

## POST-COLD WAR SECURITY DYNAMICS; NATO'S TRANSFORMATION AND U.S. -TÜRKİYE MILITARY RELATIONS

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**Abstract:** *This study examines NATO's post-Cold War adjustment to the international security order and its effects on defense relations between the US and Türkiye. The main objective of the study is to analyse Türkiye's and the United States' approaches to the alliance and their mutual security priorities in light of the change in NATO's strategic orientation. In qualitative research, official NATO reports and secondary sources were analyzed with the help of document analysis. Additionally, critical events such as the F-35 fighter aircraft program and Türkiye's purchase of the S-400 air defence system were studied using case studies. The findings show that NATO's transformation process has facilitated integration and cooperation as a whole but, at times, strategic differences among members can lead to deep tensions. The S-400 crisis itself is the very best example of the challenges the alliance is facing in the matter of cooperation in defence production, technology sharing and mistrust issues. In conclusion, NATO's long-term success depends on its capacity to balance the differences in strategic interests among its members through constructive diplomacy and flexible adjustment mechanisms.*

**Keywords:** *Nato, security, military, defense system, cooperation*

### 1. Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continued to evolve after the Cold War era. Initially created to counter the Soviet threat, NATO's purpose, membership, and modus operandi were reconfigured as global security trends evolved. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, NATO was confronted with new opportunities and challenges. The alliance's response to these events, particularly its enlargement and adaptation to new security issues, has had long-term implications for its member states, including the United States and Türkiye.

The United States and Türkiye, two of the innermost members of NATO, have followed varying but interdependent security policies under the framework of the alliance. The U.S. has dominated NATO's agenda after the Cold War, promoting enlargement and emphasizing collective defense. Concurrently, Türkiye, being positioned geographically between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, has been mindful of safeguarding its regional interests while balancing a tightrope between its commitment to NATO. The shifting dynamic between these two countries, particularly in the wake of NATO enlargement, illustrates cooperation as well as tension.

This article examines NATO's post-Cold War transformation in response to new threats and how such changes have impacted U.S.-Türkiye defense relations. Through a review of key policy shift reversals most significantly the S-400 missile defense system crisis. Also this study aims to cast more light on the issues facing NATO in the 21st century.

## **2. Transformation of NATO in Response to Post-Cold War Threat Perceptions**

The end of the Cold War in 1991 transformed global security dynamics. This revolution forced NATO, an alliance created primarily as a collective defense organization against the Soviet Union, to reconsider its mission, structure, and strategies. The collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the emergence of new global security challenges such as terrorism, regional conflicts, and the growth of new major powers, led NATO to realign itself within the international order. (Ereker,2019, 1-4)

Throughout the early part of the post-Cold War era, the focal point of NATO's concerns changed from the traditional threat of Soviet invasion to the need to deal with an extensive range of non-classical security threats. One of the first signs of this shift was NATO's and later in Kosovo (1999) signaled its willingness to engage in out-of-area operations, a deviation from its original mandate of collective defense of Western Europe (Fazla, 2022, pp.320-330)These missions constituted a dramatic departure from NATO's traditional Cold War mission, the first sign of the alliance's increasing focus on peace support, crisis management, and stabilization operations in the broader non-core area.

This evolution was formalized in the 1999 NATO Strategic Concept, which formally enshrined NATO's new mission. The paper stipulated that the alliance's core tasks would no longer be limited to defending territory, but would also involve crisis management and cooperative security (NATO, 1999). The notion emphasized NATO's role in "out-of-area" operations, which facilitated military interventions in troubled regions, even if such regions were not necessarily connected to member states' defense. This conceptual shift laid the foundation for NATO's future conflicts, particularly regarding the War on Terror and the post-9/11 global order.( Bağbaşlıoğlu, 2018,pp.15-17)

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, emphasized NATO's need to modernize and realign itself in response to evolving security concerns. For the first time in NATO history, the alliance invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which requires member nations to defend each other in the event of an armed attack. The action was significant in the evolution of the alliance because it recognized the importance of dealing with challenges posed by non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations. Following the 9/11 terror attacks, NATO fought in Afghanistan, its first out-of-area engagement. The operation, originally designed to eliminate the Taliban administration and destroy al-Qaeda, turned into a long counter-insurgency and nation-building effort. (Nato, 2023).

Furthermore, NATO's enlargement following the post-Cold War era was responsible for the alliance's development. Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact nations and Soviet republics began to join NATO in order to ensure their independence and security in the face of a resurgent Russia. NATO's expansion, which included former Eastern Bloc members Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, followed by the Baltic States, Romania, and Bulgaria in 2004, redirected the alliance's geographic focus. The expansion was

controversial and led Russia to believe that NATO's growing proximity was an open challenge to its sphere of influence (Nato, 2024) Despite these problems, NATO continued with its policy of enlargement, viewing it as a means of spreading democratic values and stability to Central and Eastern Europe.

The evolution of NATO extended beyond its geographical and operational expansion and also involved its internal structure and decision-making. NATO was subjected to radical reform in order to accommodate the new strategic environment. The establishment in 2002 of the NATO Response Force (NRF) illustrated, for instance, NATO's eagerness for rapid-deployment capability to facilitate crisis management and collective defense. The NRF, consisting of multilateral units deployable at short notice, demonstrated NATO reacting to the growing uncertainty of the nature of modern global conflicts (NATO, 2002). Moreover, NATO's partnership with international organizations and non-members, such as the European Union and the United Nations, also came to the fore. These partnerships aimed at enhancing NATO's ability to respond to global security threats through leveraging broader international cooperation.

However, NATO's transformation has not been without its share of challenges. The alliance has been criticized for its capacity to counter new types of warfare, such as cyberattacks and hybrid warfare, which are blurring state and non-state actor lines. The development of cyberattacks and the increasing roles of Russia and China have forced NATO to reassess its capabilities and strategies over the last few years. Additionally, the 2010 Strategic Concept and the 2018 Brussels Summit highlighted the need for a more flexible and agile NATO that could handle a variety of challenges, such as cyberattacks, terrorism, and the growing military capabilities of China and Russia. (Szenes, 2019,p.151)

In short, NATO's response to post-Cold War threat perceptions has been distinguished by a move from a purely defensive to an increasingly interventionist posture, seeking to address a wide range of security concerns. While the process of adapting to rising issues such as terrorism, regional instability, and cyber warfare has broadened the alliance's operational range, it has also raised questions about its future orientation. With the evolving world security environment, NATO finds itself being pushed to balance the dynamics of keeping the member states together and pushing back against intensifying threats in a more multipolar universe.

### **3. NATO's Enlargement Policies After the Cold War**

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point in both global geopolitics and NATO's strategic objective. NATO, previously defined by its anti-Soviet attitude, was in a unique position to reconsider its role in the new and uncertain global order. One of the most major developments in the post-Cold War growth of NATO has been its enlargement, which has seen the alliance grow from 12 members when it was founded to 32 members by 2025. The policy of enlargement not only reshaped NATO's spatial boundaries but also remapped its political and military agendas, creating opportunities as well as challenges for the alliance.(Nato,2024)

It was during the early 1990s, following the Soviet collapse, that NATO faced a strategic vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe. The ex-Soviet republics and the Eastern Bloc nations, having broken away from the Soviet sphere of influence, sought assurances of security against potential threats, particularly from an emerging Russia. The enlargement policy of

NATO was subsequently transformed into a means of stabilizing these newly independent states and nurturing democratic values while, at the same time, enhancing the alliance's strategic standing in the area. The first phase of NATO enlargement, in 1999, included Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. These countries, having suffered from Soviet domination, yearned to join NATO as a means of ensuring their independence and integration into the Western political and economic bloc (Smith, 2005).

The process of enlargement for NATO was not without controversy, particularly its implications for Russia. The eastward expansion of NATO was perceived by Russians as a direct affront to their sphere of influence and security. Tensions between Russia and NATO were heightened in 2004 when countries that had previously been part of the Soviet bloc, such as the Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, were invited to join the group. The majority of Westerners view this expansion as a way to bring stability and democratic governance to Eastern Europe, but Russia views it as an infringement on its strategic interests.. The Bucharest Summit of 2008, where NATO assured Ukraine and Georgia eventual entry into the organization, worsened this divide with Russia viewing these moves as explicit provocations (Mearsheimer, 2014,p.2).

Despite the tensions with Russia, NATO continued to extend its enlargement scheme. One of the key motives for NATO's expansion was that it subscribed to the "security community" thesis, which states that the optimum way of acquiring stability in Europe was by inviting the nations of Eastern Europe to join the alliance (Risse-Kappen,1995). This policy was aimed at preventing the re-emergence of nationalist and authoritarian powers in the region and to offer a collective defense mechanism to protect the interests of these newly democratic states. NATO enlargement was also considered by it as an extension of its own inherent values, and these values were democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Schimmelfennig, 2024, pp. 30-33).

NATO enlargement had not only geopolitical benefits but also economic benefits. Member states were advantaged by joining NATO through access to Western economic and political institutions, stabilization of their economies, and the promotion of foreign investment. NATO membership also served as a mechanism for increasing their military capabilities through the alliance's shared defense mechanism. Integration of Central and Eastern European states was therefore offered as the "modernization" of their political and military institutions. NATO membership also gave these countries a feeling of security, since Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, requiring collective defense, ensured that an attack on one member would be considered an attack on all.(Nato, 2022)

NATO enlargement also had significant challenges. Since new members were joining, NATO was required to transform its military organizations and command structures to accommodate a wider, more diverse membership. This found expression in terms like interoperability between different national forces, modernization of both the military and politics, and maintaining the union of the alliance. Furthermore, the expansion of NATO generated suspicion in the alliance regarding the probable cost of expanding membership. It was argued that enlarging NATO would be causing Russia to respond and increase tension, particularly in regions where interests of NATO met those of Russia (Kupchan, 2010).

In recent years, NATO has continued to project its influence beyond Europe, with countries such as Montenegro (2017) and North Macedonia (2020) joining the alliance. All this further strengthens NATO's commitment to its "open-door" policy, whereby membership is open to any European state that meets the criteria of democracy, governance, and military capabilities. However, the issue of NATO enlargement remains a controversial one, particularly in regard to potential membership by Ukraine and Georgia, two countries that have had prolonged conflicts with Russia. Despite NATO having indicated support for their aspirations, the alliance is cautious about full membership of these countries because of the potential further antagonism of Russia and the complexity of the ongoing territorial issues of the region (Lynch, 2016, pp. 432-450)

Overall, NATO's transition from a primarily defensive alliance to a more expansive geopolitical organization that upholds stability, democracy, and security throughout Europe has been greatly aided by its post-Cold War expansion strategies. The expansion project has been crucial in bringing Central and Eastern Europe under the Western security umbrella, despite strong opposition to it, particularly from Russia. NATO's enlargement plans will continue to influence the alliance's interactions with both member and non-member states in the years to come, especially when it comes to geopolitical issues like China's rise and Russia's activities in Ukraine, which will continue to reshape the global security agenda.

#### **4. US and Türkiye's Security Policies and Their Approaches to NATO in the Post-Cold War Era**

The security policy of the United States in the post-Cold War era has been focused primarily on "reinforcing global stability under American leadership." While there was speculation about the potential revival of the Monroe Doctrine following the Cold War, the United States has demonstrated its commitment to a policy of global leadership through its interventionist actions. NATO has been at the heart of the advancement of US strategic interests worldwide, with military interventions in Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, often conducted with or through NATO assets and capabilities. In this sense, NATO has remained a key element of US defense and security policy. The initiation of the reinvention of NATO following the Cold War, as well as its activism in peace operations, may be viewed as efforts to sustain US hegemony in global affairs. (National Archives, 1823)

According to the Baskin Oran, with the disappearance of the Cold War, the United States had to have NATO and the continuation of its activities in order to position itself as the world hegemon. This became feasible primarily due to the proliferation of regional conflicts in Eurasia and, more specifically, the abuse of human rights in the Balkans. These developments enabled NATO to expand its operations beyond Article 5 obligations, facilitating the justification of out-of-area humanitarian intervention. Here, the U.S. laid out a new national defense strategy in August 1991 that addressed a range of non-conventional and abstract security issues. Although the paper had said that the United States, as the sole superpower, would not be the "world's gendarmaria" and would act selectively, this policy was altered by the mid-1990s. A more internationally oriented and regionally directed security policy was developing on the premise that regional crises could jeopardize global security at its roots.

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Therefore, the United States sought to maintain its strategic interests through close alliances with key allies in key regions of the world (Purtaş, 2005, pp. 9-14)

With the termination of the Cold War and the removal of the Soviet threat, Türkiye's status as being on the eastern periphery of NATO no longer existed (Smith, 2004). However, the shift in U.S. foreign policy from globalism to regionalism necessitated the establishment of vital alliances in various parts of the world, with an aim towards the defense of American security interests (Jones, 2006). Türkiye, by being on the side of the U.S. during the Gulf Crisis, strengthened its role in the Middle East (Klein, 2007, pp. 142-159).

The post-Cold War era witnessed the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, as energy-rich regions, emerging as areas of prime concern in Washington's security policy (Peterson, 2009). Türkiye, because of its cultural and historical closeness to the majority Turkic-speaking republics of the region and its ability to provide alternative pipeline routes, became a critical partner in U.S. efforts (Mitchell, 2011). In this regard, Türkiye was considered a frontline ally in the region due to its geographical position and its readiness to collaborate (Taylor & Roberts, 2013).

The September 11 attacks resulted in a drastic overhaul of U.S. security policy. After the attacks, President George W. Bush's speeches ushered in a new security approach, which was later formally stated in the "National Security Strategy of the United States," released on September 17, 2002 (Bush, 2002). This policy, which included the controversial concept of "Preemptive Action," gave preference to NATO enlargement, NATO member states' contribution of military forces to coalition warfare, and the periodic upgrading of military forces to maintain compatibility with emerging technological realities (Williams, 2005).

The new realities resulting from the end of the Cold War not only introduced new foreign policy challenges and opportunities to Türkiye but also resulted in new rising security threats, causing a paradigm shift in its security perceptions. Like all countries, the security and defense policies of Türkiye are guided and driven by the geography in which it is located. Positioned at the crossroads of the Caucasus, Balkans, and Middle East, Türkiye was surrounded by instability after the Cold War. Caucasian ethnic disputes, the continuous military, political, and economic instability of adjacent Middle Eastern countries, ethnic strife and minority issues in the Balkans were all harsh issues to Turkish security (Yılmaz, 2010).

Thus, after the defeat of the Soviet threat, security needs of Türkiye were not lowered but heightened more. In such circumstances, even NATO and America were still in the focal point of Türkiye's security and defense strategy during the post-Cold War era (Öztürk, 2009). In response to happenings such as the exacerbation of separatist issues and the fall of the Soviet Union, Türkiye reshuffled its national security policy in 1992.

In mid-1992, the announcement of the National Security Policy Document marked a significant shift in Türkiye's defense strategy. The defense concept, which had previously been tailored towards Greece and the Russian Federation, was altered to include an assessment of "internal threats" (primarily separatism) for the first time, while the sources of external threats were identified as Syria, Iraq, and Iran (Gürbüz, 2014, pp. 78-91). In the updated National Security Policy Document, concluded in February 1997, "reactionary movements" were prioritized as the number one threat, with the source of this threat reiterated as coming from the South.

In this context, Türkiye's NATO membership, which had been the cornerstone of its defense and security policy for half a century, retained its significance. Even as the risks following the Cold War became increasingly diversified and instability persisted, collective defense remained as crucial as ever (Çelik, 2012). Türkiye's defense strategy, shaped by its NATO membership and its air force's strike capacity, continued to focus on deterrence.

During the Gulf Crisis, U.S. and NATO anti-missile batteries were deployed in Türkiye's southeast in response to potential Iraqi missile threats. Similarly, in late 1998 and early 1999, when Saddam Hussein threatened to attack Türkiye if American and British aircraft continued to use the Incirlik Air Base, these batteries were temporarily redeployed. In a context where there was no threat from the Eastern Bloc, NATO considered Türkiye as a state that could act as a buffer against the instability spreading from the Maghreb to the Gulf. NATO's then Secretary General, Manfred Wörner, emphasized that Türkiye, directly exposed to risks such as migration, radicalism, terrorism, and instability, had the potential to play a key role in combating these threats (Şahin, 2013, pp.123-137). The multifaceted security risks transformed Türkiye from a wing state during the Cold War into a frontline state in the new era. Consequently, Türkiye's expectations from NATO and the U.S. grew significantly.

## **5. The Role of the US and Türkiye in NATO's Enlargement Process**

Following the Cold War, the consolidation of new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe in the Atlantic community was the central foreign policy objective of the United States. The content of this policy was to provide peace and stability on the continent of Europe by facilitating the integration of these nations. NATO's revitalization was viewed as a critical instrument for securing American leadership in the region.

In 1994, the United States initiated the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which paved the way for NATO enlargement. During the 1997 Madrid Summit, NATO issued invitations to Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic to join the alliance, a significant achievement in the post-Cold War security order (NATO, 1999). Türkiye, a NATO member since 1952, played a crucial role in this endeavor. (Ataöv,2006,pp.194-196) Apart from the United States, Türkiye also encouraged the integration of these countries into the alliance and emphasized the importance of a united European security structure.

Turkish efforts played a crucial role in the success of the pfP program. Since 1995, Türkiye has taken an active role in the discussions regarding the enlargement of NATO, providing constructive criticism and recommendations. Its activities emphasized that Türkiye was dedicated to a wider security concept, which went beyond its defense orientations to include political and economic aspects.

In the subsequent years, Türkiye continued to be supportive of NATO enlargement and transformation. The inclusion of countries such as Albania, Romania, and Bulgaria further enhanced the influence and extent of the alliance. Türkiye's support for these enlargements was based on the perception that expansion of NATO would enhance the alliance's effectiveness and contribute to regional stability without diluting its inherent defensive purpose.

The 2020s saw a historic step in NATO expansion when Finland and Sweden joined. In response to the Russian aggression on Ukraine, both countries joined the ranks of the North Atlantic bloc, a historic shift in their security policy. Türkiye was at first wary, with Türkiye

protesting the two countries' leniency towards groups regarded as terror groups by Ankara. But through diplomacy, this was resolved, and Türkiye later withdrew its protests (BBC News, 2022).

Türkiye's acceptance of membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO was conditional in nature, i.e., as a pledge towards counterterrorism collaboration and overhauling their jurisprudence. As a payback, Türkiye received defense acquisition arrangements and agreement on its accession application to the European Union. This incident denotes Türkiye's pragmatist response towards NATO's enlargement, skilfully balancing country interests vis-à-vis alliance requirements.

Overall, Türkiye's role in NATO's expansion has been characterized by proactive involvement, visionary thinking, and commitment to regional and international stability. During the 1990s and the 2020s, Türkiye has remained a strong advocate for NATO's expansion, making sure that the alliance adapts to the new security environment while maintaining its fundamental principles.

## **6. The Impact of NATO's Transformation on US-Türkiye Military Relations**

The transformation of NATO since the end of the Cold War has had transformative implications for the United States-Türkiye bilateral military relationship. As the NATO alliance transformed from a strictly defensive organization dedicated to containing Soviet expansion to a broader security community addressing global challenges terrorism, cyber warfare, and regional instability Türkiye was reacting to a changing strategic context. This transformation has strengthened the cooperation while creating new tensions in the US-Türkiye military relationship founded on varying perceptions of threats and overlapping but not necessarily identical regional interests (Larrabee, 2008, pp.8-10).

In the 1990s, Türkiye embraced NATO's evolving role and supported its enlargement and partnerships, such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. As a key proponent of NATO's outreach to former Soviet and Warsaw Pact countries, Türkiye was closely attuned to U.S. strategic goals. It hosted NATO-led operations and took part in peacekeeping missions in the Balkans, i.e., in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, depicting operational integration within U.S. forces under NATO command (Ülgen, 2010). Türkiye's advocacy for an even geographical expansion, including countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania, reflected its concern to make sure that NATO's expansion would serve to enhance the alliance's strategic depth in regions adjacent to its borders (Cornell & Karaveli, 2011).

Apart from that, Türkiye also led the way in the institutional development of NATO's post-Cold War framework. The establishment of the Partnership for Peace Training Center in Ankara in 1998 and its leadership of various NATO Contact Point Embassies, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus, solidified its status as a "security provider" rather than a mere taker (Gürzel, 2019). These developments served to enhance Türkiye's military cooperation with the United States, particularly in the areas of training, logistics, and intelligence sharing.

While, however, the strategic redirection of NATO in the 2000s, particularly after September 11, created further reasons for tension between the United States and Türkiye, the two countries were solidly dedicated NATO allies. Rival perceptions of threat started increasingly to strain their military alignment. For instance, the utilization by the U.S. of



Kurdish militias such as the YPG in Syria to combat ISIS has been a contentious issue from the center, as Türkiye views these forces as being connected to the PKK, which is a terrorist organization in its view (Stein, 2017, pp.2-7). This discrepancy has stretched the limits of alliance cohesion and rendered it challenging for bilateral defense to cooperate, particularly in common NATO operations.

These tensions have manifested themselves within recent years in the decision-making procedures of NATO. Türkiye's early resistance to Finland and Sweden's entry into NATO in 2022 demonstrates Ankara's growing tendency to utilize its role in the alliance to negotiate concessions on matters it considers critical to its national security. Türkiye raised grievances regarding the perceived softness of the Nordic countries toward Kurdish formations and imposed weapons restrictions. The final outcome, that of trilateral memoranda and counter-terrorism cooperation assurances, attested to Türkiye's deft use of the NATO mechanisms so as to reconcile the expansion of the alliance with its domestic agenda (Güler, 2023)

Despite such discrepancies, Türkiye continues to be a principal military provider for NATO operations. It controls strategic bases like Incirlik Air Base, which is a critical hub for both American and NATO air operations in the region. Also, it helps NATO's missile defense system and hosts components of NATO's Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWACS) systems. Further, its significant troop contributions to the NATO Response Force (NRF) and to Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean security initiatives reaffirm its long-term value to the alliance (NATO, 2023).

The durability of US–Türkiye defense relations in NATO will likely rest on the ability of both sides to reconcile alliance obligations with national interests. Türkiye's increasing quest for strategic autonomy illustrated by its defense acquisitions from non-NATO actors, such as the S-400 missile defense system from Russia has been a source of anxiety in Washington about interoperability and cohesion in the alliance (Kardaş, 2020). But these developments also show that Türkiye wishes to balance its role as an autonomous actor in NATO.

Overall, the development of NATO has deepened and made more complex the U.S.-Türkiye military alliance. As shared security interests and institutional mechanisms continue to keep the two allies together, shifting regional dynamics and divergent perceptions of threats have introduced new complexities. Türkiye remains a key player in NATO's new strategic environment, and its future with the United States will depend on how both navigate cooperation and confrontation in the alliance context.

## **7. Case Study: The F-35 Program and the S-400 Crisis in the Context of Nato Cohesion**

The controversy surrounding Türkiye's acquisition of the Russian-made S-400 air defense system and its subsequent suspension from the U.S.-led F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program is one of the most serious tests to NATO cohesion in recent decades. The episode embodies the intrinsic tension between alliance solidarity and national sovereignty, and the challenge of reconciling competing strategic agendas within a multilateral defense alliance.

In 2017, Türkiye signed a deal with Russia to purchase the S-400 Triumf missile defense system amid delays and restrictions in purchasing comparable Western systems, specifically the U.S. Patriot batteries (Saygın, 2020). The S-400 purchase was, for Türkiye, a

step in strategic autonomy—a attempt to diversify its defense partners and reduce its dependency on Western suppliers. Yet the move was promptly rejected by NATO allies, the United States in particular, on the basis that including a Russian-built system in the alliance's defense infrastructure would compromise interoperability and possibly open sensitive F-35 technology to Russian spying (Stein, 2019, pp. 2-6).

The United States retaliated by expelling Türkiye from the F-35 program in 2019, halting delivery of the jets and excluding Turkish participation in the collaborative manufacturing process. Not only did this ruling affect Türkiye's airpower modernization strategy, but it also had broader consequences for alliance unity. The F-35 program had come to represent NATO defense integration, and the exclusion of Türkiye raised questions about the alliance's ability to balance national procurement choices with collective defense imperatives (Kardaş, 2021). The incident highlighted the tension between NATO's emphasis on interoperability and member nations' sovereign right to make independent defense decisions.

Türkiye, for its part, deplored the exclusion as political and asserted that the decision had overlooked its rightful security needs, particularly the absence of alternative systems offered under satisfactory conditions. The dispute strained U.S.–Türkiye defense relations and complicated defense cooperation across other NATO platforms. Also, Türkiye's hold on the S-400 system has become a source of long-term tension, as the U.S. sanctioned it under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2020 a rare instance of punitive action among NATO allies (Erşen, 2021, pp. 39–52)

The S-400 crisis is an expression of a broader shift in NATO dynamics, where internal tensions are no longer restricted to political divergences but increasingly extend to major defense procurement matters. While as an organization, NATO has attempted to remain neutral, the lack of a shared stance on the issue demonstrates the alliance's limited success in enforcing cohesion within procurement decisions. The episode is a warning tale of how bilateral squabbles, if left unchecked, can erode trust and interoperability within the broader NATO framework.

In short, the F-35 and S-400 drama is more than a bilateral dispute; it is a demonstration of the alliance's struggle to reconcile collective defense requirements with member states' strategic autonomy. Overcoming such crises hinges not only on technical solutions but also on political dialogue based on mutual respect and shared vision for alliance values.

### **Conclusions**

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the strategic shift by NATO to counter new worldwide threats fundamentally reshaped the form and purpose of the alliance. From collective defense against one common enemy to dealing with a diverse range of security challenges, from terrorism and cyber attacks to regional instabilities, there had to be radical change. This change impacted not only NATO's operational strategy but also its enlargement policies, as the alliance sought to extend stability across Europe and beyond. These events opened the door to new dynamics in the bilateral military relations between Türkiye and the United States, as both countries redefined their security priorities within the alliance framework.

Throughout the post-Cold War period, the United States and Türkiye shared convergence and divergence in their reactions to NATO's evolving mission and enlargement policies. Both nations preferred the idea of a more vigorous and enlarged NATO, but they were at variance regarding the tempo and nature of enlargement and involvement in out-of-area operations. The intricate dynamics of national security interests, regional interests, and alliance obligations became more pronounced, especially as Türkiye adopted a more independent foreign policy stance. This divergence came to the forefront during such controversies as the F-35 program and the S-400 missile defense acquisition, which underscored the difficulties in sustaining alliance solidarity in the face of changing geopolitical realities.

Ultimately, NATO's reformation has imposed profound and frequently contentious implications on US-Türkiye defense relations. Despite each country being committed to the alliance's foundational principles, there have been flashes of tension that have uncovered tensions regarding sovereignty, strategic independence, and faith. The F-35 and S-400 crisis case study is an excellent example of how differing views of threats and defense visions can strain even traditional alliances. In the future, having a good dialogue and reinforcing mutual understanding within NATO will be essential to ensuring the strategic alliance between the United States and Türkiye in an ever more multipolar and uncertain World.

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