

From Flank to Center: Türkiye, NATO, and the Ankara Summit

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ABSTRACT *As NATO approaches its 2026 Ankara Summit, the alliance faces its most demanding transformation since the end of the Cold War. Türkiye's role within NATO has undergone a fundamental strategic shift, from a southeastern flank state providing territorial depth to a central, operationally indispensable ally shaping the alliance's deterrence posture, institutional direction, and crisis management capacity. Drawing on Türkiye's sustained operational contributions, its 360-degree security approach, and its demonstrated capacity to project force and exercise command at scale, the commentary contends that the Ankara Summit represents a defining moment, one at which this repositioning must be reflected in the alliance's political and institutional frameworks. It also issues a clear warning: the European Union's exclusionary approach to non-member NATO allies risks inflicting strategic damage on Euro-Atlantic security that would exceed even the consequences of reduced American force presence on the continent.*

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Introduction: A Milestone Reframed

When Türkiye joined NATO in 1952, the strategic logic was straightforward: a large, militarily capable state with commanding geography at the alliance's southeastern edge, providing depth, deterrence, and reach toward the Soviet periphery. For much of the Cold War, Türkiye was a flank country, critical, certainly, but peripheral in the sense that the central front ran through Central Europe, not Anatolia. Seventy-four years later, that framing no longer holds. The threats that now define NATO's agenda -hybrid warfare, energy insecurity, Mediterranean instability, the arc of conflict running from Gaza to the Caucasus, and the ongoing war in Ukraine- are concentrated in precisely the region where Türkiye operates. The southeastern flank has become the front. And a country that has spent decades building operational competence, indigenous defense industrial capacity, and hard-won field experience has, as a consequence, become something categorically different from what it was in 1952: not a flank state, but a central ally.

The 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara is not merely a logistical milestone. It is the moment at which this strategic reordering becomes institutionally visible. What the alliance decides in Ankara -about burden-sharing, about capability targets, about the relationship between NATO and the European Union- will shape the Euro-Atlantic security architecture for

a generation. Türkiye's stake in those decisions, and its capacity to influence them, has never been greater.

NATO's Transformation and What It Demands

NATO was founded on a principle whose simplicity concealed its ambition: that an attack on one member would be treated as an attack on all. Article 5 of the Washington Treaty transformed that commitment into an institutional guarantee, and the guarantee into a deterrence architecture that successfully prevented major conflict in Europe for eight decades. That is a record without parallel in the history of alliances.

Yet the history of alliances is also a history of institutional decay, and NATO has not been immune to the pressures that have undone other collective security arrangements. The end of the Cold War triggered a significant contraction in allied military capabilities. Francis Fukuyama's thesis about the end of history proved seductive: if liberalism had triumphed and the existential adversary had dissolved, why maintain the costly infrastructure of collective defense? Allied defense spending fell, force structures shrank, and the culture of military readiness atrophied. NATO pivoted toward crisis management, peacekeeping, and partnership-building -essential work, but insufficient preparation for what followed.

What followed was a gradual but unmistakable return of great power

competition. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the persistent military mobilization along NATO's eastern flank forced the alliance to rediscover its foundational purpose. The 2022 Madrid Strategic Concept marked a decisive turning point, reinstating collective defense as NATO's core mission after two decades of expeditionary emphasis. New regional defense plans were developed, force-generation targets were revised upward, and the Hague Summit of 2025 formalized allied commitments to increased defense investment, a political acknowledgment that the post-Cold War peace dividend had been spent.

This transformation imposes real demands on every member of the alliance. Defense spending must increase not as a political gesture but as a genuine contribution to credible deterrence. Force structures must be built for warfighting, not just crisis response. Command and logistics systems must function at scale, under pressure, and interoperably. The question is no longer whether NATO must transform but whether its members have the strategic culture and institutional capacity to do so. The answer varies significantly across the alliance.

Türkiye's Contributions: The Evidence of Central Status

In this context, Türkiye's position within NATO is not merely a matter of geography or political weight,

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it is a function of demonstrated operational performance over decades. That performance, often underappreciated in public discourse on the alliance, constitutes the empirical foundation of Türkiye's claim to central-ally status.

Consider the breadth of that record. Türkiye has participated in NATO missions across an extraordinary geographic range: from Kabul to Sarajevo, from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Baltic. These contributions have not been symbolic, they have involved real combat capability, logistics infrastructure, and command experience. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, Turkish forces operated in complex, multi-party environments that tested both warfighting skill and the diplomatic resilience required to sustain coalition operations.

More recently, Türkiye's participation in Steadfast Dart-26, NATO's most ambitious collective exercise in recent years, illustrated the depth of these

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capabilities. Deploying a joint force of over 2,000 personnel alongside an Anatolian Maritime Task Group to a theater some 6,450 kilometers from Turkish territory demonstrated not only force projection capacity but the ability to operate as part of NATO's Flexible Deterrence Options framework in a forward-deployed context. This is not peripheral alliance participation; this is the operational core of what collective defense requires.

Türkiye's Special Forces capacity has expanded substantially: Commando Brigades now number 25, with a plan to reach 40 within three years. These are not garrison forces, they are battle-tested units with direct experience in counter-terrorism, hybrid warfare, and cross-border operations across multiple simultaneous theaters. Their doctrinal versatility, combining direct action with capacity-building missions, reflects precisely the kind of multi-domain adaptability that NATO's evolving threat environment demands.

The alliance command dimension is equally significant. From 2028, Tür-

kiye will assume command of the Allied Reaction Force, NATO's most strategically critical rapid response capability and the formation into which allies invest their highest-readiness contributions. This is an assignment that reflects the confidence the alliance places in Turkish command and staff competence, and it carries implications beyond the operational: command of the Allied Reaction Force places Turkish generals and their staffs at the center of NATO's decision-making cycle at the moment of greatest institutional consequence.

Türkiye has also assumed the KFOR command in Kosovo for the second time, deployed its operational reserve battalion on four separate rotations, and maintained ongoing command of NATO maritime operations in the Aegean and the Mediterranean. These commitments are not inherited positions, they are earned through demonstrated reliability. Air policing missions in Estonia and Romania further illustrate a force posture that spans the entire Euro-Atlantic space.

Underpinning all of this is a defense industrial transformation that has shifted Türkiye from a net importer of military technology to a significant indigenous producer. Unmanned aerial systems, air defense solutions, electronic warfare capabilities, ammunition technology, naval platforms, and command-control infrastructure are now developed domestically and exported internationally. Türkiye's industrial capacity does more than reduce import dependency, it constitutes a strategic force multiplier

for the alliance, expanding NATO's collective deterrence industrial base at a moment when European supply chains are under severe strain.

The Threat Environment: Why This Moment Is Different?

The security environment that NATO now confronts is more complex than any it has faced since its founding. Conventional military threats have returned with urgency: Russia's war against Ukraine, now entering its fourth year, has imposed an ongoing battlefield test of alliance resolve and capability, with consequences that extend far beyond Eastern Europe. It has consumed allied ammunition stocks faster than production lines can replenish them, revealed critical vulnerabilities in the defense industrial capacity of several member states, and demonstrated that large-scale conventional warfare in Europe is not a historical artifact but a present reality.

Yet the conventional dimension is only one layer of a multi-spectrum threat landscape that the alliance must now navigate simultaneously. Hybrid operations -combining cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, proxy forces, infrastructure sabotage, and economic coercion- have become the primary instrument through which state actors test alliance cohesion without triggering Article 5 thresholds. These operations target the political will of allied populations as much as the military capacity of allied governments. The

resilience of civil society, the security of critical infrastructure, and the integrity of information environments are now as strategically important as tank formations or air sortie rates. This is a qualitatively new kind of deterrence challenge, and it requires a qualitatively new kind of response.

Nuclear risks have risen to levels not seen since the late Cold War. The proliferation of long-range precision strike capabilities -including hypersonic systems that compress warning timelines to near zero- has placed enormous pressure on the decision architectures that alliance command structures were built to manage. Great power competition has extended into space, with satellite systems that underpin both civilian communications and military command increasingly contested. And the Indo-Pacific's growing centrality to American strategic calculus, driven by China's emergence as a peer competitor with global ambitions, means that American strategic attention and resources face competing claims that did not exist a generation ago.

Energy security has re-entered the strategic vocabulary with force. The manipulation of energy supply as a geopolitical instrument -a tactic demonstrated repeatedly in the years preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine- has exposed structural vulnerabilities in European economies that have direct implications for political cohesion and, therefore, for alliance solidarity. Trade policy has similarly become an instrument of strategic competition, with tariff measures

Turkish National Defense Minister Yaşar Güler attends the NATO Defense Ministers Meeting at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, on June 18, 2026.

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and supply chain disruptions generating economic pressures that translate directly into political instability.

The regional picture compounds these global pressures. The conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria have destabilized the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean at scale. The Israeli and American military operations against Iran -and Tehran's retaliatory strikes against regional targets- brought the region to the edge of a wider war before the bilateral ceasefire announced in recent weeks provided a measure of relief. That ceasefire is welcomed as a necessary brake on a potentially catastrophic escalation, and it is to be hoped that it will be fully implemented in the field and serve as a meaningful step toward more durable stability. But it would be premature to treat it as a resolution of the underlying tensions.

This regional volatility places Türkiye at the intersection of multiple active crisis arcs simultaneously, a geographic and strategic reality that no other NATO member shares in the same degree. Managing proximity to active conflict while maintaining alliance commitments, sustaining diplomatic engagement across multiple parties to a dispute, and preserving independent strategic agency is the challenge that Türkiye has navigated across decades and continues to navigate today.

Resilience -of armed forces, of defense industry, of critical infrastructure, and of civil society- has accordingly become the central concept in NATO's evolving strategic doctrine. The alliance's future credibility depends not only on the military hardware its members field but on the institutional robustness and po-

litical sustainability of their defense commitments. An ally that fields impressive equipment but lacks the organizational depth, the trained manpower, the logistic sustainability, or the public political support to employ that equipment under pressure contributes less to collective deterrence than the hardware alone would suggest. Türkiye's investment in all dimensions of national resilience -military modernization, indigenous defense production, operational readiness, and the professional depth of its armed forces- reflects a strategic culture that has long understood this.

The Ankara Summit: A Moment of Institutional Reckoning

The 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara arrives at a moment of genuine institutional consequence. The decisions made there will determine whether the transformation NATO has committed to on paper translates into the credible deterrence posture that the current threat environment demands. Several priorities must define the Summit's agenda and outcomes.

The first is reaffirmation of Article 5 as a political as well as military commitment. Article 5's credibility rests not only on the military infrastructure that surrounds it but on the political will of member governments to honor it in circumstances that may be costly, ambiguous, and domestically inconvenient. In a period when transatlantic solidarity has faced stress tests not only from external adversaries but from political dynamics

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The second is accountability on defense investment. The Hague commitments must be translated into concrete force generation targets, with allies demonstrating at Ankara not merely the budgetary trajectory of their defense spending but the actual capability milestones they have reached. Defense spending is not an end in itself, it is a means to the military capability that credible deterrence requires. The Summit must create a framework in which capability achievement, not just spending percentage, becomes the metric of allied responsibility.

The third is a serious and honest engagement with defense industrial cooperation. The war in Ukraine has exposed the fragility of allied ammunition production capacity, supply chain dependencies, and the limits of what national defense industries can

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deliver at wartime production rates. Building a more resilient, more innovative, and more genuinely collaborative defense industrial ecosystem requires political decisions that go beyond bilateral procurement, decisions about joint programs, interoperability standards, and the coordination of national industrial investments toward collective capability gaps.

The fourth, and perhaps the most politically sensitive, is the relationship between NATO and the European Union. This is not an abstract institutional question; it has direct operational consequences. The EU's recent trajectory in defense and security policy has increasingly involved mechanisms, funding programs, and planning structures from which non-EU NATO members, including Türkiye, are systematically excluded. This exclusion is strategically self-defeating. It fragments the Euro-Atlantic security space precisely at the moment when coherence is most needed; it wastes the military capacity of an ally that fields NATO's second-largest army;

and it creates institutional tensions that adversaries can and will exploit.

To be direct: the damage to European security from this exclusionary approach is comparable to, and may in certain scenarios exceed, the damage from a reduction in American forward presence. The United States can reduce its forward-deployed forces and still remain a committed ally whose strategic depth and capacity deter adversaries. But if the EU's security mechanisms develop into a parallel structure that excludes NATO's most capable non-EU members, the alliance's political cohesion -its most fundamental source of strength- will fracture in ways that are difficult to repair. Türkiye is prepared to contribute substantially more to European defense and security. Many European partners recognize this. The Ankara Summit must ensure that this recognition translates into structural change.

Türkiye's Strategic Posture: Balance as a Principle

Türkiye's approach to NATO reflects a strategic culture that has been forged in proximity to risk. The country shares borders with active conflict zones, hosts refugee populations at scales that test governance capacity, faces terrorist threats that have required sustained military engagement on multiple fronts simultaneously, and operates in a neighborhood where instability is not a theoretical concern but a daily operational reality. This exposure has produced something genuinely valuable: a strategic prag-

matism that resists the temptation to reduce complex security problems to simple ideological formulas and that maintains policy coherence under conditions of sustained pressure.

Türkiye consistently approaches crises as a de-escalating, not an escalating, actor. The most recent illustration, Türkiye's measured, constructive posture during the Iranian military confrontation with Israel and the United States, reflects a deliberate strategic choice to preserve diplomatic agency and contribute to crisis containment rather than amplify tensions. This posture was broadly recognized across the Turkish political spectrum and by international partners as both principled and effective. It is consistent with a long-standing pattern: in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, in Libya, and across the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye has repeatedly demonstrated a capacity for crisis management that combines diplomatic engagement with credible military capability, a combination that most actors can only approximate.

This balanced approach extends to Türkiye's conduct within the alliance itself. Türkiye exercises its voice within NATO clearly and, when necessary, distinctly. This is not obstruction; it is the contribution of an ally whose independent assessments carry weight precisely because they are genuinely independent. An alliance in which all members simply defer to the most powerful participant is not a true alliance but a hierarchical security arrangement, one whose political sustainability

is inherently limited. The history of NATO demonstrates that the alliance functions most effectively when its members engage as genuine partners whose concerns are taken seriously, whose interests are accommodated where possible, and whose contributions are recognized commensurate with their scale and substance.

Türkiye's commitment to collective defense is unambiguous in its operational expression. The scale and consistency of Turkish force contributions across the full range of NATO missions, the willingness to assume command responsibilities at the highest levels, and the continuing investment in military capability and defense industrial capacity all reflect a commitment to alliance solidarity that goes well beyond treaty obligation. What Türkiye asks in return is straightforward: that its contributions be recognized, that its interests within the alliance receive the same consideration extended to others, and that the institutional framework of Euro-Atlantic security reflect the actual distribution of capability and commitment rather than a political map that has not been updated to match strategic reality.

Conclusion: The Alliance Türkiye Chooses

There is little serious doubt that NATO will endure. The alliance has survived strategic drift, burden-sharing disputes, out-of-area debates, and the occasional crisis of political confidence precisely because its founda-

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tional logic, that collective defense is more credible, and therefore more effective, than national defense pursued in isolation, remains compelling. No European state has concluded that it would be more secure outside NATO than within it. No American administration, however skeptical of free-riding allies, has judged that U.S. security interests would be better served by abandoning the alliance. The institutional inheritance of seven decades -the interoperability standards, the planning processes, the command relationships, the political habits of allied consultation- represents a strategic asset whose value becomes most apparent precisely when the security environment deteriorates.

What is genuinely uncertain is not whether NATO will exist but whether it will be adequate to the threats it faces. That adequacy depends on political will, on genuine military investment, on defense industrial coherence, and on the institutional integrity of the alliance's decision-making. All of these will be tested, and to a significant degree determined, at the Ankara Summit.

Türkiye's commitment to a NATO that is adequate to these challenges is unambiguous. As a founding contributor to the alliance's operational effectiveness, as the host of the Summit that will shape its next strategic chapter, and as a country that inhabits the most demanding security environment in the Euro-Atlantic space, Türkiye has both the greatest stake in NATO's success and a demonstrated capacity to contribute to it.

That capacity, built over 74 years of service, tested in some of the most demanding operational environments the alliance has faced, and continuously renewed through investment in military modernization and indigenous defense technology, is the foundation of Türkiye's claim not to the periphery of the alliance, but to its center. The shift from flank state to central ally has been earned through performance, not asserted through rhetoric. It reflects the convergence of geography, capability, and strategic culture in a country that has spent decades learning to navigate complexity and emerge with its interests intact and its commitments honored.

The Ankara Summit will reflect that reality. The question for the alliance as a whole is whether the political frameworks, burden-sharing arrangements, and institutional relationships through which NATO operates are prepared to reflect it too. Türkiye is ready for that conversation. The alliance's long-term health depends on it being conducted honestly. ■