefore, when experts were asked to estimate the likely impact of the abovementioned developments on Canadian interests, they highlighted two of the items discussed as having the most potential negative impact. The first is a Turkish withdrawal from NATO. The majority of the experts assessed that this event would have a negative or somewhat negative impact on Canadian security. The second is the increasing divergence between allies regarding how to prioritize key security issues. Here again the overwhelming majority assessed the impact of this development as either negative or somewhat negative.

On the positive side, the experts assessed the resolution of key issues between the allies to be mostly positive or somewhat positive, while a minority of experts (25%) assessed the impact to be neutral. A change of political leadership in Turkey is assessed to be positive or somewhat positive by 75% of the experts, while 25% assessed it to have neither positive nor negative impact on Canadian interests.

There was less consensus on the assessment of the impact of the rest of the items discussed at the workshop. A brief discussion at the end of the workshop suggested that the majority of the experts considered them less important in terms of their impact on Canadian interests compared to the ones mentioned above.

Taking into account the experts' estimates in the modified Delphi panel as well as the discussions around those estimates, the next section presents three possible states of the world in 2025 and what each world would mean for Canadian defence and security.

## **Foresight Considerations: Three Futures in 2025**

What could Turkey-NATO relations look like in 2025? Taking the insights of the expert workshop on board, I would like to suggest three ideal-typical futures: Muddling Through, Return to the Fold, and Breakup. They look at what the world would look like in 2025 if the existing trends continued, reversed, or intensified while various wildcard events happen or not.

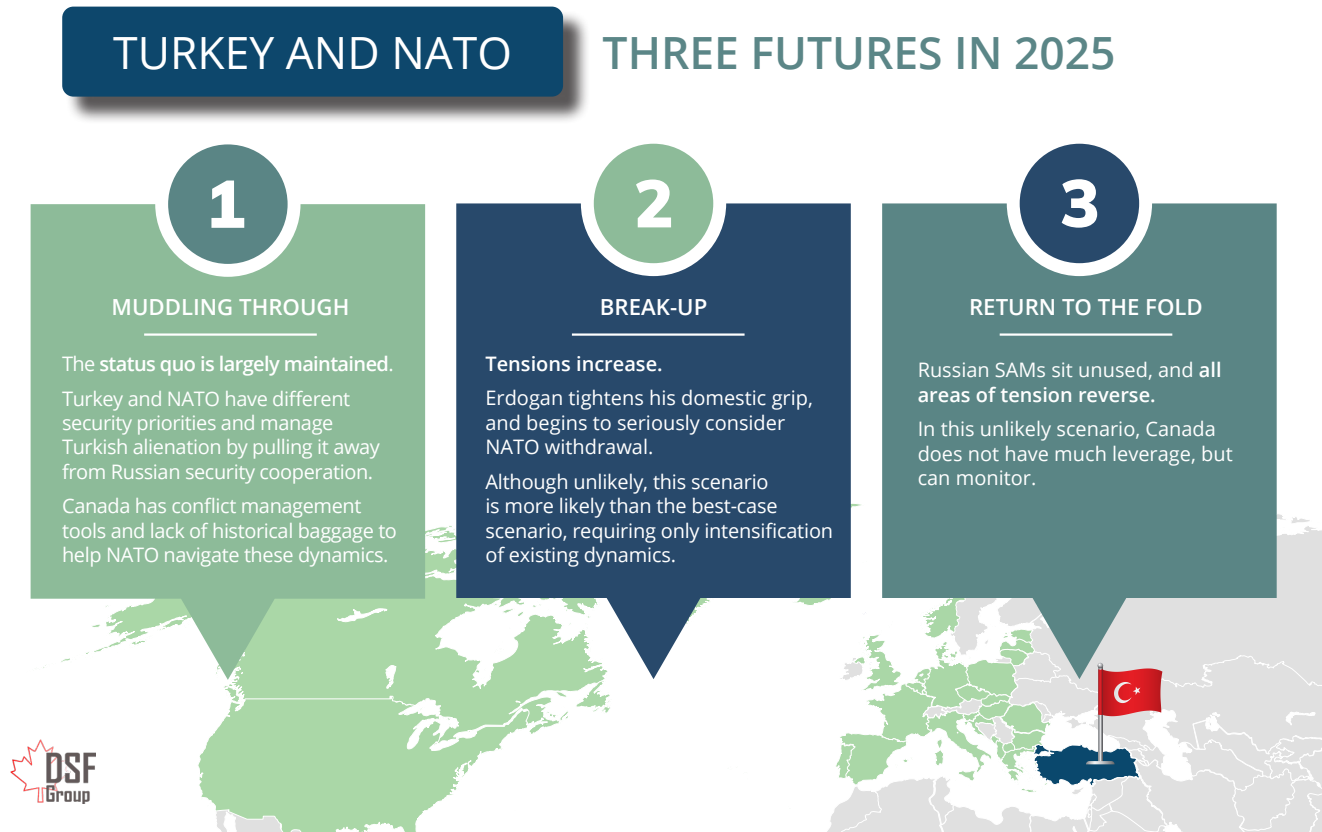


Figure 4: Turkey and NATO: Three futures in 2025

### **Muddling Through**

This is the future in which the abovementioned trends continue slowly but with stops and temporary reversals. They do not reach their zenith but fluctuate within a band without breaking one way or the other. Turkey and its NATO allies continue to prioritize different threats and increasingly question whether they can rely on each other when push comes to shove. None of the wildcard events happen. Recep Tayyip Erdogan is still in power after winning the presidential elections in 2023. Thorny issues, such as the presence of S-400s in Turkey or dispute over EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean, remain.



Despite growing alienation from the Alliance, Turkey does not withdraw from it. Although the efforts to bring Turkey back to the fold and away from a closer security cooperation with Russia continue, their success is limited to preventing a deeper cooperation between Turkey and Russia.

This is also the default scenario, given the assessments by the expert panel above. It is a projection of the state of affairs today through the next five years, assuming most of the trends will continue, albeit without an acceleration, and there will be no major event either in Turkish domestic politics or at the international level that will significantly disrupt those trends. A rough calculation would suggest a probability of this or a very similar future to be between “about even” (50% chance) and “probable” (70% chance) in terms of the categories used at the workshop.

What would this future mean for Canada? That would depend on the degree to which muddling through would paralyze decision-making in NATO and affect NATO operations. If, for example, repeated deadlocks at NATO summits continue, as witnessed in London 2019, for instance over Turkey’s refusal to support the publication of NATO’s defence plans for the Baltics and Poland unless the Alliance formally recognizes YPG as a terrorist organization (Reuters, November 27, 2019), this could create decision-fatigue, lead to resentment between allies, and degrade the Alliance’s ability to act decisively and quickly in future crises. If, on the other hand, such episodes are few and far between, the situation will not be more damaging than as it is right now. However, it is highly probable that continuing tensions between allies, especially if Turkey feels increasingly alienated from the rest of NATO, will take their toll in terms of morale, alliance cohesion, and solidarity, which in turn would undermine the Alliance’s effectiveness in the medium to long term (five to ten years). An alienated member, particularly one of Turkey’s size, could also mean more responsibility and increasing costs to the rest of the allies with regards to burden sharing in existing and future missions. This might increase Canada’s financial, personnel, and equipment burden to meet its defence and security commitments.

**“ An alienated member, particularly one of Turkey’s size, could also mean more responsibility and increasing costs to the rest of the allies with regards to burden sharing in existing and future missions. This might increase Canada’s financial, personnel, and equipment burden to meet its defence and security commitments. ”**

Paradoxically, this future is also one in which Canada could have the most influence. This most likely scenario assumes management of the intra-Alliance tensions rather than their resolution. While Canada may not have the resources to bring about change or influence the principal actors in this crisis, it does have the potential means to reduce the likelihood of the worst case scenario (Breakup) discussed below. Canadian experience in conflict management and the lack of “historical baggage” vis-à-vis Turkey compared to major European allies or the United States can be a useful tool in keeping the tensions at an unpleasant but manageable level, thus helping the Alliance to muddle through the next five years.

## Return to the Fold

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Things look better in this future for Turkey and NATO. Current trends are reversed and the positive wildcard events took place, while none of the negative wildcard events came to pass. Turkey does not deploy S-400s. They are mothballed and sitting in a depot now. Instead, American-made Patriot SAMs and European-made Eurosam missile defence systems protect Turkish airspace. Turkey scales back its security cooperation with Russia and there is no more talk of a “strategic partnership” between the two countries. NATO allies recognize Turkey’s legitimate security concerns in Northern Syria regarding YPG/SDF and help broker a settlement between Turkey and SDF that addresses Turkey’s concerns. Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean ease as Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus sign an agreement delineating their respective EEZs. Building on its 2019 municipal elections success, the opposition’s candidate wins a narrow victory in the 2023 presidential elections in Turkey. Authoritarian measures are being rolled back and new democratic reforms are being introduced, although political tensions continue between the new president and the parliament, where the AKP still has majority.

This is a rosey scenario and experts’ probability estimates put the realization of such a scenario at “almost certainly not” (less than 10% chance) given the number of things that need to happen for it to be a reality. In other words, the joint probability of the trends being reversed, positive wildcard events happening, and avoiding negative wildcard events will be very small (much lower than the upper range of 10%) as all those items are individually assigned a low probability to start with.

This future will be most beneficial for Canadian defence and security. It would mean a more strengthened and cohesive Alliance, better prepared to face the immediate Russian challenge as well as the upcoming Chinese challenge (NATO 2019), and a future where Canada does not need to shoulder additional costs of NATO missions. Canada’s closest allies could also focus on and devote resources to threats and challenges that are more central to Canadian security instead of trying to manage a growing crisis with a fellow NATO member.

The flipside of this positive picture, however, is that this is unlikely to happen within the time frame discussed in this paper, as pointed out above. Furthermore, unlike the first, muddling through scenario, Canada does not have the necessary policy tools and cannot have much of an influence on the developments that are required to realize this future state. However, it would be worthwhile to monitor the developments regarding the key disagreements between Turkey and other allies and encourage/support their resolution, as were they to happen, it would lead to a state of affairs that is beneficial to Canada at a low cost.

## Breakup

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In this world, things go from bad to worse in Turkish-NATO relations. Turkey drifts further and further from its NATO allies. Tensions with the United States over the latter’s support for SDF boil over, leading to closure of Incirlik Airbase and expulsion of US military personnel from Turkey. There is a military stand-off in the Eastern Mediterranean that involves Turkish, Greek, and French navies. Turkey continuously blocks key decisions in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and deepens its military-security cooperation with Russia.

There are joint Turkish-Russian military exercises in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. In turn, other NATO members freeze Turkey out of military exercises and intelligence sharing. In addition to CAATSA sanctions, the US imposes further military and economic sanctions on Turkey, and the EU follows suit. President Erdogan tightens his grip on power after winning re-election after what many outside observers describe as an unfair and hardly free election in 2023. Authoritarianism is in full swing in Turkey. Calls for Turkey's expulsion from NATO reach a crescendo, while the anti-NATO sentiment, whipped up by the government to win the elections, now corners Erdogan as he starts considering Turkish withdrawal from NATO seriously for the first time.

This dark scenario for Turkish-NATO relations is unfortunately more likely compared to the best case scenario described above, since its realization requires mostly the intensification of the existing trends, and a similar world could emerge even in the absence of wildcards that would lead to further deterioration in the relations. Therefore, a rough estimate range would put the mean probability of its realization at or around 10%. However, this probability would increase (getting close to the upper bound of 30% for this scenario) if the low probability/high impact wildcard of the Turkish withdrawal from NATO ever becomes a serious option for Turkish policymakers.

The consequences of this future for Canadian interests would clearly be negative, at least in the short to medium term (two to five years). It will result in the allies devoting large resources to deal with internal problems while being challenged by Russia and China across the globe. It will functionally paralyze NATO, slowing or freezing planning, decision-making, and deployment that requires unanimity at the NAC. At the extreme, for instance in case of a military encounter between Turkey and another NATO ally, it could lead to the breakup of the Alliance.

Canada can use the same tools discussed in the first scenario here to avoid a worse case scenario or at least lessen the impact of it on Canadian security and defence. Monitoring developments in Turkey-NATO relations, including key trends, weak signals, and potential wildcards for signs of change, tipping points, intensification, or reversals would be important in taking timely action to reduce Canada's exposure to their effects, wherever possible, or soften their impact when exposure reduction is not possible.

## **Conclusion**

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This paper aimed to distill the insights gained from the expert workshop that took place in early March and to provide a map of the possible futures for Turkey-NATO relations in 2025. The overall message, both from the workshop as well as from the three possible futures discussed above, is that the likelihood of improvement in this relationship is slim. The most likely future in 2025 looks exceedingly similar to the state of affairs today. Such a future would not be half as bad compared to the next most likely scenario, the Breakup, described above, where the survival of the Alliance in its current form might be in jeopardy. Furthermore, a brighter future for the Alliance looks very unlikely as such a scenario requires a reversal of the trends identified by the expert panel as well as fortuitous developments happening in the next five years, while avoiding wildcards that will make things even worse.

**“ The overall message...is that the likelihood of improvement in this relationship is slim. The most likely future in 2025 looks exceedingly similar to the state of affairs today. Such a future would not be half as bad compared to the next most likely scenario, the Breakup...where the survival of the Alliance in its current form might be in jeopardy. Furthermore, a brighter future for the Alliance looks very unlikely as such a scenario requires a reversal of the trends...while avoiding wildcards that will make things even worse. ”**

Yet not all affect Canada the same way and it is in the most likely scenario of Muddling Through that Canada has the greatest agency to shape the developments and reduce its exposure to the possible negative consequences of an even worse scenario. Canada can help to keep the disagreements between the allies within an acceptable range.

**“ Canada can help to keep the disagreements between the allies within an acceptable range. ”**

Those disagreements on security priorities are based on real differences in threat assessments among the allies. But they are also a function of increasing distrust, suspicion, misunderstandings, and a lack of honest, open, sustained dialogue between Turkey and its NATO allies. It is in the amelioration of these obstacles to a working -- not perfect -- arrangement that Canada could make a difference and make both the Alliance and Canada more secure and prepared in an increasingly uncertain international system.

**Postscript (August 2020):** Since the foresight workshop in early March 2020 that forms the basis of this working paper COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, pushing governments to scramble to deal with the consequences of it. This does not mean that everything else is frozen though. One of the issues discussed in the workshop was the increasing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and other NATO allies. The breakup scenario even alluded to a military confrontation between Turkish and other Allied navies as a catalyst for breaking up of the Alliance.

Since March a series of events increased the probability of such a military standoff, between Turkish navy on the one side and Greek and French navies on the other. On June 10th, ships belonging to Turkish and French navies were involved in what was referred to as a "naval incident" off the coast of Libya (Reuters, July 7, 2020). Later in July, tensions between Turkey and Greece flared up once again over disputed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey announced a Navtex that it is sending its research ship Oruc Reis to disputed waters to carry out drilling survey for oil and gas exploration and Greece, backed by France, responded by putting Greek military on high alert (BBC August 25, 2020). Rival military exercises in the region by Turkey and the US on the one hand and Greece, Cyprus, and France on the other hand (Italy partakes in both exercises as well) that were announced on August 26, 2020 increase the probability of an unintended military incident between Allies (CNN, August 26, 2020). Germany meanwhile urges all parties to halt military exercises to reduce tensions (Guardian, August 27, 2020).

In short, the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean since March became even more pivotal in understanding the future of Turkish - NATO relations. The situation requires close monitoring as it has the potential of bringing NATO allies to the brink of war. As of end of August 2020, the "return to the fold" scenario looks less and less likely while it is still too early to say whether Allies will manage to "muddle through" or will "breakup".



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