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EVALUATION NOTE

DEFENSE CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE EU AND TURKEY

It would not be misleading to claim that the European Union (EU) has been experiencing the most challenging period since its establishment. Yes, the EU has faced various crises in the past; the "empty chair" crisis, the constitutional crisis, the financial crisis. However, during all these crises periods, the United States (US) has always been behind or alongside the EU. Today, despite various efforts, the EU finds itself without the protective umbrella of the US at a time when it is most in need of it due to Russia's aggression, particularly in the area of defense and security where it is still unfortunately the weakest.

In fact, this danger was acknowledged years ago. It would be remembered that on November 7, 2019, during his first term, French President Emmanuel Macron highlighted in a piece he wrote for The Economist that NATO had become "brain dead" due to Trump's view on transatlantic relations and he constantly emphasized the necessity for the EU to achieve "strategic autonomy" in terms of security and foreign policy. Following the election of Joe Biden in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the EU responded more swiftly, firmly, and in a united fashion to the internal and external crises than it had in any previous instances, which led to a revitalized and strengthened transatlantic alliance, causing these discussions to be forgotten.

Today, however, we are witnessing the opposite situation. The world and transatlantic relations have been undergoing significant transformation. Since it became apparent that Donald Trump could take office again, there have been various discussions in the EU about being prepared against potential policies that could harm it, yet no concrete steps have been taken; rather, only cosmetic measures have been implemented. Although a defense strategy was prepared in March 2024 and a member responsible for defense was

¹ <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1139>

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appointed to the new European Commission, the EU unfortunately has not yet been able to develop a full fledged independent security policy. On the other hand, very recently the EU managed to adopt a €150 billion financial instrument (Security Action for Europe – SAFE) that will **support** those member states that wish to **invest in defence** industrial production through **common procurement**. SAFE is part of a broader €800 billion vision to rebuild Europe's defense capabilities by 2030 and reassess its reliance on NATO. It has the potential to sow the seeds of a joint policy design to develop its weak defense industry infrastructure, however at this stage it would not be wrong to say that the EU has still been taking baby steps to establish a security and defense capacity that could replace the collective defense capabilities provided by NATO.

Conversely, Trump's statements about withdrawing troops from Europe, including countries bordering Russia, the US negotiating with Russia over a cease-fire in Ukraine sometimes without Ukraine and Europe at the table, demanding a share of critical raw materials from Ukraine for aid and security guarantees, and claiming rights over Greenland, an EU member territory, alongside the US's closeness with Viktor ORBAN, who has often voiced dissent within EU's Ukraine policy, have solidified the notion that the US is no longer an ally of the EU. Consequently, EU leaders have begun discussing the necessity of "setting up a separate table" instead of "sitting at the table" regarding Ukraine.

Alarm bells regarding this issue have started ringing for all European officials mainly due to two significant developments. The first was the speech by US Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference held in mid-February, which provided important signals about the future of international relations. In his speech, Vance stated that the real danger for Europe comes from within, highlighting that democracy in Europe is straying from liberalism, that the migration issue cannot be managed, and that the government formation process often disregards the vote of the people (this was interpreted as a warning concerning the upcoming elections in Germany that the winning party should not involve the far-right coalition). Following this statement, he met with Alice Weidel, the leader of the far-right party AfD, instead of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Before the shock of Vance could wear off, at the end of February after the parody of Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the US, it became clear that the agreement on critical minerals supply and the potential agreement on security guarantees can be very fragile given the unpredictability of Trump administration. This further cemented the perception that Europe is alone regarding both Ukraine and general security issues.

Although no definitive outcome emerged from the meeting held on Sunday, March 2, 2025, in London, involving Turkey along with European countries and Canada, and discussions emerged regarding the re-establishment of dialogue with the US, it is evident that Europe's efforts to create an independent defense capability from the US will continue. Matters such as joint defense investments, common borrowing, cooperation for the development of defense industry infrastructure, and the relaxation of the Maastricht criteria that require public budget deficits not to exceed 3% of national income to increase defense spending are now on the table.

In addition to these issues, it is believed that the topic of making space for Turkey in the European security architecture is now being seriously addressed. After it became evident that the US's Ukraine policy had completely changed following the Munich Security Conference, the invitation to Turkey for the meeting held in London on March 2, 2025, is seen as an

important signal, considering Turkey was not invited to a meeting in Paris on February 17, which included the United Kingdom and Norway, convened by Macron.

Until now, the EU has generally avoided giving Turkey a place in its security architecture. Despite participating in various NATO operations and military missions led by the EU, Turkey's application to be involved in initiatives like PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) aimed at strengthening the EU's limited defense capabilities has gone unanswered, and the country has been excluded from other defense projects. Additionally, despite the necessity of the circumstances, a structural high-level dialogue in foreign policy and security between the EU and Turkey has not been initiated. The lack of dialogue has also contributed to Turkey's alignment with the EU's foreign and security policies remaining at a low level (as indicated in the European Commission's recent report on Turkey). When investigating the reasons for this situation, it becomes evident that the primary cause is the mutual distrust between the parties. It is argued that Turkey's departure from compliance with the "Copenhagen Criteria" and the uncertainties in its foreign policy have contributed to this. Some critical transformation in the international context have occasionally led to positive changes in Turkey-EU relations. Although reviving the accession process depends on revitalizing the reform process, the EU could benefit from Turkey's potential in its effort to create an autonomous defense capability separate from the U.S.

Although the recent developments signal that there may be progress in this regard, it does not look feasible. Despite of the fact that there is bilateral defence cooperation between some EU member states and Turkey, like the joint drone investment of Baykar and Leonardo in Italy or the recent deal between Spain and Turkey for Spain to purchase Turkey's first indigenously developed jet trainer and light-attack aircraft I do not think that Turkey can structurally be a part of the institutional defence architecture of the EU.

In this context, the debate regarding Turkey's involvement in SAFE is an important indicator. The SAFE program will offer low-interest loans to boost defense production across Europe. EU-based companies must execute at least 65 percent of the value of any project receiving funding, while non-EU partners can contribute between 15 and 35 percent. Although there is disagreement between Member States regarding the decision making procedure of involving third countries, anyway the approval of the majority of Members seems to be necessary. At this moment Turkey's bilateral problems with some member countries and concerns regarding its balancing policy between US, Europe and Russia comes into the fore.

Hence it can be stated that while the current geopolitical developments seem to provide a good opportunity for defense cooperation that could not been established between the parties outside of the refugee issue, its nature (bilateral with some member states or institutional with the EU) depends on many factors. Elements such as developments in Turkey's domestic politics, the EU's willingness to overcome its distrust towards Turkey, and halting the efforts of some member states to obstruct this cooperation, as well as Turkey's ability to balance its relations with Russia and Europe, are of great importance in this context.