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Embedded Autonomy and Strategic Hedging: Turkey's Redefinition of NATO Dependence (2020–2025)

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Abstract

The paper discusses how Turkey is redefining into a state of strategic autonomy as opposed to relying on NATO between the years 2020 and 2025. It examines how the process of industrialization on defense, diversification of energy, and foreign policy activism have re-established the role of Ankara in NATO. Through a qualitative and historical method, the study holds that Turkey has embedded a system of embedded autonomy and has balanced alliance commitments and national sovereignty. The increase in domestic defense industry, including ASELSAN, TAI, and Baykar, alongside S-400 crisis, CAATSA sanctions, and the shift of local military industries shows this change. The results suggest that the Turkish autonomy is not the withdrawal of NATO but re-structuring of the alliance politics, which embodies the new strategies of cooperation, independence and middle power politics

Keywords: Embedded Autonomy, Strategic Hedging, Turkish Foreign Policy, NATO Dependence, Security Realignment

Introduction:

The strategic orientation of Turkey has been dramatically changed-where it was a country that observed a high level of dependency on NATO throughout the Cold War to a country that is aggressively seeking strategic independence in the 21 st century. In the past, Ankara was very dependent on the assurances of the west, military support, and alliances to use against the Soviet threat. Nevertheless, recurrent alliance crises, like the 1964 Johnson Letter, the 1975 U.S arms embargo, and the 2019 S-400 crisis revealed the weaknesses of dependence. In the period

between 2020 and 2025, Turkey was aiming to reposition itself, with defense industrialization, energy diversification, and multidimensional diplomacy. The study explores the changing policies of Turkey as a way of reflecting the transformation to embedded autonomy, to stay a member of NATO and at the same time to exercise national sovereignty and regional dominance in an increasingly multipolar international system.

Research questions:

1. How did Turkey move from NATO dependence toward strategic autonomy, and what do its security strategies in 2020–2025 reveal about the future of NATO–Turkey relations?
2. What are the implications of Turkey’s evolving security strategy for NATO cohesion and alliance politics?

Research Objectives:

1. How the response of Turkey to defense, energy and foreign policies has changed to minimise reliance on the Western alliances as well as the encouraging national self-sufficiency.
2. The effectiveness of native defense industrialization to enhance the Turkish strategic autonomy in NATO.
3. The externalities of changing security and energy policies of Turkey on the internal integrity of NATO, burden-sharing, and politics of alliance.

Literature Review

Kasapsaraçoğlu (2009) examines the internal decision-making dynamics of Turkish foreign policy during the Cold War, emphasizing how political leaders, the military, and bureaucratic actors shaped key policy choices. Using a historical institutionalist and process-tracing approach based on archival sources, he argues that domestic political structures and competing institutional interests were central to policy outcomes. However, his analysis remains limited to internal politics, neglecting the influence of NATO’s strategic doctrines, defense dependencies, and alliance dilemmas. In my future research, I will address this gap by linking Turkey’s internal policy processes with its security strategies under NATO highlighting how forward defense obligations, alliance pressures, and the rise of indigenous defense industries like ASELSAN and TAI shaped both its foreign and defense policy during the Cold War.

In a study by Şevket Pamuk, (2022) the Western orientation of Turkey is discussed by considering the economic modernization as the development of the nation after the war was influenced by the economic integration into the Western institution and foreign financial support. He applies a historical-economic method of establishing a relationship between the development of Turkey and its trade trends and its political orientation towards the West. His work however fails to take into account the military-security aspect of this alignment especially NATO strategic doctrines and defense reliance. In a future study, I will fill this gap by linking the economic alignment of

Turkey to its NATO security policies- demonstrating how the demands of the alliances, obligation to defend in the forward, and development of its own defense industries such as ASELSAN and TAI supported its quest to have strategic autonomy.

Fuat Keyman and Şebnem Gumuşcu (2014) explores the case of Turkey and the West by focusing on the identity, democratization process, and foreign policy and stating that Westernization influenced Turkey in terms of domestic transformation and orientation. They demonstrate that a western identity justified the democratic transition and NATO orientation in Turkey that occurred through constructivist and qualitative approach. Nevertheless, their discussion is rather ideological, disregarding the military-security aspect of this alignment and the impact of the dependency on defense and alliance issues on the policy. In my future work, I will address this gap by bridging the identity-based alignment of Turkey with its NATO security approaches by emphasizing how forward defense, the pressures of alliances, and emergence of domestic defense industries such as ASELSAN and TAI contributed to the transformation of Turkey into a dependency country into a strategic independent country.

Demirtaş and Pirincci (2024) asserted that Ankara's growing presence in Africa represents a shift from dependency on Western alliances to diversified global relationships. They demonstrate how activism by Turkey in other countries is an amalgamation of humanitarian, defense, and diplomatic projects to create a self-sufficient image. However, the research does not extend to other parts of the world, such as Asia and the American continent, but how this external activism is linked to internal defense reforms, energy politics, or even relations with NATO. My study fills this gap by allowing Turkey to be viewed as a multidimensional activist in the context of its broader autonomy drive and bargaining behaviour in NATO between 2020 and 2025.

In the article *Facing New Security Threats in an Era of Global Transformations*, Yılmaz claimed that the expanding security focus by Turkey to the security of energy, sustainability, and climate risks. She posits that the position of Turkey is such that energy diversification is the center of national security. Nonetheless, she does not consider the energy and climate issues associated with defense and alliance policies, neglecting their connection with the post-2020 resilience agenda of NATO. My paper links these points by considering how Turkey applied energy diplomacy in the period between 2020 and 2025 as a strategic instrument to strike a balance between independence and reliance in the frameworks of NATO.

In his article *The State of Strategic Hedging: Turkey's Foreign Policy and Russia Relations* (Shlykov 2023), he claims that the show of Turkish cooperation between Russia and the West exemplifies the flexibility and risk-management element of strategic hedging. He considers this as expediency and not ideological affiliation. However, he still focuses on the relations between Turkey and Russia without including how hedging converted to NATO policies, defense expenditure, and industrial reforms following the S-400 crisis. This analysis is furthered in my research via demonstration of how Turkey formalized hedging in the defense, energy, and alliance behaviour that made autonomy a thought-through strategy in NATO between 2020 and 2025.

Turkey's Security Strategies during Cold war:

Forward defense and Containment of the soviet threat

A forward-defense posture, a significant force concentration along the eastern border, and tight integration into the Allied command structure served as the cornerstones of Turkey's security strategy under NATO during the Cold War¹. In order to guarantee immediate allied involvement under Article XII and to serve as a "tripwire" against Soviet advances, Turkey's conscription system and mobilization plans by the 1970s produced one of NATO's largest standing armies—roughly 500,000 troops, second only to the United States².

NATO war plans incorporated Turkey into the Izmir-based Allied Land Forces Southeastern Europe³. In order to ward off Soviet aggression and reassure Ankara of NATO's commitment, the United States first placed Jupiter medium-range ballistic missiles (1959–1963) and then tactical nuclear weapons in Turkey. The strategic reasoning was straightforward: protect Turkey on its own territory, stop any Soviet advance, and if required, escalate to NATO-wide defense, including nuclear options.

Alliance Politics and Strategic Dilemmas:

Two recurring themes in Turkey's alliance politics are Ankara's parallel fears of entrapment (being dragged into allies' undesired conflicts) and abandonment (being exposed by allies), which both influenced its actions within NATO⁴. These conundrums are described in detail in classic episodes, such as the covert negotiations and eventual removal of Jupiter missiles following the Cuban Missile Crisis and the U.S. arms embargo after the 1974 Cyprus intervention.⁵ These fears strengthened civilian-military tensions, gave the Turkish General Staff more authority, and caused long-lasting divisions between ministries over whether to rely on NATO or be self-sufficient. Turkey was compelled to create its own defense industries (ASELSAN, TAI) and diversify its procurement after the Johnson Letter from 1964, the withdrawal of Jupiter missiles, and the U.S. arms embargo from 1975 to 1978 highlighted the dangers of dependence. By fostering domestic armaments manufacturing, institutionalizing military dominance in politics, and establishing cautious but independent-minded doctrine within NATO, these shocks in turn established the groundwork for strategic autonomy.

¹ Byadmin, *Turkey's Military Doctrine - NECİP TORUMTAY - Dış Politika Enstitüsü.*

² NATO, "Türkiye and NATO - 1952."

³ Jfcnaples.Nato.Int, "Beginnings."

⁴ ResearchGate, "NATO and Turkey in the Post-Cold War World."

⁵ "The Jupiter Missiles and the Endgame of the Cuban Missile Crisis, 60 Years Ago | National Security Archive."

Adaptation and quest for Autonomy:

In reaction to frequent alliance shock during the Cold War, Turkey progressively moved away from strict NATO reliance and toward the early pursuit of autonomy. According to the IISS/"Adapting Security" paper, Turkey took significant steps toward developing its own defense capabilities in the early to mid-1970s when it established TUSAŞ (later TAI) in 1973 to manage aircraft production and maintenance and ASELSAN in 1975 to concentrate on military electronics⁶. According to its own milestone records, ASELSAN was founded in 1975 to supply the Turkish Armed Forces with communication equipment⁷. According to a policy article, TAI was established to guarantee the assembly of American F-16 aircraft that Turkey had ordered, combining foreign arms transfers with domestic capabilities⁸. Turkey transitioned from being a recipient of foreign weapons to progressively establishing its own defense industry.

Turkey's Security Strategies (2020–2025)

Turkey's 2020-25 security policy highlights conflicting tendencies of strategic autonomy and multidimensional activism within NATO. Despite its strategic geographic position, Ankara's defense interests often clash with alliance expectations. The core tension is between striving for industrial and operational independence and remaining in NATO. The S-400 purchase exemplifies divisions over weapon interoperability and dependence on suppliers. NATO viewed it as hedging against Russia, while Ankara saw it as a safeguard against over-reliance on Western allies. These disputes reveal weaknesses in technology sharing and fears of limited access to key systems Ankara⁹. The relations were complicated by divergent threat perceptions, especially in border security. Trying to minimize dependence and gain strategic independence, Turkey has increased its domestic military-industrial complex¹⁰. Such constant compromise between collective defense and national autonomy is what still characterizes NATO-Turkey relations.

a) Defense Procurement & Sanctions (S-400, F-35, CAATSA)

When Turkey purchased the Russian S-400 air defense system in July 2019, it signaled a significant break with NATO's standards for interoperability. Beyond the technical challenges of integrating Russian systems, NATO allies worried that Moscow could use the S-400 to compromise F-35 stealth technology. The U.S. responded quickly, suspending Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program in July 2019, a decision that NATO officials publicly supported, stressing that "*allies must remain committed to interoperability of their armed forces*"¹¹. The Trump administration imposed CAATSA sanctions in December 2020, the first time these

⁶ Mevlütoğlu et al., *Adapting Security: The Intersection of Türkiye's Foreign Policy and Defence Industrialisation*.

⁷ "Milestones - ASELSAN."

⁸ Réal-Pinto, "A Neo-Liberal Exception?"

⁹ "U.S. Envoy Expects Trump, Erdogan to Resolve Arms Sanctions on Turkey This Year -Anadolu | Reuters."

¹⁰ Minute, "Turkey Joins NATO's Top Spenders but Sees Drop in Alliance-Wide Share."

¹¹ "GAO-21-226, F-35 Joint Strike Fighter: DOD Needs to Update Modernization Schedule and Improve Data on Software Development."

measures had been applied against a NATO ally¹². Turkey was formally removed from the F-35 program, confirming its exclusion from fifth-generation fighter technology.

These measures aimed to punish and deter Washington and Brussels but emphasized the risks of overdependence on Western suppliers for Ankara. Turkish leaders re-framed the crisis, with President Erdogan in December 2020 calling sanctions an attack on sovereignty and a boost for national defense projects¹³. The Ministry of National Defense echoed this, stating Turkey would not retreat from strengthening its defense industry. This shift changed the narrative: most literature sees the controversy as a trust crisis, but Ankara justified the rush for indigenous systems like the TF-X fighter jet and Hisar and Siper air-defense systems by exclusion. Turkey's case is unique; no other NATO country has faced CAATSA sanctions, creating a historic precedent. During Greece's 1974 arms embargo following Cyprus, it balanced regaining U.S. arms with avoiding isolation. The S-400/CAATSA conflict became a turning point: NATO saw betrayal; Turkey saw necessity. This spurred a push for independence, especially in drones, which is discussed next.

b) Defense Industry and Drone Diplomacy

The transformation of Turkey from a drone importer to a supplier can be clearly seen by its entry into the Gulf defense market. Ankara is now developing an increasing amount of bilateral relationships in the region of arms sales to non-NATO countries, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as compared to previous exports of the UAV to the conflict zones like Libya or Ukrainian areas, the 2023-24 sales to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait can be seen as a qualitative change: Turkey is not merely selling any weapons anymore, but is altering the UAV purchasing decisions of the U.S. allied Gulf monarchies.

The co-production deal of Saudi Arabia and Baykar in 2023 is an indication that the Turkish drones were not only regarded as military tools but also as industrial technologies to be included in the defense system of Saudi Arabia, Likewise, in Kuwait, the \$370m acquisition of Bayraktar TB2s in 2023 denotes how even minor Gulf powers are becoming not so reliant on the traditional Western providers. *These contracts are paralleled by the fact that in 2023, Turkey exported a record of \$5.5 billion of defense, compared to the previous year of \$3.2 billion, and UAVs are one of the industry leaders*¹⁴. These two cases are related to each other, as Saudi Arabia is the center of the heavy defense sector of the Gulf, and Kuwait reflects the strategic changes of the country on a lesser scale, where Turkey is a regional supplier of interest. Analytically, the result of these exports is a change of normative power.

Turkey is not just an arms competitor but is transforming world orders by providing allies of the United States that previously relied nearly solely on Western platforms¹⁵. NATO-wise, this increases the bargaining power of Turkey: although the conflicts around independence have not

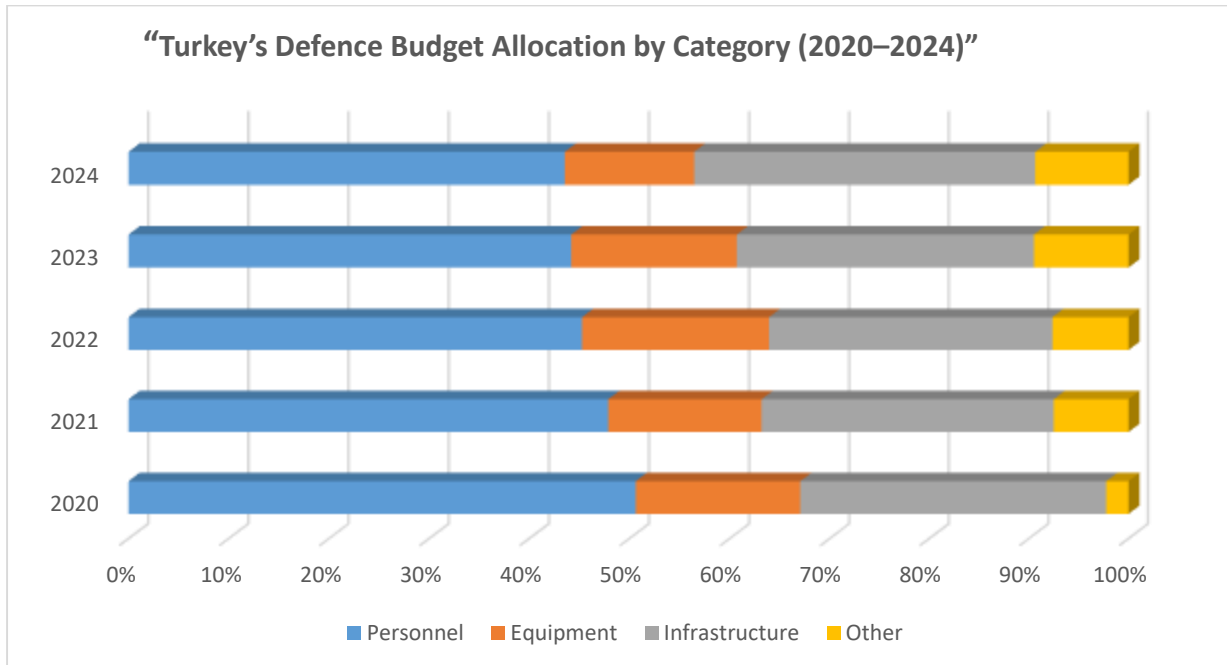
¹² "CAATSA Section 231 'Imposition of Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries.'"

¹³ "Turkey's CAATSA Reactions & Statements."

¹⁴ Bastian, "Turkey."

¹⁵ Mevlutoglu et al., *Adapting Security* (2024).

ended yet, Ankara proves that it is capable of extending its influence even into the conservative circles of Washington.



Budget of Defense Spending in Turkey, 2020–2024. The equipment expenditure ratio (including procurement and R&D) shows that Ankara has invested in its own defense, especially drones, which reached its peak in 2022 and then dwindled when the Other categories (operations, maintenance, and additional R&D) increased.

c) Energy Dependence vs. NATO Diversification

Turkey aims to become a regional energy hub, reflecting its reliance on external suppliers and its effort to align with NATO's diversification goals. Its strategic location benefits initiatives like TANAP, TurkStream, and the BTC corridor, as well as LNG terminals, which connect Russian, Caspian, and Middle Eastern resources to European markets¹⁶. While Turkey positions itself as a key route, critics argue it functions more as a transit point than a true hub, lacking the pricing power and regulatory influence of major markets like the Dutch TTF¹⁷.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict increased Turkey's importance as Europe sought to reduce dependence on Russian gas. During EU diversification talks, Turkey leveraged this situation to assert its role and seek broader political concessions. However, Ankara remains linked to Moscow through heavy gas imports and the Akkuyu nuclear plant, financed and built by Rosatom¹⁸. This paradox of dependence amid diversification efforts weakens the hub vision.

¹⁶ Novikau and Muhasilović, "Turkey's Quest to Become a Regional Energy Hub."

¹⁷ "NDL2014-002.Pdf."

¹⁸ Łoskot-Strachota and Michalski, *Turkey's Dream of a Hub. Ankara's Wartime Gas Policy*.

Other weaknesses stem from the pipeline's vulnerability to regional instability in Syria, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as the economic burden of infrastructure development¹⁹. Even as it diversifies its energy sources with LNG imports from the U.S. and Qatar, these weaknesses restrict Ankara's autonomy. In the case of NATO, the energy status of Turkey corresponds to the Alliance 2030 postulate, which focuses on resilience and diversification to lower the influence of Russia. By positioning itself as essential to the energy security of the Allies, Ankara will turn its hub ambition into political capital, the demand to have its security concerns acknowledged, and strengthen its overall ambition to have autonomy and bargaining space within NATO²⁰. Energy in such a way is not only an economic asset but also a strategic tool that Turkey has to reinvent its role in the Alliance.

d) Defense Spending and Burden-Sharing

Military expenditure is a key NATO unity measure, but also a point of contention with Turkey. The 2% GDP defense spending guideline gained urgency after the Russia-Ukraine war, with most allies committed to it by 2024-25²¹. Turkey plans to invest 2% of GDP in 2024, showing willingness to meet NATO's expectations but also acknowledging its capability gaps. Turkish military spending exceeded 21.9 billion in 2024, up from about 15.3 billion in 2021, driven by NATO demands and efforts to develop the domestic defense sector²². However, Ankara sees burden sharing differently, viewing financial contribution as a reflection of threats like border security, terrorism, and regional instability, which they want recognized within NATO plans.

Turkish policymakers argue that NATO's metrics, such as GDP percentage, don't reflect the real costs faced by frontline states like Turkey, which spends heavily on border patrols and regional security. These highlights doubts about NATO's one-size-fits-all approach.

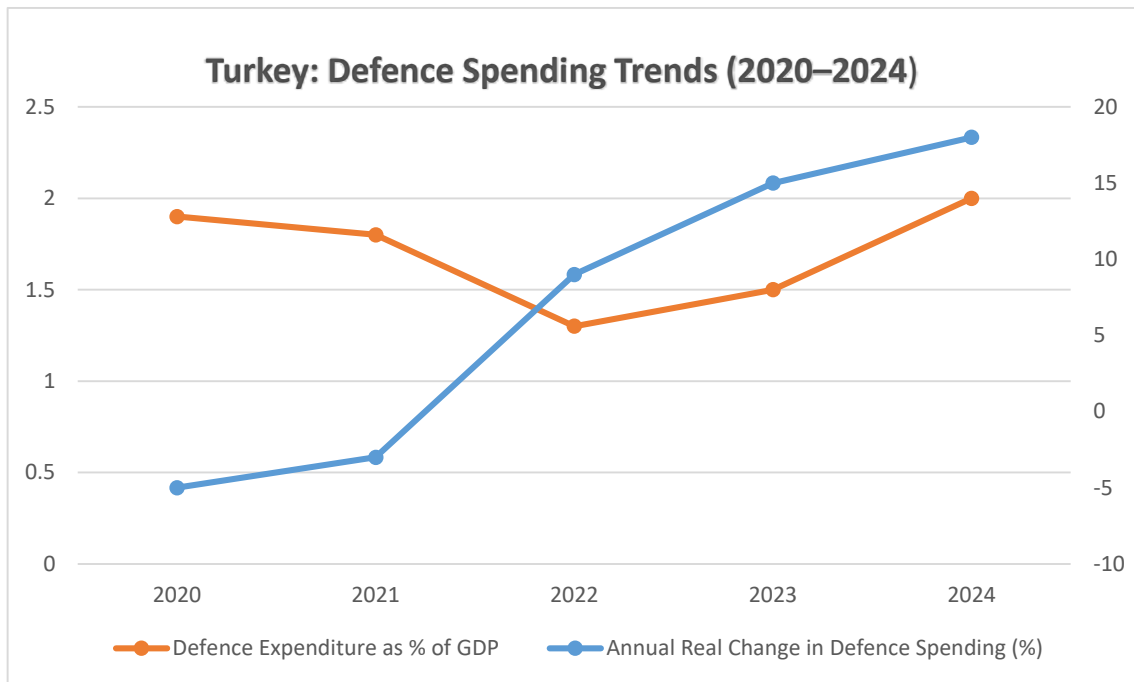
Turkey's pursuit of autonomy is evident as it exceeds NATO spending targets but directs more funds to domestic weapons, drones, and air-defense systems to reduce reliance on Western vendors. This aligns with its response to sanctions and export bans, fostering defense industry independence. While contributing numerically to NATO, Turkey's enhanced capabilities benefit the Alliance's interoperability and its strategic interests. The challenge for NATO is balancing Turkey's contributions with its demands. Without fair burden-sharing frameworks considering regional security costs and domestic limits, Ankara may continue hedging, using defense spending as loyalty symbols and leverage for more autonomy, as shown through this graph.

¹⁹ "A-Sea-of-Opportunities-L_2.Pdf."

²⁰ Siccardi, *Understanding the Energy Drivers of Turkey's Foreign Policy*.

²¹ "230707-Def-Exp-2023-En.Pdf."

²² "SIPRI Milex."



Source: NATO Defense Expenditure Report 2024

Analysis: From Dependence to Autonomy

The change of Turkey into a dependent country to an embedded autonomy country in the period 2020 to 2025 can be viewed through the changing status of Turkey in NATO. This change can be interpreted in the context of hedging theory that explains the process of middle powers balancing alliance obligations and independent strategic capacities to reduce the likelihood of uncertainty. Instead of quitting NATO, Turkey has engaged a hedged plan of staying loyal to the institutions with minimal exposure to western pressure. This change is empirically rooted in the increasing self-sufficiency in defense. The native production of Turkey currently serves approximately 80% of Turkish military demands in contrast with less than 20 percent in the early 2000s²³. Its defense and aerospace exports increased to a record high of 15.1 billion in 2023 with most of its exports being UAV systems including Bayraktar TB2²⁴. Such quantitative jump is not only an industrial advancement but also a calculated political reason of independence that is integrated in collaboration. The involvement of Turkey in NATO deterrence operations and exercises regardless of the S-400 and CAATSA sanctions is another example of hedging in practice: cooperation but nonconformity. This relationship is also a form of security dilemma in the alliance whereby efforts to punish Turkey (via sanctions and technology alerts) have instead

²³ Mevlutoglu et al., *Adapting Security* (2024).

²⁴ "Defense & Aerospace - Invest in Türkiye."

stimulated its efforts to obtain capabilities on its own. It inflicts no erosion of alliances but rather normalizes a two-track relationship whereby Turkey uses NATO as the source of legitimacy as it works on developing parallel lines of power. It is this autonomy which is strengthened by identity. According to the 2022 Strategic Concept by NATO, Russia is the existential threat, but Turkey implements the idea of the border instability, Kurdish militancy, and energy security. These varying perceptions of threat lead to the redefinition of alliance participation, which was presented through the paradigms of subordination during the Cold War to that of a self-reliant partnership. Therefore, the case of Turkey in 2025 is the classic example of institutionalized hedging: the strategic balance that would maintain the membership of NATO, putting the sovereignty together. Dependence has become a type of autonomy that takes place within and not on the outside of the alliance system.

Dimension	Cold War Era (1952–1991)	2020–2025 Era	Analytical Interpretation
Alliance Type	Full Alignment, U.S.-dependent security umbrella	Selective Hedging cooperative yet autonomous participation	Turkey institutionalizes hedging <i>within</i> NATO, not outside it.
Dependence	Heavy reliance on U.S. aid, bases, and nuclear deterrence	80% domestic defense production; diversified suppliers	Structural shift from dependency to self-help capability.
Identity	“Western sentinel” guarding NATO’s flank	“Regional actor with national sovereignty”	Normative autonomy replaces ideological alignment.
Threat Lens	USSR existential threat shared with NATO	Kurdish groups, Syria, energy corridors; Russia secondary	Divergent threat perception fuels intra-alliance friction.
Strategic Posture	Alignment strategy	Hedging strategy	Alliance membership used as negotiation tool, not constrain

Implications

The strategic development since the era of reliance to embedded autonomy of Turkey has several consequences to NATO, Turkey as well as to the overall regional order. Such consequences go past the defense-immediate policies and include the internal balance and external reputation of the alliance in the long-term. The implication of the 2020-2025 trajectory can be replied using the following implications:

- The semi-autonomous attitude of Turkey points out new rifts in NATO, whereby beginning with its alliance cohesion demands inclusion of divergent threat perceptions and not uniformity.

- The Turkish episode recommends NATO to reconsider its strategy to the south, incorporating into the common plan regional security concerns -migration, border control, and hybrid warfare.
- As a drone and technology exporter, the emergence of Turkey paves the way to a non-Western paradigm of technology and defense innovation in the alliance system.
- The deep level of autonomy of Ankara gives it a chance to leverage on its defense cooperation and energy interdependence as a bargaining weapon in the councils of NATO.
- Due to their ability to bridge the Euro-Atlantic and Middle East worlds, the Positive Turkish stance will add to a multipolar, as opposed to a hierarchical, order.

Conclusion

The study finds that the process of Turkey traveling to non-NATO independence between 2020 and 2025 is more a recalibration instead of a break in the relationship with the alliance. Ankara has used the historical weaknesses and turned them into the tools of leverage in the NATO, through defense industrialization, energy diversification, and multidimensional diplomacy. The introduction of domestic defense-related industries like ASELSAN, TAI, and Baykar, as well as the S-400 and CAATSA scandals, have hastened the quest by Turkey on independence in security related issues. Instead of leaving NATO, Turkey has formalized some sort of embedded autonomy, that is, staying in the alliance but declaring its own strategic options. This intermediate form shows a novel formula of middle-power politics: hedging on cooperation and independence to achieve global uncertainty. Turkey case indicates that autonomy in alliances is achievable, which is heralding the dawn of a multipolar, malleable NATO whereby coherence has to come along with variety.

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