

NATO Enlargement and Türkiye's Partnership with the West

This is the summary of the online public event held on 24 January 2024.

You can access the [podcast here](#) and the [video here](#).

Summary by Dr Arzu Kırca Şahin



On January 24, 2024, Contemporary Turkish Studies and the LSE IDEAS organised an online public event titled "**NATO Enlargement and Türkiye's Partnership with the West.**"

The speakers were **Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe**, Professor of International Relations and Jean Monnet Chair holder on Hybrid Threats in the EU, at Kadir Has University; **Lisel Hintz**, Assistant Professor of European and Eurasian Studies at Johns Hopkins SAIS; and **Tacan İldem**, Retired diplomat and former NATO Assistant Secretary-General, Turkish Ambassador to the Netherlands, and Chairman of the independent think tank EDAM.

Yaprak Gürsoy, Professor of European Politics and Chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, chaired the event.

Professor Yaprak Gürsoy greeted everyone and welcomed them to the event organised by LSE Contemporary Turkish Studies and LSE IDEAS. She outlined the topics of discussion for the evening, including Turkey's past and future role within NATO in light of the organisation's 75th anniversary, the war in Ukraine, current challenges facing the community, and recent enlargements. She acknowledged the contributions of Dr Selin Nasi and Dr Buğra Süsler in organising the panel and thanked them for their efforts. Gürsoy provided background information on recent developments regarding NATO's enlargement and Türkiye's role within NATO, emphasising that the panel aimed to offer a broader understanding of NATO's changing role in European security and Türkiye's contributions to it. Gürsoy concluded by handing over to Ambassador Tacan İldem for his talk.

Ambassador Tacan İldem expressed his gratitude for being invited to the webinar and conveyed his delight in joining such a distinguished panel. İldem highlighted the longstanding bond between Europe and North America, emphasising NATO's role as the strongest alliance in history, bound by shared values and goals. He stressed the importance of unity among allies, particularly in the face of the current complex security environment in which the Russian war in Ukraine continues. İldem reflected on NATO's successful adaptation since 2014 and the subsequent forward-looking reflection process launched by the heads of state and government at their meeting in London in 2019.

İldem mentioned his participation as one of the ten experts tasked with drafting proposals for NATO's future towards 2030 and beyond. He outlined key findings and recommendations of the resulting report, "NATO 2030: United for a New Era", including those that relate to deeper political consultation and coordination, strengthened deterrence and defence, improved resilience, preservation of technological edge, upholding the rules-based international order, and investment in

NATO's capabilities. He also mentioned the drafting of a new strategic concept, which was subsequently adopted at the Madrid Summit in 2022.

İldem discussed NATO's strategic priorities and told that at the Vilnius Summit in July last year NATO leaders took further major steps to strengthen the Alliance's defence and deterrence for the long term, across all domains and against all threats and challenges, in line with the 360-degree approach. They agreed the most comprehensive defence plans since the end of the Cold War designed to counter the two main threats to the Alliance: Russia and terrorism, as well as challenges such as China, climate change, hybrid tactics together with cyber-attacks and waves of disinformation campaigns targeting the democratic values and institutions.

Regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, İldem emphasised NATO's support for Ukraine's right to self-defence and efforts to prevent escalation. He noted NATO's commitment to Ukraine's future membership and addressed Türkiye's longstanding supportive stance on NATO enlargement. İldem told that despite its solid record as a staunch Ally, Türkiye has at times been perceived as a "spoiler" by some quarters within the Alliance like in the case of its opposition to the Finnish and Swedish applications for NATO membership. He emphasized that those who were critical about Türkiye failed to recognize that Türkiye's opposition stemmed from its legitimate security concerns regarding fight against terrorism.

In conclusion, İldem underscored that given its geopolitical location, accumulated historical experience, and having NATO's second largest, well-tested armed forces Türkiye brings unique added value to NATO by its contributions not only to its support to all critical consensus-based decisions at the political level, but also to NATO's collective defence efforts and to all operations and missions. On the other hand, he highlighted the fact that being a NATO member provides an invaluable contribution to Türkiye's security by reinforcing its deterrence and defence in the current complex and unpredictable security environment. He added that the complex and at times strained nature of Türkiye's bilateral relations with some Allies inevitably influence the very

dynamics of its stand on a number of issues that NATO confronts along with public perceptions both in Türkiye and in other Allied states.

During the Q&A session, Tacan İldem stated that given the threats felt in its region acquiring air and missile defence capability has long remained as an urgent and important requirement for Türkiye. He told that among the criteria set out for the acquisition of such capabilities, price, delivery time and technology transfer were among the top. Although an advanced system based on its known technical specifications it is a fact that S-400s could deliver what it is expected according to deliver according to these specifications only when it is operating in a network of capabilities. Therefore, its standalone use would not be enough to see it deliver those capacities that its specifications define. The expulsion of the Turkish companies taking part in the production of F-35 fighters was a big loss also in the technology transfer that Türkiye has rightfully been insisting on. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the technology transfer criteria were met in the off-the-shelf purchase of the S-400s. Therefore, it may be regarded as an important mistake of the recent past.

Regarding the perception of Türkiye's stance, İldem expressed frustration at how some equate Türkiye's actions, such as the S-400 purchase, with a shift of axis that distances Türkiye from NATO and bringing it closer towards Russia. He said that although Turkish-Russian relations appear complicated at first glance, there is a discernible pattern that goes back to decades. Bilateral relations between the two countries have been driven by careful compartmentalization of strategic interests and divergences. Both countries can "agree to disagree" on a number of crucial issues. This can be seen on a number of recent crisis ranging from Libya, Syria, Nagorno Karabagh to the Russian occupation of Ukraine where on all these issues they are on the opposing sides of the equation. Therefore, putting aside the acquisition of S400s, any Government in power would have followed a balanced approach towards Russia, which at times could be of great value, like in the case of the invocation of the relevant provisions of the Montreux Convention, or contributions in reaching a "grain deal".

İldem told that due to the strained relations with the US in recent years, the public support that NATO enjoyed in Türkiye has the potential to suffer as there is a tendency to perceive NATO from the prism of bilateral relations with the US. He emphasized that independent from any political party affiliation, the general sentiment in Türkiye is somewhat bitter because of the support that the US renders to PYS/YPG in Syria who are affiliated with PKK which is enlisted as a terrorist organization by both the US and the EU.

Ambassador İldem highlighted the importance of maintaining and strengthening unity among NATO Allies in this highly contested security environment. He argued that the fundamental principle of consultations, which is in the heart of the functioning of NATO, should guide individual Allies to address any serious bilateral issues that they may have with other Allies, so that these problems do not damage relations within the broader Alliance.

Lastly, İldem discussed Türkiye's involvement in NATO-EU cooperation, rejecting the notion that Türkiye acts as a "spoiler." He referenced historical events, such as the rejection of the UN-brokered agreement, known as "Annan Plan", by the Greek Cypriots while it was endorsed by the Turkish Cypriots during the simultaneous referendum on both sides of the island. He recalled that the original idea was to admit 'Cyprus' if the Plan had been accepted by both peoples of the island. This result led Greece's threat of veto the accession of the other nine candidates in case Cyprus was denied membership. Therefore, while evaluating such complex issues the entire historical background should be considered without just applying a selective memory to support unjustified claims such as a 'spoiler'.

Professor Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe expressed gratitude for being invited to the webinar and conveyed happiness to participate, even though it was held online. She extended thanks to Ambassador İldem for his insightful presentation on Türkiye's role within NATO. Akgül-Açıkmeşe highlighted Türkiye's long-standing involvement in NATO and emphasised its reciprocal relationship with the alliance. She discussed Türkiye's significant contributions to NATO's military capabilities, including hosting NATO

commands and participating in various operations. Akgül-Açıkmeşe also addressed past crises between Türkiye and NATO, such as the US weapons embargo and the Cyprus issue. She mentioned instances where Türkiye utilised its veto power but emphasised that most crises were eventually resolved. However, she noted persistent challenges, including differences in defining terrorism and ongoing tensions with some NATO members, particularly regarding Türkiye's military operations in Northern Syria. Akgül-Açıkmeşe concluded by mentioning unresolved issues like Cyprus, different definitions of terrorism, and Türkiye's relations with Russia, which continue to impact Türkiye's role within NATO.

During the Q&A session, Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe addressed several topics. Regarding the question concerning Türkiye's strategy of multi-alignment, she emphasised the misconception regarding the impact of the S-400 on Türkiye's access. She stated that throughout history, Türkiye has fluctuated between various identities, including its Western, Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Ottoman heritage, yet it has consistently maintained its Western or transatlantic identity. Despite trust issues on both sides, particularly regarding NATO's role and Türkiye's definition of terrorism, Türkiye remains committed to its Western identity.

Regarding Israel's cooperation with NATO, Akgül-Açıkmeşe clarified that it's not about membership but rather cooperation, which is crucial given the challenges in the region. She highlighted Israel's participation in NATO exercises and other forms of collaboration, stressing the importance of partnerships in the Mediterranean region.

On the topic of the US and EU's tendencies to overlook aspects of Turkish foreign policy, she noted the mutual distrust between Türkiye and the EU, particularly concerning issues like democratic backsliding and the EU's stance in the Eastern Mediterranean. She criticised both actors for overlooking Türkiye's perspectives and rights in various contexts.

Regarding expectations from Sweden, Akgül-Açıkmeşe mentioned the anticipation surrounding defence acquisitions but noted the approval process and potential complications, particularly in relation to US Congress and Swedish membership.

Responding to the broader question about Türkiye's experience in NATO, she acknowledged tensions and crises but emphasised the enduring benefits of membership, especially in terms of security and defence discipline.

Dr Lisel Hintz expressed her gratitude towards the organisers for the invitation to the panel discussion, acknowledging the honour of participating alongside distinguished speakers. She noted the importance of addressing Akgül-Açıkmeşe's earlier remarks regarding Türkiye's relationship with NATO. Hintz emphasised the distinction between

bilateral relations, particularly with the United States, and Türkiye's involvement in NATO, highlighting the complexity this brings. She discussed the evolution of Türkiye's national identity under the AKP government from Ottoman Islamism to a more pronounced Turkish nationalist stance, affecting its foreign relations.

Hintz referenced her book on Türkiye's identity, politics, and foreign policy to underscore the challenges arising from shifting perceptions of Türkiye's role globally, including its relations with NATO and the West. She pointed out discrepancies between Türkiye's stance on issues like the Israel-Palestine conflict and its alignment with Islamist groups, which have strained relations with the US and, by extension, NATO. The purchase of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia was highlighted as a major point of contention, indicative of Türkiye's pursuit of an independent foreign policy.

Economic and energy interests, as well as domestic stability concerns, were cited as driving factors in Türkiye's foreign policy decisions, leading to tensions within NATO and with Western allies. Hintz suggested that Türkiye's actions, such as its refusal to sanction Russia as demanded by the US, reflect its pushback against perceived Western hegemony. She concluded by emphasising the intersection of identity,

economic motives, and power dynamics shaping Turkish foreign policy, ultimately complicating its relations with NATO and the West.

During the Q&A session, Lisel Hintz acknowledged the complexity of the situation and stated that, in her opinion, the crisis between Türkiye and Sweden within NATO at the time of the webinar in January 2024 had not yet been fully resolved. Referring to the recent ratification in the Turkish Parliament, she highlighted that the Turkish President had not signed off on Sweden's membership yet, although he had expressed intentions to do so. Furthermore, she noted Türkiye's incremental actions aimed at influencing the Biden Administration and Congress regarding their objections, particularly concerning democratic issues and the purchase of military equipment. She emphasised that despite progress in ratifying agreements, the outcome was uncertain due to various concerns, including objections from Congress.

Hintz then discussed the context of Türkiye's objections to Sweden's NATO membership, citing changes in Sweden's domestic laws as a response. She emphasised the importance of understanding Türkiye's security concerns, particularly regarding the YPG and PKK, and how these concerns influenced NATO's rhetoric. She also highlighted Türkiye's historical distrust of the US, stemming from past incidents such as the 2016 coup attempt, which affected both domestic and international perceptions.

Regarding Türkiye's role in NATO, Hintz argued against calls to eject Türkiye from the alliance, emphasising its significant contributions. She proposed focusing on concrete security goals rather than abstract notions of values and interests to facilitate collaboration. She acknowledged the compromises of sovereignty inherent in international organisations but stressed the continued importance of NATO's collective defence for Türkiye despite evolving geopolitical dynamics.

In summary, Hintz advocated for a nuanced understanding of Türkiye's position within NATO, considering its security concerns and contributions while seeking common ground for collaboration within the alliance.