

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE NATO SUMMIT? THE CASE OF TURKEY

By

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There is less than a month to the NATO Summit scheduled for June 14, 2021. Preparations for this important Summit must by now be at full speed ahead within NATO and at the Allied capitals.

Following his teleconference with his European counterparts in March 2021 during the EU Summit, President Biden will now address for the first time the Transatlantic community at the upcoming NATO Summit.

When he started his tenure, President Biden said in unequivocal terms 'the US is back'. That means back at the international stage and back to the Transatlantic world. This stance is certainly welcomed by almost all European Allies. A wide breathing space transpired for the Alliance in an era full of uncertainties and instabilities surrounding the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond.

The NATO Defense and Foreign Ministerial Meetings in February and April respectively were important occasions to demonstrate the encouraging attitude of the US towards NATO and its members, a hallmark for the US barring the Trump administration.

At a time when systemic rivalry was on the rise, positive messages coming from the highest echelons in Washington prioritizing solidarity and unity of purpose within the Alliance are indeed critical.

The foundational principles underlying the Alliance are what makes NATO the most successful politico-military alliance. And the upcoming Summit will be another occasion to make clear the role of NATO now and in the future, thus buttressing the enduring value of the Transatlantic frame vis-à-vis current challenges.

First and foremost, the ground laid by the Report prepared by the Experts Group, namely 'NATO 2030: United for a New Era', will be blessed by the NATO leaders. Two very important aspects of that comprehensive report charting the future of the Alliance, among many, are strengthening the political dimension of NATO as a unique forum for Transatlantic consultations and introducing the idea to update the Strategic Concept of 2010.

Although NATO is a regional organization, it has acquired a global reach since the end of the Cold War. The scope of its activities and partnerships has tremendously widened extending to different theatres beyond the Euro-Atlantic area.

The number of its partners has also increased in a cross-continental direction providing the Alliance a wider space to reach out including a new focus in the Far East under present circumstances.

Since 2014, following the illegal and illegitimate occupation of Crimea and the ensuing destabilization of the Donbas region of Ukraine by Russia, its shared values of paramount significance such as pluralistic democracy, rule of law, and individual liberty, which have hitherto been often taken for granted, has become more important than ever. These fundamental values upon which NATO was built on are, at the least, equally important for domestic governance in Allied countries as they are for defining policies towards partners and competitors.

To maintain and strengthen those shared ideals and values has been the driving motto under current security circumstances as the inalienable security net for both Allies and partners.

It has now become evident that the new US administration will prioritize democracy, rule of law and individual liberty in pursuit of its foreign and security policies as enshrined in the Founding Treaty of NATO. This will have to resonate well within the Alliance and welcomed by many.

The upcoming NATO Summit in June should provide the necessary space for breathing a new spirit in the sense of prioritizing the shared values. It would serve as a serious wake-up call against aberrations observed in some Allied capitals intent on capitalizing on populism, thereby challenging the fundamental principles and values of the Washington Treaty. A clarion call to that effect would reinforce the compelling need for resilience in democratic governance in member countries.

The Summit will have to reconfirm the message that those countries challenging the rules-based international order will not reap the benefits of their misdemeanor in their affairs.

Rekindling the letter and spirit of those shared ideals and values will also strengthen the political role of NATO sidelined especially in recent years. A forward-looking 'democracy agenda' initiated within the Alliance at the Summit would set the record for the future. And this would be in full conformity with the thrust of the Report "NATO 2030: United for a New Era".

The Summit will also provide an opportunity for NATO Heads of State and Government to chart an update for a new Strategic Concept (SC) long overdue. The grounds to update the current SC have already been laid since 2014. Now is the time to consolidate the accumulated knowledge deriving from recent events since 2014 in a coherent and forward-looking manner to issue a remit to start preparations for a new SC.

It has become commonplace to advocate the need for maintaining the technological edge in respect of new and emerging technologies in the domains of space, cyber, hybrid and artificial intelligence, not to mention climate change and fight against current and future pandemics.

Competition in attaining advantage in those disruptive technologies is an ongoing challenge which should lead to combining efforts among Allies to keep abreast of them. And that requires closer collaboration and more generous sharing of technology and know-how contributing to further interoperability.

Afghanistan is another subject destined to be addressed at the Summit. Critics of the Biden administration on its Afghanistan policy have legitimate views and concerns on the rather premature withdrawal of all NATO forces from Afghanistan. This is simply not in compliance with the notion of 'adjusting together'. Conditions for peace and stability are not yet in place in Afghanistan and Allies should continue to exercise caution in the 'post withdrawal' period. Efforts exerted over the last two decades should not be squandered and relegated to the dustbin in a hasty manner.

A dose of realism has finally been injected into ongoing discussions on Afghanistan by Secretary Blinken in his recent statement of 3 May to the effect that 'Just because our troops are coming home does not mean we are leaving. We are not.' If it means re-adjusting the 'adjust together' part of the equation it would raise the hopes of a more stable future for Afghanistan.

Relations with Russia, and particularly the Ukrainian crisis, would certainly feature in Summit deliberations. Given the ongoing aggressive Russian behavior vis-a-vis Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Allies will have to re-muster their efforts with a view to resolving that serious crisis on a long-term basis.

Potential and current challenges by China would appear in the radar of the Summit necessitating a coherent policy to be pursued by the Allies and further involving NATO's global partners in the Far East.

The delicate balance which should be stricken on Russia and China is to closely monitor the evolution in relations between those two countries and to forecast the potential trends that might lead to further alignment between them. To that effect, the 'dual track approach' vis-a-vis Russia could inspire the course to be followed on how to address the China conundrum.

Under such circumstances the upcoming NATO Summit would be a critical occasion for Turkey at a time when divergences between her and some members of the Alliance remain to be resolved.

The Summit would present an opportunity for Turkey to settle the ongoing S 400 challenge which has gone beyond the confines of bilateral relations between Turkey and the US, thus impacting the Alliance as a whole.

It would be ideal, therefore, to reach a modus operandi designed to surmounting that serious challenge in the run-up to the Summit and make public the contours of a compromise at the Summit. If achieved, such an outcome would certainly be a major breakthrough in shaping the Summit agenda.

Efforts by Turkey as confirmed by many political pundits to normalize relations in her region would also contribute to a positive climate surrounding the Summit.

It is in the interest of Turkey to have potentially tangible results from the meeting between the Afghanistan Government and the Taliban, which she undertook to host in Turkey, before the Summit. If achieved, that would be an important milestone enriching the success of the Summit.

Despite intricacies involved, Turkey as a regional power could play a role in easing the crisis between Russia and Ukraine. It is in her vital interest to deploy all the diplomatic means at her disposal to prepare conducive grounds for a future modus vivendi between her two important neighbors. That certainly requires political will on all sides, especially Russia and Ukraine, which seems extremely elusive at the moment. Nevertheless, it is worth giving it a chance.

The NATO Summit in June would be a significant litmus test for Turkey to measure whether she sees her relations with her Allies and partners as a transactional endeavor or a long-term enterprise re-confirming her direction and place in global affairs.