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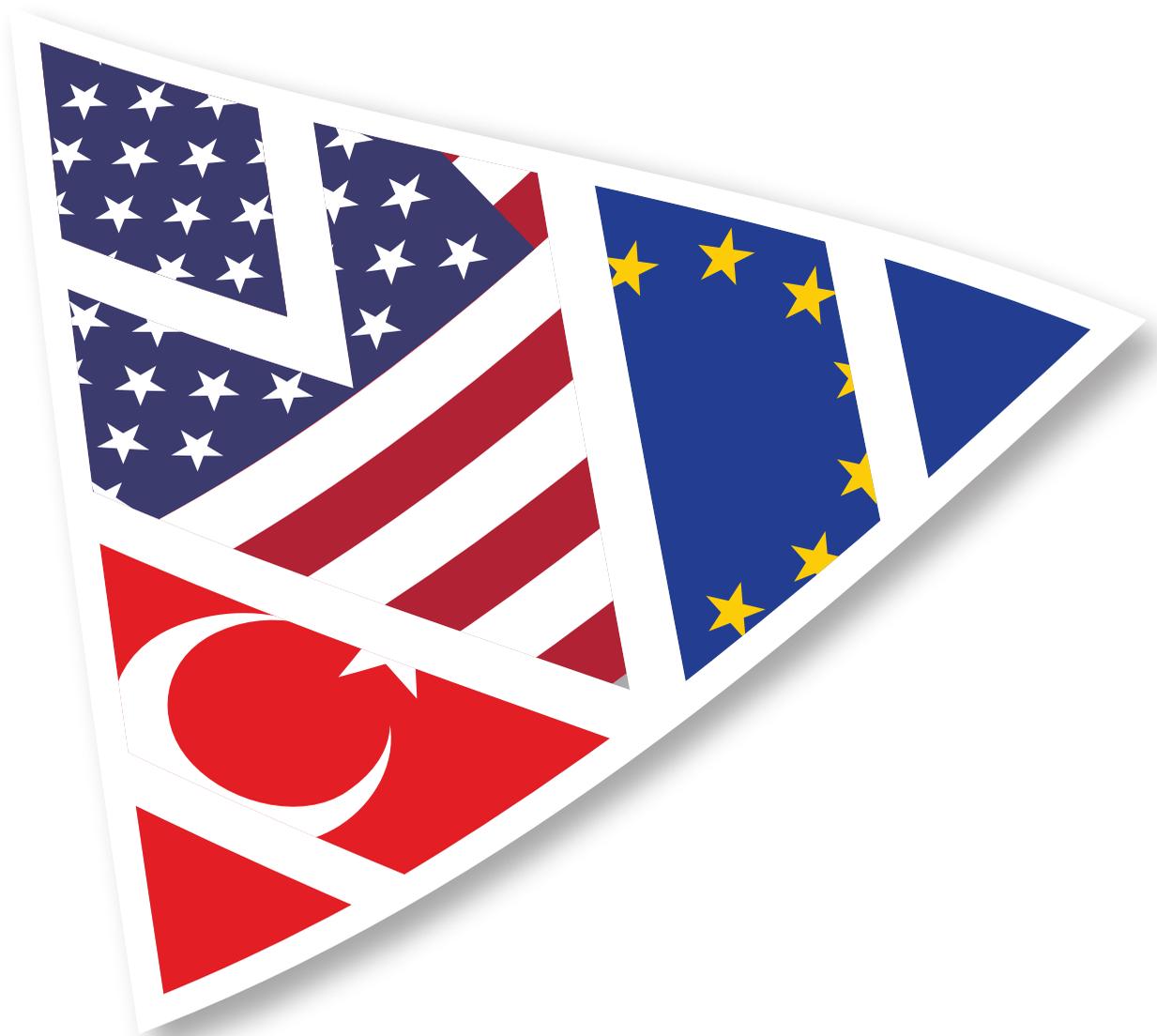


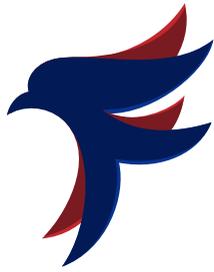
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# TRANSATLANTIC TRIALOGUE:

Turkey, the Syrian War, and the  
Future of the Transatlantic Alliance

Aaron Stein





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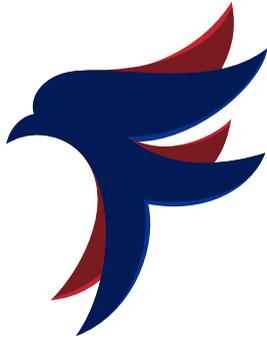
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Turkish and U.S. senior military officials successfully conducted a combined air patrol over the security mechanism on Sept. 16, 2019. (EUCOM)

# TRANSATLANTIC TRIALOGUE: TURKEY, THE SYRIAN WAR, AND THE FUTURE OF THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE

Tensions over Syria have negatively impacted the transatlantic alliance. The United States and Turkey, two NATO allies, have long debated how best to prosecute the war against the Islamic State. The European Union has its own set of bilateral issues with Ankara and Washington, and has also felt the negative effects from the crisis in Syria. To discuss these tensions, and to explore areas of overlap, the Heinrich Boll Foundation and the Foreign Policy Research Institute gathered a group of 57 American, European, and Turkish scholars and government officials in Brussels in November 2019. The meeting coincided with the start of “Operation Peace Spring,” Turkey’s cross border intervention in northeast Syria. The military campaign upended the American and European presence in Syria, forcing a hasty coalition withdrawal, which together prompted widespread condemnation of President Donald Trump’s acquiescence to the invasion and of Ankara’s determination to use military force in a pacified region of Syria. Operation Peace Spring prompted broader European and American concerns about instability in Syria’s Northeast and how the operation could enable an ISIS resurgence.

These narrow, Syria-specific tensions are a microcosm for much broader and consequential issues for the future of the transatlantic relations. At the core of the disagreement, the United States and the European Union have elevated the threat of transnational Jihadist terrorism, linked to the Islamic State’s ability to inspire or plan attacks in the West. This reasoning has led Washington and Brussels to accept working with the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to deny ISIS safe haven in Syria. For Turkey, the threat of cross-border, PKK-linked terrorism is a threat equal to that posed by ISIS, giving way to a policy of resisting the U.S.-led war in Syria

and enabling Ankara’s entente with the Russian Federation. Ankara’s entente with Moscow, of course, has further undermined transatlantic relations, particularly as NATO tensions with Russia grow, while Turkish outreach to President Vladimir Putin continues unabated. The threat of Russia also raises broader and uncomfortable questions about the U.S. and President Trump, and whether the once steadfast American commitment to transatlantic security can withstand the President’s unpredictable Twitter feed and continued inability to understand how the Western Alliance works.

These issues framed two-days of conversation, spread over six different panels that began with a discussion of the future transatlantic relations. Following this discussion, the conference discussed in back-to-back panels the prospects for peace in Syria and what the future of the Syrian state may look like. After these two sessions, the first day of the conference ended with a discussion on Turkish democracy and how that may impact Ankara’s foreign policy. On the second day, the first panel discussed the state of EU-Turkey relations and finished with a discussion of Turkey’s role in the Western Alliance. What follows is a summary of these panel discussions.

## A Summary of the Discussions: Key Themes

The conference discussions revealed a number of themes for European-Turkish relations, Ankara’s relationship with Washington, and how tensions may reverberate within the transatlantic relationship. The two-day conversation revealed significant disagreement between Europe and Turkey and Ankara and Washington over the

war in Syria, the threat of non-state actors, and continued tensions over the island of Cyprus and the management of off-shore hydrocarbons. The EU is unsure about how the Trump administration makes policy and is dissatisfied with transatlantic collaboration, particularly over the U.S.-led effort in Syria. For Washington and Brussels, however, there is a shared sense of “Turkey fatigue,” linked to the crises that now dominate relations with Ankara. Washington and Brussels are increasingly concerned about Turkey’s relationship with Russia, ranging from deepening political ties over Syria and the Turkish decision to purchase the S-400, a Russian made missile system that resulted in Turkey’s removal from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter consortium.

The discussion also affirmed that both the U.S. and Europe share interests in Syria, including pressuring Bashar al Assad to make compromises on the peace process and in working with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to detain Islamic State fighters. These overlapping interests, however, differ from those of Turkey, which sees that SDF as a long-term threat, and the Islamic State as a secondary issue that can be handled through Ankara’s preferred proxies and with law enforcement coordination. Ankara views the international legitimization of the SDF as an issue that needs to be resolved. Ankara also views its relationship with the EU as multi-faceted, but hindered from the stalled accession talks, and recognition that Turkey’s bid for EU membership is stalled. The European participants shared this view, arguing that a new updated mechanism to work with Ankara is needed to help overcome the deadlock. Beyond the accession process, however, the impasse over Cyprus remains a significant impediment to closer Turkish-European ties and, given the current trajectory in the Eastern Mediterranean, is certain to remain a point of political tension in the near future and may result in economic sanctions.

The discussions revealed deep disagreement, but also a strong desire to try and find common ground between the U.S. and Europe and between Turkey and its traditional transatlantic allies. However, this desire is marred by deep political and security fissures, related to disagreements over the threats emanating from Syria, the threat

Russia poses to Western interests, and future points of view about the NATO. The presentations and follow-on discussions revealed a number of themes:

1. The bilateral and trilateral crises have taken a toll, with American and European participants complaining of “Turkey fatigue” over the large number of crises the governments must manage every day.
2. Washington and Brussels have failed to truly internalize how the Syrian Kurdish demands for more autonomy or independence is a strategic threat for Ankara, but there are disagreements within Turkey about how to address the Kurdish issue, narrowly, and, more broadly, how to manage international disagreement about the SDF.
3. There are significant concerns about President Trump in Europe and Ankara, including how erratic and unpredictable his foreign policy is, both for Turkish and European interests, narrowly, and the transatlantic alliance, more broadly.
4. The EU and Turkey need an updated anchor for the bilateral relationship. The accession talks have become a political straitjacket and is hindering frank and open dialogue about the future of Turkey’s relationship with Brussels, and vice versa.
5. The American and European relationships with Turkey are different, but unlikely to totally decouple in the near term, given Europe’s economic links to Turkey, the large Turkish diaspora in EU member states, Cyprus, and the accessions process. For the United States, the relationship with Ankara is grounded in security interests and the historic U.S. support for a robust and strong Turkish military, but there are now sharp disagreements over how to define future threats and to find areas of overlap.

## Turkey's Relations with the U.S. and EU and the Future of Transatlantic Relations

The first panel focused on the current state of the transatlantic alliance and the trilateral relationship between the U.S., the EU, and the Turkish Republic. The three panelists all agreed that the trilateral relationship is a bit chaotic, given political changes in Turkey and the U.S., and the secondary challenges this political turmoil has had on the EU and its individual member states. The first panelist focused on changes in Ankara, arguing that there is a “New Turkey,” in reference to the entrenchment of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s presidential system and the emergence of a new political elite, less enamored with the West and focused on preparing Turkey to play a major role in a “post liberal world order.” As part of this effort, the panelist noted, Turkish political elites are preparing a “non-aligned foreign policy,” free of any “nostalgia for the old world order” and premised on a vision of Turkey as a “great power.” These efforts, the panelist noted, are not limited to Turkey, but are symptomatic of broader shifts in world politics. Therefore, it is worth challenging old assumptions about how the world should function, rather than the reality that the current geopolitical reality is defined by chaos. The panelist concluded that, perhaps, there are signs of political change in Turkey given the results of the recent mayoral election in Istanbul and indications that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) could be defeated by the opposition coalition in the next election.

Turkey’s foreign policy moves, a European panelist noted, has led to a lot of “difficulties with the EU,” largely because Ankara’s independent efforts around Cyprus and in Syria are negatively impacting European security concerns. The panelist noted how united the EU was on criticizing Turkey’s cross-border intervention in northeast Syria, which forced a hasty withdrawal of American and European forces from the border with Turkey. The Syria issue, the panelist noted, created considerable intra-European solidarity and coordination because of the shared threat of terrorism, linked to concerns that Ankara’s

invasion could lead to ISIS prison breaks, and onward migration of European detainees through illegal migration routes to Europe. As one panelist noted, the ISIS issue, along with Turkish exploratory drilling in Cypriot waters, suggested that “there is room for a further deterioration in [EU-Turkish] relations.” In the near term, the panelist indicated that it will be difficult to reverse the European sanctions passed in July 2019 and, in the future, to “justify financial assistance, high level contacts” and stem debates about additional sanctions from the EU.

More broadly, the issue is that the accession talks with Turkey are “not working, so the question is how to change the approach.” However, any changes will be “a tragedy for the EU because Turkey is a fundamental partner, linked closely to the EU with common interests and a large diaspora in many European states. This creates clear geopolitical interests on security, foreign terrorist fighters, and on migration.” Therefore, despite the challenges with Ankara, the reality is “the EU relationship with Turkey is going to be different than the U.S.” The EU cannot afford to “not work with Turkey.”

The European and the Turkish panelists expressed broader concerns about unpredictable American foreign policy decision-making, focused on President Trump’s propensity for radical policy shifts announced on Twitter without warning or consultation with allies. The third panelist echoed these sentiments, telling the group that “there is no preparing Trump” for calls with foreign leaders and explained the incoherence in Washington as a byproduct of the structural inability for Congress and the bureaucracy to create a foreign policy independent of the executive branch. For the U.S.-Turkish relationship, the panelist noted, that “there are two camps in Washington, both of which start from the same assumption that, despite Ankara being a major pain, it is strategically so important for U.S. interests that engagement is required.” The difference between these two camps, the panelist noted, was how to try and align Turkish interests with those of the U.S. One camp favors coercion and leans on sanctions.

The other, he noted, focused on cooption and trying to appease Turkey through concessions.



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A third camp, he argued, has emerged during the Trump era; this camp argues that Turkey is not important at all, and therefore is not worth the investment and time needed to maintain the relationship. This camp, the panelist noted, includes President Trump and explains why he is eager to appease the Turkish leader over most issues. He simply does not care about Turkey. The one exception, he noted, was the ISIS issue and the need for the U.S. to ensure that Islamic State is pressured. The incoherence, as described by the Turkish and European panelists, stemmed from upward Congressional pressure to use sanctions to try to force both the U.S. President and Turkey to return to a more “normal” approach to foreign policy. However, absent an implementing arm in the executive, Congressional saber rattling on sanctions would be ineffective. Looking forward, the American panelist suggested that Europe may have to “decouple from the American approach to Turkey, which means that the EU should forge their own policy path, but that they may not be up to this challenge.” If Trump were defeated in 2020, then coherence may return to the U.S. policy apparatus because a Democrat would (probably) not fight the bureaucracy. However, the U.S. “would probably not go back to the glory days” of the U.S.-Turkish relationship, either.

The broader discussion focused, first, on a theme of three panels: That future Turkish relations with the EU and the U.S. will be more transactional than before. However, as one discussant pointed out that “to be transactional, you have to have someone willing to make a deal. And Turkey isn’t willing.” This feeds into a larger problem of perception, wherein many Western states now assume “Turkey is not a Western country and is not willing to work with Western countries, so why, therefore, is it in NATO. Why is it an ally?” A separate discussant, echoing the American panelist’s reference to the “two camps” approach, suggested that one way to induce positive changes in Turkey is to pursue talks on the Customs Union, which would require structural changes in Turkey to modernize and could aid in liberalization. However, as two different discussants noted, one major difference between the EU-Turkey dyad is the role of the U.S., which had previously given support to Turkey’s membership bid. The Trump administration, as one person noted, is hostile to the EU and even supportive of Brexit. This means that the traditional American role has changed, giving way to a new dynamic in the trilateral relationship of shared, hostile points of view about the EU amongst the Turkish political elite and elements of the Trump administration.

This uncomfortable reality prompted one discussant to raise the Russia issue, arguing that despite Trump's hostility towards the EU and his personal affection for Putin, American relations with Moscow are poor, while Turkish-Russian relations have dramatically improved. The discussant suggested that American policy in Syria and European mistakes over Cyprus — i.e. allowing Cyprus to become a EU member without a resolution of the Cyprus conflict — have “opened the door for Russia” to exploit tensions and that any discussion of the “triangular relationship needs to take into account the future of the Turkish-Russian relationship.” The discussion concluded with a reaffirmation of a theme first addressed in the panel, but expanded upon in the discussion. As Ankara looks to the future, Turkey “does not want to be in any camp” or defined by the “East-West blocks,” and prefers a transactional approach in its dealings with its traditional allies.

## The Syrian Scene: Prospects of a Syrian Peace Process and the Implications for Turkey

The second session focused on a key point of contention between the U.S. and Turkey: the war in Syria. The conference began the day of Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, which to a large extent ended the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria along Turkey's border. The first panelist suggested that despite the withdrawal of U.S. and European forces from the northeast and Turkey's military role, the “Syrian war is not coming to an end” and is instead “transforming itself, which means that the conflict will flare up in different ways.” The Turkish operation could also trigger broader geopolitical shifts within the region, including Bashar al Assad's eventual return to the Arab League. The war, the panelist noted, has relegated the Arab-majority opposition to “proxies, who have lost agency” in dictating their own outcome. The Syrian Kurds, he noted, are at the mercy of larger foreign powers, including Russia, Turkey, and the U.S. With the Turkish invasion, the Kurds will get squeezed between these large powers and, at best, could end up in a future Syria in a position of having “autonomy

without recognition.”

For Turkey, specifically, the panelist suggested that Turkey has no “exit strategy” and that “conditions will force expansive development and reconstruction, so the government needs a political strategy.” Further, the operation could also inflame relations with the U.S. The second panelist picked up on this theme, arguing that Ankara's operation could give ISIS “space to regenerate” and noted that the “Turkey's support for the [anti-Assad] opposition is to serve Turkish needs on the safe zone, and not to fight Assad.” As a result, and echoing themes from the first panelist, the result of Turkey's operation could be to “strengthen the regime inside Syria” and to hasten regional rapprochement with Assad. The second panelist also picked up on the theme of Turkey's internal Kurdish question and how the operation could inflame domestic anti-government sentiment. The panelist argued that “as long as Turkey does not solve its own Kurdish problem, there are no good scenarios for Turkey . . . and that if there is no compromise, Turkey will continue to face an insurgency.”

The third panelist focused on the opening days of Turkey's military operation and what Turkey's operation could mean for the future of Syria. The operation, the panelist noted, was intended to sweep Kurdish militants off the border and to create a zone for refugees based in Turkey to be resettled inside of Syria. The panelist argued that the operation was certain to create significant internal displacement for Syrians based on the border and that they would flee to wherever they felt safe. The result could be a mass migration wave from the Turkish zone to Iraq, or contrary to the stated intention of the operation, force people to move from Syria to Turkey. The panelist then suggested broader discomfort with the idea of resettling refugees in this area because it may be against their will and that if the process was intended to change the ethnic demography and “Sunnify the border.” The panelist also noted that there are general questions about how Turkish-supported militias could be entrusted to provide peace and security, given the fact that in a previous operation in a Kurdish area, dubbed Operation Olive Branch, Turkish-backed militias looted houses and committed atrocities.

The broader issue, the panelist indicated, was that Ankara's invasion would necessarily require Turkey to take responsibility for a greater number of Syrians. Looking beyond the military operation, the panelist noted that even if Ankara were to resettle refugees inside Syria, they would still be required to subsidize them. As for the Syrian Kurds, the panelist noted that a deal with the regime to slow a Turkish offensive is also problematic because the "regime relies on terror to keep security and if you defy the regime, you are taken out of your bed and tortured."

The discussion first focused on the scope of the Turkish operation which at the outset was focused on preparing the battlefield for an armored incursion. As one discussant noted, the building of housing for Syrian refugees would require an open-ended Turkish presence beyond the initial military offensive. A Turkish participant also sought to clarify the intent of the operation, pointing to Turkish concerns about the Syrian Democratic Forces gaining legitimacy through its partner operations with the U.S. and the West, and not taking seriously Turkish security concerns and focusing only on defeating the Islamic State.

A separate participant challenged this point of view, arguing that Ankara was using an overly broad definition of terrorism to justify the operation, and that its intent was to ethnically cleanse the border. A second discussant also challenged the notion that the U.S. disregarded Turkish concerns about militant Kurdish terrorism. In Syria, he noted, the U.S. had not included the SDF in any of the international bodies created to try to negotiate an end to the crisis in deference to Turkish concerns. He also noted the U.S. support to Turkey for its fight against the PKK, noting that "friends do not always do what friends want. But in this sense, the EU and the U.S. never stepped in to pressure Turkey on the PKK peace process" to try and resolve the broader tensions over Syria.

The discussion then pivoted to the role of Russia, and whether Moscow could end the Turkish incursion. This prompted a participant to raise the refugee issue, asking if "Europe was fighting the last refugee battle" and questioned whether Brussels need to be so concerned about a

mass migration crisis at this point of the conflict. A separate discussant raised the "and then what" question, focused on the likely outcome of Turkey's incursion. As the discussant noted, Ankara's positions are likely to be based on "the conditions on the ground" and that there is probably not a "grand Turkish strategy."

## The Future Syrian State: Decentralized and Fragmented?

The third panel focused again on Syria and post-conflict governance scenarios. The first panelist focused on the humanitarian impacts of the war in Syria and the Turkish operation in Syria. The panelists echoed a sentiment from one of the discussants in the previous session, noting that "most of the Syrians in Turkey may attempt to resettle in the northeast are not from the areas where Turkey was active militarily, so returning people to these areas would be tantamount to ethnic cleansing." The Turkish effort, the panelist went on to argue, is part of a broader issue, wherein safe zones in Syria are not "safe" for people to return to. In Idlib, for example, which is part of a separate Turkish-Russian agreement to de-escalate fighting remains under threat, with "civilians still being asked to live under bombs." Looking to the northeast, the Turkish operation could exacerbate this broader humanitarian problem in Syria, leading to "mass displacement" of civilians. The panelist emphasized that Syria is not safe for people to return to and that Turkish (and Lebanese) efforts to deport Syrians can be considered a violation of international law.

The second panelist switched the focus from the humanitarian side of the conflict to the military imperatives of the Turkish operation and the future of the Syrian Arab Army. The panelist noted that the presence of Syrian Kurdish militant groups on the border was a "strategic threat" to Turkey and that military action was required to push them off the border. Going further, the panelist argued that Ankara's efforts to establish a safe zone were in good faith and reflective of the need to ease Turkey's refugee burden. As for the Syrian Arab Army, the panelist suggested that

“Assad had won the war, but will struggle to win the peace” because his forces are depleted and the insurgency still capable of conducting attacks. The third panelist delved more deeply into the Turkish-supported opposition groups, their history of operations in support of Turkish interests in Syria, and their anger with the U.S. The discussion focused, again, on Turkish security interests along the border, with the panelist saying, “As long as the Syrian war continues, no *fait accompli* will be allowed at Turkey’s doorstep.”

The final panelist sought to step back and explain how and why the U.S. chose to cooperate closely with the Syrian Democratic Forces, despite its links to the PKK, and the certainty that it would upend relations with Ankara, a NATO ally. The panelist suggested that the root cause of this divergence is how each country defines and responds to the terrorism threat. For the U.S., the Syrian war was fundamentally about denying safe haven to ISIS, a transnational, Sunni Jihadist group. For Turkey, the terrorism issue in Syria was, mainly, about the perceived transnational, Kurdish leftist terrorism. Turkey treated ISIS as law enforcement problem. The U.S., in contrast, continues to treat the PKK as a political problem and an alliance management issue—and not a national security threat for Turkey. Thus, when each side was forced to choose, they elevated their own security threat and made policy to address it. This created tensions that soured the relationship. To make his point, the panelist pointed to the presence of Al Qaeda loyalists, operating within larger Syrian militant organizations that Turkey favored to spearhead the fight against ISIS in Manbij. This reality complicated U.S. military and bureaucratic options to acquiesce to Turkish demands. In contrast, the SDF is led by a PKK veteran, making it impossible for Turkey to ever fully support the U.S.-led war in Syria. These divergences continue and are certain to frame the U.S.-Turkey relationship for the years to come and explain why Turkish-Russian ties over common interests in Syria have grown over the past two years.

The broader discussion focused on the hasty American withdrawal from Syria and what it portended for the future of ISIS, the role of Turkey, and the future of the Syrian regime. One discussant prophetically drilled down on the

likelihood of a Russian-Turkish entente, following the inevitable end of Ankara’s military intervention, and the reality that Turkey and Russia would soon share joint responsibility for patrolling Syria’s northeast. A second theme focused on the future of the Islamic State and whether the collapse of Kurdish autonomous rule in Syria will enable ISIS to regenerate. A panelist suggested that Turkey did not have a concrete plan to take over the ISIS prisons outside its proposed safe zone and that any future arrangement will probably be dependent on the Syrian regime and the Russians to handle because they will inevitably cross the Euphrates River and backfill areas the U.S. vacates in Syria. The conversation also focused on future U.S. strategy in Syria and what Washington now hopes to achieve. One discussant raised the Al-Tanf base, which is in southeastern Syria, adjacent to a highway linking Iraq with Lebanon via Syria. A panelist suggested that the U.S. position at Al Tanf “was symptomatic of where Trump policy in Syria failed because it expanded the scope of the mission to include an anti-Iran element, taking the focus off of ISIS.”

## The Turkey Scene: Prospects for the Democratization of Turkey and its Impact on Turkey’s Foreign Policy

The final session on the conference’s first day focused on Turkish domestic politics and the linkages to foreign policy. The first panelist focused on events inside Turkey, arguing that the start of Operation Peace Spring could signal the start of a “major crisis” and that “a more democratic Turkey would change how decisions are made and increase the role of parliament in policy decision-making and the implementation of foreign policy.” The panelist reiterated that such a debate could have resulted in the same outcome—a decision to use military force—but that such action would have “been a more plural discussion” and that with a free press, “there would be criticisms, and push back against government policy.”

The panelist also suggested that events in Turkey are not unique, but are instead part of a broader

trend of growing authoritarianism. As the panelist noted, “Turkey’s negative democratic trends are quite aligned with things as going on around the world, which is defined as a crisis of democracy and what has happened in Turkey is one of the early examples of a hybrid authoritarian regime.” Framing the democratic deficit in Turkey in these terms, the panelist noted, could be a way for foreign nations and interested parties to build trust with a broader segment of the Turkish population.

The second panelist focused more in-depth on an issue the first panelist raised: the lack of a free press inside Turkey. Stepping back, the panelist described in detail how Turkey’s media has been taken over by large pro-government businesses that are dependent on government contracts. This media, the panelist noted, “has been instrumental in spreading AKP messaging” and framing Erdogan’s foreign policy for the Turkish domestic audience. This media environment will frame the 2023 presidential election and how consequential domestic events are covered.

The third panelist focused on Turkish public opinion and how the AKP has sought to portray foreign policy decisions in ways that appeal to the Turkish population. The panelist began with a provocative hypothesis: “When [we] write the history of the Erdogan era, it might say that the Syrian war brought him down.” This statement stemmed from survey data that clearly shows that the Turkish population is frustrated by the government’s Syria policy and the cost of hosting refugees and believes that the best policy is for “Syrians to go back to safe zones Turkey creates. This is the public’s top priority.”

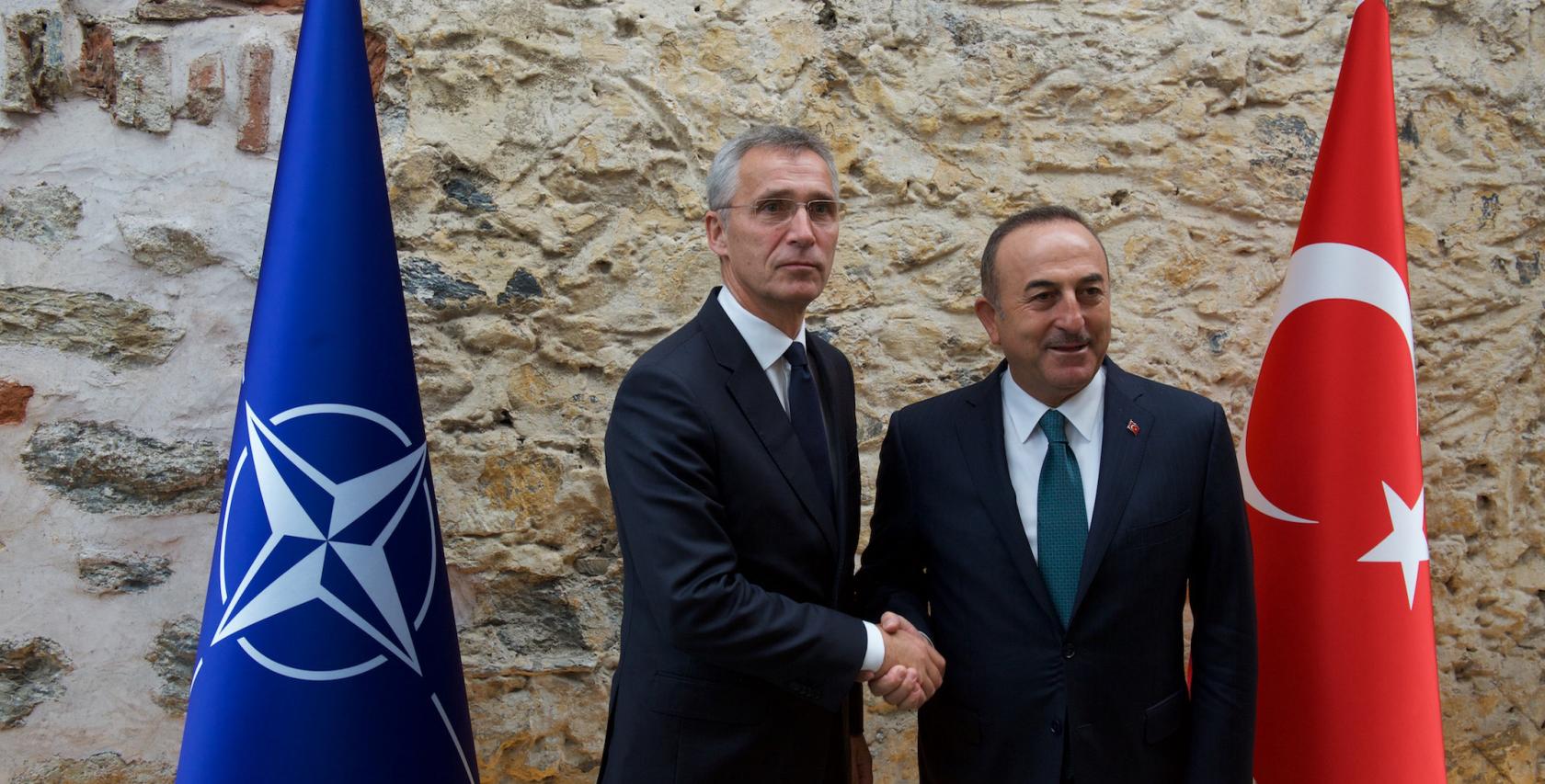
The fourth panelist expanded on elements of the survey data, and in particular the contention that as Erdogan has to grapple with discontent about his governance “he can turn to anti-Westernism as crutch because it is something that his base agrees on.” The final panelist suggested that “absolutely everything [in Turkish domestic politics] has been framed as an existential, global struggle and that the people are along for the ride.” This power to shape narratives, the panelist argued, gives Erdogan the capability to break the opposition coalition, committed to defeating

Erdogan at the polls. Both the second and fourth panelists suggested that the invasion of Syria has thrust elements of the opposition on the defensive, particularly because the military operation’s intent is to defeat a terrorist group. The historic polling on this issue, a panelist argued, suggested that there would be a brief “rally around the flag effect, but during previous cross border operations, support for Erdogan quickly fell back to around 44%.” Beyond the polling numbers, the panelist noted that Erdogan has the tools to break the opposition block, allowing him to “re-jigger his electoral alliances to ensure that he gets 50+1% of the vote to remain in power.”

The discussion began with what one discussant described as the “elephant in the room, Turkey’s Kurdish question, and the inability to deal with political demands without using military force.” A second discussant picked up on this theme, arguing that Erdogan’s calculations in Syria are linked to his party’s recent defeat in Istanbul. The discussant suggested that during the Istanbul mayoral election the opposition refused to take the bait and engage with Erdogan in the broader anti-Western, “us vs. them” rhetoric and instead focused on local issues like economic stagnation, which has links to the refugee issue. A discussant also pointed out how the Turkish government may just simply be out of answers for the refugee issue and that it may be acting in good faith on its efforts in Syria to establish a safe zone for refugees. However, the general consensus was that this was a problem of Erdogan’s own making and he was searching for a pathway to address broader antipathy in ways that satisfy Turkish security concerns and has popular support.

## The State of EU-Turkey Relations and the Need for a More Effective Cooperation Framework

The second day of the conference pivoted from events in Syria and shifted towards a discussion about Turkish-European relations. The first panelist suggested that there are four interrelated problems, dividing the EU and Turkey. The first, and perhaps the most basic, problem is that there



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlut Cavusoglu in October 2019. (NATO)

has been “a rupture of values and principles. Turkey is far away from internalizing the basic norms of the EU.” Second, the two sides remain divided over Cyprus. Third, the hydrocarbon issue has made the Cyprus issue worse. Fourth, the EU has Turkey and Erdogan fatigue and is tired of the constant crisis in relations. Despite all this, the panelist noted, the Turkish public remains supportive of joining the EU, even if they do not think it will ever happen. For this reason, the panelist noted that the accession process has become “straitjacket” for bilateral relations.

The second panelist expanded on elements of the first panelist, noting that “the main issue between the two parties is lack of trust,” stemming from divergences over the Syrian civil war and the Cyprus issue. The third panelist referred to this lack of trust and these divergences as “a downward spiral and you do not know where it is going.” Yet, despite these challenges, the European panelist noted there is “the need to engage Turkey because of geography and Turkey’s importance to the EU as partner.” On the Cyprus and hydrocarbon issue, “Turkey has legitimate rights” and called for “the EU to get more engaged on this issue,” but drew a distinction between dialogue and Ankara’s unilateral drilling

in Cypriot waters.

The fourth panelist focused on migration and how European concerns about the issues have framed cooperation with Turkey, particularly since the start of the Syrian civil war. The panelist suggested that the Turkish-European framework to prevent the movement of migrants to EU member states was not working well and that money appropriated for refugee care was primarily benefiting aid organizations. A European discussant strongly disputed this characterization. In any case, the panelist raised a broader point about how narrow talks on migrants may be indicative of how the relationship has become transactional, but it fails to answer what will underpin Turkish-European relations in the future.

The discussion turned, first, to the Cyprus problem and how it was a mistake to admit the island into the EU before the conflict was resolved. A second discussant raised the Customs Union issue, and suggested that it is in Turkish and European interests to push forward with those negotiations.

## Turkey's Role in the Western Alliance

The final session focused on the broad topic of Turkey's role in the transatlantic alliance, amidst on-going political disputes with Washington and Brussels and growing Turkish-Russian defense ties. The first panelist suggested that observers of Turkish politics should remember that "despite Turkey's framing that it is at the center of the world," the reality is that most of Ankara's efforts to position itself in the world have been "heavily influenced by structural developments in global politics." This geopolitical reality, he argued, also impacts Turkish domestic politics, including the rise of "right wing movements." As for Turkey's perception of its own security, "there is a growing and established feeling in Turkey that its national interests have diverged from its Western partners." This sentiment, the panelist noted, is reflected in government rhetoric and backed up in public opinion surveys.

The second panelist picked up on this theme, noting that "Turkish relations with the West have never been lower than today" and, importantly, that the divergences are different than other crises in the past, like the perennial disagreements about Cyprus. Therefore, relations "may be at an irreversible point." Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400, the panelist noted, is case in point and is another example of "boundary breaking" on the part of Turkey, as it seeks to chart out a new and more independent foreign policy path. The third panelist expanded on this issue, echoing the themes of the first two speakers, suggesting that "Turkey is not trying to change camps, and shifting from West to East, but play between these two camps, and carve out a role for itself." The panelist argued that Turkey is pursuing this policy because it has chosen to do so, and not because a foreign country has "lost Turkey," and encouraged Ankara to politically disengage from its allies and deepen relations with Russia. This framing, the panelist argued, denied Ankara agency for what appears to be a concerted effort to become more independent, irrespective of foreign policy camps.

The fourth panelist suggested that deepening

the Turkish-Russian relationship have sparked concerns inside NATO about the future of ties with Ankara. Specifically, the panelist mentioned the S-400 purchase and the fact that once it is "made operational, NATO will have to decide on its own deployments in Turkey, and there is the potential for a massive disruption" within the Alliance. This move, therefore, risks enabling Russian interests and undermining intra-Alliance relations and planning. The discussion that followed began with the final panelist asking a general question: Is NATO obsolete for Turkish national security elites? The question prompted one discussant to retort that President Erdogan is a "straight shooter" and that he and his advisors make clear in their rhetoric and policy statements that they do not "see a future for Turkey in the West, even if they cannot actually articulate this openly as official Turkish policy." This prompted pushback from a separate discussant, who argued that Turkey's commitment to the Alliance is clear, as evidenced in Turkey's support for NATO missions around the world. Another discussant suggested that the U.S. and Europe have not adequately internalized the extent to which the war against ISIS has threatened Turkish security and that the emergence of the Syrian Kurds as a political actor is an "enduring and strategic problem that must be dealt with militarily."

The discussion pivoted again to how the U.S. and Europe diverge on the Turkey question. The U.S., for example, has imposed sanctions on Ankara for its purchase of the S-400 and removed Turkey from the F-35 program. Europe, one panelist mentioned, has chosen to "hide behind the U.S. on the S-400 issue and let [Washington] take the lead, but are seriously concerned about what Ankara's defense cooperation with Russia means for the future security of Europe." Yet, despite this shared concern, Europe cannot simply "plan around Turkey and give up on Erdogan" and make relations "one dimensional." Turkey is a part of Europe, the discussant made clear, and suggested that different European states have a policy of engagement to try and manage these tensions.

## Conclusion

The depth and breadth of Turkey's relationship with its transatlantic allies remains strong, despite the tensions discussed during the dialogue. However, amongst the majority of the discussants and panelists, there was a general agreement that Turkish ties with its Western allies were at an all time low. Still, Europe and Turkey have ample incentive to continue dialogue over issues ranging from the Customs Union to Cyprus to migration. Yet, there are a number of key issues that continue to fester, ranging from Ankara's purchase of a Russian missile system to the West's support of the Syrian Kurds in the fight against the Islamic State. For the United States and Turkey, the fundamental problem is that the historic *raison d'être* for close ties—shared security interests—have frayed, largely over the threats posed by non-state actors and disagreements over Russia. European actors have adopted a similar approach to regional terrorism as the United States and Turkey's ties with Moscow, even if there is considerable rancor at the actions of President Trump and how the United States has conducted foreign policy in recent years. Despite these challenges, there is a continued desire for dialogue, both to continue to explore ways to compromise over security interests and to find a path forward to more useful dialogue that breaks the current cycle of lurching from crisis to crisis.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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