

The Evolution of the Global Order and NATO's Transformation: Türkiye's Strategic Role Ahead of the Ankara Summit

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ABSTRACT *This commentary examines NATO's evolving role in a multipolar and multi-layered world order, with particular attention to the pressures generated by shifting transatlantic relations, European strategic autonomy debates, hybrid threats, technological innovation, and burden sharing. Within this broader context, the analysis highlights Türkiye's strategic significance as a long-standing NATO ally, emphasizing her military capabilities, geographical position, defense industry capacity, counterterrorism experience, and diplomatic reach. It argues that Türkiye is no longer merely a troop contributing member of the alliance, but a strategic enabler that provides NATO with operational flexibility, regional insight, and geopolitical depth. The commentary also discusses the challenges in Türkiye-NATO relations, including historical grievances, divergent threat perceptions, defense restrictions, relations with Russia, and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ultimately, it presents the upcoming NATO Ankara Summit as a defining moment for both the alliance and Türkiye, arguing that NATO's future effectiveness will depend on its ability to combine transformation with unity.*

Keywords: NATO, Türkiye, Ankara Summit, Strategic Autonomy, Transatlantic Security

Insight Turkey 2026

Vol. 28 / No. 2 / pp. 43-52

Received Date: 4/5/2026 • Accepted Date: 20/6/2026 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2026282.4

Introduction

The international system is undergoing a profound and accelerated transformation. The world is no longer defined by a single dominant order, but by overlapping crises, shifting power centers, and growing uncertainty. From active and frozen conflicts to terrorism, irregular migration, climate change, social inequality, and the disruptive effects of artificial intelligence and cyber threats, the range of challenges facing the global community has expanded dramatically. What makes this period particularly complex is the simultaneity of these crises. States are no longer dealing with isolated threats but with interconnected risks that reinforce one another. At the same time, the mechanisms designed in the aftermath of the Second World War to manage global challenges are steadily losing their effectiveness. The rules-based international order is being eroded, yet no clear alternative has emerged.

Power balances are shifting, and competition is increasingly replacing cooperation. International institutions are weakening, multilateralism is in decline, and uncertainty is rising. Perhaps most concerning is the re-emergence of the notion that “might makes right,” signaling a drift away from international law toward raw power politics. In this context, the global system appears to be entering a phase of disorder, in which states are reassessing how best to navigate a more fragmented and unpredictable environment. This transition is also

fueling militarization, increased defense spending, and a search for flexible partnerships rather than rigid alliances. Yet, despite these trends, the need to defend international law and reshape the global order into a more just and inclusive framework has become more urgent than ever.

In addition to U.S.-Russia rivalry, U.S.-China competition is gaining prominence. At the same time, discussions about a post-Western world order are gaining traction. The difference in perceptions between the United States and Europe, that have become more visible as a result of the wars in Ukraine and in Iran, point to potential fractures within the Western bloc. Meanwhile, Asia, Africa, and Latin America are rising, with the Global South demanding greater representation and a fairer distribution of power and resources. The future points toward a multipolar, multilayered, and multi-cluster international system.

NATO under Pressure: The Imperative of Transformation

Against this backdrop, NATO faces a critical moment of adaptation. The alliance must transform itself not only in response to evolving global threats but also due to shifts within the transatlantic relationship itself. As the United States adopts a more global strategic outlook and Europe debates strategic autonomy, defense resilience, and burden-sharing, NATO must strike a delicate balance between continuity and change.

Since its founding in 1949, NATO has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to changing strategic conditions, from collective defense during the Cold War to crisis management, stabilization operations, and counter-terrorism in the post-Cold War era. This adaptability has been one of the main reasons for the alliance's endurance. Today, however, the scope of transformation required is broader, more complex, and more urgent. NATO is no longer responding only to conventional military threats, but also to hybrid warfare, cyber threats, technological disruption, terrorism, irregular migration, energy insecurity, and the broader consequences of geopolitical fragmentation. Therefore, the alliance's future relevance will depend on its ability to preserve its core mission of collective defense while adapting its tools, capabilities, and strategic outlook to the realities of a more contested and unpredictable international environment.

Five key trends are shaping NATO's current evolution. The first is the renewed emphasis on strengthening deterrence and defense, particularly in response to the return of high intensity warfare and the growing unpredictability of the international security environment. The second is the rise of multi domain operations, which require the alliance to integrate land, air, sea, cyber, space, and information domains within a more coordinated strategic framework. The third is rapid technological innovation, especially in areas such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, advanced

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surveillance, and defense industrial production.

The fourth is the growing importance of hybrid and non-traditional threats, including disinformation, cyberattacks, terrorism, irregular migration, energy insecurity, and attacks on critical infrastructure. Finally, shifts in the broader strategic, security, and political environment are forcing NATO to rethink its priorities, partnerships, and internal cohesion. Taken together, these trends demonstrate that NATO's transformation is not simply a matter of military modernization, but a broader process of strategic adaptation to a more fragmented, technologically contested, and unpredictable world.

To remain effective, NATO must become more strategic, prepared, pragmatic, and flexible. The alliance needs to enhance its resilience, develop new capabilities, and adopt a 360-degree approach to security. Increasing defense spending, translating this

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spending into tangible capabilities, investing in innovative technologies, and strengthening its overall capacity for adaptation are essential for NATO. Yet, the alliance's greatest strength, its unity, represents its most significant vulnerability. Even the perception of division among allies undermines deterrence. In an era of increasing geopolitical fragmentation, upholding cohesion and solidarity is essential for NATO's credibility.

At the same time, Europe's role within NATO is evolving. As the assumptions underpinning European security erode, European countries are expected to take on greater responsibility for their defense. However, this effort should reinforce, not duplicate, NATO structures. Building a stronger European pillar within NATO, rather than creating parallel mechanisms, will be more efficient, strategically sound, and operationally realistic. The principles of non-duplication and inclusivity must remain central, ensuring that European security remains indivisible. Excluding non-EU European actors from defense initiatives will strategically cripple Europe.

By sidelining actors such as Türkiye, the United Kingdom, and Norway, Europe is unlikely to become more secure.

Türkiye's Strategic Role in a Transforming Alliance

Türkiye's membership in NATO is not merely a security preference; it is part of a broader strategic orientation that has extended from the Cold War to the present day. It represents a geopolitical choice and serves as a significant element of deterrence. Since joining NATO in 1952, Türkiye has been one of the main pillars of the alliance's southern flank, while also making substantial contributions to its eastern flank.

By virtue of its geography, bordering the Soviet Union during the Cold War and today located at the heart of critical regions such as Russia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, Türkiye has played a key role in NATO's early warning, deterrence, and forward defense strategies. This role continues to grow in importance. Türkiye's contributions to NATO can be highlighted under several main headings: military contributions, geographical and strategic contributions and counterterrorism contributions.

Türkiye's Military Contributions to NATO

Possessing NATO's second-largest army and air force, Türkiye has actively participated in numerous operations from Afghanistan to the Balkans, from Kosovo to the Mediterranean. Its role during the Afghanistan

War stands as a concrete example of burden-sharing within the alliance. These contributions can be observed more clearly across several concrete indicators, ranging from defense spending and institutional burden sharing to operational deployments, command responsibilities, and participation in major NATO exercises.

For instance, Türkiye's military contribution to NATO has become increasingly visible through both quantitative commitments and operational engagement. Its defense spending reached 2.33 percent of GDP in 2025 and is expected to rise to 2.85 percent in 2026, reflecting a growing commitment to allied burden sharing. This financial contribution is also visible at the institutional level, as Türkiye ranks seventh in contributions to NATO common funding. Beyond financial commitments, Türkiye possesses NATO's second largest army and air force, which gives the alliance substantial operational depth across multiple theatres. This capacity is not merely symbolic, as Türkiye ranks third in contributions to NATO missions and operations and continues to play an active role in allied deployments. Its position as the largest non-EU contributor to the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina further demonstrates this sustained operational responsibility.

In the same vein, Türkiye reassumed command of KFOR in October 2025, underlining her continuing role in maintaining stability in the Balkans. Türkiye's participation in NATO's largest exercise of the year, Stead-

fast Dart 26, with 2,000 troops, also highlights her readiness to contribute to collective defense and deterrence. Finally, the deployment of TCG Anadolu in the North Sea and the Baltic regions demonstrates Türkiye's expanding operational reach and her growing role in strengthening NATO's deterrence posture beyond her immediate neighborhood.

Türkiye is increasingly emerging within NATO not only as a military contributor but also as a defense industry producer and technology provider. The strategic value of Türkiye's defense industry becomes particularly visible in three interrelated areas: its capacity to produce affordable and flexible systems at speed, its ability to complement NATO's traditional reliance on large and costly platforms, and its contribution to bridging the operational gap between high intensity warfare and asymmetric threats.

Türkiye's defense industry has also become an increasingly important asset for NATO, particularly because it offers more affordable, flexible, and rapidly producible systems. This capacity helps balance NATO's traditional reliance on large, costly, and often slower to produce platforms. In doing so, Türkiye contributes to filling an important capability gap within the alliance by bridging the operational space between high intensity conventional warfare and asymmetric threats. As a result, Türkiye's role within NATO is no longer limited to military manpower or geographical advantage, but increasingly extends to defense innovation,

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Head of the Turkish Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, speaks during a NATO PA meeting in Brussels.
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technological adaptability, and operational flexibility.

Türkiye is no longer just a “troop-contributing country” within NATO; it has evolved into an actor that produces technology, has capacity to influence doctrine and has capacity to set standards in certain areas.

Türkiye's Geographical and Strategic Contributions to NATO

Türkiye has played a significant role in shaping NATO's agenda in critical areas such as Black Sea security, the protection of energy corridors, migration management, and cooperation with regional partners. Through its geographical position, diplomatic reach, and operational experience, Türkiye has helped the alliance develop a broader understanding of security that goes beyond conventional military threats. In this respect, Türkiye's contribution is not limited to deterrence and defense, but also ex-

tends to crisis management, regional stability, and the protection of strategic connectivity across Europe's wider neighborhood.

Its control over the Turkish Straits under the Montreux Convention has provided a strategic advantage for NATO, particularly in times of crisis. Although some attempt to portray the Montreux regime as limiting NATO's presence in the Black Sea, it remains a cornerstone of stability and security in the region. Türkiye maintains close cooperation with allied littoral states of the Black Sea.

Türkiye's Counterterrorism Contributions to NATO

As one of the most experienced countries in this field, Türkiye has contributed significantly to the inclusion of counterterrorism within NATO's security concept. Its operational experience in combating terrorist threats has broadened the alliance's threat

perception. As mentioned above, within this evolving landscape, Türkiye occupies a uniquely important position. As a NATO member since 1952, it serves not only as a military power but also as a strategic bridge between regions, cultures, and geopolitical spheres.

Geographically, Türkiye sits at the crossroads of the Black Sea, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean, three regions critical to NATO's security. Its role in balancing deterrence and diplomacy in the Black Sea, contributing to stability in the Eastern Mediterranean, and addressing security challenges in the Middle East underscores its strategic depth.

Militarily, Türkiye remains one of NATO's most significant contributors, possessing the alliance's second-largest army and playing an active role in operations from Afghanistan to the Balkans. Beyond troop contributions, it is increasingly emerging as a defense industry actor, producing cost-effective and flexible technologies that complement NATO's capabilities and address both conventional and asymmetric threats. It has evolved into an actor that produces technology, influences doctrine, and sets standards in certain areas.

Equally important is Türkiye's diplomatic reach. Its mediation efforts in various regions, as well as its engagement in cooperative security initiatives, enhance NATO's ability to manage crises proactively. In areas such as counterterrorism, Türkiye's extensive

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field experience has helped shape the alliance's broader threat perception. In this sense, Türkiye is no longer merely a contributor to NATO operations; it is a strategic enabler that provides the alliance with regional insight, operational flexibility, and diplomatic connectivity. In return, Türkiye expects security guarantees, political support, and solidarity from the alliance. While not without challenges, the Türkiye-NATO relationship remains dynamic, underpinned by mutual interdependence.

Challenges in Türkiye-NATO Relations

Relations between Türkiye and NATO have not been without challenges. Historically, Türkiye has not always relied on NATO as a fully reassuring partnership. Experiences such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Johnson Letter, and the embargoes following the Cyprus Peace Operation have left lasting impressions.

In recent years, Türkiye's bilateral relations with Russia have occasionally led to debates within the alliance. Is-

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sues such as energy interdependence and the acquisition of the S-400 air defense system have prompted some to question Türkiye's position within NATO. However, Türkiye has pursued its relations with Russia within a framework of strategic balance. As a NATO ally capable of maintaining dialogue with Russia, Türkiye has played a critical role in keeping communication channels open.

Direct engagement between President Erdoğan and President Putin facilitated peace talks during the Russia-Ukraine War, reinforced Türkiye's mediation role, and enabled initiatives such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative. At times, Türkiye has also felt that its expectations from NATO allies regarding security threats emanating from its southern borders have not been fully met. In the context of the Syrian crisis, differences have emerged between Türkiye's counterterrorism priorities and those of some allies.

Export restrictions imposed on Türkiye in this context were not in line with the spirit of alliance solidarity. However, the recent decision by

many allies to lift these restrictions is a positive and constructive step. This development not only helps restore confidence within the alliance, but also demonstrates that NATO's cohesion depends on addressing the legitimate security concerns of all members in a spirit of mutual trust and solidarity. Issues with Greece also constitute a distinct issue. While disagreements and conflicts between the two countries over the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean occasionally led to tensions within the alliance, NATO generally adopts a balanced approach.

Differences in security perceptions within NATO have also been evident during the membership processes of Sweden and Finland. While northern allies focused on threats from Russia, Türkiye emphasized its terrorism concerns in the south. Here, Türkiye's position was not about conditionality, but about ensuring alignment with the spirit of alliance solidarity.

The Ankara Summit: A Defining Moment

The upcoming NATO Summit in Ankara comes at a pivotal time for both the alliance and the broader international system. Hosting the summit underscores Türkiye's central role within NATO and offers an opportunity to shape the alliance's future direction. Two key points merit particular attention in relation to the agenda: strengthening defense and deterrence, including reaffirming allies' commitment to Article 5, and

preserving allied unity in an increasingly fragmented world. These priorities reflect the broader challenges facing NATO as it seeks to remain relevant and effective amid systemic transformation.

Ultimately, NATO is not merely an international organization; it is an alliance grounded in shared interests, commitments, and values. Its future will depend on the ability of its members to maintain cohesion while adapting to evolving realities. As long as allies sustain solidarity in the face of common threat perceptions, NATO will endure regardless of the need for transformation. Despite diverging approaches, I argue that an increasingly uncertain security environment makes it even more imperative to reinforce this shared interest on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a world moving toward multipolarity and uncertainty, Türkiye's role as a stabilizing force, a bridge-builder, and a strategic actor will become increasingly vital. The Ankara Summit, therefore, will not only be a diplomatic event but also a critical juncture in redefining the trajectory of both NATO and the evolving global order.

Conclusion

Despite its challenges, the Türkiye-NATO relationship remains dynamic and characterized by mutual interdependence. Türkiye provides not only military capabilities, but also strategic depth, regional perspective, op-

erational experience, and diplomatic connectivity to NATO. In return, Türkiye expects security guarantees, political support, and genuine solidarity from the alliance, particularly in areas that directly affect her national security.

Although the relationship has at times been complex, from the Cold War era to the Gulf War, and from the crises in Iraq and Syria to the most recent tensions involving Iran, NATO membership has not weakened Türkiye's security. On the contrary, it has strengthened it by embedding Türkiye within a collective defense structure and by providing an important framework for deterrence, consultation, and crisis management.

In all these crises, Türkiye has benefited from tangible allied support, particularly in the field of air defense, as well as from NATO infrastructure and collective security mechanisms. At the same time, Türkiye's own contributions have strengthened NATO's posture in critical regions, from the Black Sea and the Balkans to the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. This mutual dependence shows that Türkiye is not a peripheral actor within the alliance, but one of its central strategic pillars.

Türkiye continues to view NATO as the cornerstone of its security policy and advocates for an alliance capable of adapting to evolving conditions. In an increasingly uncertain international environment, NATO's relevance will depend not only on its military capabilities, but also on its

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ability to preserve unity, address the security concerns of all allies, and respond to new forms of geopolitical, technological, and hybrid threats.

Hosting the NATO Summit again after 2004, at such a critical moment, will therefore be highly significant. The messages delivered in Ankara will be important not only for Tür-

kiye-NATO relations, but also for the future direction of the alliance as a whole. The summit will provide an opportunity to reaffirm allied solidarity, strengthen deterrence, and underline Türkiye's indispensable role in the evolving security architecture.

Looking ahead, ensuring that Türkiye's security priorities are better understood within the alliance, and that NATO more comprehensively recognizes Türkiye's strategic importance, will be key to sustaining a mutually beneficial relationship. In this sense, the future of Türkiye-NATO relations will depend on a more balanced understanding of solidarity, one that recognizes both Türkiye's expectations from the alliance and the indispensable contributions Türkiye continues to make to allied security. ■