



RESEARCH NOTES

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Turkey's Commitment to NATO NOT YET GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

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Turkey's September 2013 preliminary selection of a Chinese company to build its first long-range air- and missile-defense system raised eyebrows in Western capitals and boardrooms. Was Turkey signaling an important shift away from its commitment to NATO by selecting a Chinese system in an area of serious and sensitive need?¹ Turkey has long supplemented its array of U.S. and European defense purchases with gear from non-NATO allies such as South Korea or Israel, and has sought generally to develop its defense-industrial capacity, but the Turks have not previously partnered with a non-Western power on such a critical technology—let alone with the Chinese.² Fears that the air-defense deal indicated a deepening strategic rift have been exacerbated by other troubling signs, including Turkey's reported sharing of sensitive intelligence with the Iranians and public courting of the Russians for admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.³ The recent resumption of European Union accession talks did not alleviate unease regarding the mutual commitment of Turkey and the West, given the preceding three-year deadlock and the focus of the upcoming talks on just one of more than thirty accession chapters. In any case, public enthusiasm for EU accession remains low both in Turkey and in Europe, and NATO remains the key indicator of Turkey's "Western-ness."⁴ In that sense, any sign of wavering commitment to NATO is cause for concern.

Concern, in fact, has become widespread—some observers now view Turkey as the most problematic member of the alliance, a view quietly echoed by NATO insiders.⁵ This is not just because of the Chinese air-defense deal; other reasons include authoritarian measures taken by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan,⁶ disagreements over whether the United States should continue to maintain nuclear weapons in Turkey,⁷ public ambivalence in Turkey regarding NATO,⁸ and the growing perception that Turkey's foreign policy goals and ambitions do not overlap with the U.S. or NATO sphere of interest and influence as they once did.⁹ No doubt, Turkey's continued active role in NATO organizations and its helpful deployment of troops to Afghanistan underline a continued willingness to play major roles in NATO when its key interests are at stake. Nevertheless, when Turkey holds competing interests, the country is not afraid to cause headaches for NATO; of particular concern to some is Turkey's insistence on prohibiting NATO partnership with Israel.¹⁰

The popularity of NATO in Turkey, meanwhile, has taken several hits over the past decade. Some of this stems from Turks' conflating U.S. policy in Iraq with NATO more generally, given the extreme unpopularity of the former and the perceived association with the latter.¹¹ The Iraq war constituted a negative watershed in U.S.-Turkey relations, one from which there has not been and perhaps never will be a full recov-

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ery.¹² Incidents of Quran desecration in Afghanistan by U.S. troops had the same effect.¹³ NATO's popularity may have suffered collateral damage from growing Turkish frustration over stalled EU accession talks, based on the sense that Europe has gained more from the relationship than Turkey.¹⁴

Despite these concerns, NATO remains firmly committed to Turkey in concrete ways. Three prominent examples of this commitment include the 2011 decision to base a major early-warning radar system near Malatya, the deployment of Patriot batteries along Turkey's border with Syria since late 2012, and the continued presence of a significant American nuclear deterrent force in Turkey.¹⁵ NATO also activated a major subordinate headquarters, Allied Land Command, in Izmir in 2012.¹⁶ These steps serve as high-profile reminders of Turkey's value to NATO despite the greatly reduced NATO footprint in Turkey and ambivalence toward NATO from the ruling party and much of the public.

Increasing friction, however, leaves Turkey's role in the NATO alliance at a delicate juncture. Turkey's economic might has grown dramatically in the past decade, and the Turks have ambitious goals for military reform and expansion of the defense-industrial sector.¹⁷ Defense-industrial cooperation has increasingly become a tool for as well as product of Turkish diplomacy. Meanwhile, Turkey has deployed other national tools in support of non-NATO regional engagement, including an increased defense attaché corps, greater naval cooperation, expanded development-assistance funding, and more aggressive covert intelligence and related operations.¹⁸ Thus, NATO activities in Turkey and Turkish activities in NATO continue steadily, but within a broader context of separate agendas. Divergence is clearest regarding Russia and Iran, where Turkish interests, sensitivities, and scope of activity differ greatly from those of the United States or Europe. Perspectives also diverge regarding Cyprus, Israel and the Palestinians, Iraq, and Syria. One should not be surprised that a Turkey with rising economic might and a growing vision of its global role should pursue its interests on its own terms rather than in coordination with the United States or NATO, as was the case through the

1990s.¹⁹ During the Cold War and for a decade thereafter, Soviet threats, Turkish economic weakness, and Kemalist ideology enforced NATO's primacy as a strategic identity for Turkey rather than just a security organization to which it belonged. With those elements removed and corresponding Turkish economic and political development, the wavering commitment to NATO may have been inevitable.

Altogether, NATO membership provides Turkey too much political and strategic value to be forsaken entirely. In any case, the alliance has no mechanism for expelling a NATO member, and NATO has tolerated undemocratic and disruptive behaviors from member states throughout its history.²⁰ Yet the relationship *has* changed in fundamental ways. Evidence points to a coming decade in which the following conditions apply:

- Turkey will increasingly view NATO as an inadequate vehicle to meet the security needs required by its grander, more independent strategic identity (e.g., arming Syrian rebels).
- Turkey will therefore pursue many diplomatic initiatives *not* coordinated with NATO.
- Turkey's political culture will increasingly diverge from that of its European NATO allies.
- Turkey will follow an independent defense-industrial policy.

These trends justifiably cause alarm, but that alarm should be kept in perspective and not prompt overreaction. NATO, after all, has functioned with varying success on multiple levels: as a response to a clear, common military threat; as an aspirational community linked by political values; as an informal defense-industrial consortium; as a broad statement of geopolitical identity; and as a nuclear umbrella.²¹ The first two of these components may have lost relevance, but the third and fourth still provide value, albeit reduced, and the fifth remains vital. The Chinese air-defense deal is unfortunately a sign of the times—that is, of reduced policy convergence between Turkish political elites and their European and American counterparts—and probably a sign of things to come.

In the years ahead, current areas of divergence may grow into a more fundamental breach. But this has not happened yet. The differences today are manageable if leaders in Ankara, Washington, and Brussels communicate, in unambiguous terms, their must-haves for the future relationship.

Historical and Theoretical Context

Before probing the evidence on current Turkey-NATO tensions, one must consider the historical context. What, for instance, does “normal” look like in Turkey’s relationship with NATO and the West? How have problems in the country’s broader relationship with the West affected NATO endeavors? Indeed, concerns over Turkey’s Western orientation are not new: over the past half century, Turkey’s leaders have demonstrated a pattern of decisionmaking that cools, and then rewarms, in its relations with the West. The strongly worded “Johnson letter” of 1964 that threatened to leave Turkey at Russia’s mercy should the Turks invade Cyprus, the U.S. weapons embargo after Turkey’s Cyprus operation in 1974, and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 all led to downturns in the relationship—and in each case Turkey resumed vigorous cooperation with Western allies within NATO in relatively short order.²² The oscillating pattern of Turkey’s Western orientation, and especially the U.S. relationship, is in part a by-product of reasonable concern about not being dominated by one’s friends, a concern at the heart of modern Turkey’s strategic calculus. The pattern also reflects a deep and durable division in Turkish strategic thought between Western and Eurasian self-concepts—the first rooted in the late Ottoman and Republican periods and the second in early Ottoman and pre-Ottoman traditions.

Baskin Oran, a political scientist who edited the definitive study of Turkey’s modern foreign policy, has found striking strategic continuity from the late Ottoman to the Republican periods, despite the fundamental social and political transformation attending that transition. In both periods, Turkey was essentially a midsize state that acted according to the twin principles of carefully navigating the global power balance and avoiding war unless directly threatened.²³ A Western-oriented approach was adopted for prac-

tical rather than fundamental purposes. Carried out by elites, however, the arrangement failed to address the largely non-Western geographical, historical, and cultural ties that underlay Turkish public opinion and geostrategic context.²⁴ This marked the easiest way to modernize the state and society (through cooperation with the West) and to maintain independence (by deterring Russia). For a state like Turkey, the ideal partner in such an arrangement would be a distant but powerful patron who would share authority and resources but make relatively light or only theoretical demands. During the Cold War, NATO fit this bill.

Nevertheless, when demands upon a midsize state like Turkey increase—whether for political change, support of military actions, or commercial matters—that state will be compelled to reconsider costs and benefits, always wary of exploitation. Increasingly after the Cold War, many Turks viewed the costs as meriting a move away from the alliance. NATO expansion, the Iraq wars, and Israel-Iran tensions all begat new demands on Turkey by its allies, especially the United States, without contributing appreciably to Turkish security.²⁵ One response to this perceived imbalance was a new determination, beginning in 1998, to seriously develop Turkish defense industries with the aim of reducing dependence on foreign suppliers.²⁶ Turkish leaders had announced ambitious defense-industrial goals ever since the 1975–1978 American arms embargo, but economic and political disarray kept progress quite modest. Only in the past decade have the plans, markets, technology base, national economy, and focused bureaucratic effort aligned closely enough to make Turkey a serious defense-industrial player.²⁷

Another response was to call for a fundamental reframing of U.S.-Turkey relations. President Obama’s use of the term “model partnership” to describe bilateral ties in April 2010, rather than the “strategic partnership” of previous decades, prompted a debate among Turkish analysts as to how Turkey’s increasing assertiveness and independence should be reflected in bilateral relationships.²⁸ One such analyst described it as follows:

“Strategic partnership” refers to two allies’ joint action against a common threat in military, intelligence, and political areas. Such an alliance requires cooperation

in numerous areas, mainly against a military threat, or responding to a new strategic realignment in a region, as well as technology and intelligence sharing....The strategic partnership was never a “golden age” as it is often described. On the contrary, crises were not exceptions and relations were, more often than not, based on mutual suspicion rather than trust.²⁹

The “model partnership” was meant to redefine the framework of the strategic partnership. It also refers to the consensus that any future relations must be based on a mutual horizontal basis rather than a hierarchical one....Thus, a new framework in relations is yet to be institutionalized. Both countries seek to understand how much they can trust each other and calculate accordingly. It is clear, however, that Turkey seeks recognition as an “independent political actor.” Unless this recognition is achieved and U.S.-Turkey relations are established on equal grounds, Turkey will not be satisfied with the model partnership. The fundamental problem in bilateral relations derives from the fact that the hierarchy of the past sixty years at Turkey’s expense is now being dissolved in Turkey’s interest and the U.S. is still trying to protect the old relationship and finding it difficult to adjust to the new conditions.³⁰

The new term did not lay out in detail the changes Turkey anticipates in the relationship—it provides a framework in which those changes will unfold moving forward. While the term “model” applies formally only to the U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship, it necessarily redefines Turkey’s relationship with NATO too. For many Turks view the relationship with NATO as a subset of the relationship with the United States, and reconceptualizing the United States means reconceptualizing NATO.³¹

In his landmark work *Strategic Depth*, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu expresses the concern that NATO’s post-Cold War drive for expansion could endanger Turkish interests or sovereignty close to home. As he puts it,

One of the greatest foreign policy challenges in the coming period will be reconciling NATO’s redefinition of its global mission and the search for a new international order with Turkey’s regional policies and preferences. If this is not approached with sensitive rationality on both sides, we face the risks that Tur-

key might be alienated in its own backyard, or might enter into a period of tense relations with NATO.³²

Davutoglu also notes that the Cold War’s end has created new opportunities and risks for its relations with Russia, and Turkey must accordingly balance with nuance its NATO commitments and interests with those applicable to Russia, which extend from energy and trade through cooperation in cultural and security matters. Davutoglu argues that Turkey today can deal with Russia more equally than at any time since the Pruth River campaign of 1710–1711, when last the Turks bested Russia in war; related opportunities for equitable partnership must not be jettisoned out of reflexive conformance to European interests. In fact, because NATO comprises the same countries—with a few exceptions—as the European Union, Russia and Turkey can find common ground in a shared sense of grievance as targets of EU exclusionary policies.³³ Davutoglu’s writing does much to explain Turkey’s guarded response to Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.³⁴

The idea of Turkey simultaneously partnering more closely with Russia to manage Eurasian affairs while maintaining correct and careful ties within NATO may appear to signify an identity crisis, but to many Turks it makes perfect sense.³⁵ It certainly makes sense to Davutoglu and his boss, Prime Minister Erdogan, as an example of the “multiaxis foreign policy approach” envisioned in *Strategic Depth*. In Davutoglu’s view, a single foreign policy path is a luxury reserved for Great Powers; Turkey, for its part, must keep its options open by playing an activist role based on cross-linkages and new global lines of cooperation.

Within Turkey, a broad coalition of leftists, nationalists, and Erdogan supporters approves of the eastward reorientation articulated by Davutoglu. They see a greater complementarity of interests and style between Turkey and Eurasian states, especially Russia, than what exists between Turkey and Europe or the United States.³⁶ According to some variants of the Eurasianist vision, Turkey should maintain strong bilateral relations with the United States and Russia while de-emphasizing both NATO and the EU

as vehicles for Turkish foreign policy.³⁷ A related fear from Western observers, given the Islamist orientation of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, may be that Turkey is moving toward fundamentalism or the formation of a Muslim bloc. Instead, the evidence and historical context indicate a more likely path to "authoritarian democracy" and some sort of "understanding" with Russia.³⁸ Such foreign policy steps are considered pragmatic and natural for Eurasian states, however much they disappoint the West. Turkey's efforts to build common diplomatic, trade, and security arrangements in the Black Sea region apart from NATO might be additional evidence of such Eurasianism.³⁹

One should avoid the false dichotomy of seeing Turkey's participation in eastward-oriented partnerships, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as a replacement for or competition with Turkey's NATO partnership or EU aspirations. Turkey is not, in such a case, trading in its Western identity for an Eastern one. It is rather adding another layer of alignment, and interpreting previous alignments in the least restrictive, least costly manner possible.⁴⁰ Where NATO actions offer value to the Turks or coincide with Turkish interests, Turkey will be a staunch supporter and advocate.⁴¹ Turkey will not, however, prejudice actions or decisions based on abstract notions of NATO solidarity. Although, in the larger scheme of international relations, such a "transactional" approach to an alliance is not uncommon, it is so in NATO, where alliance loyalty is seen by European states as central to a common North Atlantic community of values and interests. It appears that neither the government nor the people of Turkey see NATO in that light.

The Chinese Deal

On September 26, 2013, Turkey's Undersecretariat for Defence Industries (*Savunma Sanayi Mustesarlisi*, or SSM) announced that the Defence Industry Executive Committee had decided to start contract negotiations with the China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation (CPMIEC) to procure an air-defense system known as the HQ-9 (the export version of the FD-2000). A medium-

to-long-range system designed to track and destroy cruise missiles or ballistic missiles after atmospheric reentry, the HQ-9 reportedly has similar capabilities to early versions of the Russian S-300.⁴² The proposed export deal would be the biggest ever won by the Chinese defense industry and would mark its first penetration of the European market.⁴³ The Turkish air-defense initiative is sometimes referred to as T-LORAMIDS (Turkish Long-Range Missile Defense System).

The HQ-9 led an SSM short list that included the Patriot (PAC-3), coproduced by Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, and Aster 30 SAMP/T of the European consortium Eurosam; the S-300 had been considered earlier but was excluded from the final stage. The original SSM request for bids aimed for an off-the-shelf system, but in January 2013 the Turks revised the requirement to prioritize codevelopment.⁴⁴ Multiple sources indicate that pricing, technology transfer, and scope of codevelopment were the leading criteria for Turkish decisionmakers. Some observers, meanwhile, have used the term "undercut" to describe the Chinese offer, speculating that CPMIEC might be willing to sell at a substantial loss in order to break into Western defense markets.⁴⁵

The Chinese offer reportedly best met SSM's key criteria, but the selection comes with several major negative second-order effects. First, NATO is certain not to allow integration of the HQ-9 into NATO's common architecture for radar, satellite, and cueing systems, due to concerns over Chinese exfiltration of technical data and subsequent sabotage or countermeasure development. This could ultimately require Turkey to indigenously develop its own radar, satellite, and cueing systems. Such a project would likely cost Turkey tens of billions of dollars, with development and deployment measured in decades. Alternatively, Turkey might deploy the system as a standalone defense against a limited range of threats, and request continued deployment of NATO systems and missiles within a networked, layered air-defense shield against the full range of threats. This would require sustained willingness by NATO to foot the cost and operational burden of coverage appropriate to Turkey's needs, which should not be taken for granted.

The second negative effect associated with the Chinese offer is that the HQ-9 has not been battle-tested like the PAC-3 and thus has not undergone corresponding cycles of observation, product improvement, and maturation.⁴⁶ Aided by operational testing during the Gulf War, Raytheon came to understand that the separation of debris from a missile or countermeasures deployed after reentry might complicate target tracking and intercept; CPMIEC products have not been subjected to similar testing. Indeed, Turkish military experts reportedly did not prefer the HQ-9, assessing that the European or American systems would better meet national technical requirements.⁴⁷ Senior Turkish military leaders were reportedly exasperated by SSM's parsimonious approach, which threatened to leave Turkey with "secondhand, not battle-tested, and cheap Chinese missiles," as well as by the U.S. companies for failing to offer a better deal on technology transfer.⁴⁸ To the consternation of Turkey's allies, Turkish decisionmakers seem oblivious to other alliance members' perceptions of the decision. At virtually the same moment NATO deployed air-defense systems to protect Turkey from a threat on its southern flank—for the third time in twenty-four years—Turkey chose to purchase a system that could not be deployed, for example, to Estonia or Poland.

Finally, Turkish leaders cannot be unaware that its allies would view Turkey's departure from NATO acquisition norms in a geopolitical as well as a business sense. When and if alliance members conclude that Turkey's move reflects a commitment to a new preferred partner, rather than a negotiation tactic, other forms of defense cooperation might be negatively affected. Western governments and banks began to assert in early 2014, for example, that Turkish companies that might partner with CPMIEC should the bid go final, such as defense electronics producer ASELSAN, will be subject to sanctions and security precautions. This is because CPMIEC has drawn U.S. sanctions for violating bans on military exports to Iran, North Korea, and Syria, but it also reflects concerns over information and technology security.⁴⁹ Erdogan and SSM undersecretary Murad Bayar—who was dismissed from his position in late March 2014—have noted in their own defense that

the militaries of several NATO states, including Greece and the former Warsaw Pact countries, use Russian systems without integration problems and that the alliance does not formally require purchase of military gear from member countries alone.⁵⁰ Evidence suggests, however, that the deal's critics are unconvinced by this explanation.

Turkey has in the past revised such decisions as negotiations develop, so the final word has yet to be spoken. In fact, the Turkish leadership has hinted at the possibility of going with the other bids "if there are difficulties we have not foreseen" with the Chinese bid.⁵¹ The Turkish procurement agency has postponed final confirmation of the Chinese system several times in order to allow U.S. and European competitors time to revise bids, with the latest extension coming on May 1 and valid until June 30.⁵² They will either discreetly abandon the Chinese system in light of the second-order effects (or perhaps in response to significantly more competitive Western bids, to which they have expressed openness), or they will proceed and accept NATO disappointment and long-term integration expenses as the costs of supporting the domestic arms industry. The latter option seems increasingly unlikely, based on the reports from industry watchers in Ankara. Erdogan's removal of Bayar as head of the defense procurement agency may offer a clue to the likely outcome; Bayar was closely associated with the Chinese air-defense deal, and his reassignment as an advisor to the prime minister was seen as a demotion.⁵³ It appears to Turkish defense industry insiders that Turkey has weighed the political pressure prompted by the CPMIEC decision and is looking for a more NATO-centric system.⁵⁴

Practical Limits on Strategic Independence

If and when Turkey formally rescinds its HQ-9 selection, one major lesson for all involved will be that Turkey's strategic independence still has real and practical limits. With respect to defense industry and acquisition policy, those limits are imposed by U.S. and European market power and the influence of Washington and Brussels over the international

legal and banking systems. For Turkey, the ability to “pivot to Eurasia,” or diversify its geostrategic alignment, runs into the brutal reality of hardball Asian politics. Namely, Russia, Iran, and other countries will continue to use force to achieve their objectives in places like Syria and Ukraine, and do not seem inclined to consult Turkey prior to doing so. Correspondingly, the central fact governing Turkey and Eurasia in 2014 is Turkish dependence on Russian, Iranian, and Azeri natural gas and other fuels, with energy costs driving a significant trade deficit and the decade’s economic progress resting largely on a superstructure of imported energy.⁵⁵ The EU remains Turkey’s main trading partner overall, though, and geopolitical reorientation might endanger crucial flows of goods, services, and investments.⁵⁶ Based on those twin dependencies, Turkey’s natural path would traverse a fine line between Russia and Eurasia on the one hand and the United States and NATO on the other, to draw maximum benefit from trade and other forms of cooperation until Western complaints turn to sanctions, assuming the Chinese missile defense deal ends up actually going through.

While trade and energy ties constrain Turkey’s strategic independence, structural gaps in the Turkish security sector limit options for independent Turkish use of force internationally. For starters, Turkey lacks the “triad of strategic mobility”: long-distance airlift and sealift capabilities, as well as prepositioned stocks.⁵⁷ It also lacks global reach in terms of basing or operational agreements with allies, and the ability to provide sustained close air support beyond its own borders. To be fair, few militaries or defense establishments even consider projecting force over great

distances, and only the United States has shown a consistent ability to do so—and even this U.S. capability has atrophied in recent years.⁵⁸ But Turkey will not have an independent capability for large-scale out-of-area military operations, even under the most ambitious projections. While the Turks have previously conducted large-scale conventional operations in their own region (Cyprus in 1974, northern Iraq in the late 1990s), it is not clear they could do so today.

For context regarding the Turkish ability to conduct large-scale operations, a look at countries lacking strategic independence from the United States can be instructive. These are states willing or able to pay for only the barest minimum of military capabilities. These typically include some light infantry or commandos for security and counterterror operations, air and naval commands to track national airspace and territorial waters, and—for richer countries—small numbers of deployable advanced systems such as fighter aircraft, countermining equipment, or air defense. These allow symbolically valuable but operationally marginal contributions to international coalitions; examples include the Emirati and Qatari roles in the war to topple Muammar Qadhafi in Libya.⁵⁹ Table 1 shows which capabilities the rest of the world can buy relative to the United States.⁶⁰

Even though NATO members constitute a fair share of the top spenders, none comes close to having a truly independent strategic or operational capability. Most of NATO falls into the “symbolic contribution” category in terms of capabilities and defense spending. The implicit bargain of NATO membership for most members has been agreement to a strategic consensus led by the United States, and some voice

TABLE 1: Comparative Expenditures

STATE	% WORLD DEFENSE EXPENDITURE
United States	41
Next 5 (China, France, Japan, Russia, Britain)	23
Next 10 (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey)	19
Next 14	8
Next 20	5
Rest of the world	3

in shaping the details of that consensus, in exchange for subsidized security, a vastly reduced need for independent capabilities, and a safety net against critical threats.⁶¹ Turkey, even if it were to advance to the “Next 5” category, would be unable to act far beyond its own borders, unless it is in coalition with NATO or the United States.

Even if Turkey, like virtually all countries other than the United States, can’t afford strategic independence, it increasingly differs from the rest of NATO in the *relative* independence it wants and needs. It does not have the luxury of distant or hypothetical enemies, but faces active conflicts on its southern and southeastern borders, a history of domestic ideological and ethnic violence, neighbors with nonconventional weapons, and great uncertainty in its region more generally. Turkey thus can be grouped with other countries with significant security threats and a consequent need to retain significant military capabilities. These states must be able to project force regionally, though not globally. Other states in this category might include China, Israel, Russia, the Koreas, Pakistan, India, and Iran. Not all these states act in ways that directly threaten U.S. interests, but their varying degrees of regional strategic independence certainly cause headaches for U.S. policymakers. The United States is used to such headaches from certain partners in troubled regions (think Israel or Pakistan) but not normally from our NATO allies.

The limitations on Turkey’s independence therefore encompass the economic, military, and strategic spheres. Even if Turkey increasingly behaves in a manner not coordinated with NATO or fails to observe NATO solidarity as a key policy criterion, one need not suspect that Turkey will categorically renounce or withdraw from NATO.⁶² Although the Turks may not have tried to purchase a strategic system from a geopolitical rival in the past six decades of membership, they have indirectly caused the downfall of another NATO government (Greece, 1974), gone to war without NATO’s blessing (Cyprus, 1974, and northern Iraq, late 1990s), shut down all American bases except Incirlik and Izmir (1975–1978), and fought a twenty-five-year counter-

insurgency and counterterror campaign against the PKK with very limited U.S. or NATO assistance. In other words, Turkey has consistently exercised great strategic independence in the past, sometimes in a manner quite problematic for NATO, so such action now should not be cause for scandal or even surprise. The NATO alliance has shown great durability over the decades, even when member states seemed ambivalent about the relationship. One should bear this in mind when contemplating Turkish acquisition strategies as an indicator of Turkey’s long-term commitment to the alliance.

The New Normal: Shifting Security Fundamentals for Turkey and NATO

The good news, then, is that the Turkish selection of a Chinese missile- and air-defense system really doesn’t mean much, since it may soon be revoked and pales in comparison to previous Turkish “actions of concern” for NATO. The bad news is that aside from the proposed HQ-9 acquisition, the fundamentals undergirding Turkey’s role within NATO are changing in ways that very well could create a far more serious breach over the coming decade. Those fundamentals include the following:

- Authoritarian trends in the Turkish political environment, opposed by a growing liberal middle class
- Deepening Turkish economic ties with Russia, Iran, and the Middle East
- Tension with Iran over Syria, and Russia over Crimea, coupled with energy dependence on both
- Modernization and resubordination of the Turkish military and security services to civilian political control
- NATO skepticism among the Turkish public
- Turkey skepticism among the European public
- Perceptions of NATO weakness

To this list may be added the possible fallout within NATO of a potential U.S. or Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear program. If the trends just listed continue or

deepen over the next decade, observers may look back with deep nostalgia at the relatively mild turbulence now playing out.

Authoritarianism. Western observers have been surprised by the increasingly authoritarian ruling style wielded by Prime Minister Erdogan and equally surprised that this style seems to have burnished his popularity with Turkish voters.⁶³ In particular, many had expected that the Justice and Development Party (AKP), after freeing Turkish democracy from military “guardianship,” would be punished by newly freed democratic forces for resorting to undemocratic methods itself.⁶⁴ In fact, the AKP’s resounding victory in the March 30 local elections may have opened the door to an executive enhanced presidency occupied by Erdogan or an Erdogan loyalist for years to come. Erdogan has a fairly specific vision for Turkey at its 2023 centennial as a republic, and he stands a good chance of being in charge right up until the celebration.⁶⁵ Turkish voters have endorsed stability with an ever more autocratic ruler over the uncertainties of more liberal and various opposition groups that have yet to win public trust. While economic or security missteps could still cost the AKP in subsequent elections, Erdogan has rigged Turkey’s political system in his favor by intimidating the media, manipulating state bureaucracies, stripping the judiciary of its independence, attempting to restrict the Internet, and using the tax system to reward friends and punish enemies. Turkey will continue to have elections, and Erdogan will likely continue to win them—but all the while, Turkey’s political culture will drift further and further from liberal democracy.⁶⁶ Opposition to Erdogan from the growing liberal middle class is not likely to go away, but whether it can mount an effective political challenge remains to be seen.

Economic ties. As the Turkish economy grows and trade relations broaden with neighbors to the south and east, linkages with Russia, Iran, and other strategic competitors of the United States and NATO take on increased importance.

In 2013, Russia was by far the top provider of imports for Turkey (\$25 billion, or 10 percent of total imports) and the sixth largest export market for Turk-

ish goods and services (\$540 million, or 4.6 percent of total exports). (See figures 1A, B, and C.) The two countries have set a bilateral trade goal of \$100 billion for 2020; this would require a significant increase and diversification of trade patterns, since the present flow consists largely of Russian energy imports into Turkey.⁶⁷ Trade with Iran has grown significantly over the past decade, and while it now remains heavily focused on energy, both countries are seeking dramatic expansion in the coming decade. Turkish businesses and banks with close ties to the Erdogan government, including the state-owned Halkbank, have furthermore made themselves very useful to the Iranian economy and regime through a complicated sanctions-avoiding arrangement in which Turkish gold was traded for Iranian oil.⁶⁸ Such deals have helped ease the effect of Western sanctions aimed at ending the Iranian nuclear program, exemplifying how changed trade patterns can erode traditional geopolitical orientations over time. While European countries, taken together, clearly remain Turkey’s key trading partner, evidence suggests that trade with China, Russia, and Iran increasingly must weigh in Turkish strategic decisionmaking, especially as regards energy markets. This does much to explain why Turkey has had conflictual, but not confrontational, relations with Iran over Syria and Russia over Crimea; business interests now form an important element of the strategic context.

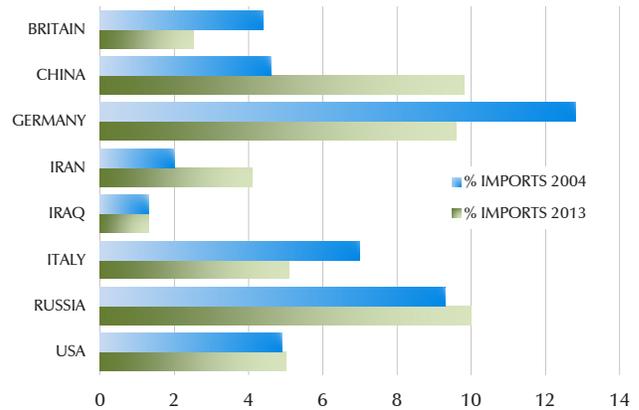
Military transformation. Ironically, the Erdogan government’s successful efforts to end the Turkish military’s political guardianship role may have facilitated a wide-ranging professionalization and reorientation of the military, one that will render it both more effective and more externally focused. The military could now be leaner and more capable, with greater potential utility beyond Turkey’s borders and outside the NATO framework. Key steps have included removing prohibitions on promoting overtly religious officers (2007), amending the law that allowed the military to remove governments to protect the Constitution (2009), and removing much of the military’s senior leadership through a series of political trials (2012–2013). Simultaneously, the Turkish

Land Forces instituted a structural reform program known as “Force 2014,” which slimmed total personnel strength and the force structure by 20 to 30 percent.⁶⁹ The duration of mandatory service has been reduced and the number of professional soldiers increased.⁷⁰ These steps will undoubtedly create a cultural change within the Turkish military, making it more responsive to civilian political controls and refocusing it away from domestic affairs.

Meanwhile, the Turkish defense industry has continued to grow and develop, with more than 50 percent of military procurement sourced domestically and coproduction and shared-technology projects on the rise.⁷¹ Turkey has begun fielding a new generation of attack helicopters (the Turkish Aerospace Industries/AgustaWestland T129) and main battle tanks (Otokar’s Altay prototype), both with significant local content.⁷² Turkey has fielded its own unmanned aerial vehicles and military satellites as well.⁷³ (Interestingly, the Gokturk imagery satellite system was launched by the Turks from a site in China.) By opting to coproduce with Spain a multi-purpose amphibious assault ship that can carry both troops and short takeoff aircraft, the Turks have begun to develop a mini-aircraft carrier capability and a greatly improved maritime force option.⁷⁴ One industry observer sums up the impact of these trends as follows:

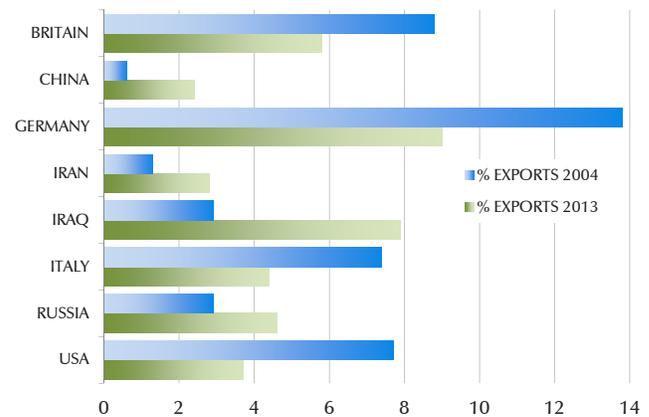
Turkey is a major exporter of equipment to countries like Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. And it’s not just countries that are keen to purchase kit. In March 2013, the country’s leading armoured vehicle manufacturer Otokar won a \$24.6 million contract to supply vehicles to the United Nations...Over the last ten years, Turkey has embarked on a defence equipment policy which puts the emphasis squarely on indigenous manufacturing and development. Through a dogged pursuit of technology transfers and co-production contracts—when defence equipment from abroad is built in Turkey—the country has been able to build up a formidable industry... Turkish defence exports totalled \$1.4 billion in 2013, a 10% increase from the previous year... Turkey has steadily weaned itself off defence imports from countries like the U.S., Israel and Germany...⁷⁵

FIG. 1A 10-Year Import Trends with Partners



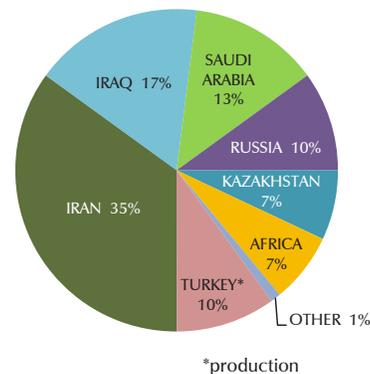
SOURCE: <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist> [(Foreign Trade/"Imports by Country and Year (Top 20 Country in Imports)"]

FIG. 1B 10-Year Export Trends with Partners



SOURCE: <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist> [(Foreign Trade/"Exports by Country and Year (Top 20 Country in Exports)"]

FIG. 1C 2012 Oil Imports



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, “Turkey: Overview,” updated April 17, 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=TU>.

Turkey has not only become independent in large areas of the defense-industrial sector, it has also developed significant capabilities for weapons design, production, and export. It would be naive to think these advances will not have implications at the policy and strategic levels.

Given such developments, Turkey may soon join the list of countries capable of projecting and sustaining high-tech, low-visibility “subconventional” capabilities.⁷⁶ Continued progress on this path will make Turkey far less vulnerable to policy pressure from NATO or even the United States when divergent interests lead the Turks to act in ways that irritate Western leaders. One recent example involved the revelation by an American journalist that Turkey’s intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, shared with Iran information regarding “the identities of up to 10 Iranians who had been meeting inside Turkey with their Mossad case officers.”⁷⁷ The United States canceled a proposed sale of Predator drones to the Turks in the wake of the revelation, but as the Turks develop more of their own systems, they will pay less heed to such steps.

NATO skepticism in Turkey. Polling data from the most recent Transatlantic Trends poll conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States shows relatively tepid Turkish public support for NATO.⁷⁸ Turks are divided on NATO’s importance, with 39 percent describing it as essential and 39 percent as not—the weakest public support from any NATO member country. Of the latter group, 70 percent cited Turkey’s need to make its own military decisions as their explanation. Stable majorities in both Europe and the United States, for comparison, see NATO as still essential. Turks also have the lowest opinion of the United States and EU of any national public polled in Transatlantic Trends. When asked with whom Turkey should primarily cooperate in international affairs, Turks answered as follows: act alone (38 percent), EU countries (21 percent), United States (8 percent), Middle East countries (8 percent), Russia (2 percent), don’t know (15 percent), and all of the above (9 percent). Turkish respondents preferred a nuclear-armed Iran to NATO, U.S., or Israeli military

action targeting Iranian nuclear facilities by a 48 to 23 percent margin, while 29 percent said they did not know or refused to answer. The Turkish public opinion profile, to sum up, looks more nonaligned or Eurasian than it does Western on threat and security perceptions. Public skepticism on NATO and the West may have held less weight during the Kemalist years, with pro-Western elites setting the outer bounds for policy and debate. But given that policy elites now are also NATO- and Euro-skeptics, the long-term effects on Turkey’s cooperation with NATO and EU countries may be more damaging.

Turkey skepticism in NATO countries. Polling data in the United States and Europe provides similarly low assessments of Turkey as a partner. As one meta-study of polling data in Europe summarizes:

Despite Turkey’s weight in foreign policy and despite its fulfilment of certain accession criteria, prospects for Turkey’s membership in the EU have worsened. Most of the citizens of current EU Member States are not supportive of Turkish accession, and pressure on politicians not to ignore their citizens’ wishes regarding the EU has risen in recent years...Four factors can explain citizens’ attitudes towards Turkish EU membership rather well: the economic benefit of Turkish EU membership, cultural differences, political ideology and citizens’ generalized attitudes towards the EU.⁷⁹

We can read in this statement a generalized European assessment that Turkish accession will cost too much, affect the cultural and political identity of European countries, and make EU institutions even less answerable to the citizens of current member states. European skepticism about Turkey’s suitability for membership in the EU is well known, but concerns over Turkey’s NATO role are more recent and more troubling. Keeping in mind that the source is the deputy defense minister of Greece, the following statement is remarkable nonetheless:

I’m a bit pessimistic about the Turkish future...they objected to mentioning Iran as a potential threat in a NATO text [concerning missile-defense doctrine]... Also, they objected very, very recently to the United Nations concerning sanctions against Iran. They

voted against sanctions. That's the reality. We have to pay attention to that...we share the same concerns with many, many colleagues within the alliance...I can tell you I would not be surprised to see a Turkey outside of the Western institutions and playing an autonomous strategic role in the whole region.⁸⁰

It can be argued, perhaps, that European publics can maintain enthusiasm for Turkey in the context of NATO but not in the context of the EU, but for the Turkish public this is a distinction without a difference. When, for instance, the coalition agreement of an incoming government in Berlin includes language virtually ruling out Turkish membership, it is difficult for Turks to see the rejection as specific and organizational rather than national and generalized.⁸¹ This augurs poorly for eventual Turkish accession to the EU and supports the notion of growing strategic divergence in the coming decade. While it is true that Europeans have invited token participation by Turks in EU-led security missions, such as those in Congo and the Central African Republic, Turkey remains concerned that the EU will use its Common Security and Defence Policy in an exclusionary manner that draws on NATO assets without the attendant requirement of fully consulting with non-EU NATO members.⁸²

NATO weakness. More troubling is the possibility that Turkey may feel less bound to NATO because it sees the organization, and even its leading force, the United States, as unhelpful or irrelevant in what it perceives as the most pressing Middle East and Eurasian affairs. It is no secret that Prime Minister Erdogan has been underwhelmed by the Western response to brutality and apparent chemical weapons use by Syria's Assad regime.⁸³ In Ukraine, where Turkey has sought to protect the Turkic Crimean Tatar community without alienating its primary energy supplier, Turkish leaders have certainly noticed that NATO assurances have not prevented Russia from having its way.⁸⁴ Cyprus is another Turkish security concern for which NATO has nothing to offer; indeed, by moving toward closer cooperation with Israel at a time when Israel-Cyprus energy cooperation threatens Turkish interests in the eastern Medi-

terranean, NATO has forced Turkey into a game of bureaucratic defense.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, concerns over NATO's viability as a security mechanism rather than a political club continue to grow. Defense expenditure by NATO members has fallen dramatically since the Cold War, with nearly all member states failing to spend the 2 percent of GDP on defense required by the alliance. Countries spending below this threshold include France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Italy, and Denmark, while others such as Spain and Lithuania fall below even 1 percent. Simultaneously, the United States has significantly cut its own defense expenditure and forces, as has Britain. NATO spending levels have resulted in an alliance that cannot fully meet its core tasks, a situation exacerbated by the U.S. shift to Asia and the Pacific.⁸⁶ Hans Binnendijk has identified six major weaknesses in today's NATO: shortfalls in European defense capability, European introspection, the U.S. "Asia pivot," disagreement over nuclear weapons, weak partnership arrangements, and lack of a comprehensive approach. These areas need major attention and rapid remediation. He has also noted the possibility that, absent significant new European commitment, the United States will lose interest in NATO and the organization "will just fade away."⁸⁷ This prediction likely overstates the case: NATO fading is likely to be a very gradual affair. In any case, Turkey may see the alliance as already on the road to being more a liability than an asset; it may likewise be sustaining membership primarily to avert a threat to the country's own national interests.

Clearly, NATO still has formidable conventional military assets and Turkey still has security gaps that can be filled by those assets: air defense and intelligence come to mind. Conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine have made clear, though, that modern warfare can easily fall below NATO's high conventional threshold for a quick, effective response to provocation. In the cases of Russia (Ukraine) and Syria (advised by Russia), the approach is clearly intentional. The emerging way of war, in which conventional force is made subordinate to economic, psychological, cyber, and other subconventional forms of attack, is expressly designed to make NATO obsolete. If Russia turns out to have already "won" two wars (Syria

and Ukraine) against the West without any direct opposition, the Turkish cost-benefit calculus regarding NATO solidarity may change for the worse.⁸⁸

Iran strike. The most unpredictable factor in Turkey's evolving NATO role over the next decade lies on the Tel Aviv–Tehran axis. In the past decade, Turkey has shifted its policy regarding that axis several times: from cautious on Iran and warm toward Israel (2002–2008) to warm toward Iran and bitterly anti-Israel (2009–2012) to the current position of caution toward both. Inflection points came with Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza at the end of 2008, and Erdogan's breach with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian sponsors over the Syrian civil war in late 2011. Ultimately, Turkey must balance its intense competition with Iran in Iraq and Syria with the reality of dependence on Iranian energy imports. Turkey has counseled against a U.S., NATO, or Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities and has indicated that Turkish bases will not be used in any such strike.⁸⁹ It has not publicly ruled out the use of airspace for transit, though, and Israel has reportedly contemplated apologizing and indemnifying Turkey for the 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla incident in exchange for access to airspace.⁹⁰ A strike could also possibly proceed via Azerbaijan without directly involving Turkey.⁹¹ In either case, an attack against Iran could prompt public outrage in Turkey and prompt Erdogan into a visible response against Israel or the West. Alternatively, such an attack could be shrugged off. The Turkish response would depend on how much diplomacy is exhausted beforehand, how the attack proceeds, and whether and how Turkey is affected by the anticipated Iranian reaction. If many civilians are killed in an initial attack, or if the blowback significantly damages Turkey in some way, Turkey might take punitive steps in reaction. Those could conceivably include downgrading its NATO position, such as through withdrawal from the unified military command or suspension of operational activities, but likely would not lead to a complete renunciation of the alliance. If the attack, conversely, is conducted with a low profile, is effective, produces little collateral damage, and prompts no blowback on Turkish soil, it may be a nonevent.

Conclusion

In assessing the Turkey-NATO relationship, one finds a useful lens in the Model of Relational Development created by communication professor Mark Knapp.⁹² According to Knapp, human relationships follow a fairly predictable trajectory, with two subprocesses—coming together and coming apart—consisting of five stages each. The stages of coming together are initiation, experimentation, intensifying, integration, and bonding; the stages of coming apart are differentiating, circumscribing, stagnation, avoidance, and termination. The relationship between Turkey and the rest of NATO in many ways evokes the middle stages of “coming apart”:

Differentiating “When people progress in a relationship they sometimes due to other external pressures will start thinking individually rather than with the partner...The relationship will start to fade...The feeling of dislike is often expressed by the partners on their commitment.”

Circumscribing “As people pull apart, the focus moves towards setting boundaries and delimiting differences. People have their own...space, their own possessions, their own friends and so on...they may avoid argument, but the differences still...work on the individual psyches.”

Stagnation “Separation is complete in many ways, yet the relationship persists...through apathy, convenience or lack of need to completely separate... couples may stay together for the children...it can be a difficult question as to whether separation is best or worst...”⁹³

Turkey and its NATO partners are complex organizations, far more so than individuals in a romantic relationship or firms in a business relationship. They do consist of humans, though, and therefore the display of familiar relational behaviors merits consideration. Knapp identifies “relationship maintenance” as the key factor underlying the two subprocesses, consisting largely of encountering and solving problems together with a common ethos. Once problem solving and maintenance of the ethos become episodic and inconsistent, “coming apart” has effectively begun.

Coming apart can last a long time, though, and no law says partners can't return to relationship maintenance if circumstances change. All the same, this exercise highlights the unhealthy trajectory of the Turkey-NATO relationship, which may culminate in a transformative crisis—even if that crisis doesn't end in a complete breakup. The Chinese missile defense deal is not that crisis, but it does offer reason to contemplate the bigger crises that may lie ahead. Given the multiple negative dynamics at play, another decade could deliver a Eurasian Turkey with very little in common with the rest of NATO.

Turkey will likely seek to avoid an open rift, and its leaders seem poised to step back by revising their missile defense selection. It should be clear by now, though, that many in Turkey no longer view the country's primary identity as Western, and NATO membership no longer means what it once did.⁹⁴ Observers can expect that Turkey will remain in NATO as an insurance policy, as a hedge both against Russian and Iranian ambitions and against NATO being turned against Turkey at some future point. But the relationship will increasingly be cool and tense, with Turkey frequently pursuing regional and global policies that defy NATO consensus when that consensus imposes financial or diplomatic costs on Turkey. Turkish participation cannot be assumed for out-of-area operations, even (especially?) if Russia, China, or Iran is the adversary. And miscalculations on one side or the other could possibly lead to a very serious crisis, akin to those in 1964 and 1974 (over Cyprus), or 2003 (over Iraq). Washington and Brussels would do well to think through options for either a slow, lengthy decline or an abrupt crisis.

Policy recommendations. In light of fraying Turkey-NATO ties, U.S. leaders should consider the following:

- It should first be noted that since the latter half of 2007, the Obama and Bush administrations have done a creditable job of managing this relationship. Much has been done right: increasing intelligence support to combat the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); staying out of Turkey's tumultuous electoral politics; urging reconciliation with Israel; maintaining discretion while

pressing for progress on political reform, the peace process with the Kurds; and showing public restraint when Turkish actions disappoint.

- Its tactful management aside, the United States must be clearer in its direct communications with Ankara. Washington made major mistakes in conveying its plans for Syria, and what the Turks *must not* do with regard to Iran, Russia, and China. Further, the United States must outline to Turkish leaders what truly constitutes behavior incompatible with NATO membership. If the alliance is to retain value as, at least, a constraint upon undesirable actions by member states, those actions need to be made clear. Sharing technology with the Chinese merits inclusion on the list of incompatible behavior; so, too, does sharing sensitive intelligence with the Iranians.
- Washington must recognize that it is in a struggle for Turkey's allegiance, and it must compete on more than just the diplomatic and security levels. Trade, investment, and civil society exchanges offer opportunities for the U.S. government to help the relationship grow in mutually beneficial ways. In particular, encouraging investment by U.S. firms in Turkey's energy-transport projects can bring strategic benefits to both sides. More university students, think tank researchers, and business representatives working on shared projects can create value in what has become an increasingly transactional relationship. Such grassroots interaction might help form a consensus across Turkey's younger generations that the Atlanticist approach to democracy is compatible with both Islam and Turkey's own unique political culture.
- Keeping in mind that Turkey's enduring, central strategic concern is to avoid domination by patrons or neighbors, the United States should be realistic in its demands for Turkish support or participation in Turkey's own region. This part of the relationship should be guided by quiet consultation and permission for the Turks to exercise some regional initiative and leadership.

The Obama administration has ably followed this course, preferring a low-key consultative approach to the “you’re either with us or against us” track pursued at the outset of the Iraq war.

- Finally, Washington must maintain high-level intelligence and defense-industrial cooperation with Turkey, because in a transactional relationship this is our single greatest asset. Military cooperation through professional educational exchanges, joint exercises, and cooperative regional deployments should be increased. These exchanges should complement rather than crowd out civilian exchanges and linkages, but they remain crucial nonetheless.

The United States will differ with the Turks on many fronts, and policy divergence will likely worsen in the coming decade. By not overreacting to this trend, U.S. leaders can avoid pushing Turkey into a mode of militant independence, isolationism, or fraternity with an autocratic, anti-Western Eurasian bloc. Despite uncertain prospects for success, the United States and NATO should clearly but subtly continue pressing Turkey to pursue democratic reform, exercise solidarity with Western foreign policy initiatives, and scrupulously avoid cooperation with Russia, China, or Iran that bolsters those states’ credentials as security competitors to the West. The time has come to get used to the new normal: a Turkey less enthusiastic for and less dependent on NATO than it was during the Cold War, but whose continued role in NATO merits vigorous U.S. efforts to maintain.

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