



Securing Europe with Turkey: Reinforcing mutual resilience in a shifting security order

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Summary

European security is being reordered in the wake of Russia's emergence as a long-term threat and American retrenchment. This has brought to the fore an often-overlooked reality: the intertwined nature of European security and that of NATO ally Turkey. At this defining moment, it is imperative for Turkey and its European allies and partners to invest in rebuilding mutual confidence and work pragmatically toward reinforcing one another's security. Alongside existing channels at NATO, this will require selective modes of engagement and flexible formats, something already gaining traction between Turkey and certain European nations. Sweden and other Nordic actors are well placed to play an important role in this process, leveraging their credibility as NATO members and honest brokers.

The Issue

Russia's emergence as a long-term threat has ended the numbing convenience of Europe's peace dividend. Combined with the realization that the United States may no longer have Europe's back, policymakers are reimagining their security order. Recognizing the dual challenge, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, put it bluntly in her 2025 State of the Union [address](#): "Europe is in a fight" and "this must be Europe's independence moment."

It is crunch time in Europe. The premium on continental solutions to security challenges is rising. This strengthens the rationale for closing ranks between Turkey and European actors. [Ankara](#) and [several European capitals](#) seem to be internalizing this requirement. At first glance, this may appear counterintuitive given Turkey's stalled EU accession process and fraught relations with some Union members. Yet it is true that Turkey and Europe would both be better served by pooling their strengths and reinforcing one another's security.

This convergence of interests is distinct from the complex question of Turkey's potential EU integration, which remains contingent, among other factors, on reversing democratic backsliding. While

Ankara's stalled EU accession has weakened Brussels' leverage, the fragmentation of Europe's security order has, paradoxically, heightened the premium on cooperation for both sides. The key question is not whether disagreements preclude greater engagement, but how to marshal strategic vision to translate overlapping interests into structured, mutually beneficial processes. This, in turn, could help realign the broader relationship.

Ankara's enduring instinct to [remain anchored](#) in Europe's security architecture alongside the value of its military capabilities, defense industry capacity, and gatekeeping role over the Black Sea are central drivers of increased engagement. Current geopolitical shifts present a fleeting opportunity for Turkey and its European partners to enhance their collective resilience against emerging security challenges. They can realize this by recalibrating their relations in a spirit of mutual benefit, rather than drifting apart at a moment of shared vulnerability.

Analysis

While European policymakers navigate the realities of a de-Americanized security landscape, the emerging order can be framed around three assumptions, and NATO ally Turkey features prominently in all:

First, NATO’s central role in deterring and defending against security threats to the continent will endure. There is no substitute for NATO’s standardized planning, tested operational capabilities, or its ability to deliver collective defense at scale. What will have to shift, however, is the balance of effort within the Alliance, with a stronger European component compensating for diminished US commitments. Turkey can add substantial value to this effort, not only through its armed forces and growing defense industry, but also through its geostrategic position, which straddles Europe, the Black Sea, and the Middle East. Turkey itself also stands to benefit from this investment, as NATO membership remains [central](#) to its security—a consideration that presumably shaped Ankara’s desire to [host](#) the upcoming NATO Summit in 2026.

Second, notwithstanding the enduring relevance of the transatlantic alliance, Europe’s strategic autonomy drive is back with unprecedented buy-in. The EU is moving ambitiously toward coupling its economic weight with military capabilities and the necessary defense industrial base. Success is far from guaranteed and will presumably require structural reforms, as stipulated in a recent EU-funded [project](#), which also acknowledges Turkey’s potential force-multiplying role. That potential, however, remains unfulfilled and hamstrung by mistrust and political disputes. For instance, Turkey’s desire to join the [EU-led military mobility project](#) has not materialized, and its [application](#) to tap into defense industry financing opportunities through the [EU’s Security Action For Europe \(SAFE\)](#) regulation met immediate [resistance](#) from Cyprus and Greece. This persistent pattern of exclusion—also applied by Turkey to Cyprus, which it does not recognize—has impeded Turkish involvement in EU-led efforts, sidelining the country as others

ranging from Norway and Switzerland to Ukraine and the geographically distant South Korea deepen their engagement.

Third, where NATO provides scale and the EU offers growing ambitions, coalitions of the willing are emerging as pragmatic additions to the European security landscape. As seen in discussions on [security guarantees](#) for Ukraine, flexible constellations of European actors provide agility, especially when institutional cooperation runs into stumbling blocks. Such groupings also offer a practical model for capability development, showcased in the German-led [European Sky Shield Initiative](#), which Turkey (and Greece) also [joined](#).

For Turkey, this de-institutionalized model of collaboration precludes political challenges that emerge in EU-framings, making them a preferred option. Turkey’s [involvement](#) in Ukraine-related coalition planning and its [deepening](#) defense industry ties with [Italy](#), [Romania](#), [Poland](#), [Portugal](#), and [Spain](#) provide tangible proof of this concept. As Turkey makes headway in its defense industry and, according to an International Institute for Strategic Studies [analysis](#), transitions “from client to competitor,” its appeal as an industrial partner is reaching new levels, drawing widespread attention, including from [Germany](#).

If Turkey’s security is incomplete without Europe, and Europe’s security is weaker without Turkey, then both sides need to draw the right lessons. Ankara should seriously consider the need to alleviate doubts over its commitment to the security of the continent. Its legitimate pursuit of national interests in its engagement with actors like Russia and China, for instance, should not come at the expense of its credibility as a European NATO ally.

Trade relations		Turkey is the EU’s 5th largest trading partner, and the EU is Turkey’s largest	
Political engagement on security challenges	EU framework	limited and unfulfilled	
	NATO framework	permanent and robust	
Defense industry cooperation	EU	severely constrained	
	NATO & national coalitions	strong and thriving	
Defense industry supply chain resilience		Turkey’s defense industry competencies overlap with EU priorities, with strong potential for mutually beneficial collaboration	

Turkey’s engagement with Europe is robust, despite being constrained in the EU framework

Flirtations with the idea of [joining](#) the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—if only seemingly—or [calls](#) from the government’s coalition partners to divest from the West and ally with Russia and China, sow doubts about Turkey’s trajectory. Turkish officials need to exercise greater care in their words and actions and better explain their differences with EU member states and their specific expectations; something Ankara failed to do before raising its initial objections about Sweden’s and Finland’s [NATO accession](#).

In turn, Turkey’s European allies and partners need to better understand Turkish concerns and invest in nurturing dialogue on shared interests and challenges. This already occurs in NATO, but the EU’s pursuit of strategic autonomy has created momentum for engagement outside of the alliance, making it necessary to keep Turkey connected, alongside other non-EU NATO allies like Norway and the United Kingdom. Alleviating Turkey’s isolation would help build trust and reduce frictions. Sweden and other Nordic actors could leverage their credibility, as EU member NATO allies and longstanding honest brokers, to advocate for pragmatic engagement with Turkey, an approach that would resonate positively in Turkish circles.

Implications

The stakes are high for both Europe and Turkey. Failure to seize the moment risks worsening the strategic drift when European security faces heightened vulnerability, whereas increased cooperation could generate mutual resilience. Where possible, this should be done in an EU framework; however, where that falls short—which will often be the case—bilateral and multilateral formats should be utilized.

The choice ultimately depends on Ankara and European capitals alike. Turkey can do its share by better managing the natural tension between its desire for autonomous action in a multipolar global setting and its alliance commitments. Its defense capabilities offer new and useful inroads for strengthening its place in European security. However, Ankara should genuinely aim for a larger, more comprehensive role in the European landscape by demonstrating an unfettered commitment to the future well-being of the continent. This should also include greater openness to aligning policies with Europe and a forceful effort

to overcome, where possible, its differences with certain EU members.

For Europe, making the right choice entails recognizing Turkey’s stature as a capable NATO ally with distinct security interests and avoiding the temptation of treating its misalignments as merely disruptive. Europe could benefit by leveraging Turkey’s potential contributions, including with a view to securing its supply chain resilience in defense items. At least five of the seven capability development areas prioritized in the [EU’s White Paper for Defense](#)—from artillery and drone and counter-drone systems, to air and missile defense capabilities and ammunition needs—are within Turkey’s competencies. Despite its own third-party dependencies on certain subsystems and technologies, Turkey’s indigenous defense industry is formidable. It can produce at scale and speed, commensurate with Europe’s needs. In fact, [studies show](#) that Turkey’s defense industry partnership with Europe has [steadily grown](#) over the past twenty years, as the American share has declined, representing an already strong basis to build on. As this cooperation widens and deepens, the emerging culture of interdependence will also facilitate greater alignment on foreign, defense, and security matters, including licensing and export policies of defense items.

Turkey and its European partners are bound by geography and now face the increasingly acute strategic requirement of working in tandem to address shared security challenges. As this reality sinks in, Sweden and Nordic actors can play an instrumental role in bridging the gap.

Further Reading

- » Coşkun, Alper. [Turkey’s Role in Consolidating European Security: Challenges and Opportunities](#). Center for Applied Turkey Studies [CATS] Network Paper No. 14, 2025.
- » Egeli Sıtkı; Kurç, Çağlar; Mevlütoğlu, Arda; and Güvenç, Serhat. [From Client to Competitor: The Rise of Türkiye’s Defence Industry](#). Centre for Foreign Policy and Peace Research [CFPPR] and International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2024.
- » Dalay, Galip; Quence, Martin; Taştan, Kadri; and Wright, Georgina. [EU–Türkiye Defense Cooperation: Why Now—and How Far?](#) German Marshall Foundation, 2025.

Takeaways

- » Turkey and its European allies and partners must meet this moment of reordering in continental security with a sober and mutual recognition of the interdependent nature of their interests.
- » NATO's relevance will endure, as European allies assume greater responsibilities and Turkey remains well-positioned to add significant value. The EU will continue its quest for strategic autonomy, with Turkey's inclusion remaining limited, and will put a premium on other, flexible modes of collaboration with Ankara.
- » While Turkey remains mostly excluded from EU-led initiatives in the realm of defense and security, it is actively involved in Ukraine-related coalition-building efforts and is advancing its defense industry cooperation with several interested European nations, reflecting the viability and mutual need for enhanced engagement.
- » Sweden and other Nordic allies are well placed to add to this momentum and preclude a strategic drift with Turkey, which would serve neither Ankara's nor Europe's core interests

Sammanfattning

- » Turkiet och dess europeiska allierade och partners bör möta den pågående omdaning av den europeiska säkerhetsordningen med ett ömsesidigt erkännande av att deras respektive intressen är sammanflätade.
- » Natos relevans kommer att bestå, i takt med att de europeiska allierade tar ett större ansvar, och Turkiet är väl positionerat för att kunna tillföra mervärde. EU kommer att fortsätta sin strävan efter strategisk autonomi, där Turkiets medverkan förblir begränsad, samtidigt som unionen sannolikt kommer att prioritera andra, mer flexibla samarbetsformer med Ankara.
- » Trots att Turkiet i stor utsträckning står utanför EU-ledda initiativ inom försvars- och säkerhetspolitiken deltar landet aktivt i koalitionsbyggande insatser kopplade till Ukraina och fördjupar sitt försvarsindustriella samarbete med flera europeiska stater. Detta vittnar om såväl genomförbarheten som det ömsesidiga behovet av ett stärkt engagemang.
- » Sverige och övriga nordiska allierade har goda förutsättningar att bidra till denna positiva utveckling och motverka ökade sprickor i den strategiska relationen till Turkiet – något som varken skulle främja Ankaras eller Europas grundläggande säkerhetsintressen.

About the SUITS policy brief

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makers and others the tools to make informed decisions.

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