

SEPTEMBER BLUES FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS**Ambassador (R) Fatih Ceylan**

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September 2021 had been a stage adding to the tempo of developments directly affecting the global security agenda following the wild fires that devastated Southern European countries including Turkey.

There had almost always been ebbs and tides in transatlantic relations subsiding in many instances given the nature of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall did not signify the end of divergences among Allied countries, but indeed offered fertile grounds for increased cooperation and coordination within the Euro-Atlantic area in the absence of a specific threat. There was a peace dividend to capitalise on following the Cold War and an urge to constitute a wide belt of security and stability from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

It was high time for the European Union to chart new territories in the fields of security and defence. The building blocks of strengthening EU security and defence were laid in the early 1990s, starting with the Maastricht Treaty. Its evolution culminated in the Lisbon Treaty of 2010 opening the door to common EU efforts towards more strategic autonomy, not only in the security-defence realm, but extending to other domains of activity.

The Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea and its destabilisation acts in the Donbas region of Ukraine did not stifle efforts within the EU to expand the latitude of strategic autonomy. Since 2014 the security landscape has undergone a dramatic change both in perceptions, interests and attitudes of nations' vis-à-vis the turn of events on a global basis.

New sources of threats manifested themselves in different forms such as the aggressive behaviour of Russia, the scourge of ISIS, emerging global security risks such as rogue and failed states, and the rise of China leading to both challenges and opportunities for the transatlantic framework.

At a time of heightened strategic rivalry and a renewed vigour by the US to shift its focus and priorities to the Indo-Pacific region, the successive steps taken in September 2021 shook the grounds for many in the transatlantic community.

Just before September the debacle created in the wake of the chaotic withdrawal of the US and NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan left an unforgettable imprint on the global agenda setting in motion soul searching within not only the West at large, but also the rest of the global village.

America was indeed back in the absence of proper and timely consultations within NATO on Afghanistan contrary to the main principles and recommendations elaborated in the “*NATO 2030: United for a New Era*” report adopted by the NATO Leaders Meeting of June 2021.

The backsliding did not stop there. Another ‘deal of the century’ declared on 15 September 2021, notably AUKUS (Australia, the US, and the UK pact), that terminated the diesel-powered submarine agreement between France and Australia unnerved the French leadership and was termed as a ‘stab in the back’ by two Allies and one global partner.

Nine days later another perceived dent was put in place by the QUAD Leader’s Summit of 24 September, demonstrating clearly the preference of the US to prioritise its efforts toward the Indo-Pacific region with a particular focus on China.

The wounds thereafter started to further fester within the transatlantic community led by France in terms of the ambivalent attitude demonstrated by the US energising once again the already ongoing debate on how to demarcate the EU’s strategic autonomy. Discussions toward that effect are very much reminiscent of the previous US administration era when Trump was advocating ‘America First’.

The shores of the Euro-Atlantic area were under strain when the waters of the Indo-Pacific region were being heated in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. For those with keen interest in the European security landscape, other developments stretching relations among European allies and partners throughout 2020 surfaced in the Eastern Mediterranean pitting the littoral countries against each other also involving NATO Allies such as Turkey, Greece and France.

National interests in the Eastern Mediterranean diverged recently as to how to benefit from the hydrocarbon reserves in the area and attempts by some regional actors to sideline Turkey from the equation backlashed resulting in a series of frictions putting Turkey and Greece on the verge of a military confrontation.

Greece started to invest heavily in defence and struck a deal with France in January 2021 to buy 18 *Rafale* jet fighters to be complemented by an additional purchase of 6 more in September 2021 bringing the total to 24 *Rafale*’s.

This deal further strengthened cooperation among two NATO and EU members when Greece decided to deepen its defence cooperation with France by signing a Strategic Partnership Agreement for Cooperation in Defence and Security on 28 September and finalised an agreement to buy three French *Belharra* type frigates with an option to buy the fourth. (The cost of the *Rafale* jet fighters and frigates totals almost 6bn. € for Greece.) This development raised some eyebrows even within the EU.

In-between the September jet fighter and frigate deals between France and Greece the *EUMed9 Summit of the Southern European Countries* convened in Athens. The leaders of those European countries did not miss the opportunity to bash Turkey, among others, in the following terms in their joint declaration, as follows:

“In line with the relevant European Council Conclusions as well as the Statement of 25 March 2021, it is fundamental that all States unequivocally abide by international legality and abstain, in a consistent and permanent manner, from provocations or unilateral actions in breach of international law. We reaffirm our determination, in case of such action, to use the instruments and options at the disposal of the European Union to defend its interests and those of its Member States as well as to uphold regional stability. We reiterate our readiness to engage with Turkey in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner to enhance cooperation in a number of areas of common interest, subject to the respect of conditionalities set out by the European Council last June.”

The absurdity of this statement is that most of the countries that participated in the summit are NATO members, supposedly allies of Turkey. It would have been wiser to keep some distance from getting involved in affairs that have deeper and even historical undertones.

The September 2021 events honed the predilection of particularly France to advance strategic autonomy of the EU manifesting first in the defence realm. President Macron of France seems to be intent on giving further blood and flesh to the EU's strategic autonomy and sovereignty. He clearly underlined his thoughts after the signing of the frigate deal with Greece as well as at the Athens Summit of nine EU members.

It is still dubious to what extent he could calibrate his thinking and attitude even after President Biden's recent phone call on the heels of AUKUS pact and his upcoming visit to the US. It is equally doubtful the degree to which he could muster the support of his EU counterparts for his ambitious thoughts on the strategic autonomy issue. The changing of the guard in Germany may provide another opportunity for him in this respect.

From a broader perspective though the simmering frictions within the Alliance and tense relations between Europe and the US runs the risk of another big challenge to surface: the fragmentation of deterrence and defence and inclination to prioritise power politics among allies lending itself to re-nationalisation of defence at a time of critical geopolitical rivalry.

Such a risky journey to a charted territory in the distant past is likely to have devastating results for many in Europe beyond their parochial interests and would erode the very bases of the NATO 2030 report.

It is clear that there will be difficult times ahead particularly on the eve of updating NATO's Strategic Concept and the EU's Strategic Compass to guide efforts at least for the next decade to come.

Time is fast approaching for the US leadership and the EU to start seriously thinking about a galvanising new vision to accommodate the concerns and interests of their allies and partners and absolve themselves of the thought of *'which and who comes first'* before we witness additional debacles calling into question the unity and cohesion within both NATO and the EU. This is the essential issue at a time when global challenges are increasing.