

EU-Turkey-UK Triangulation: The Key to Euro-Atlantic Security

by Selin Nasi and Mehmet Fatih Ceylan

It is now abundantly clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, unlike the annexation of Crimea back in 2014, marks the beginning of a new era not only for Euro-Atlantic security, but for the global security landscape at large. Hence the need to go back to the drawing board to explore new bilateral and multilateral cooperation models to recalibrate strategic priorities in a context marked by strategic rivalry among major powers.

From the Western perspective, the outcome of the war against Ukraine is likely to shape the future of a rules-based order under different parameters. The collective response to Russia is considered crucial for setting a precedent to deter other potentially aggressive powers from changing borders through the use (or the threat of use) of force. No member of the Euro-Atlantic community is eager to re-initiate a new type of long-term Cold War with its adversaries – nonetheless, they must remain ready, responsive

and resilient against the consequences of the ongoing aggression on Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's ill-advised decision to invade Ukraine has managed to unite Europe, re-engage the US in the continent and reinvigorate NATO as the core institution for the collective security of the transatlantic alliance. Under such sobering circumstances, the strategic autonomy debate – which calls for a European defence infrastructure decoupled from the US – has been put by necessity on the back burner. The long overdue third Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation of January 2023 reaffirms NATO as “the foundation of collective defence for its allies and essential for Euro Atlantic security”, and European defence initiatives as “complementary” and “interoperable” with NATO.¹ However, with US-China

¹ NATO and EU, *Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation*, 10 January 2023, points 8 and 9, <https://europa.eu/!C9TWXG>.

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power competition on the rise and the bitter memories of former US President Donald Trump's critical stance on NATO still fresh, the upcoming US presidential election of 2024 raises concerns over the credibility of Washington's long-term commitment to European defence. Against this backdrop, the spectre of war spreading to other European countries keeps haunting leaders, societies and analysts in the continent.

While war rages again on European soil, significant steps have been taken to build up Europe's defence capacity for crisis response, such as the creation of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity. However, much has still to be done to enhance European security.² It is especially imperative to seriously explore meaningful integration in this area between the EU and non-EU countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Turkey that already shoulder the bulk of European security through their defence assets and capabilities. The establishment of the European Political Community (EPC) in October 2022, the brainchild of French President Emmanuel Macron, could be a step in the right direction if managed in an inclusive manner, extending to the security and defence domains.

EU-UK cooperation – and Turkey as the missing link

In this context, the UK, no longer an EU member, but the leading military power in Europe, may take the initiative and

² Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410976>.

cooperate closely with another non-member, Turkey, in integrating non-EU members into the European defence architecture. London has traditionally prioritised NATO in its foreign and security policy, and Brexit created a hiatus in relations with Brussels. However, recent developments such as the UK's application to join the Military Mobility Project – a Permanent Structured Cooperation mission open to third parties – in July 2022 and its participation in the newly established EPC reflect London's willingness to revamp cooperation with Brussels. In a similar vein, the Windsor Framework Agreement signed between the UK and the EU last February³ and the subsequent Anglo-French rapprochement⁴ are indicative of a policy change in Westminster in favour of a wider re-engagement with Europe by mending ties.

The fundamental question remains whether this renewed cooperation is sufficient to keep abreast of present and future challenges. In particular, the role that Turkey-UK cooperation could play in European security is somehow overlooked, as evident in the very brief mention of Turkey in the most recent UK Integrated Review Refresh (IR 2023).⁵

³ Patrick Butchard et al., "Northern Ireland Protocol: The Windsor Framework", in *House of Commons Library Research Briefings*, No. 9736 (21 March 2023), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9736>.

⁴ Claire Mills and Louisa Brooke-Holland, "UK-French Defence Cooperation: A Decade on from the Lancaster House Treaties", in *House of Commons Library Research Briefings*, No. 9743 (15 March 2023), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9743>.

⁵ UK Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023. Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*, March 2023, <https://www.gov>.

Turkey and the UK have enjoyed close relations for decades based on shared NATO membership ties, mutual economic interests and security concerns. Building on the widening relationship between Turkey and the UK, especially in the post-Brexit period, there is still room to further develop existing cooperation, especially in the defence and security realms. Key areas of interest identified in IR 2023 – such as the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Caucasus – coincide with Turkey's vital security interests, which may be a catalyst for Turkey and the UK to concert their efforts to the benefit of both countries. Improving cooperation with Ankara would allow London to better comply with the letter and spirit of NATO's recent Strategic Concept of June 2022 and adhere to the principles of the UK-Turkey strategic partnership launched in 2010.⁶ More generally, it would help strengthen Euro-Atlantic security at large, and reinforce the inextricable link between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres.

A new partnership between Turkey and the UK could be designed to integrate both countries' hard and soft power assets and capabilities, culminating in a "separate" but not "separable" bilateral capacity, which could be made available to NATO on mutual consent. This would certainly reinforce European defence and help expand the security belt of the Euro-Atlantic community.

[uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world).

⁶ UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, *UK-Turkey Relations and Turkey's Regional Role*, Part 1, 20 March 2012, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcaff/1567/156706.htm>.

Turkey and Euro-Atlantic security

As the member with the second-largest military force in NATO situated at the crossroads of three continents with outreach to a vast hinterland, Turkey stands out as an ideal partner for strengthening Euro-Atlantic security. Ankara, like London, has shown unwavering support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Turkish arms supply to Kyiv has provided Ukrainian forces with a defensive edge on the ground over Russia. Ankara also offered to mediate for a peaceful settlement of the conflict and acted as a facilitator in establishing a safe corridor for grain exports from the Black Sea and in the exchange of prisoners between Russia and Ukraine.

Traditionally, Turkey has played a pivotal role in Euro-Atlantic security, participating in all NATO operations and missions conducted in the post-Cold War period and supporting the EU missions open to non-EU NATO members such as Operation Althea in Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁷ The NATO-EU mission in the Aegean launched in 2016 to prevent irregular migration to Europe is another solid example of Turkey's contribution to European security.⁸ In a similar vein, Turkey's participation in Operation Sea Guardian launched by NATO in 2016, to support

⁷ European External Action Service (EEAS), *EUFOR Bosnia-Herzegovina Military Operation ALTHEA*, 30 November 2020, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/89321>.

⁸ NATO, *Assistance for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the Aegean Sea*, last updated on 17 January 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_128746.htm.

and coordinate with the EU's Operation Sophia, clearly demonstrate the benefits of close coordination between NATO and the EU.⁹ Recently, Turkey has manifested an interest in joining the EU's Military Mobility Project which, in essence, complements NATO's plan to enhance the Alliance's deterrence and defence.

True, critics of Ankara's potential involvement in the European defence apparatus have often expressed concerns over Turkey's strained relations with EU member states such as Greece and Cyprus.¹⁰ In this respect, however, following the upcoming general election scheduled this May, the post-electoral political landscape in Turkey may pave the way for new avenues of cooperation, further harmonising foreign policy goals and threat perceptions between Turkey and the EU.

Interestingly, 2023 is also an election year for Cyprus and Greece. Greek Cypriots elected their new President in February, while Greeks will also hold parliamentary elections in May. The post-electoral period, if used efficiently, may provide a window of opportunity for the three parties to take reconciliatory steps and improve relations. To this effect, the recent exchange of warm messages between Ankara and Athens following the

⁹ NATO, *Operation Sea Guardian*, last updated on 17 May 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136233.htm.

¹⁰ Marco Zanni et al., "Turkey's Request to Take Part in a PESCO Military Mobility Project", in *European Parliament-Parliamentary Questions*, No. E-002795/2021 (26 May 2021), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-002795_EN.html.

earthquake disaster in Turkey has been encouraging, also raising prospects for the resolution of the Cyprus issue.

Cordial relations between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus would undoubtedly contribute to European security at large in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond, leading to a conducive atmosphere for cooperation in various areas, including diversification of energy resources and routes, as well as combating climate change and illegal migration. Also in this respect, the UK, as one of the three guarantor powers of Cyprus, can play a mediator role, further highlighting the potential benefits of EU-Turkey-UK strategic triangulation.

Toward an all-encompassing approach

Against the backdrop of an increasingly complex and challenging security environment, it is time to develop an all-encompassing approach to European security, crosscutting boundaries of existing institutions like NATO and the EU. In this respect, the deepening of UK-Turkey defence cooperation can facilitate the integration of non-EU members into European security. If achieved, the renewed concord between Turkey and the UK would set an important partnership to which the EU and its member states may look to navigate geopolitical challenges ahead. The time is ripe for a strategic triangulation of these three Euro-Atlantic powers to meet the magnitude of today's challenges.

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