

---

*Peer-reviewed*

---

## Turkey's Trust in the USA: Causes of the Criticised Alliance Member's Approach

### Důvěra Turecka vůči USA: Příčiny postoje kritizovaného člena aliance

Denisa Schvachová, Jozef Vojtek

**Abstract:** The article deals with Turkey's trust in the USA as its most important ally in NATO. Semi-structured interviews with Turkish academics and international relations experts during field research identified three main areas of Turkish mistrust in the USA – the Cyprus question, USA support for the PYD/YPG in Syria, and USA intervention in Turkish politics. The research results presented in the causal network show that the main cause of Turkish mistrust towards the USA is the factors leading to the phenomenon of fear of abandonment. That causes Turkey's increased need for independence from strategic partners and the subsequent increase in the application of a balance policy. The study concludes that one of the main reasons for Turkey's current attitude towards NATO is the need to ensure its security, and this need stems from Turkey's mistrust of the USA.

**Abstrakt:** Článek se zabývá otázkou důvěry Turecka v USA jako jeho nejdůležitějšího spojence v NATO. Terénním výzkumem s využitím polostrukturovaných rozhovorů s tureckými akademiky a experty na mezinárodní vztahy byly identifikovány tři hlavní oblasti nedůvěry Turecka v USA – kyperská otázka, americká podpora PYD/YPG v Sýrii a americká intervence do turecké politiky. Výsledky výzkumu prezentované kauzální sítí ukazují, že hlavní příčinou turecké nedůvěry vůči USA jsou faktory vedoucí k fenoménu strachu z opuštění. Ten způsobuje zvýšenou potřebu Turecka po nezávislosti na strategických partnerech, a následné zvýšení uplatnění balanční politiky. Studie dochází k závěru, že jedním z hlavních důvodů současného tureckého postoje k NATO je potřeba zajištění si vlastní bezpečnosti, přičemž tato potřeba pramení z nedůvěry Turecka k USA.

**Keywords:** NATO; Security Dilemma; Transatlantic Relations; Trust; Turkey.

**Klíčová slova:** NATO; bezpečnostní dilema; transatlantické vztahy; důvěra; Turecko.

## INTRODUCTION

Security uncertainty is not only a matter of enemy states, it can also be present in alliances. Although the purpose of the Transatlantic Alliance (NATO) is to “ensure the freedom and security of its members by political and military means”<sup>1</sup>, it is natural that even within this organisation, there are disagreements caused by different perceptions of threats and partial interests. Attention is mainly drawn to Turkey,<sup>2</sup> whose positions within NATO are often criticised. Noncompliance with anti-Russian sanctions and Turkish cooperation with Russia in the economic sphere, including purchasing Russian antimissile systems S-400, is perceived as the most fundamental. Furthermore, delaying and complicating the process of the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, Turkey demanded concessions and, among other things, the resumption of the process of Turkish accession to the EU.

From this point of view, Turkey behaves as a rebellious member of the alliance and thus arouses a certain degree of mistrust among the other members. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) estimated that “Turkey’s growing cooperation with Russia undermines NATO cohesion...”<sup>3</sup> Terms such as *risky partner*<sup>4</sup> that *acts against American interests*<sup>5</sup> are used in connection with Turkey, and directly in connection with Turkish President Erdoğan words as *uncooperative* and *pugilistic* are used.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is also a significant level of mistrust on the part of Turkey. In September 2023, Turkish President Erdoğan said in the interview with the American public broadcaster PBS News Hour that he trusted Russia as much as the West.<sup>7</sup> This statement indicates obvious problems in Turkey’s trust towards its allies.

The article tests the hypothesis that *the Turkish need to ensure its own security is one of the main reasons behind the current Turkish attitude toward NATO*. This need stems from Turkey’s mistrust of the USA. The article does not state that the mistrust in the USA is the only reason for Turkey’s approaches but that it plays a key role as one of them.

1 Co je NATO? In: *nato.int* [online]. [cit. 2024-1-22]. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index\\_cz.html](https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index_cz.html)

2 Official name Türkiye was adopted in 2021 at the United Nations (UN), the name Turkey is used in this article as it is commonly known term.

3 Turkey Brief: January 23 - March 18, 2019. In: *iswresearch.org* [online]. March 19, 2019 [cit. 2024-1-22]. Available at: <https://www.iswresearch.org/2019/03/turkey-brief-january-23-march-18-2019.html>

4 COHEN, Jordan, Jonathan Ellis ALLEN and Nardine MOSAAD. Turkey is a US ally, but should not be a trusted one. In: *thehill.com* [online]. December 31, 2023 [cit. 2024-01-02] Available at: <https://thehill.com/opinion/4383282-turkey-is-a-us-ally-but-should-not-be-a-trusted-one/>

5 Ibid.

6 CIDDİ, Sinan. It’s Time to Reconsider Turkey’s NATO Membership. In: *foreignpolicy.com* [online]. December 6, 2023 [cit. 2024-01-02] Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/06/turkey-nato-membership-alliance-russia-erdogan-sweden-syria/>

7 Turkey’s Erdogan says he trusts Russia ‘just as much as I trust the West’. In: *pbs.org* [online]. September 18, 2023 [cit. 2024-01-12] Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/turkeys-erdogan-says-he-trusts-russia-just-as-much-as-i-trust-the-west>

The first part of the article focuses on the concept of trust in international relations, its role in alliances, and the literature dealing with trust between Turkey and the USA. Research methodology is also described. In the following section, the authors analyse the causes of Turkey's mistrust of the USA in three areas – the Cyprus question, American support for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Defense Units (YPG) in Syria, and American interference in Turkish politics. The article focuses solely on the Turkish point of view on the mistrust of the USA. In the final part, space is devoted to discussing the research results and illustrating the causal relationship between mistrust and the Turkish attitude.

## 1 TRUST IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A security dilemma exists between states or non-state actors, which in international relations refers to a concept describing steps a state takes to become more secure. The security dilemma is then linked to the issue of trust.<sup>8</sup> It began to be examined within the framework of international relations only at the beginning of the 21st century. Hoffman presents it as one of the main factors of cooperation in international relations.<sup>9</sup> From the definition of Kydd, *“trust is a belief that the other side prefers mutual cooperation to exploiting one's own cooperation, while mistrust is a belief that the other side prefers exploiting one's cooperation to returning it.”*<sup>10</sup>

There are different approaches to research concept of trust, which are the rational, psychological, and constructivist. As trust is a multidimensional phenomenon, it should be viewed in combination of the mentioned approaches.<sup>11</sup> In the rational approach, trust is seen as taking a risk, as it can be abused by others. Hardin defines trust and distrust as cognitive evaluations of the other party's trustworthiness.<sup>12</sup> The psychological approach emphasises the actors' emotions, which can play an important role in decision-making. In this context, Booth and Wheeler emphasise the need for empathy with the fears of other states and, simultaneously, consider trust as a means to overcome the security dilemma.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the constructivist approach, also used in this study, is a socially and narratively constructed concept in which the state's identity is essential. Identity is created by the interaction of states; also the domestic sources, such as culture, are included

<sup>8</sup> The term security dilemma is first mentioned by John H. Herz in the article *Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma* (1950).

<sup>9</sup> HOFFMAN, Aaron M. *A Conceptualisation of Trust in International Relations*. *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 8, Issue 3. September 2002.

<sup>10</sup> KYDD, Andrew H. *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*. Princeton University Press, 2005. p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> HAUKKALA, Hiski, VAN DE WETERING, Carina and Johanna VUORELMA. eds. *Trust in International Relations: Rationalist, Constructivist, and Psychological Approaches*. Routledge Global Cooperation Series. Routledge, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> HARDIN, Russell, ed. *Distrust*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2004. p.8.

<sup>13</sup> BOOTH, Ken and Nicholas WHEELER, *Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

to be a source of the state's identity.<sup>14</sup> The interests of states and their preferences are then a consequence of states identities.

Since misplaced trust can have disastrous consequences, states may be more inclined to exercise caution. Such an attitude can lead to instability, as the other state may realise that it is viewed as untrustworthy and take defensive measures. However, as Larson points out, institutionalised mistrust was created in the case of nuclear deterrence, which, on the contrary, stabilised relations between the USA and the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 TRUST BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE USA IN LITERATURE

Forming an alliance requires the mutual trust of the states on a certain level. Kydd talks about cooperative equilibrium, the existence of lower bounds on the level of trust for each player and achieving cooperation by exceeding the minimum trust threshold.<sup>16</sup>

But the security dilemma is also a problem within alliances. Snyder presents a two-phase alliance security dilemma, where the primary alliance dilemma occurs during the formation of the alliance itself, and the secondary alliance dilemma occurs already in the formed alliance. The primary alliance dilemma arises with regard to the choice of allies. The negotiated alliance then turns into a secondary alliance dilemma, which includes fear of abandonment or fear of entrapment.<sup>17</sup> The fear of abandonment causes the state to worry that the other states of the alliance will withdraw their membership or will not honour their commitments. That means they will not help if that country gets into a conflict. On the contrary, being pulled unwillingly into a conflict due to commitments to the alliance is a fear of entrapment.

Keating and Růžička identify three factors that increase trust in an alliance – first, concrete obligations such as a commitment to come to the rescue; second, the expectation that commitments will be fulfilled; and third, the creation of additional opportunities to exercise commitments.<sup>18</sup> After World War II, according to Pesu and Sinkkonen, relations between the USA and Europe's other allies were characterised by asymmetric trust since the USA represented the ultimate guarantor of their security, while the other allies were a group on which the USA „can periodically rely on, for example as a platform for projecting out-of-area power.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> KYDD, Andrew H. *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*. Princeton University Press, 2005. p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> HARDIN, Russell, ed. *Distrust*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2004. p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> KYDD, Andrew H. *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*. Princeton University Press, 2005. p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> SNYDER, Glenn H. *The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics*. In: *World Politics* Vol. 36, No. 4. July 1984, pp. 461-495. The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 466.

<sup>18</sup> KEATING, Vincent and Jan RUZICKA. *Trust, Obligation, and Reciprocity in NATO*. In: *Défense et Sécurité Internationale*, (57). 2017.

<sup>19</sup> PESU, Matti and Ville SINKKONEN. *Managing Transatlantic (mis)trust. The Trump Era in Perspective*. In: *Finnish Institute of International Affairs* [online]. March, 2019 [cit. 2024-1-17]. Available at: [https://aspeninstitute.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/wp107\\_trust\\_in\\_transatlantic\\_relations\\_3.pdf](https://aspeninstitute.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/wp107_trust_in_transatlantic_relations_3.pdf) p. 4.

Turkey has already maintained a degree of mistrust towards NATO member states while joining the alliance in 1952. Its attitude was influenced by the Sèvres syndrome, the belief that the surrounding states could betray Turkey at any time and Turkey could lose its sovereignty. This syndrome resulted from the events following the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 when the Ottoman Empire lost most of its territory by redistributing it between Armenia, Britain, France, Italy and Greece. The fact that the Ottoman elite in Istanbul felt betrayed by the cooperation of external and internal enemies also played an important role here.<sup>20</sup> Göçek emphasizes that the Kemalist elites in Turkey identified the USA and the Soviet Union as the main external enemies during the Cold War in connection with the Sèvres syndrome.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Guida emphasizes that the Sèvres syndrome, which he describes as an irrational fear, is applicable to Kemalists as well as to Islamists,<sup>22</sup> which explains why it is present even today after governments changed in Turkey. As Şirin writes, the West as the main threat to Turkey *“has always been a fancied concept in Turkish politics, and it has been used when someone is needed to blame for any political, social, or economic incident in Turkey... the United States is the principal actor of this western camp...”*<sup>23</sup>

However, Turkey evaluated the Soviet Union as a greater threat than the West and decided to establish a strategic partnership within NATO. Together with Greece, they were the first countries to expand the alliance beyond the founding states. After the end of the Cold War, international relations and cooperation within the alliance changed due to replacing the bipolar system with a multipolar world order.

For Turkey's trust in NATO, the relations between Turkey and the USA, which are permeated by mutual distrust, appear to be the most fundamental. The topic of trust is mentioned only marginally in the literature devoted to Turkish-American relations.

Kumcuoğlu describes Turkish-American relations as pragmatic despite mutual mistrust. According to Kumcuoğlu, the contradictions in the interests of Turkey and the USA in the Middle East are the triggers for Turkey's pro-autonomy and anti-American instincts, and he considers the first turning point in their relations to be the “Hood event” military incident that occurred during the 2003 Iraq War when a group of Turkish soldiers were captured by American troops and taken for interrogation.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The Sèvres Syndrome. American Diplomacy. Insight and Analysis from Foreign Affairs Practitioners and Scholars. In: *americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu* [online]. August, 2003. [cit. 2024-1-18]. Available at: <https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2003/08/the-sevres-syndrome/>

<sup>21</sup> GÖÇEK, Fatma Müge. The Transformation of Turkey. Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era. London/New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> GUIDA, Michelangel. The Sèvres syndrome and “Komplo” theories in the Islamist and Secular Press. *Turkish Studies*, 9(1), 37–52, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> ŞİRİN, Başar. A Kemalist Perception of Threat. Sèvres Syndrome in Contemporary Turkish Politics. In: *Kemalism as a fixed Variable in the Republic of Turkey*. *Orientalistik*, 31, 75-96, 2020, p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> KUMCUOĞLU, Umit. Time for a Complete Makeover in Turkish-U.S. Relations. German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020. Available at: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21233.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A18c5a9166a56c9c30d26d454f6b7bf12&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21233.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A18c5a9166a56c9c30d26d454f6b7bf12&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&acceptTC=1)

In their article, Kardaş and Ünlühisarçıklı emphasise the need for a new strategic partnership framework and a transactional approach, identifying the issue of trust as one of the main issues in current (2021) Turkish-American relations.<sup>25</sup> This trust deficit was to be created by the difference in policies. On Turkey's side, Kardaş and Ünlühisarçıklı identify three suspicions towards the USA – the USA PYD-YPG partnership in Syria, the USA interference in Turkish politics, and finally, suspicions about the reliability of the USA as a security partner.<sup>26</sup>

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on qualitative research, which allows the researcher to collect data and, at the same time, analyse it, which makes it possible to supplement the research during its course.<sup>27</sup>

The article was created as part of field research for a dissertation during a foreign internship at Istanbul University in Turkey. Semi-structured interviews with five respondents from Turkish universities as Istanbul University, Kadir Has University, Giresun University became the research method. They were chosen by snowball sampling, which is used to identify interviewees through the personal network<sup>28</sup> and which provided opportunities to interview Turkish academicians focusing on Turkey's foreign policy and security studies. The names of the respondents of these interviews are listed in a footnote of their citations. A semi-structured interview is a partially controlled interview, where the interviewer asks pre-prepared questions but simultaneously allows sufficient freedom, thanks to which the interviewee can develop his ideas. The conducted interviews were converted into a verbatim transcription, which is an important step in the subsequent comparison of individual parts of the text, and due to the importance of the content-thematic level, they were stylistically modified.<sup>29</sup> The written forms of the interviews then went through a process of coding, which serves to classify and sort the data systematically. Headings are assigned to the data material, creating categorical systems.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> KARDAŞ, Şaban and Özgür ÜNLÜHISARCIKLİ. Managing the US-Turkey security relationship: structured transactionalism within a dual framework. In: <http://turkishpolicy.com> [online]. March 22, 2021 [cit. 2024-1-5]. Available at: <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1043/managing-the-us-turkey-security-relationship-structured-transactionalism-within-a-dual-framework>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> HENDL, Jan. Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace. Čtvrté, přepracované a rozšířené vydání. Praha: Portál, 2016. ISBN 978-80-262-0982-9. p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> BABBIE, Earl. The Basics of Social Research. Fourth Edition. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008. ISBN 0-495-10233-4. p. 205.

<sup>29</sup> HENDL, Jan. Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace. Čtvrté, přepracované a rozšířené vydání. Praha: Portál, 2016. ISBN 978-80-262-0982-9. p. 208.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

The concept of security and sharing common security beliefs and values between Turkey and NATO played an important role in the talks. It is precisely these questions that have resulted in many uncertainties having an impact on the relationship between Turkey and the USA, which deserve more attention and are addressed in this article. Three main areas of Turkey's mistrust in the USA emerged from the coding:

- The Cyprus question;
- American support for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Defense Units (YPG) in Syria;
- American interference in Turkish politics.

These areas were subsequently analysed as case studies in the article, which are suitable for searching for configurations, associations, causes and effects within cases.<sup>31</sup> In them, causality was analysed, i.e., the causality of Turkey's lack of trust in the USA and Turkey's attitude towards the USA. Subsequently, the data obtained for all these cases were compared. Although Kardaş and Ünlühisarcıklı identify three areas of Turkish suspicion towards NATO, they only mention them and do not pay more attention to them. Kardaş's and Ünlühisarcıklı's areas are not identical to the ones in this article. This study determined the area of the Cyprus question, which is essential for understanding the causes of Turkish mistrust of the USA, while the suspicion of the reliability of the USA as a security partner is rather a consequence of mistrust in the given areas.

Another research method became the analysis of documents, official statements of government representatives, media articles, and secondary literature. A causal network represents the results, which Hendl defines as a diagram "containing the most important dependent and independent variables in a case study and the relationships between them."<sup>32</sup>

#### 4 AREAS OF TURKEY'S MISTRUST TO THE USA

According to Professor Serhat Güvenç from Kadir Has University with who one of the semi-structured interviews was made: „*The public opinion suggests that it is able to grasp the significance of NATO, the political and military significance of NATO. But when it comes to the reliability of NATO, that is another question. The majority of Turks think that NATO is important for Turkey's security, but also, there is little faith in NATO, in case Turkey needs to defend itself.*”<sup>33</sup>

In another semi-structured interview historian Serhan Güngör also discusses distrust in NATO similarly: “*I think if you ask an average Turk if Turkey trusts NATO or the United States as a main ally, you will probably get an answer no.*”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>32</sup> HENDL, Jan. Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace. Čtvrté, přepracované a rozšířené vydání. Praha: Portál, 2016. ISBN 978-80-262-0982-9. p. 216.

<sup>33</sup> From the interview with Professor Serhat Güvenç, Kadir Has University.

<sup>34</sup> From the interview with historian Serhan Güngör.

Public surveys confirm the mistrust of Turkish citizens towards the USA or NATO. According to a 2019 survey by Areda, 41.4% of Turkish citizens said the USA cannot be trusted because it does not keep its promises.<sup>35</sup> In Areda's other 2020 survey on support from NATO in Syria, 47.1% of Turkish citizens said that NATO does not want to help Turkey, 33.8% said that NATO does not provide full military assistance but only partial military support in the form of arms supplies and air defence. 13.1% believed that NATO would protect Turkey if it met the EU's foreign policy requirements, and only 6% believed that NATO would protect Turkey in any case as it is part of the alliance.<sup>36</sup>

According to another 2021 poll by Areda, which looked at public opinion directly on the topic of trust in NATO, 84.6% of Turkish citizens thought that NATO did not protect Turkish interests. For 70.4% of respondents, NATO bases in Turkey were considered a national safety problem.<sup>37</sup> When asked whether respondents believed that NATO would stand up for Turkey in a possible war between Turkey and a non-NATO country, 78.3% answered negatively, while when asked about ensuring Turkey's security, 69.5% of people answered that Turkey is able to ensure its own security in the event of leaving NATO.<sup>38</sup> The USA was identified by 82.4% of Turkish citizens as a country whose interests are being defended by NATO.<sup>39</sup>

According to the results of the public opinion of the Metropoll agency from March 2022, i.e. already after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the USA was perceived as the biggest threat to Turkey by 52% of the Turkish population, while only 19% considered Russia a threat.<sup>40</sup>

The results of these public opinion polls may indicate a permanent decrease in Turkish citizens' trust in the USA and NATO. Moreover it shows a close connection between the USA and NATO, as the questioned Turkish citizens answered the USA is the main state representing its interests in NATO. Based on interviews conducted with Turkish academics, the main areas creating a negative image of the USA, in Turkish society emerge, which are analysed in the following chapters.

<sup>35</sup> Areda. Türklerin yüzde 41'i Amerika'nin sözüne güvenmiyor. In: areda.com [online]. November 18, 2019 [cit. 2024-1-18]. Available at: <https://www.areda.com/turklerin-yuzde-41i-amerikanin-sozune-guvenmiyor/>

<sup>36</sup> Areda. Rusya'ya güven yok. In: areda.com [online]. March 9, 2020 [cit. 2024-1-18]. Available at: <https://www.areda.com/rusyaya-guven-yok/>

<sup>37</sup> CELİK, Kadir Ertac. NATO – Turkey Relations: Allies on Insecurity. In: Ankasam.org [online]. June 13, 2021 [cit. 2024-1-4]. Available at: <https://www.ankasam.org/nato-turkey-relations-allies-on-insecurity/?lang=en>

<sup>38</sup> Areda. Türkler NATO'ya güvenmiyor. In: areda.com [online]. June 10, 2021 [cit. 2024-1-18]. Available at: <https://www.areda.com/turkler-natoya-guvenmiyor/>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> European Union & NATO. Turkey's Pulse. In: metropoll.com.tr [online]. March, 2022. [cit. 2024-1-4]. Available at: <https://metropoll.com.tr/upload/content/files/1908-eu-and-nato-section-tp-mar22.pdf>

## 4.1 The Cyprus Question

In 1974, Turkey invaded the northern part of Cyprus in response to a failed coup that aimed to annex the entire island to Greece. Turkey announced the intervention was to protect the Turks living in Cyprus, and to guarantee the state independence of Cyprus. Due to the fact the Cyprus question became a conflict between two allies, namely Turkey and Greece, it represented a major security problem within NATO and became a turning point in Turkish-American relations.

All semi-structured interview respondents cited the Cyprus question as one of the main reasons for Turkey's mistrust of the USA as a major NATO ally. A key role here was played by the letter of the USA President Johnson addressed to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey İsmet İnönü, from 1964, i.e. before the Turkish intervention in Cyprus. Interviewed PhD student Burak Hacıoğlu from Istanbul University said in the interview: *"States may find themselves abandoned in NATO. Turkey experienced this in the context of Cyprus. President Johnson sent a letter to İsmet Pasha saying that if the Turks did anything against the Greeks, they would not be protected from the Soviet Union."*<sup>41</sup>

Until this time, Turkey felt relatively safe within the alliance, and the letter shook the Turkish state administration.<sup>42</sup> The letter read: *"I hope you will understand that your NATO allies have not had a chance to consider whether they have an obligation to protect Turkey against the Soviet Union if Turkey takes a step which results in Soviet intervention without the full consent and understanding of its NATO Allies."*<sup>43</sup>

After the events in Cyprus, Turkey realised that it could not rely solely on the alliance for its security and began working to build friendly relations outside of it. A document by the American Central Intelligence Agency shows the Turkish response to President Johnson's letter, stating that the letter shocked Turkey and caused great disappointment toward the USA. At the same time, the report says that *"this letter gives Turkey almost an obligation to become more independent from the USA in the framework of international relations."*<sup>44</sup> Simultaneously, Turkey has reassessed its position regarding the arms industry. After the USA embargoed Turkey for using American weapons for the operation in Cyprus, Turkey began to realise the limitations of its dependence on the USA arms imports.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> From the interview with PhD student Burak Hacıoğlu, Istanbul University.

<sup>42</sup> AYDEMİR, Sefa Salih. The first diplomatic crisis that caused harm to the image of the USA in the eyes of the Turkish public: the Johnson letter. *International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences*, Vol: 12, Issue: 45, 2021. p. 639.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson's letter. June 5, 1964. (President Johnson and Prime Minister İnönü: Correspondence between President Johnson and Prime Minister İnönü, June 1964, as Released by the White House, January 15, 1966. In: *Middle East Journal*, Summer, 1966, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer, 1966), pp. 386-393.

<sup>44</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. Intelligence Information Cable. 1964. Turkish reaction to president Johnson's letter to prime minister İnönü. In: [cia.gov](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000615268.pdf) [online]. June 6, 1964 [cit. 2024-1-11]. Available at: [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000615268.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000615268.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> ÇORA, Hakan. Turkish-american relations: A focused study of international affairs. Soncağ Yayınları: January, 2021., ISBN 6257604354. p. 38.

Based on the above, the Cyprus question represents a major turning point in Turkish-American relations and Turkish confidence in a major ally. Turkey's trust was irretrievably damaged by Johnson's letter. The direct American statement of non-support Turkey in the event of a Russian threat has become the main cause of Turkey's fear of being abandoned by its allies.

## 4.2 American Support for the Democratic Union Party and the People's Defense Units in Syria

When the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2011 turned into a civil war in Syria, the consequences were also felt by Turkey, which shares about 909 km long border with it. The conflict soon turned into a proxy war involving superpowers such as the USA, Russia and other external actors, including Turkey, which undertook intervention in August 2016 by Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>46</sup> The aim of Turkey at this point was to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad and defeat terrorist groups such as Islamic State (IS) and YPG.

Turkey considers the PYD and the YPG to be offshoots of the terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Their affiliation with PKK is considered to be clear by Turkish government as PYD and YPG were set up under the control of PKK in 2003 and they *"share the same leadership cadres, organizational structure, strategies and tactics, military structure, propaganda tools, financial resources and training camps."*<sup>47</sup> While Turkey is trying to prevent PYD and YPG from achieving the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state in the region, the USA is actually pragmatically cooperating with these groups to fight IS in Syria.

American financial and military support of activities of PYD and YPG has become a major issue in Turkish-American relations and represents the second main area of Turkey's mistrust in the USA that emerged from the coding of the interviews. The interviewed academics said: *"Turkey does not trust NATO member countries thinking that they support terrorist organisations such as the PKK."*<sup>48</sup>

*"Despite NATO's definition of terrorism, the fact that a structure such as PYD/YPG, which Turkey sees as a terrorist organisation, is not addressed in this context by NATO members, especially the USA, undermines Ankara's trust in NATO. In fact, at this point, the voices of those who question NATO membership are becoming louder."*<sup>49</sup>

*"The end of the Cold War also saw the rise of PKK terrorism in Southeast Turkey and in Iraq and then Syria. And from the very beginning of it, especially after the first Gulf War in 1991, which somehow coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union, our NATO allies*

<sup>46</sup> Another Turkish military operations in northern Syria are Operation Olive Branch and Operation Spring Shield.

<sup>47</sup> Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. PKK. In: *mfa.gov.tr* [cit. 2024-4-25]. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/pkk.en.mfa>

<sup>48</sup> From the interview with Dr. Sabir Askeroğlu.

<sup>49</sup> From the interview with Professor Göktürk Tüysüzoğlu, Giresun University.

*secretly and then openly supported PKK, which is responsible for the death of 40,000 people in Turkey in the last 40 years. And PKK and now YPG in Syria, which is a branch of Kurdish separatist terrorist organisation, is the number one enemy of Turkey and our NATO allies, the United States and others, and includes Sweden too, which wants to be a NATO ally, openly supporting these people politically, financially and also through providing them arms and weapons systems.”<sup>50</sup>*

PKK is included in the American list of terrorist organizations since 1997, however PYD and YPG are not part of it. The USA is presenting support to Turkey in the fight against PKK, but the key problem is the different approach toward PYD and YPG. At the Department Press Briefing in Washington on October 2, 2023, the day after the terrorist attack in Ankara attributed to PKK members, the USA expressed its support for Turkey in the fight against the group. Asked how the USA can address Turkish society's concerns about the USA support for the YPG and the USA-YPG relationship itself, spokesman Matthew Miller said the USA condemns any act of terrorism against Turkey and that the USA stands firmly with Turkey in its fight against the PKK.<sup>51</sup>

While Turkey wanted to initiate collective action within the alliance in the fight against the PKK, the USA and NATO showed only verbal support and used a strategy of inaction.<sup>52</sup> The analysis shows that Turkey perceived this again as a disappointment, as the allies did not stand up for Turkey. This inaction deepened the gap in Turkey's trust in NATO. The USA activities were neither parallel nor consistent with Turkey's security interests. Their relations in the Syrian civil war suffered due to the different attitudes toward terror, representing a key factor in the context of non-state actors operating in the conflict.

### 4.3 American Interference in Turkish Politics

On the night of July 15-16, 2016, a failed military coup took place in Turkey. The cleric Fethullah Gülen, who has lived in Pennsylvania since 1999, and his followers from the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), were subsequently identified as the initiator by the Turkish government. Gülen Movement, called as FETÖ by Turkish officials, was founded by Fethullah Gülen in 1966 in Turkish Izmir. Its tactic became based on infiltration into the key state institutions, including high military positions, with the aim of transforming society by taking control of the government.

According to the interviewed historian Serhan Güngör, *“During the coup and during the first hours of the coup, there was no reaction from the NATO allies to legitimately*

<sup>50</sup> From the interview with historian Serhan Güngör.

<sup>51</sup> Department Press Briefing – October 2, 2023. Matthew Miller, Department Spokerman, Washington, D. C. In: state.gov [online]. October 2, 2023 [cit. 2024-1-17]. Availableat: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-2-2023/>

<sup>52</sup> YÜKSELEN, Hasan. Turkey and Russia in Syria. Testing the extremes. Istanbul: SETA, 2020. ISBN 978-625-7040-86-0

*support the legitimate government in Turkey, which really increased the mistrust between Turkey and the United States.”<sup>53</sup>*

During his speech, Erdoğan expressed concern about the lack of interest and sympathy, saying, among other things, that he expected many countries to “*side with human rights, legitimate political will and the elected government.*”<sup>54</sup> Presumably, he was referring to his allies in NATO. On the contrary, Russian President Putin was the first politician to contact Turkish President Erdoğan. This helped Turkey and Russia stabilise relations damaged by the downing of a Russian plane near the Syrian-Turkish border in November 2015. The bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia have been developing since the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and acquired a new dimension after the 2016 coup. Energy and economic cooperation became more intensive, especially thanks to the construction of the natural gas pipeline TurkStream and Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in Mersin in 2017.<sup>55</sup>

Gülenists are mostly seen as the fifth column of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>56</sup> Interior Minister of the Republic of Turkey Süleyman Soylu expressed his belief that the USA was actually behind the coup planned by the Gülenists.<sup>57</sup> The USA rejected this claim, saying that it is false information, which also contradicts Turkey's status as a member of NATO and as a strategic partner of the USA.<sup>58</sup>

However, the belief of American interference in Turkish political affairs was already emerging before this coup. Historian Serhan Güngör pointed out that “*in Turkey's military coups, there was a kind of open support from the United States and its allies. It was known and generally accepted by the Turkish people that the United States definitely interfered with Turkey's local politics and supported the right-wing military coups. So, there was a mistrust already developed in the 1970s... In the Turkish military coups of 1972 and 1980, America and the CIA played a role. They represented hard-right and violent military coups, the consequences of which were very dramatic in Turkey.*”<sup>59</sup>

Resulting from the analysed data, the USA interference in Turkish politics is a fear of connecting external and internal enemies. The already mentioned Sèvres syndrome,

<sup>53</sup> From the interview with historian Serhan Güngör.

<sup>54</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye. We Will Lift the State Of Emergency Once We Achieve the Goal in the Fight against Terror. In: [tccb.gov.tr](https://www.tccb.gov.tr) [online]. July 14, 2017 [cit. 2024-1-12]. Available at: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/79927/terorle-mucadelede-hedefe-ulastigimiz-zaman-ohali-kaldiracagiz>

<sup>55</sup> Relations between Türkiye and the Russian Federation. Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In: [mfa.gov.tr](https://www.mfa.gov.tr) [cit. 2024-4-30]. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-the-russian-federation.en.mfa>

<sup>56</sup> AKTÜRK, Şener. Relations between Russia and Turkey Before, During, and After the Failed Coup in 2016. Insight Turkey Vol. 21 /No. 4/ 2019, p. 103. In: [insightturkey.com](https://www.insightturkey.com) [online]. Fall 2019 [cit. 2024-4-25]. Available at: <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/relations-between-russia-and-turkey-before-during-and-after-the-failed-coup-of-2016>

<sup>57</sup> Turkish minister says U.S. behind 2016 failed coup – Hurriyet. In: [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com) [online]. February 5, 2021 [cit. 2024-1-16]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN2A41NE/>

<sup>58</sup> Response to Turkish Statements on the 2016 Attempted Coup in Turkey. PRESS STATEMENT, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson. In: [state.gov](https://www.state.gov) [online]. February 4, 2021 [cit. 2024-1-16]. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/response-to-turkish-statements-on-the-2016-attempted-coup-in-turkey/>

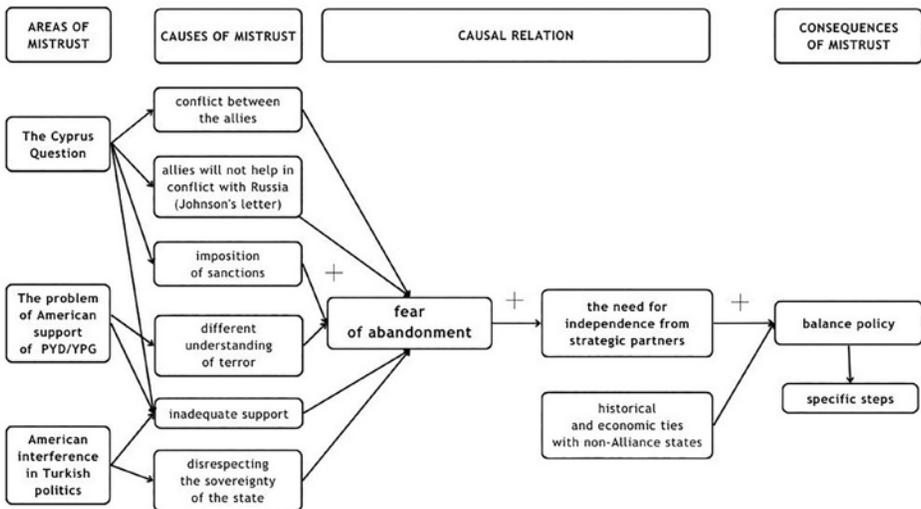
<sup>59</sup> From the interview with historian Serhan Güngör.

which brings a feeling of constant threat, can play a certain role here. Considering that interfering in the affairs of another state is disrespecting its sovereignty, it is a failure to fulfill the obligations of allies. From this perspective, the fear of abandonment is also found in the third researched area.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Turkey doubted its trust in the USA before joining NATO in 1952. As we see from the constructivist view, Turkey partly changed its identity through international interaction and joined the ally as shared security values were accepted. The trust at this point exceeded the minimum trust threshold and emerged into cooperation. In our study, we focused on the causes of Turkey's mistrust to the USA since being allied within NATO.

A causal network was created based on the research findings. It shows the causal relationship between Turkey's mistrust of the USA and Turkey's approach to NATO.



**Figure 1:** Causal relationship between Turkish attitudes and Turkish distrust of the USA

The causal network presented in Figure 1 first depicts the three main areas of Turkey's mistrust in the USA as the most important ally in the alliance. These areas were determined based on the interviews conducted. Subsequently, the causes of mistrust arising from these areas are depicted in the causal network.

The first area to be analysed was the Cyprus question, which, due to the conflict between Turkey and Greece, i.e. two NATO members, represents a problem. In its context, a key aspect in Turkey's loss of trust in the USA is Johnson's letter, in which the USA

president expressed to Turkey the possible inaction of the allies if Turkey was attacked by Russia (the Soviet Union at the time).

In the second area, represented by the problem of American support for the Kurdish terrorist groups PYD and YPG in Syria, a key source of Turkey's mistrust is the different attitudes toward terror and inadequate support from allies in Turkey's fight against these PKK offshoots.

The third area affecting Turkey's trust in the USA is American interference in Turkish politics. The lack of support for Turkey during the military coups was identified as the cause of mistrust. In this area, there are concerns about the union of internal and external enemies and, therefore, a threat to the state's sovereignty, while the Sèvres syndrome is probably an influence here.

Mistrust was not present only during the mentioned periods, although cooperation between Turkey and the USA existed. Specifically, cooperation in Syria can be presented by some cross-border operations against terrorism, as not all of them were opposed,<sup>60</sup> or the Annan Plan<sup>61</sup> for solving the Cyprus question. This shows that mistrust is present even during cooperation with an ally, if not exceeding the already mentioned minimum trust threshold. The case studies show the causes of Turkey's mistrust of the USA in the areas the respondents considered essential.

The hypothesis that *the Turkish need to ensure its own security is one of the main reasons behind the current Turkish attitudes towards NATO* is confirmed, while this need stems from Turkey's mistrust of the USA. All the mentioned causes of mistrust increase fear of abandonment. In all areas, conflict exists between Turkey and another state or non-state actor, with Turkey receiving inadequate or no support from the alliance. Turkey, therefore, fears that its allies will not help it in case of danger, whether it is an attack by the state or non-state actors, such as terrorist groups. Turkey is convinced that it cannot rely on others but must ensure its security.

Turkey considers NATO the *"cornerstone of the Turkish defence and security policy"*; it is aware of the strategic importance of NATO for its security and, at the same time, its significance for the alliance. NATO remains Turkey's strategic partner, but Turkey's mistrust of the USA leads to an increased need for independence in security, which it seeks to achieve through a balancing policy. Turkish attitudes towards NATO result from this balancing policy, manifested in concrete steps, which the West often criticises. This article does not argue that mistrust of the USA is the cause of balance policy alone but that it is a key factor influencing Turkey's stance, alongside other important factors, such as historical and economic ties with non-Alliance states.

<sup>60</sup> Turkey and the USA cooperate against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and an al-Qaeda affiliates.

<sup>61</sup> Annan plan represented efforts of OSN for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem by founding the United Cyprus Republic. The Annan plan was for the first time submitted in 2002 by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, later underwent modifications. In 2004 the Turkish Cypriots voted in referendum for acceptance of the plan with 65%, however it was not accepted as Greek Cypriots rejected it with 76% votes, which disappointed the USA. (Cyprus. Republic of Türkiye. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In: *mfa.gov.tr* [cit. 2024-4-30]. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-cyprus-issue-overview.en.mfa>.; What the World said After the Referanda. Republic of Türkiye. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In: *mfa.gov.tr* [cit. 2024-4-30]. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/what-the-world-said-after-the-referanda.en.mfa>)

## CONCLUSION

The article aimed to verify the hypothesis that Turkish attitudes towards NATO are strongly influenced by Turkey's distrust of the USA, the strongest ally in NATO. The causes of this mistrust were analysed, and a causal relationship was found, thereby confirming the hypothesis.

The article was created as part of research for a dissertation during field research in Turkey and had a qualitative character. Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews with academics from Turkish universities. Three main areas of Turkey's mistrust in the USA emerged from these talks - the first is the Cyprus question, the second is the American support of Kurdish terrorist groups in Syria, and finally, the third area was American interference in Turkish politics.

Further research could, therefore, deal with concrete options for strengthening trust between Turkey and the USA and possibly between other NATO members.

---

**Authors:** *Denisa Schvachová, born 1996. She graduated from the field of religious studies at the University of Pardubice (2021). Currently, she has been an academic staff member of the Institute of Intelligence Studies (ÚZS) at the University of Defence, where she is also studying doctoral program in National Defence Theory at the Faculty of Military Leadership. Her primary research interests are Turkish-Russian relations and their potential impact on the security of the Czech Republic, and the current security situation in the Middle East.*

*Jozef Vojtek, PhD, born 1961. He is a graduate of the High Military School of the Ground Forces in Vyškov. After completing postgraduate studies at the Military Academy in Brno, he worked in the intelligence staffs of the rapid deployment brigade and mechanized division headquarters, and the Ministry of Defence. He has been working in an academic environment since 2016 and is currently an academic staff member of the Institute of Intelligence Studies at the University of Defence. He defended his dissertation in the field of Military Management in 2021. In his work, he deals with the issue of intelligence and information analysis.*

---

**How to cite:** SCHVACHOVÁ, Denisa and JOZEF VOJTEK. Turkey's Trust in the USA: Causes of the Criticised Alliance Member's Approach. *Vojenské rozhledy*. 2024, 33 (2), 003-017. ISSN 1210-3292 (print), 2336-2995 (online). Available at: [www.vojenskerozhledy.cz](http://www.vojenskerozhledy.cz)