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A marriage on the rocks

Relations between NATO and Turkey have never been worse. It's time to fix that

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Turkey has been a member of NATO for 65 years. An iron-clad marriage, you could say. But iron is prone to rusting, and that's exactly what is happening to the relationship between NATO and Turkey. Turkey's membership of the North Atlantic alliance has never been free of controversy. Since the 1950s, hostilities between Turkey and Greece and between Turkey and the United States on the status of Cyprus have put a strain on relations. But the deterioration of the relationship between NATO and Turkey we are seeing now is different. It isn't about any one conflict, or a passing trend. Rather, it's all to do with the current political tide, which will not be easily turned. There are three main reasons why it has come to a head, four reasons why it is worth repairing the relationship, and five recommendations on how to do that.

Why it has come to a head

Gezi Park: To pinpoint precisely when relations between Turkey and the West started to sour, we have to go back four years. After a bomb attack in the Turkish province of Hatay, on the Syrian border, which claimed the lives of 52 people in May 2013, fears grew across Turkey that the country would be drawn into a fierce war against its neighbour. These fears were only exacerbated by the increasingly harsh line adopted by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the issue of Syria.

Amid this atmosphere, protests broke out at Gezi Park in the heart of Istanbul against the construction of a shopping centre, which soon turned into a movement expressing dissatisfaction with the government. The crowds were dispersed with force. The death of eight demonstrators and Erdoğan's unforgiving rhetoric split Turkish society, causing concern in Western countries. It was precisely this concern and the sympathy with the demonstrators that made Erdoğan feel 'the West' would be glad to see him fail, something he and his party, the AKP, fought back with a resounding win in the local and presidential elections the following year.

Failed military coup: Erdoğan's conviction that his NATO partners are against him and his AKP government gave a huge boost to the failed military coup in July 2016. In Turkey, it was perceived that Western politicians were condemning the harsh countermeasures taken by the government more than the actions of the rebels. The US government's decision not to extradite the alleged coup plotter, Fethullah Gülen, provoked as much outrage as when Turkish NATO officers under suspicion form Ankara were granted the chance to apply for asylum by some of Turkey's European NATO allies, in particular Germany. At the same time, the AKP government exploited the failed coup as an opportunity to restructure the armed forces, curb their power considerably, and replace sacked officers with less powerful soldiers.

Syrian crisis: Turkey is at loggerheads with its NATO partners, not least the US, on their Syria strategy. With the outbreak of the crisis in Syria in 2011, Ankara quickly moved to oppose the Assad regime, which had been an ally until that point, and put pressure on NATO given Turkey's position as a potential frontline state. Since 2012, the alliance's Patriot units have been stationed in Turkey to ward off potential rocket attacks from Syria. NATO Airborne Warning & Control System aircraft have been monitoring the airspace above the Turkish-Syrian border since December 2015, and over IS-held territory since October 2016.

Moreover, NATO as an institution does not want to see itself embroiled in the war in Syria. Turkey's initial reluctance to join the fight against ISIS until mid-2015 and the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet that year have given the impression that the country is becoming increasingly unpredictable.

The most important discrepancy in the strategy is the question of how to deal with the Kurds in northern Syria, who have proven themselves to be the most reliable partner of the US-led coalition against ISIS on the ground since 2014. The military successes achieved by Kurdish fighters, most recently in Rakka in October 2017, have also boosted their political self-confidence. Any increase in autonomy, in whatever form, in the three Kurdish-administered districts in northern Syria would be perceived as a substantial threat by Turkey, giving rise to fears that the struggle for autonomy could spread to the Kurdish part of Anatolia. Turkey feels that its concerns are not understood by its NATO partners and are even actively undermined by the US. This political deadlock inevitably affects NATO as an organisation.

Taking these three developments together, it would seem that the best way to overcome these tensions would be for Turkey and NATO to part ways. However, this would rob NATO of the value that Turkey brings to

the organisation, and vice versa.

Why it's better to stay together

Coherence: For an alliance providing reassurance and mutual defence like NATO, unity and mutual trust are essential, because they are the only way individual countries can be sure that others will come to their aid in times of crisis. This value – referred to within the alliance as coherence – arises under the assumption that only a single highly cohesive alliance can be fully effective and serve as a deterrent. Coherence can also conceal the differences between individual member states and underpin the different perceptions of what constitutes a threat, as we see time and time again with the eastern and southern partners of the alliance. If Turkey were to leave NATO, this fundamental value would be shattered. NATO would enter a period of uncertainty and realignment, which would weaken it, at least temporarily.

Geostrategy: Turkey's geostrategic location is of huge importance to the alliance. From a European perspective, Turkey is a monumental bridge to the Middle East, the Caucasus and, indirectly, to Central Asia. The Bosphorus is the maritime gateway to the Black Sea. The NATO Status of Forces Agreement regulates the relatively simple and unbureaucratic stationing of troops and weapons in other member states.

In addition to the headquarters for NATO land forces, there are also more strategically important NATO bases in Turkey. Like Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, Turkey does not have its own nuclear capability, but it is involved in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement whereby US tactical nuclear weapons are stationed in the country. If Turkey were to withdraw, NATO would either lose all the current and potential geostrategic benefits it enjoys as a result of Turkey's membership, or it would have to laboriously negotiate everything on a case-by-case basis.

Commitments: As of autumn 2017, NATO as an institution was engaged in three primary missions: Operation Resolute Support, the successor mission to ISAF in Afghanistan, which is gaining importance as the security situation is deteriorating in the country; KFOR, to preserve a secure environment in Kosovo; and Sea Guardian, to help maintain security in the Mediterranean. Turkey contributes to all three of these missions and even has the second largest force in the alliance after the United States, providing significant contingents. At present, there are more than 500 Turkish soldiers serving in Afghanistan and a good 300 deployed to Kosovo. This means the Turkish make up the sixth largest national contingent in both these missions, out of 39 and 31 countries

respectively. Other member states would have to increase their contribution to cover the loss if Turkey withdrew from NATO.

No alternative: Despite Turkish politicians and the Turkish public turning against NATO, the alliance actually provides a high strategic value for the country. This is simply because there is no alternative. Although the Turkish cooperate with the Russians on security, such as the S-400 anti-aircraft missile deal, it's a different story when it comes to strategy. Ankara disagrees as much with Moscow as it does with Washington on issues such as the situation in the Middle East in general and Syria specifically.

Turkey is also eyeing up membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a current dialogue partner. However, neither the SCO's degree of institutionalisation nor its membership structure or focus make it a suitable substitution for the guarantee provided by NATO. It is also completely unclear whether Russia and China in particular would grant Turkey full membership or whether they would be relegated to the role of junior partner.

What can be done to restore trust?

Trust needs to be restored in the relationship between Turkey and the West. When it comes to NATO, there are five things that could help to do this.

The other members of NATO need to be frank about the difficulties in their relationship with Turkey, but it is better to have a difficult partner within the alliance than exclude it from the dialogue.

Wherever possible, bilateral differences of opinion need to be detached from the context of NATO, so NATO is not unnecessarily blamed for these disagreements.

Efforts to integrate the new Turkish NATO dialogue partners as much as possible following the failed coup should be resolute.

NATO partners need to take Turkey's security concerns seriously, especially the perceived threat of PKK terrorism and Kurdish efforts to gain autonomy in the region.

The public arena is rarely the right place to settle differences of opinion. Calm diplomatic efforts through all channels and at all levels of hierarchy that help both sides to save face is usually the better way to achieve

mutual trust and respect again.

Preventing the relationship from getting any rustier is not going to be easy, and requires a great degree of motivation after 65 years of marriage. But as anyone who has been married for such a long time and has overcome their difficulties knows: it's usually worth it.



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