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### **Turkey's Future in NATO: Asset or Liability?**

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#### **Introduction**

In September 2020, Greece and Turkey narrowly avoided war as a result of a dispute regarding offshore energy exploration rights in the Aegean Sea. This near-miss propelled Athens to pursue a military modernization program over the fear of a possible future escalation with Ankara – an ally ostensibly committed to Greece's defense.<sup>1</sup>

The incident was not an isolated one, however. It followed the Trump administration's leveling of sanctions against Turkey for its acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system in contravention of U.S. concerns, as well as its assault on U.S.-backed Kurdish militias in Syria.<sup>2</sup> It also comes against the backdrop of a deepening internal crackdown by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in recent years, featuring mass arrests, the erosion of the rule of law, and marked increases in the power of the Presidency. Further, Turkey has threatened to veto Sweden and Finland's applications for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership amid Russia's unjust, irredentist invasion of Ukraine, delaying the addition of two strategically valuable members to the Alliance in a bid to gain political concessions.



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Cumulatively, these developments have raised questions about Turkey's future in NATO, with some officials and commentators doubting the value of its continued participation in the bloc.<sup>3</sup> Yet, such a move would be an unprecedented decision for the Alliance—and a potentially catastrophic one. This raises serious questions about the integrity and true purpose of NATO.

### **Turkey's Historic Role in NATO**

Anxiety among Western powers over Soviet expansionism in Europe peaked following World War II as a result of the Soviet Union's overwhelming conventional military superiority in Europe, Moscow's reluctance to disarm following the conclusion of hostilities, and the establishment of satellite governments beholden to Moscow in Eastern and Central Europe.<sup>4</sup> NATO was founded in 1949 to defend Western liberal democracies, and to establish a unified framework for collective defense and military cooperation.<sup>5</sup> The preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty affirms the commitment of NATO to preserving democracy, saying members are, "determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."<sup>6</sup> Further, Article V proclaims that an attack on one member will be considered an attack on all members, and every member is obligated to take action—including but not necessarily the use of armed force—to restore peace to the treaty area.<sup>7</sup>

Turkish ascension into NATO occurred in the context of the spread of communism and Soviet influence in Europe as well as the ongoing Greek Civil War. If Greek communist forces had been victorious, Turkey would have been situated between Soviet-dominated countries on its eastern and western borders, and it would consequently be unable to resist Soviet pressure in the future. In 1947, the U.S. responded by approving \$400 million in civil and military aid to both Greece and Turkey as an early implementation of the Truman Doctrine aimed at curbing Soviet influence.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey's strategic geopolitical position played the greatest role in the decision to send it aid and later incorporate it into NATO. Considering the Soviet Union's overwhelming conventional superiority in Europe, U.S. military planners assumed that Soviet forces had a realistic chance of overrunning the continent. Maintaining air superiority in such a conflict scenario would be crucial for slowing the Soviet advance, highlighting Turkey's potential contribution. Western air forces stationed in Turkey could strike Soviet oilfields in the Caucasus and Romania and as a result, hamper the Soviet capability to wage an offensive war.<sup>9</sup> Turkey was considered to be a critical first line of defense against a Soviet assault due to its shared land border with the Soviet Union, its land border with Soviet-aligned Bulgaria, and its ability to effectively control access to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits. Due to these considerations, Turkish cooperation with the West would force the Soviets to divert military assets from Western Europe to the Turkish theater and, as a result, dilute its ability to concentrate forces in a single region.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing the significant contribution Turkey could



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make to the Alliance, NATO members agreed to admit Turkey (as well as its regional rival, Greece) into the bloc in 1952.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, Turkey's Cold War tenure in NATO did not go without controversy. In 1974, Turkey invaded Cyprus, ostensibly to defend Turkish minorities on the island from the Greek majority. This led to an armed conflict between Greece and Turkey that the latter won. Turkey maintains an enclave on the island to this day. The Cypriot Crisis represented an all-time low for Turkish-NATO relations, and it exposed the uncomfortable question of what NATO should do if two of its members went to war.<sup>12</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 required NATO to reevaluate its mandate. Throughout the Cold War, Article V of the treaty was never invoked, but the collective efforts of the Alliance successfully deterred the Soviet Union from initiating a war in Europe.<sup>13</sup> Lacking an apparent external threat, the shared democratic values of its members kept the Alliance intact and created a standard for new members to achieve.<sup>14</sup> In 1991, NATO approved the new strategic concept of *crisis management*, defined as, "the management of crises affecting the security of its members."<sup>15</sup> This shift in approach, however, divided the Alliance because it required members to commit to potentially using force to create the conditions for peace and enforcing peace settlements to conflicts in which no member was attacked.<sup>16</sup> The first time NATO executed a non-Article V crisis management operation was an air campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 in response to gross human rights abuses.<sup>17</sup>

Crisis management was expanded in 2010 to include a joint response to all levels of a crisis, including crisis prevention, post-conflict stabilization, and reconstruction support.<sup>18</sup> That year, NATO also adopted a new Strategic Concept which states, "Our Alliance thrives as a source of hope because it is based on common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and because our common essential and enduring purpose is to safeguard the freedom and security of its members."<sup>19</sup> This clearly reaffirms the importance of the Alliance's shared, founding values as the fabric that binds members together, but it also underscores that the fundamental purpose of NATO is the common defense of its members.

Today, Turkey remains one of the most important members of the Alliance in operational and quantitative terms. It possesses the second-largest number of military personnel and the third-highest population in NATO.<sup>20</sup> Its geopolitical position still provides a strategic advantage to the bloc, as it borders areas of key interest such as Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. To its north, across the Black Sea, is Ukraine. Turkey also serves as part of America's extended deterrent in Europe, reportedly housing U.S. nuclear weapons at its Incirlik Air Base.<sup>21</sup> Over time, however, shifting political currents within Turkey itself have given rise to doubts about the country's reliability and suitability in the NATO alliance.



## Trends in Turkish Policy

Over the past two decades, Turkey's relationship with the West has changed fundamentally. In a break from the country's historical reliance on the U.S. and Europe for both inspiration and security, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made clear that he seeks to make Turkey a great standalone power.<sup>22</sup> In the early 2000s, Turkey was in the early stages of applying to be a member of the European Union, appeared to be willing to compromise on the Cyprus issue, and aimed to make inroads with the country's Kurdish minority. These efforts eventually collapsed, however, while internal political moves by Erdogan to consolidate power in subsequent years led to the erosion of the secular nature of state institutions, the rollback of civil liberties, and a concentration of power in the office of the President.<sup>23</sup>

These trends intensified in the aftermath of a failed 2016 coup against Erdogan. An internal crackdown on government opposition resulted in 150,000 people being removed from state institutions and 50,000 arrests. Military and judicial officials accused of colluding with the coup were purged and replaced with Erdogan loyalists.<sup>24</sup> Via a continuous state of emergency declaration and a constitutional referendum, Erdogan has obtained the power to unilaterally appoint loyalists as high-ranking government officials and judges and the ability to severely restrict press freedoms.<sup>25</sup> These actions have caused concern among U.S. and European officials over the state of human rights and democracy in Turkey.<sup>26</sup>

Turkey's foreign policy has also become a cause of concern for other NATO members. Ankara's decision to acquire Russian-made air defenses over U.S. and NATO objections, for instance, has raised worries over potential security risks to the Alliance.<sup>27</sup> In turn, Turkey was removed from the U.S. F-35 program and suffered sanctions imposed by the Trump administration in 2020. Turkey has also granted the Russian air force overflight rights, thus facilitating Russia's activities in Syria and Libya.<sup>28</sup> Further, Turkey violated an arms embargo on Libya's Government of National Accord by shipping armaments and trainers by air and sea. This has led to multiple standoffs between the Turkish and French navies.<sup>29</sup> Turkey now favors a two-state solution to the Cyprus issue, ditching the "dialogue and compromise" approach common among its European neighbors.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Turkey's energy exploration activities brought itself and Greece to the brink of war in 2020.<sup>31</sup> Further, Turkey's priorities in its response to the Syrian Civil War have at times diverged from those of the United States and NATO. Like its allies, Turkey supported defeating the Islamic State, and it continues to oppose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government. Still, it also wants to prevent the U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from gaining political autonomy due to their connections to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) – a Kurdish terrorist organization. In 2019, this resulted in Turkish incursions into areas of northern Syria and direct clashes with the YPG.<sup>32</sup>

One area of Turkey's foreign policy of particular interest to NATO has been its response to Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Ankara has carved out a role for itself as a mediator in





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this conflict. Turkey retains a partnership with Russia through its weapons acquisitions, allowance of Russian military aircraft to transit Turkish airspace to support Russian forces in Syria, and reliance on Russia for approximately half of its natural gas imports.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Turkey has been a strong supporter of the Ukrainian struggle for self-determination. It has supplied arms to Kyiv – most notably the Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 series drone that has provided Ukraine with precision airstrike capabilities with great effect against Russian forces.<sup>34</sup> At the outset of Russia’s invasion, Turkey invoked its rights under the Montreux Convention of 1936 and closed off the Turkish Straits to transiting warships, preventing Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea naval forces.<sup>35</sup> Through its unique position, Turkey has already shown success by helping mediate a United Nations-backed deal between Moscow and Kyiv that facilitates Ukrainian grain and fertilizer exports through Russia’s Black Sea blockade.<sup>36</sup> While this unique position could be instrumental in future negotiations, Turkey has created some difficulties for NATO in this crisis. A particular point of contention is Ankara’s threat to veto Sweden and Finland’s applications to join NATO – which require the approval of all current members of the Alliance – over their decisions to harbor individuals allegedly associated with the PKK and their decisions to ban arms exports to Turkey in response to its military operations in Syria. This threat was largely dropped following a June 2022 memorandum of understanding among the three countries that commits Sweden and Finland to resolve these discrepancies, but Erdogan stated in October 2022 that Turkey’s consent for their NATO ascension will not come until those commitments come to fruition.<sup>37</sup>

### **NATO: An Alliance of Values or Defense?**

The trendlines above have contributed to growing concern over – and declining confidence in – Turkey’s role in NATO. Turkey, for instance, has been criticized as a democratic “backslider” that challenges the ideological foundations of the Alliance.<sup>38</sup> Central to this criticism is the notion that, without a common external threat, the fabric that binds NATO together is its shared commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The preamble of the Alliance’s founding treaty and its 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly declares the commitment of members to these values.<sup>39</sup> As a result, if a NATO member fails to share this commitment in practice, then it undermines the rationale for the Alliance’s continued existence. Further, if a NATO member does not respect these values at home, how can the bloc rely on them to participate in collective action to defend them outside of an Article V scenario? From this perspective, Turkey should be disciplined or removed from NATO for failing to uphold the Alliance’s values.

Yet, NATO has not uniformly been an alliance of liberal democracies with stellar human rights records throughout its history. Portugal, a founding member, had an authoritarian government until 1974. Greece was controlled by a brutal military junta between 1967 and 1974.<sup>40</sup> The civilian government in Turkey was overthrown multiple times by the country’s military.



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Moreover, some have applied the same concerns about modern Turkey to both Poland and Hungary, which have been categorized as democratic “backsliders.”<sup>41</sup>

Prioritizing the need for consistent values among members risks ignoring the ramifications for punishment or exclusion of nonconformist members. As it stands, there are no de-accession criteria for NATO, and no clear road map exists to evict members from the bloc. Nor is the creation of such a mechanism likely, since doing so would require the consensus of every member.<sup>42</sup> As a result, such pressure could convince those considered to be “backsliders” to form a bloc *within* the Alliance that would profoundly hamper consensus and fragment internal standards.

A more pragmatic approach would place a higher value on NATO’s fundamental purpose: a defensive military pact, whose strength lies in the converging security interests of its members.<sup>43</sup> If a member no longer finds common ground with the collective on this front— or worse yet, is actively endangering the security of other members— then it should either withdraw itself or be coerced into doing so. However, Turkey currently does not meet this standard for expulsion.

### **Turkey’s Future in NATO**

Despite recent instances of cooperation, Turkey’s relationship with Russia does not represent a fundamental realignment in its foreign policy. Rather, the contemporary interactions between Moscow and Ankara are transactional and tactical in nature. It still actively opposes Russia on multiple fronts, including in Syria,<sup>44</sup> Libya,<sup>45</sup> and Ukraine.<sup>46</sup> Still, this does show Turkey’s willingness to work alongside NATO’s key strategic adversary, potentially to the detriment of the Alliance’s goals and security. Even at a transactional level of interaction, this relationship must be monitored for indications of deeper cooperation.

By contrast, the U.S.-Turkey and NATO-Turkey relationships remain strategic and enduring.<sup>47</sup> While Turkey’s divergent approach to the Syrian Civil War reflects a break with its NATO allies, throughout the conflict it has not questioned the value of NATO as an institution.<sup>48</sup> In fact, Turkey called on NATO for assistance in 2013 and 2015 in response to threats to Turkish forces and civilians posed by the conflict. Turkey continues to value its participation in NATO for its security.<sup>49</sup>

The most concerning element of Turkey’s foreign policy is its standoffish behavior towards its NATO allies. How would the Alliance respond to another open conflict between Greece and Turkey? The treaty appears to have no answers aside from opposing whoever shot first. Pursuing amicable solutions to the division of Cyprus, energy exploitation rights in the Aegean Sea, and the longstanding negative Greek-Turkish relationship is a daunting task, but allowing



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these issues to continue to fester threatens the Alliance's viability as an effective force for collective action.

Despite Turkey's concerning behavior, the case for it remaining in NATO is strong. Turkey is committed to NATO's core mission as a collective security pact. Its geopolitical position is no less relevant now than it was during the Cold War. Also, the size of its military and its status as the only Muslim-majority country in the Alliance are valuable assets for crisis response operations in a diverse set of theaters. Further, Ankara's exit alone would do little to address current or future nonadherence to the Alliance's values as Turkey is seen by some as not the only democratic "backslider" in the bloc. A longer-term solution would entail the implementation of a mechanism to eject members that fail to comply with the Alliance's values and standards of conduct; however, achieving the consensus of all NATO members to this end would be unlikely to succeed in a meaningful way. Positive inducements and punitive diplomatic measures outside NATO's organizational structure may be the only tools presently available to encourage a change of behavior in wayward members. Nevertheless, assuming Turkey is willing and able to commit to the mutual defense of its allies without jeopardizing the security of the Alliance, it remains more of an asset than a liability.

<sup>1</sup> Helena Smith, "Greece and Turkey resume talks to try to avert military escalation," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2021, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/25/greece-and-turkey-in-talks-to-try-to-avert-military-escalation>.

<sup>2</sup> Lara Jakes, "U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Turkey Over 2017 Purchase of Russian Missile Defenses," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/14/us/politics/trump-turkey-missile-defense-sanctions.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Tim Ogden, "It's time to expel Turkey from Nato," *The Spectator*, October 30, 2020, available at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/it-s-time-to-expel-turkey-from-nato>. Also see Doug Bandow, "Transatlantic Alliance Mistake: Turkey Isn't Worthy of NATO Membership," *CATO Institute*, November 13, 2019, available at <https://www.cato.org/commentary/transatlantic-alliance-mistake-turkey-isnt-worthy-nato-membership#>; and Rep. Eric Swalwell's comments in Tal Axelrod, "Democratic lawmaker: Expelling Turkey from NATO 'should be on the table,'" *The Hill*, October 15, 2019, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/465847-democratic-lawmaker-expelling-turkey-from-nato-should-be-on-the-table>.

<sup>4</sup> Lord Ismay, "NATO: the First Five Years 1949-1954," *NATO*, 1954, available at [https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/2/1/216977/NATO-The\\_first\\_5\\_years\\_1949-1954\\_by\\_Lord\\_Ismay\\_.pdf](https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/2/1/216977/NATO-The_first_5_years_1949-1954_by_Lord_Ismay_.pdf). pp. 3-6.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew R. Hoehn and Sarah Harting, "The NATO That Once Was," In *Risking NATO: Testing the Limits of the Alliance in Afghanistan*, 5-12, RAND Corporation, 2010, p. 5, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg974af.9>.

<sup>6</sup> Lord Ismay. op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, "Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952," *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 4 (1985): p. 814, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/1888505>.



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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 817-823.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 822-824.

<sup>12</sup> W. Robert Pearson and Frances G. Burwell, "TURKEY AND NATO: NEW IMAGES AND OLD QUESTIONS," *THE EVOLUTION OF u.s.-TURKISH RELATIONS IN A TRANSATLANTIC CONTEXT*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2008, p. 64, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12097.8>.

<sup>13</sup> "Crisis Management," *NATO*, October 8, 2020, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49192.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49192.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Celeste Wallander, "NATO's Enemies Within," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/natos-enemies-within>.

<sup>15</sup> "Crisis Management," *NATO*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew R. Hoehn and Sarah Harting, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> "Crisis Management," *NATO*, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> "Strategic Concept," *NATO*, November 19-20, 2010, p. 35, available at [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_publications/20120214\\_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120214_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Adam Taylor, "Turkey's Increasingly Complicated Relationship with NATO," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2016, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/19/turkeys-increasingly-complicated-relationship-with-nato/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Soner Cagaptay, et al., "Erdogan's Empire: The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 29, 2019, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogans-empire-evolution-turkish-foreign-policy>.

<sup>23</sup> Kemal Kirisci and Amanda Sloat, "The rise and fall of liberal democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West," *Brookings*, February, 2019, pp. 1-3, available at [https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2019/02/FP\\_20190226\\_turkey\\_kirisci\\_sloat.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190226_turkey_kirisci_sloat.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkey," *U.S. Department of State*, 2021, available at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/turkey/>. Also see "Key findings of the 2021 Report on Turkey," *European Commission*, October 19, 2021, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_21\\_5282](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_5282).

<sup>27</sup> Carlotta Gall, "Turkey Get Shipments of Russian Missile System, Defying U.S.," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/12/world/europe/turkey-russia-missiles.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

<sup>28</sup> Marc Pierini and Francesco Siccardi, "Why the EU and the United States Should Rethink Their Turkey Policies in 2021." *Carnegie Europe*. January 21, 2021, available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/01/21/why-eu-and-united-states-should-rethink-their-turkey-policies-in-2021-pub-83662>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Helena Smith, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Can Kasapoglu, "Turkey's Military Policy in Syria: Implications for NATO," *NATO Defense College*, 2020, pp. 3-4, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23668>.





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<sup>34</sup>Steven Witt, "The Turkish Drone That Changed the Nature of Warfare," *New Yorker*, May 9, 2022, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/16/the-turkish-drone-that-changed-the-nature-of-warfare>.

<sup>35</sup>Al Jazeera, "Russia cancelled Black Sea passage bid of four warships: Turkey," *Al Jazeera*, March 2, 2022, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/russia-cancelled-black-sea-passage-bid-warships-turkey>.

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<sup>37</sup>VOA, "Turkey's Erdogan Renews Threat to Block NATO Bids by Sweden, Finland," *VOA*, October 1, 2022, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-erdogan-renews-threat-to-block-nato-bids-by-sweden-finland/6771840.html>.

<sup>38</sup>Nathalie Durhin. "NATO and Its Founding Values: Renewal of Vows or 'Conscious Uncoupling'?" Edited by Stephen J. Mariano. *NATO's Strategic Foundations: Values, Deterrence, and Arms Control*. NATO Defense College, 2020, p. 11, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26057.6>.

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<sup>40</sup>Celeste Wallander, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup>Judy Dempsey, "NATO's Bad Apples," *Carnegie Europe*, April 03, 2018, available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/75962>.

<sup>42</sup>Judy Dempsey, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup>Nathalie Durhin. op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>44</sup>Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, "Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief," *Congressional Research Service*, December 30, 2021, p. 13, available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44000.pdf>.

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<sup>46</sup>Andrew E. Kramer, "Turkey, a Sometimes Wavering NATO Ally, Backs Ukraine," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/world/europe/ukraine-turkey-russia-drones.html>.

<sup>47</sup>Kamal A Beyoghlou, "TURKEY AND THE UNITED STATES ON THE BRINK: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO AND THE US-TURKISH STRATEGIC AND MILITARY PARTNERSHIP," *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, 2020, p. 75, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24340>.

<sup>48</sup>Can Kasapoglu, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

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