



March 2021

# A Dual Framework for the Turkey-U.S. Security Relationship

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## Summary

This paper identifies key elements of a potential new strategic framework for the security relationship between Turkey and the United States. Despite both being NATO members, their relationship is increasingly transactional, with shared interests on some issues, potential for convergence on others, and substantial disagreement on quite a few. Four problems breed their widening strategic divergence: an obsolete framework for governing the relationship, a trust deficit, weakened institutional ownership, and weakened popular support.

Some have suggested a reset based on a grand bargain to resolve the different disputes between Turkey and the United States. However, this is unrealistic because disagreement over issues is the symptom rather than the cause of their strategic divergence. Moreover, the purely transactional approach that has emerged and been recommended recently cannot provide a sustainable framework either. Others argue for a decoupling. However, this would have sustained consequences for both countries as it would be highly difficult for either to find a substitute for their current security relationship.

The main challenge facing Turkey and the United States is to find a new modus operandi between the old strategic partnership framework and pure transactionalism. Doing so will avoid mutually hurting collisions, minimize costs, and prevent negative spillovers of issue-based divergence to the treaty-based NATO alliance that should remain the core of their relationship.

This paper proposes a dual framework that introduces “structured transactionalism”—a flexible yet institutionalized form of bilateral engagement—to supplement the NATO core of the U.S.-Turkish security relationship by offering fresh perspective to manage specific policy issues. This may provide a better foundation for the United States to elicit Turkey’s cooperation while accommodating its quest for strategic autonomy. Likewise, the continuation of some form of multilateral, long-term commitment on a more flexible platform would serve Turkey’s secu-

rity interests better as it needs coalitions to realize its interests.

Under the proposed dual framework, the core of the Turkey-U.S. security relationship will continue to function through the existing strategic partnership within NATO. At the nucleus of the core is the Article 5 collective-defense commitment. Moreover, there are also core issues such as defense planning that are directly tied to NATO’s main competences as well as other issues the allies agree collectively to govern within NATO framework. The Article 5 nucleus needs to be kept free from policy contestation. Beyond it, Turkey and the United States may experience convergence, divergence, or negotiation on issues belonging to the core, which will be managed within NATO framework.

The issues in the Turkey-U.S. security relationship can be examined in two distinct dimensions to map out where each falls in current practice. Different issues may produce unique challenges based on their specific position in this classification, and the framework is useful for seeking ways to approach them.

**Governance Framework:** Issues can be classified based on whether they fall within the core or secondary area of the relationship. Those deemed to fall into the NATO core can still be managed through the strategic partnership, while those in the secondary area can be managed by structured transactionalism. There are also “issues in-between” on which the two countries disagree about whether they fall within the core or outside it.

**Policy contestation:** Depending on where the two countries stand on a specific issue, there arise different degrees of policy contestation. This leads to the presence of areas of convergence—where they largely agree on, areas of negotiation—where they have some differences despite overall agreement, and areas of divergence—where they deeply disagree.

A large part of the agenda between Turkey and the United States will continue to involve issues outside of NATO’s remit. These “secondary issues” could be

governed through structured transactionalism with the following objectives in mind. With regard to secondary issues falling into the areas of convergence, Turkey and the United States should continue to cooperate, and use this to demonstrate how a cooperative approach provides benefits to both. With regard to the secondary issues falling into areas of negotiation, they should cooperate as much as they can and continue to negotiate to bridge their remaining differences so that some can be moved to the areas of convergence. Finally, with regard to issues falling into the areas of divergence, the two countries should focus on crisis-prevention mechanisms to avoid collisions that could make cooperation on other issues more difficult.

### Policy Recommendations

**Introduce regular strategic reviews:** Turkey and the United States should craft mechanisms of consultation and policy coordination before the outbreak of crises. This would provide more resilient, effective, and prompt crisis-response capability as well as the flexibility needed for ad hoc security cooperation on various issues.

**Revisit the institutional ownership:** Turkey and the United States should review the relevant policymaking mechanisms, starting from the presidential offices and foreign policy apparatus and expanding toward defense and security agencies, and eventually other

stakeholders to develop a robust institutional mechanism. The legislative bodies should also be involved.

**Invest in confidence-building measures:** Turkey and the United States should invest in confidence-building measures and revisit the overreliance on coercive diplomacy against each other. They should focus on defense industry cooperation.

**Cooperate where possible, fix what is fixable, and manage divergence:** Turkey and the United States should adopt a more realistic approach to manage issues based on different modalities applied to different ones instead of a “one size fits all” formula.

**Coordinate engagement with third parties:** Turkey and the United States should rethink ways to manage their engagements with third parties, in view of how the use of proxies has become a new normal in Turkey’s security environment.

**Watch overlapping contentions:** Turkey and the United States should beware the issues where they disagree substantively and also contest over whether issues belong to the core of their relationship or are secondary, lest these turn into make-or-break issues. While the United States and Turkey need to manage their divergences on secondary issues, the current S-400 crisis is a make-or-break test and it would be hard to manage it within any framework. Until both countries make a genuine commitment to the alliance and help address it within such a spirit, it will remain as a toxic issue.

## Introduction

The security relationship between Turkey and the United States has never had a golden age. Since its inception in the 1950s following the Truman Doctrine's promise of support against authoritarianism and Turkey joining NATO in 1952, the partnership has been important for both countries due to their shared interests on a significant number of issues. Yet, it has also been strained due to their differences in strategic culture and perceptions. More often than not, the relationship has been in crisis-management mode. Crises were somewhat easier to manage during the Cold War. There was a shared threat perception and Turkey conducted a foreign policy that accepted the inherent power asymmetry in its relationship with the United States in return for reassurance against Soviet expansionism. The end of the Cold War changed the dynamics of the relationship fundamentally. Despite the two countries being members of NATO, their relationship today is increasingly transactional, based on shared interests on some issues, potential for convergence on others, and significant divergence on quite a few.

Four problems stand out at the heart of the current crises bedeviling the U.S.-Turkey security relationship.

First, the framework for cooperation based on the strategic partnership within NATO formed during the Cold War no longer fits the complexity of the relationship today.

Second, important policy divergences have created a trust deficit. This has been particularly aggravated by the perceptions each country has about the other. Although Turkey harbors many suspicions toward the United States, three are most prevalent. First, Washington's partnership with the Democratic Union Party-People's Protection Units (PYD-YPG) in Syria, which Turkey treats as an offshoot of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), drives Ankara's perception that Washington could be hostile to Turkey's vital interests. The perception of U.S. interference in Turkish politics is another source of suspicion, which was worsened by the U.S. failure to comply with Turkey's demands to extradite members

of the Gülenist network charged for their involvement in the coup attempt of 2016. Unlike Turkey, the United States has not designated this group as a terror organization and has rejected Ankara's extradition demands on grounds of lack of sufficient evidence. Third, Turkey doubts the reliability of the United States as a security partner, which is directly related to Washington's perceived disregard of Turkish priorities on issues of vital interest. In that respect, the imposition of sanctions over Turkey's purchase of Russian missile systems as well as other defense-industry conflicts, in which Congress has played a role, is breeding suspicions in Turkey.

### *Whether or not the perceptions behind their mutual mistrust are completely accurate, they shape policies.*

There is distrust on the U.S. side as well. The most deep-rooted concern is whether Turkey is a reliable ally. Turkey's independent stance and reluctance to assist the United States in the Gulf War in 1990, the Iraq War in 2003, and the global coalition against ISIS in 2014 left the United States feeling unsupported. Moreover, Turkey's regional policies, including its rapprochement with Russia, raise suspicions that Ankara could act against U.S. interests. There is also the perception that Turkey pursues an ideological foreign policy, which would create security challenges for the United States and its allies such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies.

Of all these contested issues, arms-procurement has been one of the main drivers of divergence and mistrust. While the United States questions Turkey's recent acquisition of S-400 missile system from Russia, Turkey argues that the United States has always been a difficult and reluctant defense supplier, including in the case of air-defense systems.

Whether or not the perceptions behind their mutual mistrust are completely accurate, they shape policies on both sides.

Third, erosion of institutional ownership has weakened elite support for the relationship today. Under

the Cold War strategic partnership framework, the relationship was mainly managed by the two countries' security-military establishments and some political constituencies. However, the new strategic reality has weakened the institutional ownership and led to the erosion of elite support for the relationship. In its better days, there was a network of individuals in the United States and in Turkey who would defend the relationship during crises. Today, Turkey has few friends in Washington, the United States has few friends in Turkey, and those who still value the relationship are in a spiral of silence.

Fourth, popular support for the relationship in both countries is waning as well. The relationship with the United States has been gradually losing its natural constituencies in Turkey as the public sees itself surrounded by enemies.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, there has been a gradual increase in criticism of Turkey in the U.S. domestic context; for example, during his election campaign Joe Biden said he was “very concerned” about President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and that the United States should support opposition leadership.<sup>2</sup> The negative public image of Turkey has contributed to Congress taking an adversarial position toward Ankara in recent years.

### *New Strategic Framework Needed*

The fact that the two countries have are expending a great deal of energy on managing their crises demonstrates that the Turkey-U.S. security relationship today is not well served by its Cold War framework. The debate on sanctions epitomizes the poor state of the relationship. Several attempts to reset ties and build a

relationship on a new foundation, such as the “model partnership” envisaged during the Obama administration, have failed. Today, experts and policymakers still look for a new definition and beginning for the relationship.

Domestic and systemic transformations have forged a new normal and bred strategic divergence. The two countries no longer view their engagement as a deliberate grand strategic choice, embedded in a shared normative fabric and multilateral institutions. Rather, the major impetus to sustain the relationship comes from convergence on certain issues directly related to Turkey's need for security reassurance on the one hand and its geopolitical value to the United States on the other. Despite the absence of a grand strategic choice, the rationale behind the Cold War era strategic relationship remains relevant—the geostrategic value of Turkey for the United States' security interests justifying U.S. security reassurance to Turkey. Despite all the challenges, both seem willing to sustain cooperation at the heart of the relationship based on collective territorial defense, as encapsulated in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and the issues that fall within the wider remit of NATO, while maintaining bilateral engagement on issues that fall outside of the remit of NATO.

### *The Way Forward*

There has been an unfolding debate as to how to address the strategic divergence between Turkey and the United States. Some have suggested that the start of a new U.S. administration is a good moment for a reset based on a grand bargain to resolve all the disputes between the two countries. However, this is unrealistic because their disagreements on different issues are the symptom rather than the cause of the widening strategic divergence. Yet, the opposite track, a purely transactional approach that has emerged and been recommended recently cannot provide a sustainable framework either.

Others argue that maybe it is time for Turkey and the United States to decouple. While this sounds easy and attractive to some, it would carry a cost for

1 A recent survey conducted by The German Marshall Fund of the United States and İstanbul Bilgi University Center for Migration Research showed that only 4 percent of Turks said they regard the United States as Turkey's most important partner and 48 percent as the biggest threat to Turkey. Strategies and Tools for Mitigating Polarization in Turkey Project (TurkuazLab), “[Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey 2020](#),” German Marshall Fund of the United States and İstanbul Bilgi University Center for Migration Research.

2 Jonathan Spicer, “[Turkey Slams Biden's Past Call for U.S. to Back Erdogan Opponents](#),” Reuters, August 15, 2020.

both as it would be unlikely that either could find a substitute for their current security relationship. The United States does not have any other partner in Turkey's neighborhood with the same capacity to shape regional developments, let alone with the same geopolitical significance. While the United States could perhaps reach most of its foreign policy goals in the region without Turkey's support, this would be at a much greater cost. As for Turkey, while it has enjoyed forging new relationships with Russia and other partners at the expense of ties to the United States, these other powers will hardly be a substitute as they have neither the capacity for nor the interest in such a role.

Thus a new framework is needed. Neither holding to the old strategic partnership framework alone, nor adopting a purely transactional approach can provide a sustainable path. The challenge is to agree on a new framework within which Turkey and the United States will be able to develop ways to work in agreement and manage disagreement. This paper lays out a dual framework in which the strategic partnership within NATO is supplemented by what we call "structured transactionalism"—a flexible yet institutionalized form of bilateral engagement on certain issues. Combined with fresh thinking about specific policy issues, such a framework can offer a viable way forward to manage strategic engagement between the two countries.

### **The Blueprint for a Dual Framework**

The need for a new *modus operandi* between the old strategic partnership framework and pure transactionalism is grounded in two interrelated trends in Turkey-U.S. security relationship: the erosion of the strategic partnership framework and a move toward transactional relations.

#### *New Strategic Landscape*

The most important factors that have rendered the strategic partnership framework obsolete are systemic power shifts and the deep transformation that has taken place in Turkey's domestic scene and regional policies. Together, these have forged a new normal of

strategic divergence. The current reality speaks against trying to recreate the strategic partnership framework inherited from the Cold War as the sole one for the Turkey-U.S. security relationship. This would be transformationalist and interventionist, and it would require that both countries agree on a shared, long-term strategic vision, and certain role definitions. This would assume Turkey's performance of a specific role, such as acting as a moderate Islamic country or as a "bridge between East and West." If Turkey does not fit its role, the United States would try to make it fit, either by re-anchoring it in the West, reinstating it as a role model in its neighborhood or by reengaging with its domestic politics. In the past such attempts have failed and only added to tensions.

As much as the Biden administration is willing to bring U.S. leadership back, Washington's ability to influence the trajectory of other countries is limited. Reasserting a new world order centered on its leadership will hardly be easy and may not be possible. Recent polling suggests the U.S. public remains committed to a policy of engagement in the world, but it is hesitant to get involved in "endless" wars.<sup>3</sup> However, international support for U.S. global leadership has been declining in recent years as well.<sup>4</sup> In any case, the United States' role in the world remains highly contested.<sup>5</sup> Amid arguments about retrenchment, rebalancing, offshore balancing, decline of primacy, liberal internationalism, or patriotism, what allies such as Turkey see is deep structural uncertainty about the U.S. grand strategy and an inability to make credible commitments. Certainly, in Turkey's neighborhood Washington has been unwilling or unable to revive a U.S.-centered order.

Turkey's domestic and international realities have also weakened the fundamentals of the security

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3 Dina Smeltz et al., [2020 Chicago Council Survey](#), The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 17, 2020.

4 Sintia Radu, "[The World Continues to Disapprove of America's Leadership](#)," U.S. News and World Report, February 28, 2019.

5 Ronald O'Rourke, [U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress](#), Congressional Research Service, January 19, 2021.

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relationship. Harboring a regionally driven understanding of international relations, it has opted to base its external conduct on the quest for strategic autonomy. A desire to readjust to global power transitions also lurks in the background. Moreover, the worldview of Turkey's leadership drives a deliberate attempt to challenge the power asymmetry with the United States. Furthermore, the cycle of insecurity following the Arab Spring overwhelmed Turkey's strategic thinking to such a degree that concerns for state and regime survival came to the forefront. Meanwhile, its domestic trajectory has been characterized by such wide-ranging social and political transformations that its strategic elite no longer sees the country's future as being fully embedded within a Western ideational order. Without the Cold War order common strategic cause and shared threat perception, Turkey's domestic trajectory and the course of its democracy has emerged as a further point of contention in the relationship.

Without a functional strategic framework, relations have moved toward one-off, tit-for-tat deal making.

### *The Problems with Transactionalism*

Downscaling the Turkey-U.S. security relationship to nothing more than transactionalism is not an option. Many objections can be raised against transactionalism—fundamentally it means conducting foreign policy on narrowly defined national interests and through pragmatic and reciprocal exchanges based on short-term concerns centered around power calculus, rather than a long-term strategic vision or shared normative framework. This is anathema for two countries that are in an institutionalized relationship and a values-based alliance since it prioritizes bilateralism over multilateralism, weakens the importance of shared norms, and involves a short-term, zero-sum approach. Moreover, to the extent that it caters to populism, transactionalism leaves ties between countries hostage to the domestic political calculus of leaders, which may further drive short-termism and undermine normative foundations.

A purely transactional approach would seem incompatible with the fact that U.S.-Turkey engagement is structured around the treaty-based NATO alliance. Shortcomings of transactionalism for the two countries have been widely discussed. First, Turkey and the United States are still NATO allies and they are likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. Although transactionalism is mostly offered as a short-term measure to prevent further deterioration in the relationship, it could turn into a permanent operating mode, undermining the remaining elements and, eventually, the NATO core of their relationship. It may also reduce their bilateral engagement to a tactical defense entente. Furthermore, pure transactionalism whereby they engage in ad hoc cooperation only on certain issues may eventually end up being costlier when it comes to delivering the same security benefits than what is currently offered to both countries by the alliance.

***Without a functional strategic framework, relations have moved toward one-off, tit-for-tat deal making.***

However, some elements of transactionalism can be useful. President Donald Trump's approach to foreign policy has loaded the concept of transactionalism with negative connotations. It came to be identified as inherently unpredictable and unstable, as completely disregarding any institutionalized interaction, and as rejection of any global leadership role and passing off risks to others. But flexibility, deal-making, issue-based cooperation, and pragmatism are part of a classical Realpolitik foreign policy. While the administration of President Joe Biden has taken office calling for multilateralism and restoring alliances and partnerships, there is nothing to suggest that it would disregard a pragmatic approach to foreign policy with elements of transactionalism as long as it is structured within an institutional framework. This pragmatism was reflected during the call between U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Ibrahim Kalin, the

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spokesperson and chief advisor to President Erdoğan. Sullivan spoke of the administration's "desire to build constructive U.S.-Turkey ties, expanding areas of cooperation and managing disagreements effectively."<sup>6</sup>

Most on both sides would agree that neither country benefits from the current dysfunctional situation, which has trapped them in a suboptimal outcome. The U.S. strategic community is keen to maintain a deeper security engagement with Turkey, given the many areas of convergence with it and the critical role it plays in various issues or regions. Despite its skepticism about the United States and lingering anti-Americanism, the Turkish public and security elite wants to see the continuation of extended security ties. It perceives the relationship in purely defense-military terms and disregards its normative dimension.<sup>7</sup> The expert community has also identified the necessity to sustain such security engagement.<sup>8</sup>

Given all this, a dual framework based on elements of both is needed. We propose "structured transactionalism"—institutionalized bilateral cooperation based on pragmatic and flexible foundations alongside a vision of long-term commitments—to supplement the NATO core of their security relationship.

As conceived here, structured transactionalism could help allay some of the concerns raised above. Talk of restoring the alliance or resetting the relationship may sound good but, unless based on a realistic framework, it is likely to face the same fate as similar initiatives in recent decades. Structured transactionalism within a dual framework may provide a better foundation for the United States to elicit Turkey's cooperation while accommodating its quest for strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the continuation of some form of multilateral, long-term commitment within a more flexible framework would serve Turkey's security interests better. Strategic autonomy does not mean going it alone, and Ankara needs to bolster its capacity with issue-based coalitions to realize its interests. In the final analysis, this may act as a major restraint on Turkey's understanding of its autonomy. A dual framework incorporating structured transactionalism would be viable if Turkey assumes all the risks involved in an independent course and understands that the United States may, when Ankara goes it alone, not act as the final provider of its security.

### *The Case for Structured Transactionalism*

The case for structured transactionalism rests on three interrelated arguments.

First, it is already upon us. The era of the strategic partnership framework that went beyond a simple defense entente is long gone. Erosion of its normative foundations and changes in the structural parameters of the relationship have been the reality of the post-Cold War era. And elements of transactionalism had already been introduced even before the rise of populism in both countries' domestic and foreign policy.

Second, structured transactionalism fits an international security environment in transition. The challenge of finding a new framework for relations with allies is hardly a problem that pertains to the Turkey-U.S. relationship only. The United States is in need of rethinking its security cooperation with various long-standing allies not only in Europe but also in Asia and elsewhere. Turkey has also been in need of rethinking its strategic relationships as it has ventured into new partnerships with Russia, Iran, Qatar, and other countries. Recent strategic discussions have centered on the return of power politics, including whether this is a new era of great-power competition. In this new setting, old alliance relations have been going through a redefinition chiefly because of the changing threat perceptions of different countries, including within the transatlantic community. In recent decades, there has also been growing resort

6 The White House, "[Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with Ibrahim Kalin, Spokesperson and Chief Advisor to the President of Turkey](#)," February 2, 2021.

7 Kadir Has University, [Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions Survey - 2020](#), April 2020.

8 As part of this research project, a Delphi study and a policy workshop were carried out. In both, the participants highlighted the need to invest in security cooperation.



to “coalitions of the willing” to manage the challenges posed by NATO’s foray into out-of-area operations.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, concerns over the United States’ reliability and commitment have already forced many of its allies and partners around the world to develop more independent security and defense policies. The European quest for strategic autonomy is only one manifestation of this trend, which is redefining the nature of the security relationships between the United States and its European allies. Today, a main challenge for Washington is to develop an effective alliance management model that advances its security interests while allaying the concerns of its allies and partners by taking into account their own security needs and priorities.<sup>10</sup>

***The relationship remains embedded within a complex network in the economic, cultural, trade, and political fields.***

Third, structured transactionalism may provide the flexibility needed to manage some of the current challenges the transatlantic alliance is facing. It may offer a less complicated way to attend to the bilateral problems in the U.S.-Turkey security relationship outside NATO mechanisms. Moreover, it may allow for compartmentalization, considering how issue-based divergence has become a reality of the relationship. As such, the dual approach may also contribute to alliance cohesion, which is already under pressure from disagreements over several internal challenges. For example, it has been difficult for the United States to pursue uniform relations with its European allies, as was reflected in the Libya crisis in 2011. To the

extent that structured transactionalism could address issues contested among NATO members outside the alliance’s mechanisms, it might also help preserve its cohesion.

***The Outline of a Dual Framework***

The Turkish-U.S. security relationship is based on long-term foundations forged around a multitude of institutional mechanisms. However, weakened those foundations are due to their strategic divergence of recent decades, the relationship remains embedded within a complex network in the economic, cultural, trade, and political fields.

The core of the relationship is the NATO alliance, which consists of the nucleus of the Article 5 collective-defense commitment, the wider NATO main competences such as defense planning, as well as other “outer core” issues the allies agree collectively to govern within the NATO framework, such as the operations in Afghanistan. The secondary area of the relationship lies outside of NATO’s remit, where the two countries come into contact in various bilateral or multilateral settings. Structured transactionalism would take on this secondary area. It would not replace but supplement the strategic partnership that would remain the core of the relationship. It does not exclude multilateralism altogether or reject a rules-based institutional framework.

As elaborated below, structured transactionalism can better guide U.S.-Turkey interactions in the secondary area to avoid mutually hurting collisions, minimize costs, and prevent negative spillovers to the treaty-based core of the relationship. The objective is to make sure that their engagement in the secondary area is not based on a short-term, zero-sum mentality. This can be realized by striking the right balance between flexible and ad hoc behavior in the short term and sustaining joint interest in shared strategic objectives in the long term. Therefore, Turkey and the United States should maintain a vision of long-term commitments and institutionalized bilateral cooperation in the secondary area, which would otherwise be subject to short-term thinking and pure transaction-

9 Sophie Arts and Steven Keil, [Flexible Security Arrangements and the Future of NATO Partnerships](#), The German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 16, 2021.

10 Emma Bates, Samuel Brannen, and Alexander Kaplan, [Global Security Forum 2020: A New Era for U.S. Alliances](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies, December 14, 2020, and [Karl Friedhoff, Democrats, Republicans Support Alliances, Disagree on International Organizations](#), The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, January 26, 2021.

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alism. This does not foreclose the possibility of moving beyond bilateralism to address these challenges—they could resort to structured transactionalism with regard to each other while at the same participating in issue-based small groupings with other concerned allies where possible.

### **Rethinking Issues in a Dual Framework**

The agenda of the U.S.-Turkey security relationship has widened in the post-Cold War era as a result of fluidity in the regional and international systems, transformations in the foreign policy orientations of the two countries, and the rise of new security challenges. While NATO members opted to address some of these within the context of the alliance, when it came to other ones they acted outside it, unilaterally or in concert with other partners. Sometimes disagreements among members have prevented the incorporation of certain issues into NATO's remit, which effectively left them to be managed through outside mechanisms.

*The relationship has been overburdened by crises stemming from policy differences and interest divergence.*

The relationship has been overburdened by crises stemming from policy differences and interest divergence on issues ranging from the Libya crisis in North Africa to recent tensions over hydrocarbon explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Syrian conflict in the Levant. The United States' partnerships with unconventional actors in those regions has also pitted it against Turkey, which considers some of them as direct challengers, if not existential threats, to its core security interests. In a similar fashion, the United States feels that Turkey's engagement or cooperation with different state and non-state actors in the Middle East and North Africa undermines its security interests or those of some U.S. allies. The result has been erosion of trust, further exacerbated by mutual suspicions over intentions. Furthermore, although Turkey

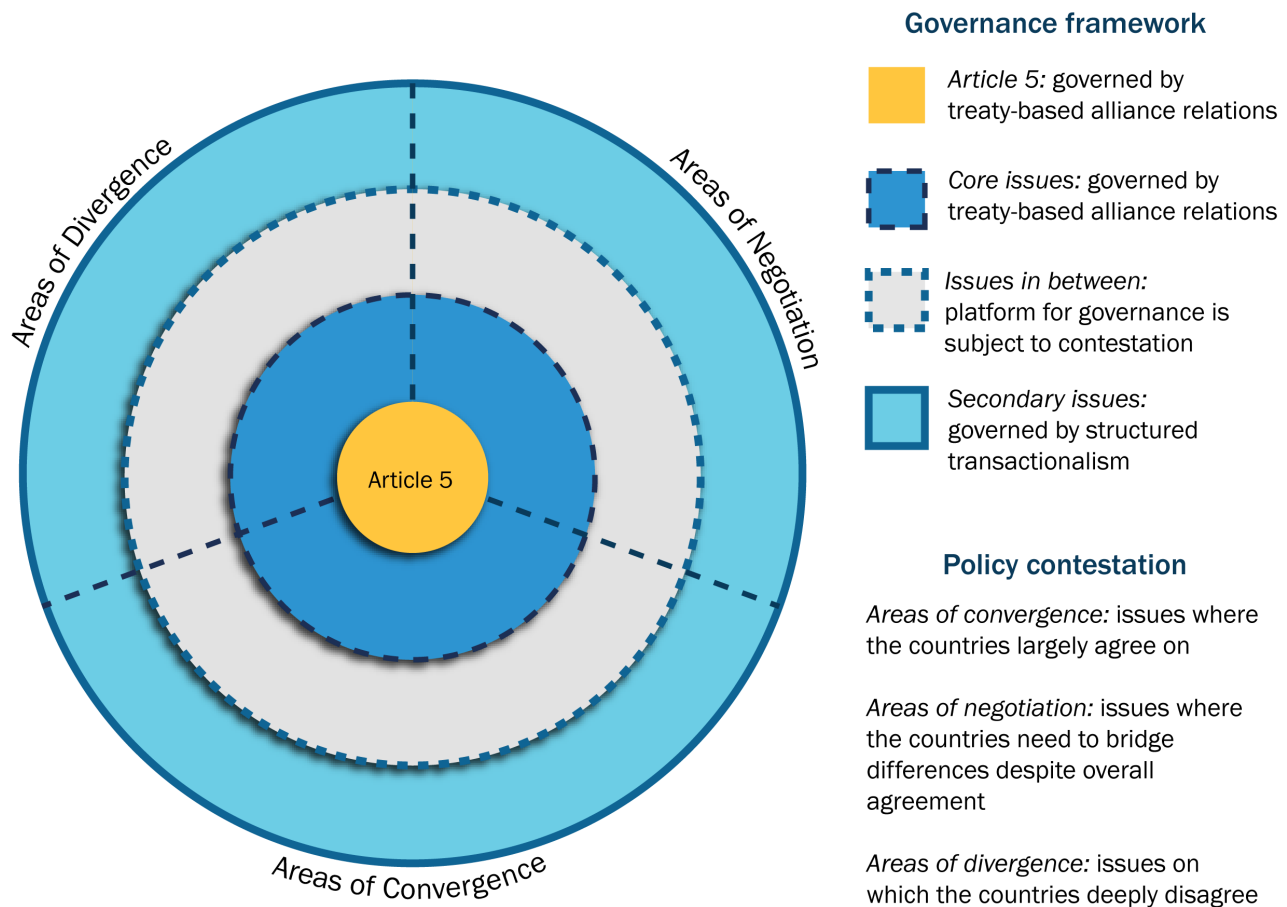
increasingly views these issues as the main focus of its foreign policy, most of them fall outside the NATO core of its relationship with the United States; hence there is no institutionalized, treaty-based framework for the relationship with regard to these issues. Thus, the main source of tensions in the relationship are actually "out of area" engagements from the NATO perspective.

To add a further complication, there has been disagreement over what is a NATO issue and what is not, as well as other questions raised by this disagreement. This situation poses two challenges for policy coordination and crisis management for the two countries. First, how can they agree whether an issue belongs to the NATO-core of the relationship or is "out of area"? Second, what would be the best way to deal with "out of area" issues?

Even during the Cold War, there was always some ambiguity regarding the alliance's commitments to Turkey since it was not originally designed to address primarily the challenges in the country's security environment, especially those emanating from the "south." In the evolving post-Cold War security environment, this demarcation has been further blurred. For instance, NATO has stepped into new areas to respond to conventional and evolving threats. Moreover, considering that the Turkey-U.S. relationship is essentially that between a global power and a regional power, divergence in their interests, threat perceptions, and priorities is inevitable. For instance, Turkey has preferred to see Russia's growing assertiveness in Eurasia and more recently in the Middle East and North Africa as falling outside NATO's remit. Meanwhile the United States wanted to see Turkey act in line with the alliance's positions on these issues, particularly in Eastern Europe. These challenges have exerted enormous pressure on the Turkey-U.S. security relationship in recent years. The two countries have at times employed several bilateral channels including issue-based task forces to manage such divergence in recent years, with mixed track record.

On the uncertainty over which platform is best suited to handle policy divergence in "out of area"

**Figure 1. Classification of issues**



issues, one alternative would be to keep them within NATO. Indeed, in many crises it has faced in the Middle East, Turkey has tried to discuss matters within traditional NATO mechanisms, especially considering the Article 4 consultation process, under which members can bring all issues of concern affecting their security to the attention of the alliance. However, Turkey-U.S. grievances over contested issues have occasionally played out on the NATO stage, threatening alliance cohesion. Therefore, considering the risk of negative spillover and the declining relevance of the alliance as the sole reference point in an age of flexible security relationships, it is best to move those issues out of NATO. A dual framework that includes structured transactionalism may offer a better way to manage some contested issues outside NATO.

### *Classifying Issues by Governance Framework and Policy Contestation*

The issues in the Turkey-U.S. security relationship can be examined in two distinct dimensions. The classification here provides a compass that can be used for analytical purposes to map out where issues fall in the current practice. It does not seek to solve the problem of whether an issue is or should be a core or secondary issue—this is a policy question that the countries themselves must decide, likely case by case. As explored below, depending on their specific position on this classification, different issues may produce unique challenges. Hence, they need to be handled with specific considerations in mind. The framework is useful in the sense of proposing ways to approach those specific issues.

*Governance framework:* Issues can be classified based on whether they fall within the core or secondary areas of the relations. Issues that are deemed to fall into the NATO core can still be managed through the strategic partnership, while those in the secondary area can be managed by structured transactionalism. There are also “issues in between” on which the two countries disagree about whether they fall within the core or outside. Hence, where these issues will be governed will be a matter of contention.

*Policy contestation:* Depending on where the two countries stand on a specific issue, there arise different degrees of policy contestation. This leads to the presence of areas of convergence—where they largely agree on, areas of negotiation—where they have some differences despite overall agreement, and areas of divergence—where they deeply disagree.

### *The NATO Strategic Partnership in the Core*

Under a dual framework, the core of the Turkey-U.S. security relationship will continue to be managed through the two components of the existing strategic partnership within NATO: the Article 5 nucleus of territorial defense and those issues that allies collectively agree to bring within the wider remit of NATO.

The Article 5 nucleus needs to be kept free from policy contestation. Beyond the Article 5, Turkey and the United States may experience patterns of convergence, divergence, or negotiation on issues belonging to the core NATO remit, but they will continue to manage this policy contestation based on alliance mechanisms, norms, and values. This would include contingencies such as the current NATO mission in the Black Sea and evolving operations and missions, such as Resolute Support in Afghanistan or the Kosovo Force.

### *Structured Transactionalism on Secondary Issues*

A large part of the agenda between Turkey and the United States will continue to involve issues that fall outside the NATO core of their relationship. These

secondary issues will also be divided across areas of convergence, of negotiation, or of divergence.

**Areas of convergence:** This includes secondary issues that Turkey and the United States largely agree on. Cooperation in Syria against ISIS and the Assad regime, leaving aside the differences over engagement with the country’s Kurdish groups, and in Central Asia fall into this category. Although being NATO allies makes it easier for them to cooperate on these issues, this will remain most likely within a bilateral framework to be shaped according to their respective interests. Sometimes, managing these issues may also gain a multilateral character, as in the case of the “coalitions of the willing” the United States has launched to manage certain issues such as combating terrorism. The two countries should continue to cooperate on these issues and use them to demonstrate how a cooperative approach provides benefits to both.

**Areas of negotiation:** This includes secondary issues on which Turkey and the United States broadly agree but also have differences that need to be bridged. Currently, most issues on their common agenda fall into this category. Iran is one example. The United States sees it as an adversary and treats it as such, using a wide range of tools including sanctions, intelligence operations, and military instruments. Turkey sees Iran as a regional competitor but not as an adversary. Turkey wants to see it contained but is against military options. Another example is Iraq. Turkey and the United States aim at keeping the country stable, secure, and independent from Iranian influence, but they have differences regarding power-sharing between the Iraqi national government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). A further example is the South Caucasus. Turkey and the United States support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states in the region and their potential integration in NATO. However, they have disagreements on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On all these issues, Turkey and the United States should cooperate as much as they can and continue to negotiate to bridge their remaining

differences so that some can be moved to the areas of convergence category.

**Areas of divergence:** This includes secondary issues on which Turkey and the United States disagree and are most likely to continue to disagree in the foreseeable future. The issue of the armed Kurdish non-state actors is one example. The United States has supported autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds while Turkey was concerned that this would lead to Kurdish independence and destabilize the region. While Turkey did establish close ties with the KRG, it remains vigilant to prevent it from declaring independence. The United States also supports the PYD-YPG in Syria, which Turkey treats as an offshoot of the PKK, which is also designated by the United States as a terrorist organization. The United States is very likely to continue its partnership with armed Kurdish non-state actors in the region, while Turkey is likely to try to prevent them from increasing their capacity or gaining territorial control. While cooperation on these issues is not possible, crisis-prevention mechanisms are required to avoid collisions that could make cooperation on other issues more difficult.

## Conclusion

There are serious structural problems in the Turkey-U.S. security relationship, including issue-based divergence, mutual suspicion, and on both sides disengagement by the relationship's core constituency and negative public attitudes. Nonetheless, the way ahead is neither decoupling nor a reset based on a grand bargain over issues.

Those on both sides calling for decoupling point out to the erosion of the core NATO relationship as the main driver of strategic divergence. However, the United States is also facing the erosion of conventional security relationships and having to redefine its alliances with many countries, not just Turkey. To support upholding the treaty-based NATO alliance is not to say that it is set in stone. Indeed, the values underpinning it are under constant pressure. Nonetheless, the redefinition of the normative dimension of the treaty-based relationship in the core as well as deciding who should

be the members of that alliance is an open-ended process that transcends the Turkey-U.S. relationship. The future of the treaty-based relationship will be shaped by the overall evolution of the dynamics within the U.S.-led global order in general, and the transatlantic security community in particular. This will be a result of the long-term strategic deliberations between Washington and European capitals including Ankara. As a matter of fact, such a need has already been recognized and is underway, as reflected, for example, by the "NATO 360 degree" concept adapted at the Warsaw summit in 2016.

### *The way ahead is neither decoupling nor a reset based on a grand bargain over issues.*

Alternatively, calls for a reset downplay the need to find a suitable framework for the Turkey-U.S. security relationship against the background of strategic divergence. Underpinning the current negative picture is the lack of a comprehensive framework that takes into account new global and regional geopolitical realities as well as the domestic conditions of the two countries. Therefore, the challenge is agreeing on how to manage the patterns of convergence and divergence on specific issues, which requires coherent and determined effort by both countries.

The dual framework proposed here in which the core NATO strategic partnership between Turkey and the United States is supplemented with structured transactionalism on secondary issues can potentially alleviate mutual suspicions, generate institutional and elite ownership, and help identify confidence-building measures and ways for managing crises. Interactions on secondary issues being managed through structured transactionalism may allow creative and flexible compartmentalization that helps preserve the strategic nature of the relationship in the core area, and it may also leave open the possibility of moving these to the core in the future.

However, this can only be achieved if Turkey and the United States have a vision of long-term commit-

ment to institutionalized cooperation and are willing to invest in their relationship.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Below are some ideas that policymakers on both sides could consider for designing institutional foundations and tools to flesh out the dual framework proposed here. To the extent that such a framework can be operationalized, it may help avoid collisions, minimize costs, and prevent negative spillovers from secondary issues to the core of the relationship.

#### *Introduce Regular Strategic Reviews*

Turkey and the United States should invest in regular strategic reviews about their common challenges. Structured transactionalism cannot be casual and driven by crises; it needs to be based on functional mechanisms of consultation and policy coordination that are at work before crises arise. It would help address the deficit of trust while also providing more resilient, effective, and prompt crisis-response capability and a flexible structure for developing ad hoc security cooperation on various issues. Both countries possess this capability as part of NATO's existing mechanisms under Article 4. However, in recent years many rapidly evolving crises have dragged them into an escalation spiral and such NATO mechanisms have been of limited utility. Therefore, they should explore denser bilateral mechanisms, as opposed to relying on Article 4 consultations, to review current and evolving issues, with an eye to identify common threat perceptions and shared interests. It may also contribute to the identification of the most appropriate channels for handling such issues as well as ways to manage the patterns of convergence and divergence.

#### *Revisit the Institutional Ownership*

There is a need for genuine rethinking about the institutional foundations of the Turkey-U.S. security relationship—alliances need nurturing. Considering the erosion of the constituencies invested in the relationship and the questions surrounding its institutional ownership, both countries need to review their

relevant policymaking mechanisms, starting from the presidential offices and foreign policy apparatus and expanding toward defense and security agencies, and eventually other stakeholders. As the experience of recent years has shown, addressing institutional foundations is overdue and it is high time for a creative redesign of the various branches involved in the decision making and implementation of policies on both sides. In that regard, one urgent area is the identification of institutionalized crisis-management mechanisms as resorting to leader-to-leader channels might not always deliver. Other critical lessons learned, moreover, include the need to involve the legislative bodies in the policy process, including but not limited to enhanced interparliamentary exchanges. Well planned out parliamentary diplomacy initiatives may deepen mutual understanding and improve public support. Moreover, public opinion has also emerged as a major force affecting the dynamics of the relationship and it needs to be engaged on both sides. Public outreach campaigns might be also necessary, considering the collapse of the strategic constituencies.

#### *Invest in Confidence-building Measures*

Turkey and the United States will benefit from investing in confidence-building measures and from revisiting the overreliance on coercive diplomacy against each other. This may be particularly true in the defense and security field. It is ironic that in a relationship centered on collective defense, arms-procurement issues have been one of the main drivers of divergence and mistrust. Letting the situation in such a critical part of the partnership escalate into a crisis that triggered U.S. sanctions has left a very negative legacy. Defense-industry cooperation between the two countries may need to be revisited from the perspective of confidence building to address their respective concerns and security and defense needs. Another critical area is intelligence sharing. Though provision of actionable intelligence is already happening in the context of counterterrorism and specific crisis situations, it could be expanded on a more regular basis.

Positive steps in these areas are likely to help rebuild trust and strengthen solidarity.

### *Cooperate Where Possible, Fix What Is Fixable, and Manage Divergence*

A “one size fits all” formula for managing the issues that make up the Turkey-U.S. security relationship should be replaced by a more realistic approach based on different modalities applied to different ones. Turkey and the United States should continue to cooperate on issues in the convergence category, in the process demonstrating how a cooperative approach benefits them both. In the areas of negotiation, they should cooperate as much as they can and continue to negotiate to bridge their remaining differences so that some can be moved to the convergence category. Managing their differences in the areas of divergence should be a key concern. The two countries should not settle for just “agreeing to disagree.” They should instead consider developing special bilateral arrangements and mechanisms to manage their engagement on the issues in the areas of divergence and to prevent disagreements from escalating into crises that makes even transactional cooperation very difficult. As a first step, they could, for example, consider agreeing on demarcation lines beyond which they will not challenge each other’s sensitivities. The long-term goal should be to move as many issues as possible from the divergence and negotiation areas to that of convergence.

Furthermore, special attention needs to be placed on certain issues within the areas of category, considering their explosive nature. If not handled properly, the issue discussed below may turn into a make-or-break test for the Turkey-U.S. security relationship.

### *Coordinate Engagement with Third Parties*

The divergence of Turkey and the United States with regard to their engagement with third parties requires closer attention. Policy contestation has been largely

a product of the duality of each country’s regional engagements. As they interact with other regional actors on secondary issues, both are driven by mixed motivations. They have their own priorities and make commitments independent of a shared bilateral strategic vision. The challenges created by their engagement with third parties have been revealed most clearly by their involvement with non-state actors. As the use of proxies has become a new normal in Turkey’s security environment, both countries need to rethink how they will manage their engagements in proxy dynamics, with a view to minimize the cost to each other.

### *Watch Overlapping Contentions*

The most challenging issues will be those on which Turkey and the United States not only disagree substantively but also disagree on whether they belong to the core or secondary area. As these issues are likely to put the biggest stress on the future of the relationship, they will require particularly careful handling.

The outstanding dispute between the United States and Turkey over the latter’s acquisition of the S-400 missile system from Russia is such a double disagreement issue. While they are deeply divided in terms of the substance, their dispute also is rooted in identifying the proper platform for dealing with it. If such crises cannot be managed, they will poison all aspects of the relationship and push it to the point of collapse. The ideal situation would be for Turkey not to have S-400s and to instead acquire an air-defense system serving its needs that is integrated to NATO, as well as for Turkey to return to the F35 program. A genuine solution in that respect extends well beyond U.S.-Turkish relations and goes to the very heart of the meaning of the transatlantic alliance. Therefore, this crisis should serve as a reminder of the need for all NATO members to consider bringing defense procurement back to the core of the alliance with all that this entails, including in terms of burden sharing and technology transfers.

This work represents solely the opinion of the author and any opinion expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the institution to which the author is affiliated.

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This report was funded by a grant from the United States Embassy in Ankara. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

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