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Turkey's à la carte foreign policy

Turkey enters alliances or puts them on hold, strengthens or weakens them. While this might look like a big jumble, Erdoğan knows how to play his cards

The G20 summit in Bali relied entirely on the power of images: the world's most powerful figures sitting under palm trees and in the shade of Buddha statues, in large groups and confidential circles. However, the most curious moment of the summit was provided by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. After a rocket exploded on Polish soil, the heads of state and government met at short notice on the initiative of US President Joe Biden to discuss a response. The mutual defence clause was being considered if it turned out that the missile had been fired by Russia into NATO territory. After the meeting, Scholz said that the NATO partners had taken up the matter – although Erdoğan, the president of the country with NATO's second largest army, had not taken part. Erdoğan later stated succinctly that he was not obliged to attend unimportant meetings.

It is still unclear whether this was merely a communication problem, a misunderstanding, or a deliberate action. The mere fact that such an incident did not come as a big surprise to most observers and even to the actors involved, and that it did not have any significant consequences, points to a huge problem that the transatlantic defence alliance is facing. Namely, certain allied states tend to slide away and becomewavering candidates that are suspiciously viewed. 'Hybrid partners' who are allies on the one hand, but whose behaviour is no longer perceived as conforming to the norms of the alliance. This phenomenon does not only affect NATO – and within NATO, not only Turkey. The example of Turkey, however, makes the problem particularly clear.

Turkey's alienation from NATO

For some time now, Turkey has been a source of serious concern for ambassadors at the NATO headquarters in Brussels. This is also due to the fact that the country has a special status within the alliance. Since the beginning of Russia's attack on Ukraine, professional publications, the

military and politicians have rightly – and with great regularity – referred to Turkey's importance as an alliance partner. NATO's south-eastern flank reaches deep into the geostrategically important and latently unstable region of the Middle East. At the same time, Turkey acts as a Black Sea power and as a counterweight to Russia there. UN Secretary-General António Guterres and even Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rarely miss an opportunity to flatter Turkey and its president. And yet, Turkey seems to have long since fallen back into a kind of second rank among the members of the alliance. Its absence from the consultative talks in Bali would be just the latest example of this in a long series of discrepancies, crises and scandals that have characterised the relationship in recent years.

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Turkey's alienation from NATO reached its high point in 2017, when the country bought the S-400 missile system from Russia against the declared will of NATO members, especially the US. In response, the US is still holding back delivery of F-35 fighter jets that Turkey has already paid for – an unprecedented move between allies. And yet, this is not an isolated case: earlier this year, Turkey's refusal aroused the ire of its European and transatlantic partners when, after Russia began its attack on Ukraine, the president not only spoke out against participating in sanctions against Russia, but actively sought ways to circumvent them. The fact that Turkey initially opposed Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO and to this day has not ratified it, despite the agreement in principle that has now been reached at the level of the heads of government, only triggers general groaning and chronic annoyance within the alliance.

The general disillusionment with Turkey is evident not only in NATO, but also in all of the other Western alliances and institutions. Take the EU, for example: SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) co-leader Lars Klingbeil and Chancellor Scholz, independently of one another, recently emphasised the importance of strengthening the EU and positioning it more geopolitically. This also includes the strategic enlargement of the EU. Both of them cite the Western Balkans, Moldova, Ukraine and even Georgia as prospective EU member states. Turkey, which has been a candidate for accession since 2004 and has long been linked to the European single market via a customs union, is not

even mentioned anymore in this respect.

A result of political calculation

Turkey has brought itself into this position in particular through its foreign policy behaviour. But this is more than the result of wilful or even irrational action. Taking a look at Turkey with the necessary analytical distance and without overarching moral concepts reveals a pattern. The maximum flexibility in alliance policy is by no means limited to the area of military cooperation, but closely follows the foreign policy agenda of the Turkish government.

Turkey has recently been quite active in all sorts of other international forums – in alliances, platforms, regional organisations and other associations. Erdoğan caused a stir in Samarkand in mid-September 2022 when he casually stated that Turkey wanted to become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – an organisation that, in its charter, has specified the containment of NATO's sphere of influence as one of its policies. A short time later, the President of OSCE member Turkey appeared at the summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Astana, Kazakhstan. Further items could be added to this list: Turkey, which has been a member of the Council of Europe longer than Germany, is also an active member of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Organization of Turkic States, to name just a few examples.

Observers and even allies find it difficult, in this jumble of alliances, to maintain an overview of all the economic, military and cultural claims. Turkey, on the other hand, knows very well from which forum it can derive which benefit. Nothing else could possibly be the goal. This variety of alliances allows the Turkish President to serve himself *à la carte*, depending on current requirements. Alliances are entered into or put on hold, strengthened or weakened, emphasised or concealed, according to Turkey's own interests. As long as it is able to prove itself as a valuable member of an alliance, it can make political capital out of it. This is precisely what the Turkish government is doing, and many states are looking at Ankara with admiration.

Turkey's behaviour is an expression of a changed world order whose poles are simultaneously becoming more numerous and losing their clearly defined contours. The era of global dualism is long gone; the idea of a leaderless world is being shattered in the face of reality. Global and regional powers are forming alliances, courting allies and attempting to organise the world into spheres of influence according to their ideas. It is

no coincidence that Turkey, at the crossroads of Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Arab world and Africa, is a welcome guest at major events of all kinds. Erdoğan knows how to play his cards without much regard for historical alliances. He takes this behaviour further than most, and yet it's safe to assume that it's more than just his personal choice in tactics.

Formulating a European response

How should the EU and NATO deal with this form of Realpolitik? It helps to focus on the essential motive for inconsistent action – namely foreign policy interests. A sober view can help to understand which red lines even insecure allies will not cross. While appeals to morality and norms regularly go unheeded, with regard to Turkey it should be made clear: NATO membership is not the only foreign policy safeguard, but it remains by far the most important. In case of any doubt, NATO is the only reliable protective wall against Ankara's eternal Eurasian rival: Russia. What may sound contradictory in view of Turkey's advances towards Russia since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, follows the logic of rapprochement and deterrence from Erdoğan's perspective. His broad-legged posture towards Russia is only possible because of protection from NATO. The rivalry with Russia has resulted in both NATO membership and taking a soft line with Putin – a position which is disconcerting for Europe.

The flip side to such a sober analysis of interests is the insight that even in a post-Erdoğan era, Turkey is unlikely to be willing to put all its eggs in a single political basket. NATO or SCO, EU or ECO: future differences are likely to lie in different weighing of priorities and not in exclusive memberships. The politics of both/and, fluid-alliance politics and hybrid partnerships are phenomena that will characterise the era of the *Zeitwende*.

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Such insights may be far from ideal for partnership relations, but they make it possible to formulate a meaningful foreign policy. This is because it doesn't matter whether it's Turkey under Erdoğan, the US under Donald Trump, Italy under Giorgia Meloni or perhaps soon France under the leadership of the *Rassemblement National*: the mere invocation of alliance-political or even value-based solidarity loses its binding force. As the importance of alliances increases, their internal coherence in turn decreases.

An honest analysis of the underlying dynamics and interests is not yet the answer, but this gap can be overcome by translating it into policy offers. Crucial months lie ahead for Turkey. Parliamentary and presidential elections will be held by next June at the latest. In times of economic and monetary crises, the opposition's chances of ending Erdoğan's rule after 20 years are better than ever.

Europe must now prepare to make an offer that provides Turkey with a genuine European perspective beyond perpetual EU candidate status. Membership in the European Political Community (EPC), which is perceived as the 'second league of the EU', is not sufficient for this purpose. Only if the European offer meets Turkey's interests to a minimum degree will it consider rebalancing its commitment to the alliance. This prospect, which does not generate much enthusiasm, would nevertheless be a gradual foreign policy success that could point the way to constructive dealings with hybrid partners.



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