Opinion – Turkey's Role in Europe's Post-American Defense

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/08/28/opinion-turkeys-role-in-europes-post-american-defense/

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Donald Trump's pressure on Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own defense triggered an important shift. What had long been a comfortable arrangement – Europe acting as a security satellite under the American umbrella – suddenly looks fragile. For the first time in decades, European leaders began openly discussing the need to stand on their own feet and perhaps even emerge as a renewed geopolitical pole in world politics. Yet amid all this talk of autonomy, one question still hangs in the air: what role should Turkey play in Europe's post-American defense?

The debate in Western policy circles has been both lively and divided. Analysts tend to fall into two camps: some exaggerate Turkey's role, imagining it as a substitute for the United States, while others disregard Ankara altogether. Neither perspective is particularly helpful. A more realistic answer requires looking at the issue from different angles, acknowledging both Turkey's capabilities and its limitations. Some observers portray Turkey as a dynamic and strengthening military power, buoyed by a young population ready to fight. That assessment is not entirely wrong. Turkey has indeed a capable military force. But it is misleading to assume that Turkish soldiers will step in and fill the vacuum left behind by American troops. Turkey itself is encircled by conflicts in Syria, Iraq, the Caucasus, and beyond. It has no incentive to overextend itself on Europe's behalf.

For Europe, the smarter course is to take greater responsibility for its own defense, either by increasing troop numbers or by compensating with technological advances. Israel offers an instructive example here: it is widely recognized as a formidable military actor without ever needing to deploy large numbers of soldiers on foreign soil. If Turkish boots are not the answer, what role could Ankara realistically play? One idea occasionally floated is the revival of the Intermarium. Originally proposed by Polish leader Józef Piłsudski in the 1930s, the concept imagined a belt of nations stretching between the Baltic and the Black Seas, from Finland to Turkey, designed to contain Russian power. At first glance, this looks attractive. But critics quickly point to a central obstacle: Turkey's ongoing ties with Russia. Ankara is unlikely to abandon those ties without receiving something in return. There are two main reasons for this relationship. First, Turkey depends heavily on Russian natural gas imports. Second, it operates within Russia's geopolitical neighborhood, where Moscow continues to expand its influence in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and even Africa.

The energy dependence issue could be addressed. Both the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea contain vast natural gas reserves, more than enough to cover Turkey's long-term needs. With the right agreements, Ankara could reduce its reliance on Russia. Joint research into renewable energy for example, especially solar and wind, would reinforce this autonomy. Despite chronic economic mismanagement, Turkey remains an attractive location for long-term investment, with a young, skilled workforce and considerable technological talent.

The geopolitical challenge is more complex. Turkey has already taken steps to counterbalance Russian influence. Often on its own. Yet European governments have shown limited interest in confronting Moscow in Africa or the Caucasus. Left unsupported, Ankara risks overexposure. Still, there is potential for collaboration in areas where interests overlap. Defense industry cooperation is one such area. Turkey lacks expertise in complex systems such as advanced surface-to-air missiles. Europe, on the other hand, could benefit from Turkey's ability to produce military technologies more cheaply while maintaining resilience. The goal would not be to sever Ankara from Moscow

completely but to create incentives that gradually tilt its calculations toward Europe. Soft power instead of coercion.

This raises the question of whether Europe should pursue tactical cooperation with Turkey, or aim for something more strategic. One of the main arguments against deep strategic cooperation is Ankara's hard-nosed Realpolitik. Europe still aspires to build long-term alliances rooted in liberal democratic values. Turkey, by contrast, engages in transactional diplomacy, striking deals with whoever is useful at the moment, from Russia to Qatar to the EU. This mismatch suggests that the most realistic formula is to keep things simple: cooperate tactically when interests align, and accept distance when they do not. Limited incentives on both sides can sustain such pragmatic arrangements. This is already how Turkey conducts its foreign policy, playing off different powers in its neighborhood while simultaneously seeking investment.

For Europe, however, this would require a cultural shift. Especially in Germany, foreign policy debates remain framed in moral terms rather than in the language of national interest. Cooperating with countries like Turkey will be impossible unless Berlin and Brussels embrace a morally agnostic strategic culture based on interests: Realpolitik. Without this adjustment, Europe risks setting itself impossible standards while missing opportunities for pragmatic collaboration. Some argue that Europe should go further and build its own NATO. Such talk remains speculative, but it is worth asking what role Turkey would play in such a scenario. Clearly, Ankara will not replace the United States as Europe's security guarantor. But it does bring valuable assets that should not be ignored. Turkey's armed forces have extensive experience in guerrilla warfare against the PKK, in urban combat in Syria, and in training foreign militaries. These are not abstract credentials. They are practical skills Europe currently lacks. A European security project could leverage this expertise.

In return, Europe could provide what Turkey needs most: capital investment and advanced technology. Such a partnership could over time contribute to stabilizing Ukraine. Not through massive Turkish deployments, but by building up Ukraine's capacity with training and support. This would not only strengthen Kyiv but also create a broader architecture of security cooperation stretching from Warsaw and Berlin to Ankara. France, Germany, and Poland could all benefit from joint drills and training camps with Turkey. At the same time, they could deepen Ukraine's economic integration with Europe. The biggest challenge, of course, would be managing relations with Moscow. Here, a revitalized CSCE-style forum – a "CSCE 2.0" or new Helsinki process, if you will – might provide a useful diplomatic complement to military deterrence.

Turkey has proven itself a resilient and dynamic power at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. Any serious European security strategy will be harder to construct without Ankara's involvement. Ignoring Turkey is not an option. At the same time, there is no silver bullet that can reconcile every difference. For now, tactical cooperation remains more realistic than deep strategic alliance. Germany is still adjusting to the realities of a new geopolitical landscape, while Turkey struggles with democratic backsliding. A change of government in Ankara could reopen the door to deeper cooperation if democratic reforms restore the common ground Europe has long sought. Or, if Germany successfully adjusts to the new geopolitical realities of the multipolar world, this could decrease the burden to cooperate with Ankara. Until then, Europe must take Turkey for what it is: not a replacement for the United States, not an ally of destiny, but a partner of convenience. And with the Pax Americana fading, such partners may matter more than Europe is yet willing to admit.

About the author:

Anil Can Özgün (he/him) is a PhD student in Germany researching the historical roots of contemporary Turkish foreign policy. His work explores how the decline and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire continues to shape Turkey's approach to Syria. His research sits at the intersection of history and political science. He is a fellow of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.