AÜİİBFD
Anadolu Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi
Anadolu University Journal of Economics and Administrative Sciences

Volume: 27, **Number:** 2, **Year:** 2026
e-ISSN: 2687-184X
https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/anadoluibfd

Article Type: Research Article
Date Submitted: June 29, 2025
Date Accepted: May 20, 2026

DOI: 10.53443/anadoluibfd.1730124
2026, 27(2), 714-742

BETWEEN ALLIANCE AND AUTONOMY: THE EVOLUTION OF SKEPTICISM IN NATO–TÜRKIYE RELATIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the increasing skepticism shaping NATO–Türkiye relations and assesses its consequences for the Alliance's credibility, cohesion, and capacity to fulfill its collective defense mandate. It contends that geopolitical tensions, identity-based differences, and the proliferation of disinformation have fundamentally reshaped alliance politics. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study draws on document analysis of NATO's official statements, strategic reports, and policy texts concerning Türkiye, alongside discourse analysis of secondary sources, to investigate the conceptual foundations and long-term persistence of this skepticism. The findings indicate a clear departure from the cooperative dynamics of the Cold War era, replaced by a phase marked by strategic rivalries and mutual distrust. Divergent threat perceptions, disagreements over NATO's relations with the European Union, and disputes surrounding the Alliance's enlargement policies have transformed skepticism into an entrenched institutional feature. Türkiye's unilateral military operations in Syria and its defense partnerships with non-NATO actors have further eroded trust, weakening the collective understanding of shared security principles. Although NATO's primary mission remains to build solidarity and mutual trust among its members, growing normative and operational disagreements with Türkiye continue to strain the Alliance's internal cohesion. The research highlights the need to re-evaluate defense strategies, particularly regarding reliability, alliance unity, and operational coordination. Framing the analysis within geopolitical, normative, and institutional contexts, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of alliance politics in the 21st century.

Keywords: NATO, Alliance, Skepticism, Diplomacy, Security Tools

JEL Codes: F52, H50, H56, N40

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INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has become a key actor in international security, responding to shifting global balances of power and security threats. Designed as a collective defense mechanism against the Soviet threat during the Cold War, NATO expanded its security agenda after the Cold War with new functions such as peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and ballistic missile defense.

Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952 marked a turning point both in the country's security policies and in NATO's strategic balance. With its geostrategic position as a bridge between Europe and Asia, its control of the Straits, and its military capacity, Turkey served as a critical bulwark against Soviet expansion during the Cold War. After the Cold War, Turkey continued to play an active role in areas such as peacekeeping operations, counterterrorism, and contribution to NATO's missile defense systems.

However, Turkey-NATO relations have not always been harmonious. Fears of abandonment and entrapment are two key factors that have historically shaped Turkey's approach to NATO (Güvenç & Özel, 2012, p.535). The transformation of NATO's security approach in the post-Cold War era and Turkey's growing regional ambitions have created new parameters that question the harmony between the alliance and Ankara. Differences in interests and values, particularly with the US, have led to an erosion of Turkey's trust in the alliance. Ankara's purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia and its military operations in Syria have highlighted the diverging security priorities between NATO and Turkey.

These breaking points became even more pronounced after the 2016 coup attempt, accelerating Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy in its foreign policy. While Turkey has downplayed its commitment to the Western alliance, it has adopted a multifaceted and interest-focused foreign policy. In this context, it has focused on increasing its capacity to act more independently within NATO by developing cooperation with non-Western actors such as Russia and China (Shlykov, 2023). In the literature, this approach is conceptualized as strategic balancing (hedging) and leash-slipping (loosening alliance ties) strategies (Aslan, 2024, p.750). However, the discourse of strategic autonomy is used not only in foreign policy but also in domestic politics as a legitimacy tool for the ruling party (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021, p.1088).

However, Turkey's pursuit of this autonomy has limited success due to its ongoing economic and security dependence on the West. Furthermore, developing relations with new partners such as Russia and China confront Turkey with new asymmetric dependencies (Düzgit & Keyman, 2025). Therefore, although Turkey maintains its NATO membership, it is now positioned within the alliance as an actor demanding free-will participation and increased strategic autonomy.

In the literature, Turkey's relations with NATO have mostly been addressed within the context of either Cold War-era security dynamics or EU-Turkey relations. Existing studies on the post-2016 period, however, focus primarily on Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and China, but a systematic analysis of its position within NATO through the discourse of autonomy within the alliance remains limited. This study fills this gap, assessing Turkey's approach to NATO within the context of both intra-alliance security dynamics and its pursuit of autonomy within a multipolar system. This study examines Türkiye's post-2016 approach to NATO within a neorealist framework, focusing on how shifting threat perceptions, strategic autonomy, and normative tensions have transformed alliance dynamics. While neorealism provides the primary analytical framework, the study also incorporates insights from foreign policy analysis and neoclassical realism to account for the role of domestic political dynamics and identity-based narratives in shaping Türkiye's foreign policy behavior.

The article asks how skepticism has become institutionalized within NATO–Türkiye relations and what this transformation means for alliance cohesion and collective security. It argues that skepticism is no longer a temporary political disagreement but has evolved into a structural condition shaped by strategic disagreement, competing security priorities, and normative tensions within the Alliance. Existing studies on the post-2016 period primarily focus on Türkiye's relations with Russia and China or broader East–West frictions, while systematic analyses of skepticism within NATO–Türkiye relations remain limited. This study addresses this gap by examining strategic distrust as a structural feature of alliance politics through alliance discourse, institutional trust dynamics, and strategic divergence in an increasingly multipolar international system.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the evolution of skepticism in NATO–Türkiye relations and its implications for institutional unity and collective security. The research combines document analysis and discourse analysis in order to evaluate how strategic, institutional, and normative tensions have shaped mutual distrust within the Alliance.

The study primarily draws on NATO summit declarations, strategic concepts, official policy documents, public statements by political leaders, and secondary academic literature concerning NATO–Türkiye relations. Particular attention is given to the post-2016 period, during which Türkiye's pursuit of strategic autonomy became increasingly visible following the failed coup attempt, the S-400 procurement process, military operations in Syria, and debates surrounding NATO enlargement. This timeframe was

selected because it represents a significant turning point in the evolution of alliance dynamics and intra-alliance skepticism.

The document analysis focuses on identifying recurring themes related to strategic disagreement, alliance trust, collective security, democratic norms, and institutional cohesion. NATO summit communiqués and strategic documents were examined comparatively in order to trace shifts in alliance discourse regarding Türkiye's position within NATO. In addition, political rhetoric and public statements were analyzed to assess how skepticism has been framed and reproduced at both institutional and public levels.

The discourse analysis component of the study examines how concepts such as strategic autonomy, mistrust, democratic divergence, and security threats are constructed within political and institutional narratives. Rather than treating skepticism as a temporary political disagreement, the study conceptualizes it as a structural and institutionalized condition emerging from competing security perceptions and normative tensions within the Alliance.

While the study relies primarily on qualitative interpretation rather than quantitative measurement, public opinion surveys and secondary empirical findings are incorporated to support broader discussions regarding alliance perceptions and political rhetoric. Accordingly, the study adopts an interpretive and theoretically flexible approach informed by neorealism, foreign policy analysis, and alliance theory.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NATO-TÜRKIYE RELATIONS

Since joining NATO in 1952, Türkiye has remained a strategically important ally, although the relationship has periodically been marked by friction and disagreement. During the Cold War, Türkiye played a central role in securing NATO's southeastern flank against Soviet influence and became deeply integrated into the Western security architecture. In the post–Cold War era, however, changing security dynamics, regional crises, and Türkiye's pursuit of greater strategic autonomy have made its position within the Alliance increasingly contested. Türkiye's expanding regional ambitions in the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, and Eurasia have diverged from the priorities of several NATO members, contributing to growing skepticism within NATO. Political disputes over regional security policies, maritime boundaries, and NATO enlargement—particularly regarding Sweden and Finland's accession process—have further intensified disputes between Türkiye and its allies.

Tensions intensified following Türkiye's procurement of the Russian S-400 air defense system, which NATO allies regarded as incompatible with the Alliance's integrated defense architecture and collective

security principles. Additional disputes emerged over Türkiye's military operations in Syria and Libya, as well as disagreements concerning the use of the Incirlik Air Base. Together, these developments deepened skepticism regarding alliance cohesion, interoperability, and strategic trust within NATO. Western allies—particularly the United States, France, and Germany—have also viewed Türkiye's occasional cooperation with Russia as further widening the trust gap within the Alliance.

During the Cold War, Türkiye's strategic location and military capabilities made it a central component of NATO's southeastern defense architecture. Türkiye's accession to NATO in 1952 institutionalized its integration into the Western security system and reinforced its military and political alignment with the Western bloc through active participation in collective defense initiatives and broader regional security policies (Kuniholm, 2001, p. 342; Balcı, 2018, p. 889). American military assistance provided under the Truman Doctrine further strengthened Türkiye's defense capacity against Soviet expansionism and consolidated its position within the Western alliance (Harris, 1975, p. 62; Çakır, 2024, pp. 195–197; Athanassopoulou, 1999, pp. 177–178). Throughout the Cold War, NATO membership also contributed to Türkiye's integration into Western political and security structures while enhancing its national security capabilities. Despite this strategic alignment, however, disputes concerning national sovereignty, regional priorities, and alliance obligations periodically emerged within NATO–Türkiye relations, particularly regarding Türkiye's geopolitical role and political orientation within the Alliance (Bölme, 2022, pp. 98–99; Kınacıoğlu, 2017, p. 86).

These tensions became more visible during periods of bilateral crisis between Türkiye and the United States. One early example was the opium crisis of the early 1970s, which highlighted the difficulties of reconciling alliance commitments with concerns over national sovereignty and domestic political priorities (Robins, 2007, p. 28).

In the post–Cold War period, the 2003 Iraq War marked a significant turning point in NATO–Türkiye relations, exposing diverging threat perceptions and strategic priorities between Türkiye and the United States. Türkiye's refusal to allow U.S. military forces to use its territory during the invasion of Iraq reflected domestic political concerns and security sensitivities, particularly regarding the Kurdish issue (Robins, 2007, p. 30). These disagreements revealed the growing complexity of Türkiye's position within NATO as it sought to balance regional security concerns with alliance commitments (Akyeşilmen et al., 2020, p. 85).

Similar disputes deepened during Türkiye's military operations in Syria, especially due to disagreements over U.S. support for Kurdish groups that Ankara designates as terrorist organizations. These

disputes generated significant friction regarding NATO's collective security principles, strategic coordination, and operational cohesion (Akyeşilmen et al., 2020, p. 86).

Another major turning point emerged with Türkiye's procurement of the Russian S-400 missile defense system in 2019. NATO allies, particularly the United States, viewed the system as incompatible with NATO's integrated defense infrastructure and as a potential threat to alliance security (Açıkmeşe & Aksu, 2024, pp. 8–9; Outzen, 2014). Concerns regarding interoperability and the potential exposure of sensitive military technology ultimately led to Türkiye's removal from the F-35 program and the imposition of CAATSA sanctions by the United States (Hintz & Banks, 2022, p. 832; Kibaroğlu, 2019, p. 165).

The resurgence of Russian power, particularly following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, further intensified debates regarding Türkiye's role within NATO. While some observers argued that the war could encourage closer alignment between Türkiye and the Alliance, others viewed Türkiye's increasingly autonomous foreign policy and political transformation as continuing sources of disputes (Bölme, 2022, p. 101). In particular, disagreements over Türkiye's military activities in Syria and Libya, its Eastern Mediterranean policies, and its relations with Russia contributed to growing friction with several NATO members, especially France and other European allies.

Despite these tensions, Türkiye has continued to occupy a strategically important position within NATO due to its geopolitical location, military capabilities, and role in regional security dynamics. However, its pursuit of a more autonomous and multidimensional foreign policy has increasingly complicated its relationship with the Alliance. As a result, NATO–Türkiye relations have gradually evolved from a predominantly cooperative partnership toward a more contested and skepticism-driven relationship shaped by diverging strategic priorities and competing regional interests. These historical developments laid the foundation for the emergence of institutionalized skepticism within NATO–Türkiye relations.

SOURCES OF SKEPTICISM

Understanding this transformation requires examining skepticism not only as a political attitude but also as a structural feature of alliance politics. Skepticism generally refers to a questioning attitude toward knowledge, beliefs, and truth claims. In international relations, however, skepticism is more commonly associated with strategic distrust regarding the intentions, reliability, and commitments of other actors. From a realist perspective, such distrust is not merely psychological but structural, emerging from the anarchic nature of the international system in which states prioritize survival and security (Waltz, 1979).

Within this framework, the security dilemma represents an institutionalized form of skepticism. Efforts by one state to enhance its security—through military expansion, strategic partnerships, or autonomous foreign policy initiatives—are frequently perceived as threatening by others, thereby reinforcing cycles of mistrust and insecurity (Jervis, 1978, p. 176). In this sense, alliance uncertainty in NATO–Türkiye relations can be understood not only as a reaction to specific political disputes but also as a structural outcome of diverging threat perceptions and competing security priorities.

Neoclassical realist approaches further emphasize that alliance behavior is shaped not only by systemic pressures but also by domestic political dynamics and leadership perceptions (Rose, 1998, p. 154). From this perspective, Türkiye's pursuit of strategic autonomy, its regional security policies, and its engagement with non-Western actors have increasingly generated doubts among NATO allies regarding its strategic orientation (Açıkmeşe, 2024, p. 10). At the same time, Türkiye has perceived certain NATO policies—particularly U.S. cooperation with Kurdish groups in Syria and Western reactions following the 2016 coup attempt—as undermining its national security interests.

As a result, skepticism in NATO–Türkiye relations has evolved beyond temporary political disagreements and gradually become institutionalized within alliance dynamics. Türkiye's position within NATO has increasingly shifted from that of a reliable strategic partner toward a more contested and ambivalent actor shaped by diverging security priorities, domestic political developments, and mutual distrust (Sayari, 2000, pp. 172–173; Kirişçi, 2017, pp. 45–47).

Strategic Divergence And Defense Dilemmas Within The NATO–Türkiye Alliance

Türkiye has traditionally been regarded as a key NATO ally, owing to its substantial military capabilities and strategic importance. However, its regional aspirations have at times come into conflict with the Alliance's broader objectives, largely because of differing geopolitical priorities. Since the early 2000s, Türkiye has pursued a more autonomous foreign policy designed to balance its Western commitments with its interests in the East—an approach often referred to as "Constructive Eurasianism." This strategy aims to preserve cooperation with NATO partners while simultaneously deepening relations with Eastern powers, particularly Russia. Nevertheless, this balancing act has occasionally run counter to NATO's strategic agenda, especially when Türkiye develops ties with states viewed as adversaries by other members. Considering the conflicts in its region, Türkiye's participation in diplomatic processes in crisis areas such as Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean has revealed disagreements within NATO. These actions are often driven by Türkiye's national interests, which are incompatible with NATO's common goals and can lead to friction between member countries (Can, 2021, pp. 18-20).

Türkiye's approach to international missions, such as its civilian-focused contributions to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2005, is also referred to as an attitude contradicting NATO's predominantly military strategies. This difference highlights that Türkiye sometimes prioritizes soft power and cultural diplomacy, which may conflict with NATO's military objectives (Vamvakas, 2012, p.256). Since Türkiye's foreign policy is shaped by cultural and religious factors, such as its reluctance to intervene militarily against other Muslim countries, this stance can create strategic incompatibilities with NATO and lead to mutual disagreements regarding military interventions in crisis regions (Vamvakas, 2012, p. 261). Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system has been a source of significant skepticism between NATO and Türkiye, primarily due to its implications for NATO's security architecture and broader geopolitical dynamics. This decision emerged from a complex interplay of national interests, geopolitical strategies, and domestic political considerations. The purchase has generated controversy, including Türkiye's exclusion from the F-35 program and strained relations with the United States, and has revealed compelling factors within the NATO alliance for Türkiye. Türkiye's decision to purchase the S-400 system stems partly from its desire to balance relations with Russia and the West. Türkiye aims to prevent future conflicts and enhance its regional geopolitical power by cooperating with Russia (Saragih, 2023, pp. 53-54). Indeed, this purchase can be considered noteworthy in that it reflects Türkiye's pursuit of a more independent foreign policy, which seeks to defend its sovereignty and regional influence, at times conflicting with NATO's collective security goals.

Türkiye's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 Triumf (NATO code name: SA-21 Growler) long-range air defense system in 2017 was a defense purchase and a development that profoundly affected the strategic balances within the NATO alliance. Although Türkiye based this decision on a sovereign choice, rather than the urgent need for air defense, the technical incompatibility of the system with NATO's existing Integrated Air and Missile Defense System (NATINAMDS) and the security risks it poses have created profound skepticism among allies. When evaluated from a technical perspective, the S-400 system has the capacity to track, detect, and destroy various air threats, including fifth-generation fighter jets (Erhan, 2021). This feature has brought to the agenda the risk of analyzing the radar signatures of stealth aircraft, especially the F-35 Lightning II, developed by the US. The US and other NATO countries have claimed that the deployment of this system in Türkiye could allow Russian technical personnel or the system's software infrastructure to collect sensitive radar data about NATO platforms, potentially revealing strategic military secrets (Roberts, 2019). Another fundamental problem with the S-400 is that its command and control system is incompatible with NATO. The system cannot integrate with the Link 16 tactical data network used by NATO in joint operations, significantly weakening the joint operational capability in air defense. It is seen that this system contradicts NATO's transparent, centralized, and interconnected defense approach.

In addition, even if it is suggested that the S-400 be kept physically separate from NATO systems, that is, isolated in an "air-gapped" manner, the deployment of a Russian-made system in a NATO member country like Türkiye is still considered a security threat due to cybersecurity vulnerabilities, the risk of electronic espionage and the potential for intelligence leakage through backdoor access within the system. Although Türkiye has stated that it will keep the system isolated by physically separating it from NATO infrastructure, such technological dependencies can become strategic in the international arena, where there is no absolute security guarantee, as realist theory emphasizes (Waltz, 1997, p. 182). Due to these risks, the US removed Türkiye from the F-35 program in 2019 and imposed sanctions under the CAATSA (Countering Adversaries Through Sanctions Act). Therefore, Türkiye's S-400 procurement is considered a technical defense choice and a symbol of strategic incompatibility with NATO's integrated security architecture (Sayari, 2021, p.78).

This development has also sparked a deeper strategic debate within the alliance context: While Türkiye is seeking to enhance its maneuverability and preserve its autonomy in a multipolar international order, as envisioned by realist international relations theory, this orientation is viewed as a tendency that contradicts the collective security understanding. As a result, the S-400 purchase has become both a symbolic and structural manifestation of the growing skepticism in Türkiye-NATO relations. The evolving geopolitical landscape, including Russia's aggression in Ukraine, has complicated Türkiye's position within NATO as it shapes its relations with both Western allies and Russia (Bölme, 2022, p.110). While this situation has created significant friction within NATO, it is notable for reflecting broader trends in changing alliances and the complexity of modern geopolitics. Türkiye's actions can be considered part of a broader strategy to defend its autonomy and address security concerns, even if this means challenging traditional alliances. It is also crucial to recognize NATO's need to adapt to shifting dynamics and address the diverse security needs of its members in order to maintain its effectiveness.

Democratic Values And Human Rights: NATO's Concerns Over Türkiye

NATO functions not only as a military defense organization but also as a political alliance founded on liberal-democratic values. Article 2 of the 1949 Washington Treaty obliges member states to promote democratic institutions, safeguard individual freedoms, and uphold the rule of law (NATO, 1949).

In Türkiye, the political developments of the last decade have intensified such concerns among NATO allies. The state of emergency declared by the Turkish Grand National Assembly following the failed coup attempt in 2016 was one of the first issues to draw criticism. Over time, restrictions on press freedom, the erosion of judicial independence, and growing pressure on civil society have become increasingly evident.

These concerns have been consistently raised by international human rights organizations, particularly the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2020)

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights emphasized in his 2021 report that democratic regression in Türkiye has become structural, and that freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial have been seriously violated (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). In this context, normative tensions in NATO-Türkiye relations, especially in the areas of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, have deepened due to Türkiye's domestic policies contradicting the core values of the Alliance. These concerns also stem from Türkiye's inability to meet the European Union's 1993 Copenhagen political criteria (European Commission, Turkey 2022 Report). Despite Türkiye's efforts to align with European standards, persistent structural problems in these areas have raised questions about normative alignment within NATO (Rumford, 2002, p.60).

Western allies have stated that, despite Türkiye being a party to many core human rights treaties, its long-standing human rights violations, especially the increasing disproportionate practices within the framework of counter-terrorism policies, constitute a serious problem (Çınar & Şirin, 2017, p. 135). The 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye, which was a significant event in the country's recent history, led to the declaration of a state of emergency and a series of measures that have raised serious questions about Türkiye's commitment to human rights and democratic governance. Mass arrests, dismissals from public office and restrictions on freedom of expression carried out under the state of emergency have further deepened the normative disputes within NATO.

The post-coup process, which has increased concerns among NATO allies about Türkiye's commitment to democratic values and the rule of law, has led to allegations of erosion of judicial independence and suppression of dissent. This has further contributed to criticism of Türkiye's domestic policies within NATO, deepening skepticism about the lack of expected support from its allies, as well as for Türkiye (Demirsu, 2017, p. 111). In the eyes of NATO allies, this process is considered as a breaking point that questions Türkiye's commitment to both democratic values and the rule of law. The perception that Türkiye did not receive sufficient support from its Western allies during the period in question has further deepened the crisis of trust. Therefore, strategic distrust is not only an attitude towards Türkiye, but also a dynamic in which mutual distrust has become institutionalized. It is also observed that normative principles have become more visible in the recent strategic documents developed by NATO. In the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, democracy, individual freedoms and the rule of law are clearly defined as indispensable basic principles for the sustainability of collective security (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept).

This situation further legitimizes the questioning of the extent to which Türkiye's domestic policies are compatible with the institutional norms of the Alliance.

Although NATO does not have the authority to intervene directly in domestic politics, the increasing institutional sensitivity regarding democracy and human rights issues reinforces the perception that normative inconsistencies threaten the integrity of the Alliance. It should be remembered that Türkiye was similarly subject to intense criticism from Western institutions after the 1980 military coup due to widespread torture, poor prison conditions and repression of the Kurdish political opposition (Dagi, 2001, p.56). This historical example shows that when Türkiye deviates from democratic norms, a recurring normative distrust problem arises within NATO. Türkiye's counter-terrorism policies, internal security priorities, and practices regarding democratic norms create trust, harmony, and legitimacy problems to the extent that they contradict NATO's institutional values. Türkiye's perception that these criticisms are used to undermine its strategic interests further reinforces its defensive and autonomous foreign policy tendencies. Despite Türkiye's strategic importance, the failure to resolve normative problems creates potentially devastating risks for NATO's decision-making processes and regional cooperation.

Public Opinion and Political Rhetoric in NATO–Türkiye Relations

Skepticism in NATO–Türkiye relations arises from a mix of historical legacies, geopolitical shifts, and cultural perceptions, with political discourse and public opinion amplifying these tensions. Leaders in both Türkiye and other NATO states often frame alliance issues in ways that reinforce doubts and deepen mistrust. Strategic differences and identity-based frictions—exacerbated by regional crises and domestic political shifts—have solidified this climate of suspicion. This persistent distrust reflects not only temporary disagreements but also deeper structural disputes within the Alliance. In Türkiye, anti-American sentiment holds a particularly influential position, shaped largely by Washington's dominant role within NATO. This sentiment, rooted in decades of historical grievances, continues to be fueled by ongoing controversies, most notably U.S. support for Kurdish groups in Syria, which Ankara views as a direct threat to its national security.

This perception not only strengthens public opposition to NATO but also complicates diplomatic trust within the Alliance. In this sense, the Turkish media has also played a significant role in strengthening anti-NATO and anti-American sentiments, highlighting perceived contempt and threats from NATO members towards Turkish sovereignty and security (Grıgorıadıs & Aras, 2023, p. 132). In addition, NATO's participation in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, which were seen as initiatives led by the US, was strongly criticized by the Turkish public opinion, and despite the US, Türkiye's attitude towards intervention was

shaped negatively. The skepticism between the parties, fueled by public sentiment and different geopolitical priorities, has been frequently criticized by Turkish political leaders, especially in ideas that turned into action regarding the Middle East. On the other hand, the perception of insecurity stemming from Türkiye's domestic policies and approach to regional conflicts has been reflected in the public discourses of NATO member countries. It has increased strategic distrust regarding the alliance's harmony and strategic goals. This perception is particularly fueled by political discourses and public opinion that Türkiye will reject Sweden and Finland's NATO membership applications. In addition, anti-Turkish views influenced by clichés such as "bad Turk" and Islamophobia have become increasingly observable in the US public opinion (Yılmaz, 2011, p.192). These narratives contribute to the normalization of strategic distrust within alliance politics by reinforcing perceptions of incompatibility, alliance uncertainty, and mutual suspicion among both political elites and broader public audiences. It would not be incorrect to think that these views reflect the broader tensions in Türkiye-US relations, which have worsened since 2016.

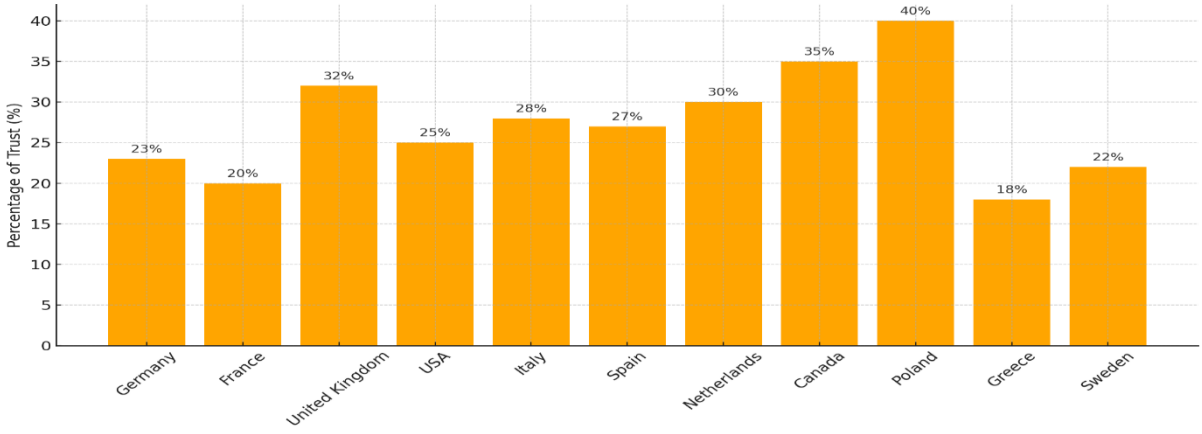
To summarize at this point, it is evident that public opinion in the US and some European countries generally influences Türkiye's actions within NATO, often shaping them around traditional clichés and concerns about Türkiye's compatibility with Western values (Turgut & Çakır, 2023, pp.32-33). The US, as a leading member of the alliance, often influences Türkiye's decisions and actions. Especially for European partners, perceiving Türkiye as a difficult partner due to its unique identity and political trajectory brings about Euroskepticism that may parallel alliance uncertainty towards NATO (Bakır, 2023, p.829). The dynamic created by this emotional state, which shapes public opinion in NATO member countries regarding Türkiye's compatibility with Western values and Euroskepticism, can lead to a complex interaction of skepticism in both contexts. The concerns of European NATO members about Türkiye's actions, perceived as undermining the alliance's unity, such as its military operations in Syria and its purchase of Russian defense systems, can serve as examples of this interaction at this point (Bölme, 2022, pp. 112-113).

Since Türkiye's role in NATO has historically been shaped by its strategic relationship with the US, European criticisms of Türkiye's identity and defense capabilities were often muted during the Cold War, when Türkiye was viewed as a crucial ally against Soviet expansion. However, after the end of the Cold War and the elimination of the Soviet threat, Türkiye's strategic importance began to be questioned more loudly by European allies. Especially after the 2003 Iraq War, significant differences and disagreements emerged between the US and Türkiye, leading to a deepening of important breaking points in the US-Türkiye axis. These differences raised questions regarding Türkiye's status as a 'reliable ally of NATO', and tendencies towards mutual skepticism regarding the issue of trust were reflected in discourses both in public opinion and among leaders. An important dimension of the alliance uncertainty that emerged in NATO-Türkiye relations is the public opinion in NATO member countries towards Türkiye. Türkiye's

foreign policy orientations, fluctuations in the democratization process, and approach to regional crises, especially since the 2000s, have eroded the trust in Türkiye among the Western public. Türkiye's military operations in Syria, its purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia, and its recent opposition to Sweden and Finland's NATO membership have contributed to these perceptions becoming even more negative.

According to Pew Research Center data for 2021, the public trust in Türkiye is relatively low in many NATO member countries. The chart below shows the percentages of those who trust Türkiye in 11 NATO member countries:

Table 1. Rate of those who trust Türkiye in NATO member countries (%)



Source: Pew Research Center, 2021 (Adapted)

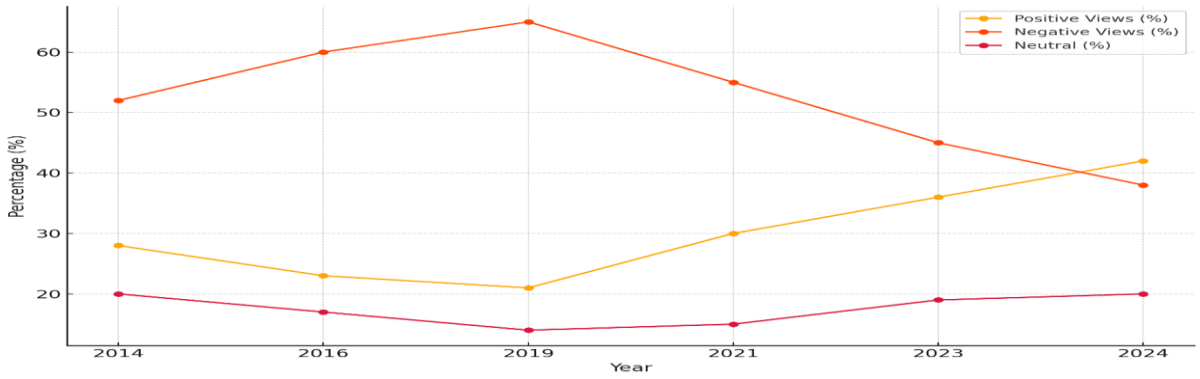
According to the graph:

- Public trust in Türkiye is relatively low in countries such as Germany (23%), France (20%) and Greece (18%). Türkiye is generally perceived as a problematic ally in these countries.
- The level of trust is also low in traditional NATO leaders such as the US (25%) and the UK (32%).
- In contrast, relatively higher rates are seen in countries such as Poland (40%) and Canada (35%).

This distribution shows that Türkiye's stance within NATO is perceived as problematic not only at the government level but also at the public level. Frequently expressed concerns in the Western public are that Türkiye is moving away from democratic values, becoming authoritarian, and exhibiting strategic preferences that contradict NATO's basic normative principles (Clancy et al., 2024).

Public perception of NATO in Türkiye has a dynamic structure that changes periodically and is shaped mainly by domestic political developments, foreign policy preferences and conflicting issues within the alliance. NATO membership has long been a contentious issue for large segments of Turkish society. The decisive role of the US in the alliance, in particular, has had negative reflections on the public when it conflicted with Türkiye's foreign policy priorities. Public opinion data for the period 2014–2024 clearly demonstrates the fluctuation in this perception. The graph below presents the change in the percentages of those who view NATO positively, negatively and neutrally in Türkiye over the years (Türkiye Raporu, 2023; Turkish Minute, 2025).

Table 2. Public perception towards NATO in Türkiye (2014-2024)



Source: Pew Research Center, 2024; Turkish Minute, 2025; Türkiye Report, 2023 (adapted)

According to the graph, public attitudes toward NATO in Türkiye have shifted notably in recent years. Positive perceptions of NATO in Türkiye, which had dropped to 21% in 2019, rose to 42% by 2024, largely driven by major geopolitical developments—most notably the Ukraine War—which reshaped regional security perceptions.

During this period, negative perceptions declined from 66% to 38%, signaling a gradual change in how NATO is viewed. Neutral opinions remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 13% and 20%. Regional and global developments have played a decisive role in shaping these attitudes. The conflict in Syria, U.S. support for the YPG, and disagreements over Sweden and Finland's NATO accession have been especially influential in forming Türkiye's view of the Alliance. NATO's renewed strategic relevance after the onset of the Ukraine war has also contributed to a moderately more favorable perception. However, skepticism endures on both sides; Turkish distrust of Western allies and Western criticism of Türkiye continue to feed one another, maintaining an environment of mutual suspicion within the Alliance.

FROM STRATEGIC COOPERATION TO STRUCTURAL SKEPTICISM: REFLECTIONS IN NATO SUMMIT DECLARATIONS

Since the late 2010s, Türkiye–NATO relations have shifted notably. This change reflects new strategic priorities, evolving norms, and different views on institutional unity. The Brussels, London, Madrid, and Vilnius summit communiqués explicitly and implicitly mention Türkiye, recognize its security concerns, stress allied unity, and use democratic language. However, they also reveal growing structural skepticism. While reaffirming NATO's commitment to Türkiye, they include value-based criticisms and highlight trust issues. These texts serve as institutional records, revealing both the vulnerabilities and the evolving nature of Türkiye–NATO relations.

Brussels Summit (2018): Strategic Cooperation and Normative Tensions

The 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels marked a key shift in the Alliance's security outlook, signaling a new approach to regional threats and cooperation. Its final communiqué made direct and indirect references to Türkiye, sending political and strategic messages that reflected debates about Türkiye's role and position within NATO (NATO, 2018). In the Brussels Summit Declaration, special emphasis was placed on threats coming from Türkiye's southern borders, and NATO's commitment to act together with all allies against security threats originating from its southern flank was reiterated. In this context, it was emphasized that Türkiye's geographical location, especially its proximity to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, is of key importance in terms of NATO's regional deterrence strategies. The following statement from the summit is noteworthy: "Türkiye continues to be subject to terrorist threats and instability in its neighborhood. We remain committed to ensuring the security and defense of the Alliance, including Türkiye's borders" (NATO, 2018, para. 17). Although this statement was interpreted as a sign of solidarity towards Türkiye's security sensitivities, there is intense criticism that these statements have not been translated into concrete action in practice (Bölme, 2022, p. 95; Açıkmeşe & Aksu, 2024).

Although the importance NATO attaches to the fight against terrorism was emphasized at the summit, Türkiye's sensitivities, especially regarding the YPG/PYD, were not directly included in the declaration. This situation created a perception that NATO did not consider Türkiye's security threats to be sufficiently legitimate, indicating an asymmetrical understanding of security regarding the definition of a "common threat" within the alliance (Robins, 2007, pp. 290-291; Outzen, 2014). The direct operational support that Türkiye expected from NATO, especially during the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations, was not included in the declaration, which strengthened the public discourse that "we were left alone" (Açıkmeşe & Aksu, 2024). The emphasis placed on fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and individual freedoms in the summit declaration is striking. For example, the following statement

was included in the declaration: "*We are committed to the rules-based international order and to the values of democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law*" (NATO, 2018, para. 2).

These value emphasis, especially in the context of the state of emergency regime implemented in Türkiye after the 2016 coup attempt and the accompanying democratic regressions, were perceived by Ankara as an indirect criticism (Council of Europe, 2020; Dagi, 200, 25). This situation gave rise to the idea that NATO was increasingly adopting a cooperative approach based on normative conditions in its approach towards Türkiye, deepening the atmosphere of mutual distrust (Rumford, 2002, pp. 54-55; Sayarı, 2000, p. 11). The period in which the Brussels Summit took place coincided with a critical period in which Türkiye accelerated the process of procuring the S-400 air defense system from Russia. Although this issue was not directly mentioned in the declaration, it is understood that strategic harmony problems between the members were gaining ground (Roberts, 2019). In this respect, the summit can be considered as a threshold that carries the preliminary signals of the S-400 crisis and sanctions discussions that will occur in the future.

The summit declaration has a structure that is consistent with the basic claims of the theory of skepticism in international relations. When evaluated from Türkiye's perspective:

- Alliance relations should be based not only on interests but also on mutual trust.
- Actors like Türkiye, squeezed between normative values and security interests, can develop structural suspicion towards their allies.
- Skepticism deepens over time in alliance relations, creating a perception of asymmetric threat and a sense of diplomatic inequality (Rathbun, 2007, p. 543; Rumelili, 2015, pp. 64-65).

In this context, although the Brussels Summit expressed NATO’s solidarity with Türkiye, the language and emphasis themes in the declaration were perceived by decision-makers in Türkiye not as confidence-building but as reinforcing suspicion. NATO’s “common values” discourse was interpreted in Türkiye as an intervention in internal affairs, revealing that the structural skepticism in alliance relations was reproduced through institutional documents.

London Summit (2019): Normative Tensions and Deepening Institutional Skepticism

The NATO Summit in London, held in 2019, took place amid deepening internal tensions, as well as to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the alliance. While the summit declaration emphasized NATO's unity and solidarity, it also included indirect references to Türkiye's position within the alliance, which has been questioned, particularly due to the procurement of the S-400 air defense system. One of the prominent themes of the summit was the "complex security environment" that NATO faces. Within this scope, threats such as Russia, China, cyberattacks, terrorism, and irregular migration were defined. The declaration highlighted the alliance's shifting threat perception with the phrase "We are addressing the breadth and scale of new challenges." However, structures such as the YPG/PYD, which Türkiye recognizes as terrorist organizations, were not directly mentioned among these definitions. This situation brought to the agenda Ankara's long-standing criticisms of the "lack of coordination in allies' threat definition" (Açıkmeşe & Aksu, 2024).

The summit declaration includes the phrase "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations," which remains at a general level and does not show apparent solidarity with Türkiye's concrete security concerns. The increasing criticism and threats of sanctions in Western public opinion following Türkiye's Operation Peace Spring in 2019 cast a shadow over the summit, which in turn raised questions about NATO's reliability in Türkiye. On the other hand, the declaration strongly emphasized NATO's fundamental values, especially democracy, human rights, and the rule of law: "Our Alliance is based on the enduring commitment to democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." This emphasis was interpreted as an indirect warning to Türkiye, especially in the context of the state of emergency declared after the July 15 coup attempt, the pressures on media freedom, and civil society (Council of Europe, 2020; Rumford, 2002, pp. 58-59).

The most striking development after the summit was the expression "brain death" used by French President Emmanuel Macron for NATO. This statement was evaluated as a reference to the deadlock in decision-making processes in which Türkiye was also involved; Macron's statements further increased doubts in Ankara about equality within the alliance (Oğuzlu, 2012, pp. 157-158). In this context, the London Summit, in support of the basic tenets of the theory of skepticism, reveals a value-based conflict between the allies, which deepens the crisis of confidence. Türkiye's tendency to act autonomously, especially in security policies, can be interpreted as a result of its strategic and normative alliance uncertainty towards NATO (Rathbun, 2007, p. 552; Rumelili, 2020, p. 71). In Türkiye's perception, NATO has become a control mechanism through which Western norms are imposed rather than a security umbrella.

Madrid Summit (2022): Renewal of the Strategic Concept and Positioning of Türkiye

The 2022 Madrid NATO Summit stood out for the adoption of the New NATO Strategic Concept, the most comprehensive strategic document of the post-Cold War era. The summit took place under the shadow of geopolitical changes that accelerated, especially with Russia's attacks on Ukraine. This new concept redefines NATO's threat perceptions, while bringing with it a clear emphasis and implicit disputes regarding Türkiye's role (NATO, 2022). In the new strategic document, Russia is explicitly defined as the "most important and direct threat." China, on the other hand, is mentioned as a strategic challenger. From Türkiye's perspective, these definitions, on the one hand, clarify NATO's common threat perception; on the other hand, they draw attention to the strategic gap that has opened up between Türkiye's different foreign policy priorities and the West. In particular, Türkiye's open dialogue channels with Russia and the development of economic relations with China have led to these threat definitions being met with caution in Ankara (Parmeter, 2023).

Before the summit, Türkiye objected to the membership processes of Sweden and Finland because they did not show sufficient cooperation in the fight against terrorism; this process was overcome with the trilateral agreement signed in Madrid. However, this situation reinforced the perception that Türkiye could only impose its demands within NATO through bargaining. This development indicates that Türkiye's sense of trust within the alliance has weakened, and skepticism is reflected in institutional relations (Schvachová & Vojtek, 2024, p. 11). No specific reference was made to Türkiye's security in the summit declaration, and it was only stated that NATO was on the alert against threats coming from the "South" in general. Although holistic deterrence is emphasized with the statement "We are strengthening our posture to defend every inch of Allied territory", the terrorist threat coming from Türkiye's southern border has not been clearly defined. This deficiency indicates that Türkiye continues to be the only NATO member to disagree with the definition of "asymmetric threat definition" (NATO Summit, 2022).

In addition, the statement "Our unity and solidarity are stronger than ever" in the summit documents emphasized the unity of the allies. However, this discourse creates the impression that the specific security threats and value differences faced by some members, such as Türkiye, are ignored. This situation illustrates that, as the theory of skepticism suggests, the dispute between security and normative values can create a lasting rift in allied relations (Glaser, 1997, p. 177; Jervis, 1978, pp. 169-170). The Madrid Summit also strengthened NATO's emphasis on democratic values. Expressions such as "We reaffirm our adherence to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law" in the document contribute to the construction of collective identity on the one hand, while on the other hand, they imply an implicit normative criticism for actors whose democratic performance is questioned, such as Türkiye. This increased

Ankara's distrust of the alliance and deepened normative skepticism (Rumford, 2002, p. 66; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

Vilnius Summit (2023): Enlargement Agenda, Normative Tensions and Türkiye's Position

The 2023 NATO Summit, held in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, coincided with a period during which important decisions were made regarding the alliance's expansion process, while normative divisions within NATO became evident. At the summit, decisions regarding Ukraine's membership perspective, Sweden's accession process, and increasing defense capacity were at the forefront. Türkiye, on the other hand, used its strategic position as a bargaining tool and maintained a more distant stance against normative discourses during this process (NATO, 2023). In the lead-up to the summit, Türkiye's veto of Sweden's NATO membership continued because sufficient measures were not taken against individuals and groups affiliated with the PKK. However, as a result of intensive diplomatic contacts in Vilnius, mediated by the NATO Secretary General, Türkiye decided to support Sweden's membership application. This support was made possible by recording in writing the commitments to combat terrorism that Türkiye had long demanded (Outzen, 2014; Turkish Minute, 2025).

In this respect, the Vilnius Summit shows that Türkiye's position in NATO has become dependent not only on military-strategic but also political and normative bargaining. The acceptance of Türkiye's demands has not been shaped by a common threat perception and allied solidarity, but rather by the politics of bargaining and balance. This situation highlights that, as the theory of skepticism suggests, trust between allies should not be assumed; instead, each actor seeks to maximize its interests (Rathbun, 2007, p. 554; Glaser, 1997, p. 181). The Vilnius declaration, like other summits, reiterated its commitment to NATO's fundamental values, with expressions such as "We reaffirm our unwavering commitment to democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law" included. This emphasis has also been read as an indirect criticism of Türkiye's democratic record (Council of Europe, 2020; Rumford, 2002, p. 58). It has been noted that the increasing normative criticisms of Türkiye in Western capitals, especially following the 2023 election process, are reflected in the summit documents. Türkiye was also among the countries that supported Ukraine's NATO membership at the Vilnius Summit. However, this support was expressed more cautiously and conditionally than by some allies. Türkiye's continued economic and energy cooperation with Russia reveals the strategic justifications behind this cautious approach (Dursun-Ozkanca, 2019, pp. 63-64). As a result, the Vilnius Summit demonstrates that both pragmatic cooperation and normative differences continue to deepen in NATO-Türkiye relations. Although Türkiye continues to be an

indispensable actor within NATO, it is evident that mutual alliance uncertainty is increasing as normative harmony is being distanced. As predicted by the skepticism theory:

- The alliance relationship does not operate based on shared values and interests, but on security-based reciprocity and unbalanced power relations.
- The opening between Türkiye's security priorities and NATO's value-oriented discourses reveals that relations have evolved into a tension that cannot be resolved, even with institutional guarantees (Jervis, 1978, p. 210; Rumelili, 2020, p. 68).

CONSEQUENCES OF THE GROWING SKEPTICISM

The increasing skepticism between NATO and Türkiye, rooted in a complex interplay of historical, political, and strategic factors, has significant and multifaceted effects on both sides. These effects span various dimensions, including military cooperation, political alliances, and the intricate dynamics of regional security. Türkiye's geographical importance and military capabilities have long made it a vital asset for NATO. However, recent changes in foreign policy and significant domestic political developments have led to increasing strains within the alliance. These tensions have profound implications for NATO's alignment strategies and Türkiye's interactions and relations on the global stage, particularly regarding regional security. Türkiye, which once aligned its national security interests with the alliance's security objectives, especially during the Cold War, has fundamentally changed its approach to international relations in response to the geopolitical landscape that emerged after the end of the Cold War. It has begun to adopt a more autonomous foreign policy stance, particularly regarding developments in the Middle East region. The historical relationship between Türkiye and NATO, shaped by the dynamics of Turkish-American relations, has consistently seen Türkiye assume the role of a key ally and supporter of the United States within the NATO framework. However, developments since the beginning of the 2010s have revealed a growing divergence in interests and values between Türkiye and its NATO allies, primarily the United States, resulting in a noticeable decline in American support for Türkiye and, as a result, increasing doubts among European NATO members about Türkiye's commitment to the alliance (Bölme, 2022, p.114).

The increasing skepticism between NATO and Türkiye has particularly significantly affected military cooperation. This alliance uncertainty, which has evolved due to a combination of political, strategic, and identity-related factors, has impacted joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and overall trust within the alliance. When Türkiye's changing foreign policy, rapprochement with Russia, and independent military actions are considered factors contributing to the atmosphere of mistrust within NATO, these developments have led to difficulties in maintaining harmonious military cooperation between the parties. This has led to

Türkiye being excluded from some joint military exercises as NATO seeks to maintain its operational security and technological integrity. The mistrust between Türkiye and other NATO members also negatively affects intelligence sharing, a critical component of military cooperation. Concerns about the potential for sharing sensitive information with non-NATO actors, such as Russia, have led to a more cautious approach to intelligence exchanges with Türkiye (Schvachova & Vojtek, 2024, p.15). Western concerns that fear of abandonment and the need for strategic independence are driving Türkiye to adopt a more balanced foreign policy, which includes diversifying its intelligence partnerships, tend to perceive Türkiye's actions as distinct from the alliance's collective security interests (Pesu & Sinkkonnen, 2023, pp.211-212). The perception of erosion of trust within the alliance has been further exacerbated by Türkiye's autonomous foreign policy in regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, which has led to tensions with NATO members, particularly France. When examined in the context of relations with non-NATO countries outside its member states, the increasing skepticism between NATO and Türkiye has significant geopolitical implications, particularly regarding regional power dynamics and Türkiye's relations with non-NATO countries, such as Russia and Iran. The growing alliance uncertainty toward NATO arises from a mix of strategic, political, and historical factors that have pushed Türkiye to seek alternative partnerships and explore new regional alignments. As confidence in NATO has declined, Ankara's engagement with neighboring and regional actors has gained greater significance, with the potential to alter power dynamics in regions such as the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Since its founding, Türkiye's foreign policy orientation has gradually shifted from a predominantly Western-centric outlook to one with a stronger Eurasian dimension. This change reflects, in part, frustration with both the EU and NATO, as well as an interest in forging closer ties with regional powers, including Russia and Iran. Among Turkish intellectual and political circles, the concept of "Eurasianism" has become increasingly influential, signaling a possible reorientation of Türkiye's geopolitical focus toward the East (Lin, 2016, p.36).

Despite historical tensions, Türkiye has developed a pragmatic relationship with Russia, characterized by cooperation in defense, energy, and foreign policy. A complex equation has emerged as Türkiye balances its NATO obligations with its interests in maintaining strong ties with Russia. The S-400 missile defense system purchase from Russia is a notable example, as is Türkiye's willingness to prioritize its national interests over NATO's strategic preferences (Parmeter, 2023, p. 22; Yegin, 2019). The relations developed among Türkiye, Russia, and Iran are reshaping the power dynamics in the Middle East and the Caucasus, and despite having different long-term goals, they are increasingly cooperating on regional issues, such as the Syrian conflict, where they find common ground. This cooperation is interpreted as a challenge to NATO's influence in the region and is seen as developments that hinder the West's efforts to maintain a

coherent security strategy. Energy cooperation, a critical component of Türkiye's relations with Russia and Iran, Türkiye's dependence on Russian gas, and its participation in regional energy projects increase the economic interdependence between these countries. In essence, this interdependence provides Türkiye with an advantage in its relations with both NATO and non-NATO countries (Didic & Kösebalan, 2019, pp. 132-133). While Türkiye's multifaceted foreign policy offers short-term benefits, it also poses risks, providing Türkiye with flexibility but also creating uncertainty about its long-term strategic commitments (Parmeter, 2023, p.24). The ongoing skepticism between NATO and Türkiye also has significant implications for NATO's cohesion and reliability on the global stage. Türkiye, a vital member of NATO with its strategic location and military capabilities, has not only caused strains within the alliance with its recent changes in foreign policy and increasing independence but these tensions have been exacerbated by Türkiye's military interventions in Syria and actions such as the purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system. This raises concerns among NATO members about Türkiye's commitment to the alliance's common security goals, and this strategic distrust could potentially undermine NATO's unity and erode its credibility as a cohesive military alliance. When examined in the context of divergent interests, intra-alliance opposition, and identity issues, Türkiye's independent foreign policy, particularly its actions in Syria and defense procurement options, is the most obvious disagreement of interests that creates friction with NATO allies (Açıkmeşe & Aksu, 2024, p.12). In addition, Türkiye's boundary-testing and boundary-breaking behaviors, as summarized in its relations with the West, highlight the increasing intra-alliance opposition that could challenge NATO's internal cohesion (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019, p.1264). As Türkiye pursues a more independent foreign policy and engages in military interventions, the erosion and tension it creates within the alliance can be interpreted, at least in part, as the emergence of identity and trust issues and Türkiye's compatibility with the values and interests of the West can be questioned Türkiye's autonomous foreign policy and geopolitical maneuvers, such as those in the Eastern Mediterranean, reveal vulnerabilities within NATO and can be interpreted as moves that can undermine the perception of unity within the alliance and cast a shadow over its ability to present a united front (Can, 2021, p.30).

CONCLUSION

Türkiye's role within NATO carries exceptional weight, making it one of the Alliance's most complex and unique partnerships. This relationship—rooted in historical depth, strategic geography, and a central position in the security architecture—has repeatedly been tested by changing geopolitical realities. Shifts in global power balances, ongoing regional conflicts, and identity-based disagreements have all shaped this evolving dynamic. Today, skepticism is reflected not only in political rhetoric and public attitudes but also in defense cooperation, threat perception, and overall foreign policy orientation.

In recent years, growing calls for reform within NATO have underlined the need to address this mistrust. Türkiye's pursuit of greater strategic independence, combined with the Alliance's often rigid approach to collective security, has repeatedly triggered strains. Disputes over the Syrian war, contrasting counterterrorism policies, disagreements regarding the accession of Sweden and Finland, and Ankara's purchase of Russian-made defense systems have deepened the climate of suspicion. Restoring trust will therefore require more than routine institutional adjustments; it demands the creation of a cooperative framework capable of addressing the security concerns of all members in a fair and constructive manner.

Reducing this skepticism depends largely on Türkiye's ability to express its security concerns clearly and effectively through NATO's institutional mechanisms. At the same time, the Alliance must adopt a more inclusive and flexible approach to threat assessment, giving real weight to Türkiye's strategic priorities. Resolving technical incompatibilities in defense systems, expanding joint military exercises, and improving technological cooperation would strengthen operational coordination and deepen strategic ties. Equally important is consistent and well-structured public diplomacy designed to reshape mutual perceptions and build an atmosphere of trust among member states.

Clear communication about NATO's role in Türkiye should remain a priority and be supported by targeted public outreach initiatives. Academic cooperation, media engagement, and cultural exchange projects could help counter negative stereotypes about Türkiye in Western public opinion. Such efforts would not only improve mutual understanding but could also positively influence policy-making within the Alliance. As highlighted in the NATO Brussels Summit Declaration (2018), "NATO's strength depends on the cohesion and trust among its members, and Türkiye plays a critical role in maintaining this southern flank stability."

Moreover, NATO's stronger recognition of Türkiye's security concerns during regional crises would reinforce its crisis management capacity and encourage Ankara to reaffirm its institutional commitment. Practical mechanisms—such as coordinated intervention frameworks, rapid-response forces, and flexible funding models—would send a clear signal that Türkiye remains a valued and indispensable partner. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly underlined this point, stating that "Türkiye is a highly valued Ally, making essential contributions to our collective defense and to the fight against terrorism." Similarly, Türkiye expects its concerns to be fully acknowledged. As President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan emphasized at the 2022 Madrid Summit, "Türkiye has always fulfilled its responsibilities within NATO and expects its legitimate security concerns to be respected by all Allies."

However, these affirmations often remain rhetorical and fail to fully address the structural sources of mistrust. While high-level statements underline Türkiye's importance, practical steps to incorporate its security concerns into NATO's broader strategic agenda have been limited. This gap between discourse and action fuels persistent skepticism, reinforcing the perception that Ankara's concerns are acknowledged but not genuinely prioritized. Without concrete and consistent policy adjustments, such statements risk being viewed as symbolic gestures rather than indicators of real strategic alignment.

Balancing Türkiye's desire for strategic autonomy with NATO's collective defense priorities is essential not only for Ankara but also for the Alliance's long-term stability. A comprehensive approach built on mutual understanding would allow NATO to preserve its internal cohesion while maintaining a unified response to external threats, offering a constructive vision for the future.

The findings of this study suggest that skepticism within alliances should not be understood merely as a temporary diplomatic disagreement, but rather as a structural and institutionalized condition arising from diverging security perceptions, debates over independent foreign policy postures, and normative tensions. In the case of NATO–Türkiye relations, strategic distrust has gradually evolved beyond episodic political crises and become embedded within broader alliance dynamics, reshaping patterns of trust, cooperation, and strategic coordination.

This study also contributes to alliance theory by demonstrating that alliance cohesion is influenced not only by external threats but also by internal disagreements concerning regional priorities, identity-based narratives, and competing security perceptions. From this perspective, Türkiye's pursuit of strategic autonomy reflects both systemic pressures and domestic political considerations, highlighting the limitations of explanations based solely on traditional alliance commitments.

Ultimately, the future of NATO–Türkiye relations will likely depend on the Alliance's ability to manage strategic disagreement while maintaining institutional cohesion in an increasingly multipolar and uncertain international order.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

The author declares that all contributions to this manuscript were made solely by the author. The author also declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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