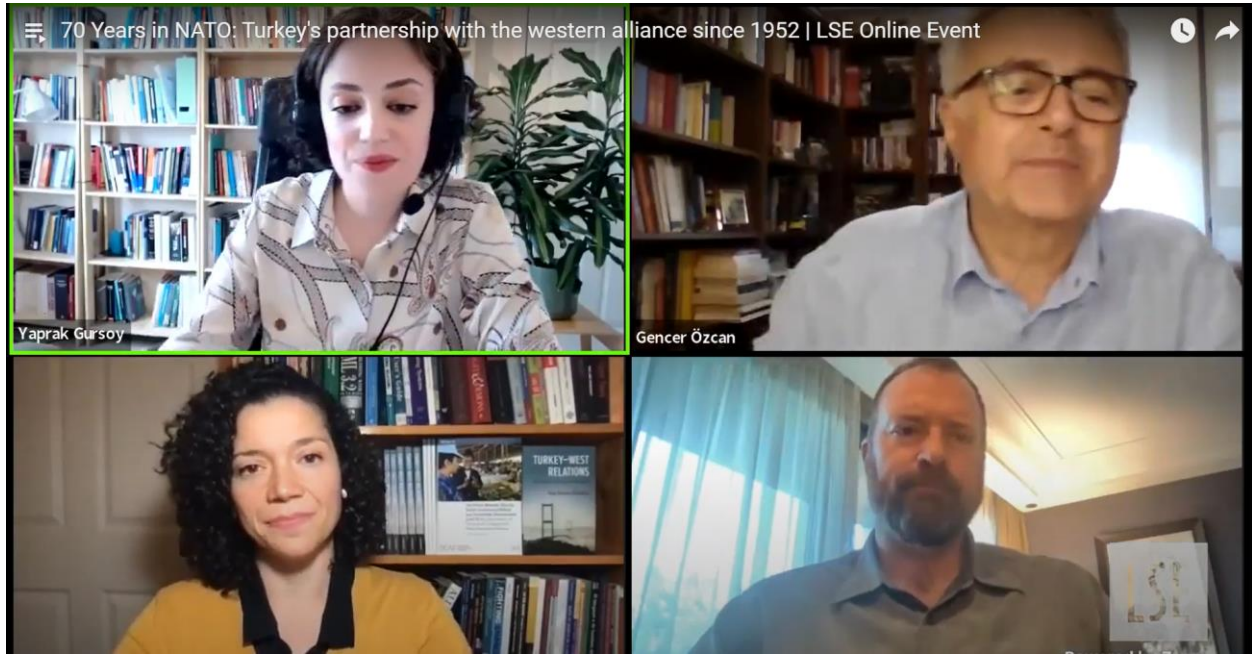


70 Years in NATO: Türkiye's Partnership with the Western Alliance since 1952 | LSE Online Event

This is the summary of the online event held on the 8th of June 2022.

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Please [watch the video](#) or [listen to the podcast](#) to access the entire event.



On the 8th of June 2022, Contemporary Turkish Studies at the LSE European Institute hosted an online event on Türkiye-NATO relations. The event was entitled: "70 Years in NATO: Türkiye's Partnership with the Western Alliance since 1952."

The speakers included Gencer Özcan, Professor of International Relations at Istanbul Bilgi University; Oya Dursun-Özkanca, Endowed Chair of International Studies and Professor of Political Science at Elizabethtown College, USA; and Rich Outzen, geopolitical consultant and a retired colonel and foreign area officer, who served in the US State Department's Policy Planning Staff and as an advisor to several secretaries of state in the US.

Prof Yaprak Gürsoy, Chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, European Institute, chaired the event. In her introduction, Prof Yaprak Gürsoy welcomed the participants and speakers and introduced them to the audience. She explained the significance of understanding the historical background of Turkish-NATO relations in making sense of the changing dynamics following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Main Attributes of NATO-Turkish Relations in the past 70 years

As the first speaker, **Prof Gencer Özcan** highlighted seven points that provided insights into understanding the evolution of Türkiye's relations with NATO and the present state of relations between NATO and Türkiye. These points could be summarized as follows:

1. Turkish politicians and the public rarely, if ever, differentiate between NATO and the United States.
2. Turkish membership in NATO in the 1950s was an outcome of changing threat perceptions of the United States after the Second World War rather than the willingness of the ruling parties in Türkiye.
3. NATO has always been perceived as an agency for the modernization of the army and the society in Türkiye. Also, NATO played an important role in transforming Türkiye's infrastructure and improving the military workforce in line with the requirements of the market economy.
4. Although indirectly, NATO played a significant role in Turkish politics by remaining aloof when the Turkish Armed Forces formed their fully-fledged national security state in Türkiye. NATO is an organization of like-minded free and democratic states. However, NATO has never problematized the militarization of the state in Türkiye, and in that regard, NATO has not been primarily interested in democratic backsliding.
5. NATO/US had become part and parcel of all political debates prevailing in the 1960s and the 1970s in Türkiye. In the later part of the 1960s, all influential socio-political movements questioned NATO membership and Türkiye's relations with the US. NATO was perceived as the stumbling block on the way to Türkiye's development and prosperity. "Türkiye cannot remain independent unless it leaves NATO" was the motive of the prevailing political discourse of the late 1960s.
6. With the exception of the first decade of Türkiye's membership, public perception regarding NATO has always been negative. Anti-American and anti-NATO debates that started in 1964 were partly due to problems with Greece over Cyprus. Although no comprehensive agreement has been reached, NATO has so far played a significant role in preventing the two members of the alliance from being involved in a military conflict with each other.

7. Türkiye's position within NATO underwent a substantial change after the Cold War. This change happened because Türkiye had already begun adapting to the new threat environment of the post-cold war period during the Cold War. Prof Özcan concluded that Türkiye's major asset to NATO was its geographical location and cheap labour. However, throughout the 1990s, the Turkish armed forces learned bitter lessons from the asymmetrical warfare it was involved within and without its borders. Therefore, Türkiye transformed its colossal army into an expeditionary force with new military projection capabilities.

Turkish Strategy toward NATO in the Last Two Decades

Prof Oya Dursun Özkanca began her comments by pointing out that Türkiye is strategically important for the transatlantic alliance because it is located between Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the South Caucasus. Over the last decade, Ankara has adopted several proactive and anti-western foreign policies. Scarcely a day passes without a report or a headline on the front pages of the leading international newsletters questioning Ankara's reliability as a western ally. How did Türkiye get here? To answer the question, Prof Özkanca listed several explanations. Firstly, she pointed out that Türkiye-US relations throughout the last couple of years have been very tense over the US's support to the Syrian Kurds in the fight against the ISIS terrorist organization. Furthermore, the extradition of Fethullah Gülen from the US, whom the Turkish authorities implicated behind the failed coup attempt back in July 2016, led to a deterioration of relations. Ankara's disappointment over its lack of progress over the accession negotiations with the EU and visa liberalization talks, as well as the Turkish-Russian rapprochement on energy, defence, and security issues, further deepened the rift between Türkiye and its NATO allies.

Based on her book's intra-alliance opposition framework, Prof Özkanca interpreted Türkiye's relations with the NATO allies in the last couple of years. In May 2017, Turkish-US relations reached their nadir when the top advisor to Turkish President Erdoğan threatened that Turkish troops might target US forces in Northern Syria if their collaboration with the Kurdish fighters along the Turkish border continued. Prof Özkanca described the threat of using force as a balancing act that goes further than a "soft balancing strategy" between allies and extends into the "hard balancing" area. Prof Özkanca argued that Ankara's purchase of the S-400s raised many questions regarding whether Türkiye is shifting its defence posture towards Russia, which created another major rift within the Western alliance.

At the end of her talk, Prof Özkanca suggested three factors behind Türkiye's increased intensity of intra-alliance opposition: 1. International systemic and regional sub-systemic factors; 2. the irreconcilable differences between Türkiye and the NATO allies on the issues of Syria, Cyprus,



Libya, maritime delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean, hydrocarbon explorations in the region and the subsequent lack of trust; 3. domestic factors such as anti-Americanism and Euroscepticism. Prof Özkanca concluded her talk by expressing that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is creating new opportunities for Türkiye to present itself as a reliable NATO ally.

The Changing International Order after the Cold War and Turkish Independence in Foreign Policy

The third speaker, **Rich Outzen**, started his speech by agreeing with Prof Özcan's point that the USA and NATO are understood as interchangeable from the Turkish perspective. He added that in the past 30 years, US-Türkiye relations have become locked up and calcified in US policy towards Türkiye. Working primarily through NATO as a vehicle to provide synergy in relations has a better chance now than solving problems bilaterally.

Outzen discussed how the US and NATO approached Türkiye within the alliance since the early 2000s. He underlined that the Türkiye-US/NATO relations changed with the fall of the Soviet Union since there is no common threat. This loss of a common threat in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union was a life-changing experience for Türkiye and NATO/US. After the Cold War, the world was divided into two blocs: the democratic free world and the totalitarian world where Russia and China belong. Türkiye was initially considered part of the free world. With the increasing conservatism in Türkiye in AKP-era, frictions have emerged because Türkiye now appeared to be on the "other side" although it had been on the "right side" of the ideological barrier during the entirety of the Cold War. In line with Francis Fukuyama's End of History argument, the US has ignored geopolitical factors and local varieties and wanted to converge everyone on one ideological, political, and economic model. Yet, Türkiye had to make some hedging bets that other European and western countries did not have to do. As a result, Türkiye was dismissed because the idea was you were either "with us" or "against us".

In another argument defining changes in Türkiye-US/NATO relations, Outzen stated that Türkiye was not strong enough to have an independent foreign policy before the reforms which were pursued in the 2000s. He added that a different Türkiye was seen from 2000 to 2010 and 2015, one that tripled its per capita GDP and became much more lethal in terms of military capacity. Outzen expressed that the Gülenist movement, which was trying to establish its control at certain times in conjunction with the AKP, was a cancer within the Turkish military, and the struggle for the control of the Turkish army rendered the military much less effective.

Outzen highlighted that with regards to NATO, the defence industrial cooperation with Türkiye declined because Ankara is currently trying to develop its own equipment and systems and does

not need to buy from the US, UK or Germany like it used to. This situation decreases Western leverage over Ankara in terms of its foreign policy.

Türkiye aligns with the US and NATO in many regions such as Africa, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. More alignment is observed where we go further away from the borders of Türkiye, and in a way, Ankara supports the liberal international order in its unique way to some degree. Outzen argued that it is implausible when people in the West, especially in Washington DC, say that Türkiye is not a partner and should be kicked out of NATO. He remarked that Türkiye could be part of the solution in many cases. From a western perspective, it means making some compromises. Outzen concluded by stating that there are still pragmatic deals that can be done with Türkiye, such as in the case of Ukraine or in Libya and Africa, where the US does not want the Russians or Chinese to dominate but does not care enough to solve problems.

After the speaker's initial comments, the seminar continued with questions from the audience, covering diverse issues, including the Eastern Mediterranean, Greek-Turkish relations, NATO's role in upholding democracy in its member states, and the influence of European countries, as well as the impact of EU-NATO relations on Türkiye's relations with NATO.