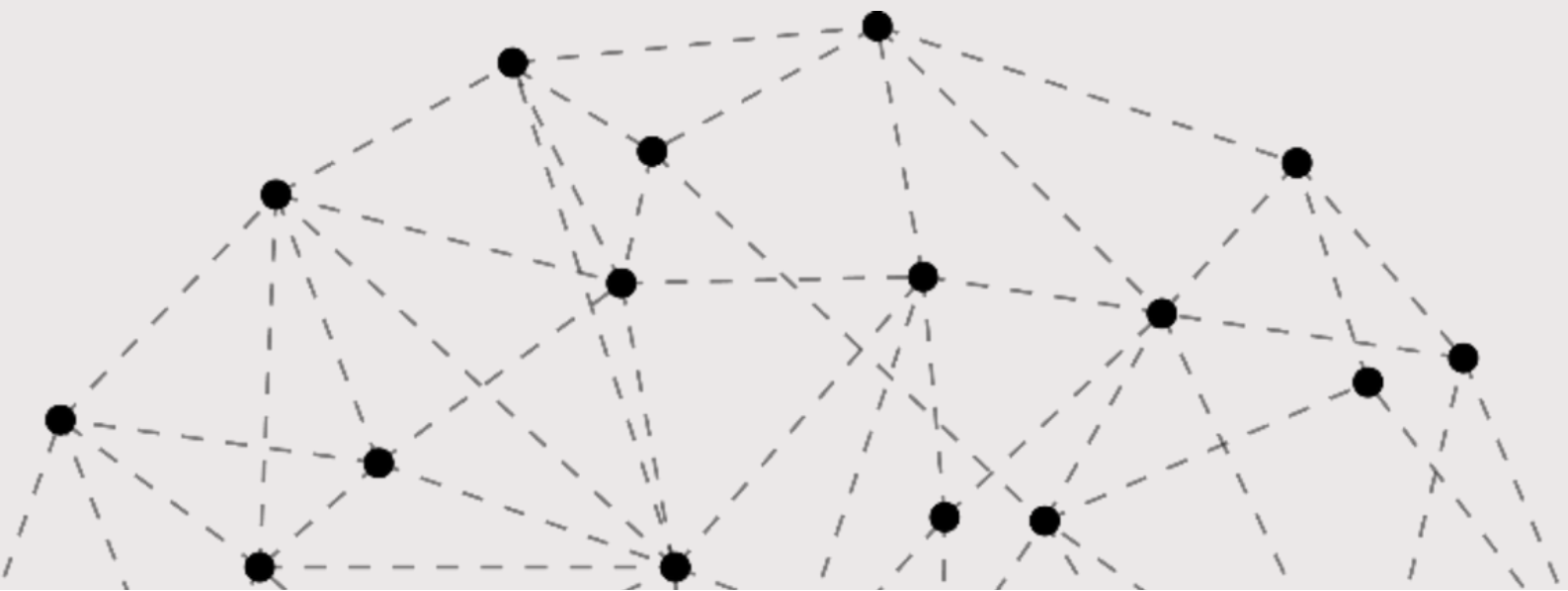


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TURKEY AND INTERNATIONAL DEFENSE COOPERATION: THE POSITION IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION (NATO) AND THE AMBITION FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU)

Allan Antunes
Carolina Ambinder
João Pedro Mendonça

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Policy Statement

This policy brief analyses the complexity of Turkey's current international approach, focusing on defense cooperation. It highlights the country's position in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its ambition to join the European Union (EU). While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was previously adamant about supporting Sweden's entry into NATO because of the Kurds in the country, today, this issue is treated as a bargaining opportunity for Turkey's entry into the EU. However, Erdogan's duality between greater internationalization and simultaneous internal conservatism is weakening Turkey's image in the international system. The country invests in expanding its defense industry, for example, making varied exports both in terms of equipment and products in the sector, as well as to recipient countries, but it adopts or fails to implement policies that could affect its position in NATO and prevent its entry into the EU.

Background

As an embodiment of Turkish nationalism and a conservative stance, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's president, is trying to revisit the republican constitutional principles of Mustafa Atatürk[1], with the aim of creating a great nation. Attentive to the political changes in his strategic surroundings since 2014, when he was elected, Erdogan seeks to enhance Turkey's power in the Middle East, focusing mainly on becoming competitive with European and global powers.

Erdogan and his nationalism are increasingly distancing themselves from the European Union (EU) and its agendas. The Turkish state's desired entry process into the organization was suspended in 2016 following the threat of the return of the death penalty in the country, which goes against the EU's terms of accession. Erdogan tried to use the refugee issue as a bargaining chip to continue the process of joining the organization but was unsuccessful. In 2017, all applications were suspended, including Turkey's, and in 2023, the decision was made not to restart any of them.

Turkey's position in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allows it to be close to the West, and it plays an important role in the members' military relations in the Middle East, which puts it on the international map and, above all, in line with the US

agenda of controlling "terrorism." This agenda is aligned with Turkey's domestic objective of hunting down the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the main opposition group to Erdogan[2]. This objective, however, has caused obstacles to Sweden's accession to NATO due to Turkish allegations that the Swedish state is harboring terrorist dissidents on its territory, and its entry into NATO would make it more difficult for Turkey to defend itself against the PKK.[3]

Meanwhile, Erdogan saw Sweden's entry into the organization as an opportunity to negotiate Turkey's entry into the European Union. Thus, the Turkish president recently mentioned Sweden's position "at the gates" (Aljazeera, 2023) and said that if the path to Turkish membership is paved, the country will be an ally in Sweden's accession process, just as it was with Finland in 2022.

Findings

The tensions surrounding Erdogan's political management do not belong to a specific situation. Since his three consecutive terms as prime minister, which began in 2003, Turkey's current president has sought to legitimize himself with what appears to be a "dual identity": internationally, he seeks to maintain his proximity to the traditional European powers; domestically, he has appealed to conservative sectors, simultaneously seeking to gain greater political power for the presidency and to project the agenda of political Islam among potential voters.

However, this duality, which allows Erdogan some "room for maneuver" between discourse and practice, has significantly eroded the country's image in the international community. At the same time as emphasizing Turkey's role as a NATO member state, the president has remained close to the Russian Federation, even in the context of severe sanctions caused by the continuing Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It has even negotiated the safe opening of the Black Sea for grain trade with Vladimir Putin.

In turn, the construction of the PKK as both an internal and international enemy of Turkey has sought to guide some of its positions - beyond the bargaining between the country, the European Union, and NATO. Above all, the growth of Turkey's defense industry has been highlighted, indicating a tendency towards military confrontation to the detriment of diplomacy.

In 2022, Turkey had a significant defense industry surplus: US\$ 4.3 billion in exports compared to US\$ 1.2 billion in imports (Savunma Sanayist, 2022). These exports were destined for Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, Poland, Rwanda, India, Burkina Faso, and Azerbaijan and were unmanned aerial vehicles/UAVs (almost 25% of the total), ammunition and missile systems, land vehicles, turbojet/turboprop, aircraft parts, rifles, barrel guns and gun turrets and military helicopters. The standout companies were Baykar, Tusas, Pratt & Whitney, and BMC (Husain, 2022).

In April of this year, at LAAD Defence & Security, the largest defense and security fair in Latin America (but with companies and representations from all over the world), Turkey was the third country with the most exhibitors (30), behind Brazil (150), the host country, and the United States (53), the major global military power (LAAD, 2023). Furthermore, on September 26th, Turkey sought to bargain its vote - for Swedish entry into NATO - with the United States if the country agreed to supply it with F-16 "Fighting Falcon" fighters.[4]

Recommendations

Using the Kurdish population in Sweden to favor the Turkish bargain in NATO seems to have more weaknesses than advantages. Apart from the fact that there are representatives of Kurdish origin in the Swedish parliament, the country does not recognize the PKK as a risky paramilitary organization. Furthermore, there has been a Swedish policy of recognizing the multiculturalism of these Kurdish communities since the 1970s in the context of the immigration laws of Olof Palme's Social Democratic government.

On the other hand, Turkish intransigence could end up eroding the consensual policy on which new members are entered into NATO. This could lead to revisionism about the value of multilateralism in military alliances, for example, which is not in either country's interest (Norell, 2022).

In addition, the country's focus on the growth of the defense sector is somewhat paradoxical to its objectives for joining the European Union, which should prioritize economic and social development goals[5]. According to the 2022 Progress Report on Turkey's entry into the EU[6], of the 34 points required by the Community Collection, the country has 8 points in "total disagreement" and 12 classified as "difficult to

adapt." With two-thirds of the chapters completely incompatible with entry, only a severe institutional reform of the legal base - which is in line with Erdogan's attempts to reform the Turkish Constitution - can bring the country into line with these terms in such a short time.

Conclusions

The fact that Turkey can bargain its vote in NATO, invest considerably in the defense industry, and revive revanchist discourses with the PKK does not have a linear logic. However, given the above, they are arguments that can be approximated to support a strategic positioning. It is also worth noting that although this apparent planning has fragile foundations, it can still generate positive externalities.

Turkey can launch itself more actively as a security provider in the Mediterranean region by paying more attention to the defense sector and intensifying its cooperative architectures (with other countries and/or international organizations). Although this region has been relegated to the sidelines with the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is still significantly problematic in the European Union's strategic environment. And focusing on greater control of migratory flows could also generate greater political capital for integration into the organization.

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Allan Antunes (InterAgency Institute, Affiliate): Master Candidate in Maritime Studies (PPGEM/EGN) and Bachelor in International Affairs, allanc.freitas@gmail.com

Carolina Ambinder (InterAgency Institute, Researcher): PhD Candidate in Strategic Studies at PPGEST/UFF, MSc in Maritime Studies at PPGEM/EGN. carolina.ambinder@interagency.institute

João Pedro Mendonça (UniLaSalle-RJ): joaomendonca@soulasalle.com.br

[1] Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) was Turkey's first president, who founded the republican system based on a military revolutionary process between 1919 and 1923.

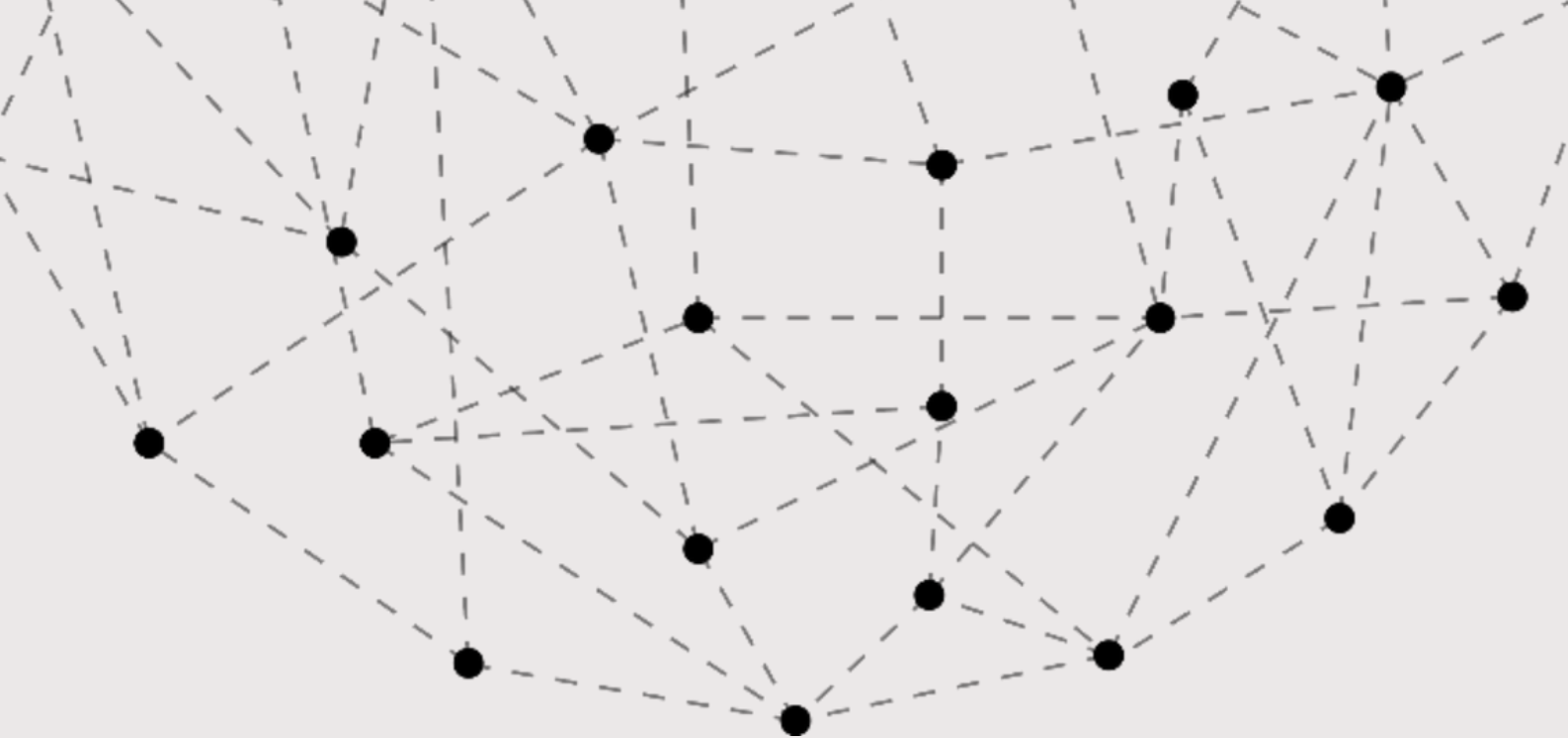
[2] The Kurds are considered the largest stateless nation in the population (Gunter, 2004: 197; Foundation-Institut Kurde de Paris, 2017). Between 36 and 45 million Kurds live in the diaspora - the majority of whom reside in Turkey, with some 20 million inhabitants or 25 percent of the country's total population (CIA, [n.d.]). They are mostly persecuted in the countries where they live because they represent a "state within a state" since they don't tend to renounce their Kurdish identity. The conflicts between Turks and Kurds, however, originated in the 1920s. The national disintegration agreements that ended the Ottoman Empire it was intended to create a Kurdish state, "Kurdistan," in territory that currently comprises parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Armenia, and Turkey itself. However, this was prevented by the Turkish-initiated Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Prevented from exercising their identity in favor of a project of national cohesion in Turkey that accompanied the drafting of the first republican constitution, the Kurds began nationalist rebellions. Among the most representative organizations of this movement is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

[3] In addition to the polysemy and subjectivity that surrounds the concept of "terrorism," calling it the PKK has a series of inconsistencies, such as unduly associating the organization with Kurdish identity itself and not being an organization with significant paramilitary capabilities to the point of posing a threat to NATO countries - especially in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

[4] Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/26/world/europe/sweden-nato-turkey-fighter-jets.html>>. Accessed September 2023.

[5] In addition to the destabilization caused by the earthquake this year, the country has been one of the main routes for immigrants seeking to enter Europe as asylum seekers for over a decade.

[6] Available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkiye-report-2022_en>. Accessed September 2023.



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