

The London Summit as a Test for NATO Unity

On December 3-4, 2019, the North Atlantic Council held a summit meeting in London to commemorate the 70th anniversary of NATO founding treaty as well as the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain. The summit turned out to be another tense meeting for NATO. The disputes between the member states materialised on the first day of the summit. The President of France, Emmanuel Macron, accused Turkey of supporting the Islamic State. On the other hand, Macron's recent comments on NATO provoked sharp criticism from Donald Trump^[i]. Furthermore, on the eve of the summit a rumour had surfaced that Ankara would oppose NATO's defence plans for Poland and the Baltic States, sparking fears that Recep Erdoğan's unpredictability could have a detrimental impact on the Alliance.

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Turkey at a crossroads

In July 2019, the Pentagon removed Turkey from the F-35 Lightning II programme in response to the purchase of the S-400 Triumph air defence missile system by the Turkish Armed Forces^[ii]. The growing antagonism between Ankara and Washington was reinforced by Erdoğan's visit to MAKS international air show in Moscow in August 2019. In November, the Turkish President confirmed that Ankara will buy 36 Sukhoi Su-35S multirole fighters if the United States blocks delivery of the F-35 aircraft^[iii]. The US-Turkey tensions have serious implications for other NATO member states. As a result of the US withdrawal from northern Syria which ended the American support for local Kurdish fighters, the Turkish Armed Forces launched Operation Peace Spring against the Autonomous Administration of

North and East Syria, Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. The Turkish offensive provoked some NATO and EU member states (including France, Finland, the Netherlands, and Germany) to impose arms embargo against Turkey^[iv]. The French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, called the European Union to condemn the Turkish operation and ban arms exports to Turkey^[v]. Turkish operation in Syria is not the only reason why the European Union and NATO members are in dispute with Ankara. On November 8, 2019, the Council of the European Union approved a legal framework which allows the European Union to impose sanctions on Ankara in response to Turkey's illegal drilling within the Cypriot exclusive economic zone^[vi]. The dispute over offshore hydrocarbon exploration in Cypriot territorial waters is another episode of the tense relations between the EU and Turkey. Following the EU condemnation of the Turkish operation in Syria, Ankara threatened to open borders to refugees from the Middle East that could flood the EU once again^[vii].

Furthermore, prior to the London Summit, Turkey demanded that NATO recognise the Kurdish People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) as a terrorist organisation. In late November Reuters cited four senior NATO officials who claimed that Ankara had threatened to block defence plans for Poland and the Baltic states unless NATO agrees for Turkey's demands^[viii]. The Turkish officials denied those claims although they also emphasised that Ankara would not hesitate to use the power of veto^[ix]. According to the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Ankara is not against defence plans for NATO's eastern flank; nonetheless, the Erdoğan cabinet expects that the Alliance will address Turkey's security concerns on a par with demands of other NATO member states^[x].

Despite that rapprochement between Turkey and Russia is seen as Ankara's drift away from NATO, the interests of these two countries tend to be contradictory, even in Syria. Following the Turkish offensive, Vladimir Putin indicated that Ankara's actions could bring about the revival of the Islamic State in Kurdish controlled areas in northeast Syria that were struck by the Turkish forces. Another reason why Turkey and Russia have very little in common is the emergence of a new alliance between two former enemies – the Kurdish forces that were abandoned by their American ally and the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad backed by Russia and Iran^[xi]. Therefore, it is certain that Vladimir Putin is holding all the cards as a mediator of the Syrian conflict and that the Kremlin will ultimately determine

the future of the Middle Eastern nation depending on Russia's political interests in the region.

Based on recent statements made by Trump in London we may conclude that the US president perceives the Ankara's pro-Russian stance as a measure to strengthen Turkey's position in negotiations with Washington, although Trump himself said "it's a very tough situation that they're in" when he referred to the Turkish F-35 deal. Interestingly enough, during the press conference with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, Trump decided to hold off on discussing punitive sanctions on Turkey for the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence missile systems. The US president also refused to answer questions regarding the Turkish membership in NATO in the context of Ankara's operation in Syria. On the contrary, instead of criticising Ankara's recent policies, Trump was very restrained while emphasising a key role of Turkey in defeating the Islamic State. Furthermore, he did put the blame for the deterioration of the American-Turkish relations on Barack Obama who refused to sell the Patriot missile systems to Turkey[xii].

Macron's perspective on NATO

Macron's remarks regarding "the brain death of NATO," in his infamous interview with the Economist, reverberated across the capitals of all NATO member nations[xiii]. His controversial words – used in the context of Europe's inability to defend itself and its dependence on the military alliance with the United States whose foreign policy has become unpredictable in the era of Donald Trump – have triggered a wave of criticism from most leaders of NATO nations including the German chancellor Angela Merkel[xiv]. Macron pointed out that the Alliance had not been able to coordinate its policies regarding the US withdrawal from Syria and the Turkish operation against the Kurdish forces despite the fact that a full-scale war between Ankara and Damascus could have a devastating impact on NATO. The French president confirmed his previous remarks and outlined major challenges facing NATO during the meeting with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in Paris on November 28, 2019. Macron put great emphasis on redefining NATO's security agenda as well as the Alliance's policy towards Russia which, in his opinion, is ineffective. The French president opted for a dialogue with Russia and opposed designating Russia and China as enemies of NATO. On the other hand, he stated that terrorism is currently a major internal and external threat to NATO's security and, therefore, this issue ought to be prioritised. The French president also criticised the United States for withdrawing from the Intermediate-

Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) and shared his view that the Turkish operation in Syria could undermine years of achievements in the fight against the Islamic State^[xv].

Macron's comments about the death brain of NATO and a lack of coherent plans for the Alliance sparked a debate during the London Summit. In answer to questions about Macron's remarks, Jens Stoltenberg distanced himself from the opinions of the French President and emphasised that NATO "is actually stronger and more agile than we have been for many, many years." In this context, he mentioned the presence of the Alliance's troops on the eastern flank as well as tripling the size of NATO Response Force^[xvi]. NATO Secretary General responded evasively regarding de-escalation of the arms race and potential détente between the Alliance and Russia in the future. Stoltenberg's stance on Russia seemed to reaffirm claims of several European politicians, including the Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz^[xvii], that the pro-Russian comments of the French President had not been acclaimed by most NATO member states. The Polish Foreign Minister also pointed out that there is little understanding between Paris and other European capitals in terms of cooperation within NATO and the European Union. In October 2019, France damaged the EU credibility in the Balkans by blocking EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. Some analysts suggested that Macron's disruptive foreign policy could open up deep divisions within the European Union and thus extend Russia's and China's sphere of influence across the Balkans^[xviii].

Final declaration

Despite all internal disputes and concerns that the London Summit could have ended up as a triumph of Moscow, the Heads of State and Government of NATO nations have reached an agreement regarding several crucial issues. The final declaration designated Russia's aggressive policy and terrorism as major challenges for the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. The document also emphasised the importance of NATO's Open Door policy, the readiness of the Alliance to accept new member states and to continue North Macedonia's accession to NATO (North Macedonia joined the Alliance on March 27, 2020). The final declaration addressed also other issues such as cyber security, hybrid warfare, security of critical infrastructure and telecommunications, including 5G networks. An important point of the London declaration is recognition of China's growing international clout. According to Jens Stoltenberg, the development of Chinese missile technologies as well as Beijing's economic expansion are not only a challenge in the context of the tensions in East Asia and

the South China Sea. China's expansionism has serious implications for both Europe and the United States due to Beijing's activity in the Arctic, Africa, and Europe^[xix]. It is also worth noting China's growing cyber capabilities and the expansion of Chinese tech companies such as Huawei that attempt to develop their own 5G infrastructure across the world. Although the final declaration did not designate China as the main source of cyber threats, it seems clear that the point regarding the security of 5G networks is related to the US attempts to block the expansion of the Chinese corporation in Europe due to Washington's perception of Huawei as a direct threat to national security. Despite having reached a consensus on a number of matters, NATO failed to resolve the issue of defence plans. Following the London Summit, the Polish Minister of Defence Mariusz Błaszczak confirmed that Turkey initially approved the defence plans for NATO's eastern flank. However, a few days later, the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that Ankara had not changed its previous demands and would continue to block the document as long as NATO does not recognise YPG as a terrorist organisation^[xx]. Contrary to the Turkish claims, Krzysztof Szczerski, Secretary of State and Chief of the Cabinet of the Polish President, said that NATO had approved contingency plans for Poland, the Baltic states, and Turkey. Nonetheless, based on recent information released by Tomasz Szatkowski, Poland's Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council^[xxi], and Gülnur Aybet, Senior Adviser to the President of Turkey^[xxii], the final decisions regarding the updated defence plans for Turkey and the eastern flank will be negotiated behind closed doors.

Conclusions

1. The US-Turkey tensions have serious implications for other NATO member states. As a result of the US withdrawal from northern Syria which ended the American support for Kurdish fighters in Syria, the Turkish Armed Forces launched Operation Peace Spring against the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. The Turkish offensive provoked some NATO and EU member states (including France, Finland, the Netherlands, and Germany) to impose arms embargo against Turkey.
2. During the press conference with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, Trump decided to hold off on discussing punitive sanctions on Turkey for the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence missile systems. Instead of criticising Ankara's recent policies, Trump was very restrained and he emphasised a key role of Turkey in defeating the Islamic

State. Furthermore, he did put the blame for the deterioration of the American-Turkish relations on Barack Obama who refused to sell the Patriot missile systems to Turkey

3. Macron's comments about the death brain of NATO and a lack of coherent plans for the Alliance sparked a debate during the London Summit. In answer to questions about Macron's remarks, Jens Stoltenberg distanced himself from the opinions of the French President and emphasised that NATO "is actually stronger and more agile than we have been for many, many years." In this context, he mentioned the presence of the alliance's troops on the eastern flank as well as tripling the size of NATO Response Force.

4. There is no denying that Macron's pro-Russian stance is a challenge for the Euro-Atlantic security system whose foundations depend on cooperation between Europe and the United States. Anti-American rhetoric of the French President seems to indicate that Macron would like to fulfil his political ambitions and extend the clout of Paris not only in the EU but also within NATO. Although Macron's critical remarks on NATO seem constructive, the actions of the French President could erode NATO's unity and its stance on Russia which may be perceived by Moscow as a weakness of the Alliance. Furthermore, Macron's remarks could, paradoxically, strengthen between the United States and those nations that consider Russia as a major threat and remain sceptical about the EU defence initiatives. Therefore, there is no chance that Macron's stance on Russia could increase support for deeper defence integration within the EU.

5. Despite all internal disputes and concerns that the London Summit could have ended up as a triumph of Moscow, the Heads of State and Government of NATO nations have reached an agreement regarding several crucial issues such as increasing defence spending and designating Russia's aggressive policy and terrorism as major challenges for the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. The document also emphasised the importance of NATO's Open Door policy and the readiness of the Alliance to accept new member states and to continue North Macedonia's accession to NATO (North Macedonia joined the Alliance on March 27, 2020).

6. Despite having reached a consensus on a number of matters, NATO failed to resolve the issue of defence plans. Based on recent information released by Polish and Turkish senior officials, the final decisions regarding the updated defence plans for Turkey and the eastern flank will be negotiated behind closed doors. The Turkish-Russian rapprochement and the US-Turkey tensions remain serious challenges for the Alliance. The latter issue is particularly

important given that Turkey threatened to close Kürecik Radar Station operated by the US Armed Forces as well as Incirlik Air Base operated by the 39th Air Base Wing, where American nuclear weapons are stored under the NATO's Nuclear Sharing arrangements. Although such a scenario is very unlikely, it cannot be ruled if the United States decides to impose sanctions on Turkey for the purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system.

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