

Research Paper

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# Transatlantic Rifts

## Averting a Turkey/Russia Conflict

## Summary

- Chatham House brought together 22 participants over a two-day period in May 2016 to discuss US and European responses to a potential conflict between Turkey and Russia. This was the third of four scenario roundtables (the first two involved a conflict between China and Japan and a potential breakdown in the Iran nuclear deal, respectively).
- The scenario was designed and the roundtable took place before a number of crucial subsequent developments, including the partial restoration of Turkish/Russian relations, the British vote to leave the European Union (EU), and the attempted coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This paper should be read and understood in that context.
- In our simulation, the United States and Europe worked closely together, with cooperation particularly in evidence between the US and Germany. While the US was slightly more willing than Europe to threaten sanctions against Russia, transatlantic unity was not seriously threatened by a Turkey/Russia conflict.
- Western states were wary of bringing NATO into the picture for fear that this would be perceived as militarizing an already tense situation. The EU was also sidelined in favour of more ad hoc negotiating strategies.
- Russia was effective in using international law to defend its position, even as it took steadily more aggressive action in Syria. Neither the West nor Turkey deployed an effective countermeasure to this tactic.

## Introduction

The Turkish air force's downing in November 2015 of a Russian Su-24 bomber threw Russia/Turkey relations into a tailspin. The two countries' once-collegial relationship had already deteriorated, and the incident – in which one of the Russian pilots and a marine sent on a rescue mission were killed by Turkish-supported Syrian rebels – damaged it yet further. President Vladimir Putin described the event as 'a stab in the back', and Russia acted accordingly – shoring up its military presence in Syria and cutting numerous economic links with Turkey. Only very recently have the two countries begun to mend bilateral ties.<sup>1</sup>

This was the context in which, on 26–27 May 2016, the US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House convened a group of experts to conduct the third of four simulation exercises designed to test the strength of the transatlantic relationship. The roundtable played out a scenario of rising Turkey/Russia tensions and explored, over four rounds, the likely US and European responses.

These exercises form the core of a broader project exploring whether the US/European relationship is strengthening or weakening, what is causing any such changes, and whether they are cyclical (and therefore temporary) or structural (and permanent). The project aims to provide insights into how to mitigate any potentially harmful divergences in agendas and geopolitical priorities on either side of the Atlantic.

An important caveat needs to be stated at the outset. Shortly after we had held the scenario exercise, a number of significant developments occurred. Contrary to our predictions, Russia and Turkey indicated that they were starting a cautious rapprochement. On 23 June, the United Kingdom – also contrary to our prediction – voted to leave the European Union (EU). And finally, in July, an attempted coup threw Turkey's internal politics and its military and counterterrorist operations into disarray. These developments were not, for obvious reasons, reflected in the scenario – but the underlying political relationships that the simulation sought to explore remain relevant none the less.

This paper draws on the debate, conducted over two days, among participants from Russia, the Middle East, Europe and the United States. The principal elements of the scenario, actions, conclusions and implications are laid out here.

## Interests and perceptions

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, in recent years the US has had largely transactional relationships with both Turkey and Russia. For Europe, however, the relationships are far more strategic and, at least with regard to Russia, perceived as existential in nature. As a result, Europe and the US consider any engagement with Turkey from quite different perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Stubbs, J. and Solovyov, D. (2016), 'Kremlin says Turkey apologized for shooting down Russian jet', Reuters, 27 June 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-jet-idUSKCN0ZD1PR> (accessed 25 Jul. 2016).

For the US and Europe, a potential Turkey/Russia conflict involves a complex set of issues. As a member of NATO, Turkey is a military ally of the US and many European states. But it is not a member of the EU, and this complicates its relationship with Europe.

Turkey and Russia are central actors in a number of priority policy areas for both the US and Europe, most significantly with respect to their roles in Syria. Turkey and Russia are backing different sides in the fight. Russia has long supported the Assad dynasty and, after several years of traditional proxy support, in 2015 began a military operation to preserve President Bashar al-Assad's remaining territory. In contrast, Turkey has long supported elements of the anti-Assad forces.

The situation with the Kurds, who have a long and often violent history of conflict with the Turkish state, further complicates the picture. Syrian Kurds have the backing of both Russia and the US. In Russia's case, this reflects the Kurds' role as a proxy against Turkey; in the case of the US, it is because Washington considers them one of the few militarily effective Syrian ground forces contesting the spread of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

By and large, the US and Europe are driven by similar impulses with regard to Russia. Since the Ukraine crisis – and particularly since the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine – both the US and Europe have imposed sanctions on Russia and have become more assertive towards it, moving towards a policy of deterrence rather than accommodation. This does not mean that the transatlantic allies speak with one voice on Russia – Poland, for example, often takes a harder line than Germany, at least rhetorically – but rather that the broad objectives of American and European foreign policy with regard to Russia are generally aligned.

That being said, the European nation states and the US are quite different in how urgent they consider the challenge of Russia. Due to geography and energy dependence, most European governments see Russia as a more immediate threat than does the US (although the American *public* views Russia as more of a threat than do most Europeans).<sup>2</sup> Russia threatens Europe's borders and stability, and its actions and policies affect European priorities such as the environment, energy and non-proliferation. Putin has made concerted efforts to split the EU, drawing on Russia's energy resources and role in Syria and Ukraine for leverage.

For many in the US, however, Russia is a weakening power – one that must be engaged with on specific issues (such as Syria), that can still do damage, but that is becoming less relevant globally. In the words of one participant in our exercise, the US/Russia relationship is today one of 'compelled engagement'. The US/Russia relationship has taken a significant downturn in recent years, with Russia increasingly seeing the US as a threat (given America's support of the 'colour revolutions' in Russia's near abroad, and the sense that the US is looking for regime change). The Russian government tries to exploit differences in European and American attitudes in order to divide its interlocutors.

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<sup>2</sup> A Pew Research Center survey found that 59 per cent of Americans viewed Russia as a major threat to its neighbours. This compared with 53 per cent of respondents in Britain, 51 per cent in France, 38 per cent in Germany, 44 per cent in Italy and 49 per cent in Spain. Pew Research Center (2015), 'Pew Global Attitudes & Trends Question Database', <http://www.pewglobal.org/question-search/?qid=2050&cntIDs=&stdIDs=> (accessed 27 Jul. 2016).

Differences also exist within Europe, as many countries on Europe's southern borders find themselves more concerned, in security terms and in particular in the context of NATO, with events and extremism in the Middle East, while those to the east see Russia as the more existential threat. There is a similar potential split between the Russia-focused European governments and the US, given the prominence of Middle East issues to foreign and security policy in Washington.

European and American attitudes and agendas *vis-à-vis* Turkey are also diverse. This reflects differences in perspective both between the US and Europe, and internally between individual European governments. Turkey has quickly become increasingly prominent in European and US foreign policy calculations, given its role in the Syria conflict and, in particular, its exposure to the refugee crisis.

Until fairly recently, the US and Turkey had a good relationship, as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan worked closely with the US government. However, Erdoğan's transition from the post of prime minister to president has coincided with his consolidating his leadership and cracking down on opposition (including on the Kurds). As Turkey has moved away from its 'zero problems with neighbouring countries' foreign policy approach,<sup>3</sup> its relationship with the US has deteriorated.

Europe's relationship with Turkey has long been hostage to the ongoing (but stalled) issue of EU accession. However, over the past year Turkey's role in managing the refugee crisis has taken precedence from a European perspective. Tensions exist within Europe over Turkey. Some countries (such as the UK) have historically favoured Turkish accession, while others (such as Germany and France) have long resisted it. Turkey has closer links with Germany than with any other European country: approximately 3 million Turks live in Germany, while 4 million German tourists visit Turkey every year.<sup>4</sup> Germany is the largest market for Turkish exports (accounting for 9.3 per cent of the total in 2015), followed by the UK and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> This gives Germany a greater incentive than many other European countries (in particular Greece, which continues to have territorial disputes with Turkey) to work with Turkey, and perhaps explains Germany's willingness to take a leading role as an interlocutor with the antagonists.

Complicating Turkey's relationship with the European states is the tension between its membership of NATO and non-membership of the EU. The former means that an attack on Turkish territory could militarily involve the entire alliance, potentially drawing in the US and many European nations; while most NATO nations have never done so, Turkey has invoked Article 4 repeatedly, in 2003, 2012 and 2015.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Turkey's position outside the EU means that member states are often divided over how closely to engage with it. For the US, meanwhile, the relationship is a clearer one, based principally on security and Turkey's regional role.

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<sup>3</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2016), 'Policy of Zero Problems with our Neighbors', <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa> (accessed 1 Jul. 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2016), 'Relations between Turkey and the Federal Republic of Germany', <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-the-federal-republic-of-germany.en.mfa> (accessed 1 Jul. 2016).

<sup>5</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution, 'Turkey Trade at a Glance : Most Recent Values', <http://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/TUR/textview> (accessed 27 Jul. 2016).

<sup>6</sup> NATO (2016), 'The consultation process and Article 4', 17 March 2016, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49187.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49187.htm) (accessed 5 Jul. 2016).

Over the past year, the refugee crisis has gained primacy as being of more direct interest in the European/Turkish relationship. Erdoğan's government has succeeded in leveraging the refugee flow from Syria through Turkey into Europe into a deal on favourable terms, including a resumption of EU accession negotiations – in effect, in the words of one participant, 'blackmailing' Europe. Despite this, there seems to be little near-term prospect of Turkish accession.

## Simulation exercise

Set in late 2017, our scenario was intentionally an exercise in conjecture. It envisaged a UK that had narrowly voted to remain in the EU (an assumption subsequently contradicted by actual events). It also forecast a status quo-minded Democratic US presidency curtailed by the Republican Party's control of the House of Representatives. The scenario envisaged an existing (but partial) Syrian ceasefire continuing, with Syria split roughly into thirds between the government in the west, a patchwork of Kurdish and rebel groups in the centre and north of the country, and a diminished but still cohesive ISIS in the east.

The scenario started with a pair of inciting incidents: (a) the Syrian government capturing a group of Turkish special operations soldiers in Syria and accusing them of working to undermine the government's position ahead of peace talks; and (b) the Turkish coastguard boarding and seizing a Russian freighter carrying arms to Syria. The final element of the scenario was that a new round of Syrian peace talks was due to begin one month later (i.e. at the end of the time frame covered by the scenario).

For the purposes of the scenario, each round represented a period of one week.

**Round one:** Russia and Turkey started the scenario with symmetrical escalation:

- Russia decided to use warships to escort its freighters passing through Turkish waters to Syria, while publicly encouraging its Syrian ally to place the Turkish soldiers on trial. Meanwhile, the Russian government expanded its contacts with the Kurdish YPG group,<sup>7</sup> declaring support for the YPG's 'struggle and legitimate aspirations.'
- The Turkish government declared that its stop and search of the Russian ship was legitimate and had taken place in Turkish waters. It also condemned Russian and Syrian 'provocations'. It further announced that it would not be taking part in the upcoming peace talks and that it was seeking an extraordinary UN Security Council session to defuse the crisis. Intervention by European and American diplomats convinced the Turkish team not to attempt to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, even though the Turkish government believed that the 'withholding' of the soldiers constituted a breach of Article 5. The Turkish military deployed additional forces to the Syrian border. Saudi Arabia issued a statement declaring that Turkish and Saudi national security are 'one and the same'.

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<sup>7</sup> The People's Protection Units (YPG) are a militia associated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant Syrian Kurdish political party. See Gunes, C. and Lowe, R. (2015), *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 4, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/impact-syrian-war-kurdish-politics-across-middle-east> (accessed 28 Jul. 2016).

- The United Nations took an active role early on, sending fact-finding missions to Syria and Turkey to gather information about the two incidents. The Syrian government rejected the UN's attempt to visit the captured Turkish soldiers.
- By contrast, NATO took a back seat in the first round. Member states were unwilling to risk being seen to militarize the situation even by having NATO issue a statement.
- The US and the EU acted largely in parallel in this round, consulting each other early on and urging restraint on all sides. American and European diplomats encouraged Turkey to refrain from invoking Article 5. As a result, the Turkish team partially retreated from its original position, instead stating that it merely 'believed' the capture of the soldiers to constitute a breach of Article 5.
- The US undertook separate missions to Turkey and Russia, though it took a slightly harder line with Russia than with Turkey. It called for the release of the Turkish prisoners and the release of the Russian ship and crew (though not its cargo). Those missions were coordinated and supported by France, Germany and the UK, all of which agreed that the priority was de-escalation.

**Round two:** A number of new aspects to the scenario were announced at the beginning of the second round. A skirmish between Chinese and Japanese ships in the South China Sea threatened to draw American attention away from the Middle Eastern theatre. Meanwhile, a French newspaper blamed the deaths of several reporters in Turkey on that country's government; and Russian gas supplies to Turkey were shut down for 48 hours due to what was reported as a 'technical problem', with unofficial Russian sources indicating that supplies to Europe might imminently be affected as well.

The second round saw further escalation from Russia:

- The Russians began to deliver advanced portable surface-to-air missiles to the Kurds, while also sending warplanes to probe the edges of Turkish airspace. At the same time, Russian forces mounted a significant snap exercise in the Baltic region. Most significantly, Russia activated an anti-access/area denial 'bubble' of air defences within Syria, supported by the Syrian government. The range of these weapons extended into Turkish airspace near where the Russian jet had been shot down in 2015. However, Russia also indicated a willingness to negotiate on the issue of democratic representation within the Syrian government.
- Turkey confined its actions to public statements. It demanded an immediate, unconditional release of its soldiers and called for a new international convention relevant to Turkish territorial waters to supplant the Montreux Convention. On the condition that its soldiers were released, the Turkish team indicated that it would be willing to engage with Russia to resolve the matter peacefully – but during this round contact between the two antagonists remained indirect.
- Saudi Arabia, which had announced additional investment in Russia, sought to maintain good relations with both countries by sending its crown prince on a public visit to Russia and then leaking news of the private visit of its chief of staff to Turkey.

- In Europe, Germany was increasingly becoming the interlocutor of choice between the antagonists. This reflected its strong ties to both Russia and Turkey, despite discontent from Poland in particular. Following a meeting of the North Atlantic Council, NATO was suddenly in the ascendant – with all the major European member countries and the US signing a statement calling for the immediate release of the Turkish soldiers held by Syria, and reiterating NATO’s commitment to Turkey’s defence. By contrast, the EU was marginalized during this round. The US continued to push for transatlantic unity, while cautioning that the US public was not necessarily willing to go to war on Turkey’s behalf.

**Round three:** The third round began with a simulated UN Security Council meeting to discuss the crisis, convened by the UN representative. The meeting accomplished little: Russia and Turkey both remained adamant that their concerns be resolved first; while American, British and French calls for restraint and compromise fell on deaf ears.

After the UN meeting, a new set of updates was announced by the scenario organizers. The South China Sea skirmish escalated, with the release of video showing the Chinese navy firing on a Japanese ship, and Japanese newspapers asking whether the US would come to Japan’s aid. A report in the *Washington Post* concurrently suggested that the House of Representatives was weighing whether to shift military funding to the Pacific theatre, and oil prices began to rise in response to the dual crises. Meanwhile, Belgian police rounded up an ‘operational’ cell of terrorists in Brussels, discovering that they had recently transited through Turkey. Reports suggested that the information leading to their discovery had been forwarded to Belgium by the Russian intelligence services.

This scenario update prompted the following actions and responses by participants:

- Russia launched airstrikes on Turkish-backed rebel groups on the Syrian border. It also began to confiscate property owned by Turkish companies in Russia, and to deliver heavy mortars to the Kurds to help them suppress artillery fire from the Turkish military. At the same time, Russia negotiated an agreement with NATO to deconflict military activities in Syria and elsewhere. Again, Turkey’s escalations were more limited than those of Russia and largely focused on maintaining its negotiating position *vis-à-vis* the soldiers.
- The UN attempted to send its secretary-general to Ankara and Damascus, but this plan was vetoed in the Security Council by Russia. Meanwhile, UN fact-finders continued to be denied full access to the captured Turkish soldiers, and a separate mission determined that the Russian freighter had in fact been in international waters when it was intercepted by the Turkish coastguard.
- The US and the UK sent a joint naval task force to Japan to reassure American allies in the Pacific theatre. The major diplomatic effort in this round involved the presentation of a detailed five-step plan by Germany (supported by the US and all other European allies) to the Turks and Russians, seeking a negotiated end to the conflict.

**Round four:** The fourth round started with further escalation in the Asia-Pacific – China insisted that its conflict with Japan was bilateral rather than international, and sent fighter jets to escort an American reconnaissance plane out of its declared (if unrecognized) Air Defence Identification Zone

in the South China Sea. In Europe, a statement signed by members of left- and right-wing opposition parties throughout the continent called for consideration of a ‘grand bargain’ with Russia, which would offer sanctions relief in exchange for an arms embargo and a lasting political solution in Syria. Finally, a *New York Times* report indicated that the Russian military had had an opportunity to strike ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but had declined to do so.

The last set of moves from the participants saw some minor progress, but no resolution to the inciting incidents:

- The Syrian government agreed to allow Red Cross access to the Turkish prisoners, but subject to conditions that included a prohibition on medical examination of them. It announced a ‘fast-track’ trial of the soldiers, but indicated privately (via Russia) to its European interlocutors that the soldiers would be immediately pardoned following their conviction. Finally, Assad announced that he would consider a UN-supplied list of candidates for interim head of government for a political transition provided that he remained head of state with full responsibility for security during the process.
- The Turkish government released a ranking officer of the Russian ship but continued to insist on the release of its soldiers as a precondition for any further concessions.
- For the US and European teams, the major obstacle in negotiating a solution remained sequencing. Both the Turkish and Russian teams had slowed the pace of their escalation and had made limited gestures towards reconciliation, but neither had yet backed down.
- At this stage in the scenario, the US began to gently push for more robust action on Russia, suggesting to the Europeans that Moscow might be susceptible to pressure from increased sanctions. The European delegations disagreed, however, and the US backed away from this suggestion. This minor disagreement represented the only notable instance of US/European discord during the entire simulation.
- The EU and NATO, having both demonstrated some institutional utility earlier in the scenario, were once again marginalized. Similarly, the UN Security Council session’s lack of success in de-escalating the crisis resulted in the UN’s marginalization in the final stages of the scenario.

At the end of the final round, Chatham House polled the participants on whether they would still participate in the Syrian peace talks (which were not modelled as part of the simulation). All participating teams aside from Turkey indicated their intention to take part.

## Scenario findings

Over the course of a simulated month – and notwithstanding the actual rapprochement visible in reality after the scenario exercise was held – we did not see any resolution to the Turkish/Russian conflict. But nor, by the same token, did we observe any incipient or actual rift in the transatlantic relationship. Unlike in previous scenario exercises, there was no friction either within the European states or between them and the US. This was despite the presence, as noted earlier, of inherent differences in their interests and agendas, which widened as the scenario progressed.

Regardless of the escalation or other developments, the participants playing the roles of the US and European states never wavered from the goals of de-escalating the situation and maintaining transatlantic unity (these were the top two priorities for both parties). For both sides, resolving the conflict in Syria remained an important, but subsidiary, objective. Challenges in other regions, notably the Asia-Pacific, did not divide the US and Europe but seemed instead to strengthen both sides' resolve to settle the Turkish/Russian crisis through diplomatic channels. The US team, in particular, was circumspect in its use of public statements, viewing such moves as counterproductive given the tenseness of US/Turkish and US/Russian relations.

Where Europe and the US did differ, to some degree, was on the best method to achieve their objectives. For example, the US was more willing to increase sanctions as a means of bringing pressure to bear on Russia (although the US also backed down when Europe resisted).

The EU was sidelined in the negotiating process, as individual member states found it more effective to work in ad hoc coalitions. Meanwhile, NATO members put much effort into avoiding formal engagement through alliance mechanisms, fearing that the Russians would see such action as a militarization of the situation. One participant observed that NATO was 'under-pressured' by Turkey; the latter's decision not to demand anything of the alliance left significant potential leverage on the table. Nor did Turkey seek to use the opening or closing of refugee flows as a means of putting pressure on the EU or on individual European states.

The EU briefly played an institutional role, but this was then largely sidelined in favour of a US-supported, German-led initiative. The dual US–Germany mediating role did not raise problems for other European states (as the US's close relationship with the UK had done in earlier scenarios). Interestingly, while the negotiations were led by Germany and the US, from the start strategy and policy discussions included all individual European member states, the EU, the US and NATO delegates. However, the public statements that emerged from these sessions were largely crafted by national teams rather than by the multilateral organizations and groupings.

The two major issues on which the US and Europe have immediate non-aligned interests – refugees and energy – did not play a major role in the simulation. Russia, partly due to its own dependence on oil and gas export revenue, made no serious attempt to use energy for leverage. Similarly, despite the fact that Turkey had the option of threatening to undo its refugee deal with Europe, the country declined to do so. Both of these factors, had they been brought into play more actively by the participants, could have proven divisive. Similarly, commercial interests, particularly between Germany and Turkey, did not play a role; as a result, Germany felt under little pressure to appease Turkey.

Some participants suggested that in a real-world scenario, public pressure and corporate interests might play a larger role. But other participants speculated that domestic pressure on American and European policy-makers would be limited by the generally low level of public interest in relations between Turkey and Russia in some countries – notwithstanding the intense public interest in Russia in Eastern Europe.

The European and US representatives noted that one factor enabling them to avoid both NATO engagement and more active engagement through other formats was that they viewed the Turkish position as a weak one, particularly after the UN statement that the Russian ship had been in

international waters when boarded. In similar fashion to our [Iran scenario](#) – in which unity was sustained through commitment to agreed protocols in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – international norms such as those regarding rules of the sea, the treatment of captives and NATO engagement were available for participants to fall back on (although they readily ignored such norms when it was inconvenient to abide by them). While there were some opportunities for differing interpretations, consensus among NATO members (excepting Turkey) on the desirability of not invoking Article 5, and indeed of avoiding any formal engagement, ensured alliance unity during the simulation.

The Russian team observed that it was able to use a strategy of ‘lawfare’ aggressively and with a considerable degree of success. That is, by playing up the extent to which Turkey’s actions violated the letter of international law, Russia was able to easily forestall Turkish progress and frustrate Turkey’s attempts to gain the upper hand in negotiations.

## Conclusion: Implications

One of the major takeaways from our simulation was that tensions between Russia and Turkey would have to escalate quite dramatically to threaten transatlantic unity.

Turkey is ostensibly an ally of the US and Europe, but our simulation demonstrated that there are hard limits to the political support it can call upon, even in confrontation with a Russia largely seen as an antagonist by the West. Turkey’s attempts to improve its position by relying on the institutional frameworks that it shares with the US and Europe – primarily NATO – were quickly shut down by American and European joint efforts. Nor did commercial or security interests threatened by the refugee crisis seem to have a significant influence on European attitudes.

However, many delegates suggested that in a real-world setting Turkey would have exploited the desire for unity within NATO more than it did in the simulation. This would have put more pressure on NATO to act; some participants, led by Poland, suggested that in such circumstances they would have been forced to defend Turkey to maintain unity. Unity was seen as paramount, and the need for it might thus force action that states would otherwise prefer to avoid.

The scenario also demonstrated that while the US and Europe remain committed to finding a solution to the Syrian civil war, that is subordinate to maintaining the transatlantic alliance (an objective that itself is secondary to preventing the escalation of tensions). It may also be that Turkey does not at present have sufficient leverage to force the US, the most powerful European countries or international institutions into its corner.

The US played a largely passive role in the scenario. It was happy to have Germany take the lead and work in conjunction with all European states, the EU and NATO. Equally, the US backed down quickly over increasing sanctions on Russia when European support was absent. The likely driver of this was the relatively low weight accorded to direct US interests in the region – at least, compared with the far more pressing security concerns that Russia’s proximity poses for European countries. European states need to heed the increasing expectations of Washington that they take a stronger leadership role where their interests are more directly engaged than those of the US.

Unlike in previous scenarios, the process of negotiations within the West was highly inclusive. While Germany and the US took the lead, all parties, including the EU and NATO, were involved in discussions from the beginning. There was additionally no tension around Germany's prominent role. The level of early inclusion could have been a factor in the lack of concern expressed around German (and American) leadership. The common interests and their prioritization (i.e. de-escalation, unity and Syria) would also have supported this. Given the level of tension around processes in other scenarios, we can suppose that a close alignment of interests is necessary for such a relaxed attitude towards German (or other European) leadership to prevail.

The negotiating styles of the various actors were also quite different and worth noting. For the Turkish representatives, maintaining face was important. It was noted that Turkey's system would collapse in the absence of Erdoğan. While face was also important in Russia, participants expressed their belief that the system would survive beyond Putin. For the West, however, both in Europe and the US, institutions were more important. This underlines a disparity in strength between different interests, in which the personal is more visceral and thus stronger, whereas the institutional is more impassive and thus renders participants readier to abandon entrenched positions earlier in the negotiating process.

As noted earlier, domestic pressures had little influence on the Western actors. This was also the case in the previous scenarios. This could have been due to the structure of the scenario: the teams operated as a whole, rather than being divided to represent different political, business and/or public factions (which could have added to internal stresses). While the US decided to send more military resources to Asia following a rise in tensions there, which also induced Congress to propose a redistribution of military funding, this had little impact on the US team's actions with regard to Turkey and Russia. Equally, efforts to involve French and other European domestic forces were largely ignored by the participants. One can therefore conclude that the scenario, as structured, ensured that maintaining stability and cooperation within the West was a more powerful priority for participants than responding to public or political pressure. The exception to this, it was suggested, would be when such dilemmas arose during an election campaign (the German decision in 2011 to abstain in a UN Security Council vote over action on Libya may have been driven, in part, by concerns about political fallout in important state elections).

It is also interesting to note that the Western actors did little to escalate pressure, particularly on Russia. One inference that can be drawn from this is simply that the West has more to lose than Russia, and that Russia has a freer hand to act to pursue its interests at the expense of others. Thus even if the unity of the transatlantic relationship is preserved, that may not be enough to maintain the existing, if limited, degree of American and European influence in the Middle East.

## Appendix: Scenario details

*Note: This scenario was conceived and designed in early spring 2016, and the simulation exercise held on 26–27 May 2016. Some assumptions and forecasts outlined in the paragraphs below were subsequently overtaken by events – notably, by the cautious rapprochement between Turkey and Russia, by the result of the UK’s 23 June referendum on membership of the EU, and by the failed coup against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. For purposes of clarity and transparency, however, the following section is reproduced here (in slightly edited form) to show the scenario details **as supplied to participants**.*

**Setting:** Late 2017

**Background:** Tensions between Turkey and Russia have remained high since the downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber by the Turkish air force in November 2015. Diplomatic relations have remained frosty, and there have been no new efforts to rebuild economic ties. The EU–Turkey refugee deal has taken effect, reducing the numbers of refugees entering the EU, but it remains a source of intense controversy in Europe.

The conflict in Syria has not been resolved. A partial ceasefire has resulted in fairly static lines, with the government and its allies controlling the western portion of the country, rebel and Kurdish groups occupying portions of the centre and north, and ISIS controlling a diminished but largely contiguous portion of the country’s east.

**Scenario:** A Syrian army unit raids a village on the outskirts of Afrin, a settlement bordering regions controlled by the Assad regime, the Kurds and the Turkish-aligned Syrian rebels. In the raid, Syrian troops capture six Turkish soldiers. The Assad regime promptly announces to the world that it has captured a Turkish special forces unit, broadcasting their interrogation to support this claim. The Assad government also claims that Turkish military involvement is designed to illegitimately bolster Ankara’s negotiating position ahead of peace talks; Turkey claims that the soldiers were undertaking counter-ISIS operations.

Russia applauds Syria’s actions and extensively rebroadcasts footage of the captured Turkish troops through its own media channels. The Russian foreign ministry calls on Turkey to cease its collaboration with Syrian rebel groups and its violation of Syria’s territorial sovereignty. Bolstered by Russian support, Syria announces its intention to hold the soldiers in conditions that accord with the Geneva Conventions until Turkey renounces its support for ‘anti-regime elements’.

Anti-Russia protests erupt in Istanbul and Ankara. Shortly thereafter, the Turkish coastguard boards a Russian-flagged cargo ship passing through the Aegean. The cargo ship is forced into a Turkish port, where Turkish authorities declare that they are impounding its cargo consisting of battle tanks, small arms and ammunition destined for the Syrian regime. The Turkish government argues that the weapons will be used to commit atrocities in Syria, and that Turkey – as a signatory to the Arms Trade Treaty – is duty-bound to prevent their passage. Anti-Turkish protests begin in Moscow and Damascus, and the Russian government announces that unless the cargo and ship are released, it will examine ‘all potential means’ of seeking redress.

With a new round of peace talks on Syria due to start in just over a month, both the Russian and Turkish governments make public statements indicating that they will refrain from participation unless the other side concedes, while the US and EU have continued to push for the peace talks to go ahead.

### Country-specific information

**European Union:** The EU has managed to remain intact and prevent the exits of Britain,<sup>8</sup> Greece or any other country. However, substantial reforms both to the EU overall and to the eurozone have not been implemented, and the EU remains divided and fragile. While the refugee agreement with Turkey remains in force – and has significantly decreased the flow of refugees into Europe while providing visa-free travel for Turkish citizens – it continues to cause friction between member states and has sustained the recent growth in populist parties. Meanwhile, EU and US sanctions on Russia over the latter's operations in Ukraine are still in force.

**France:** Helped by policy reforms, French economic growth has begun to pick up, though the recovery is still fragile. At the same time, France has maintained a close working relationship with the US in the Middle East, including collaborating in airstrikes against ISIS. The Front National holds a substantial minority in parliament, but did not succeed in capturing the presidency in the mid-2017 elections.

**Germany:** Despite an uneven economic recovery, Germany remains at the centre of EU fiscal and economic policy. Refugee policy continues to dominate political attention in Germany. A slowdown in Chinese growth has increased pressure on German industry, but the German economy has proven mostly resilient. While Germany has begun to recapitalize its military forces, it remains largely reluctant to participate in international military operations that do not have a clear and widely accepted mandate, and its military still lacks independent power-projection capability. Germany continues to be one of the largest buyers of Russian natural gas. The public also remains sceptical of US involvement in the Middle East and, increasingly, of NATO. Germany's government was weakened by growing populist resistance to its refugee policy. Although the Christian Democratic Union-led coalition has survived the most recent elections, it is hanging on to a very slim majority, with both left- and right-wing populist parties having made notable gains.

**Greece:** The refugee deal between Turkey and the EU has reduced the number of refugees arriving in Greece, but the economy remains in poor shape and further EU assistance has not been forthcoming. The left-wing Syriza party has remained in control, but has had limited room to manoeuvre because of restrictive financial arrangements with the EU. The refugee deal has not notably improved Greece/Turkey relations.

**NATO:** NATO has received increased policy attention and funding since Russian's action in Ukraine in 2014. More resources have been spent, in particular in the Baltic states, and significant troop rotations are taking place in that area. While some states in Eastern Europe have increased military spending, NATO continues to be dominated by American resources and capabilities. The

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned, this scenario was presented to participants before the 23 June 2016 referendum, in which the British electorate voted to leave the EU.

alliance remains highly focused on Russia, and many members are wary of expanding their attention too much to the EU's southern borders and the Middle East.

**Norway:** Norway's economy has started to suffer from the effects of a lengthy period of depressed oil prices. Domestic politics have been increasingly driven towards nationalism, with stricter controls on immigration and a government-driven push to build up national industries outside the energy sector.

**Poland:** With an economy that continues to outperform the EU average, Poland has invested heavily in defensive military capabilities, largely in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. Poland continues to push for greater European integration, a more integrated European foreign policy, and more inclusive free-trade regimes.

**Russia:** Russia's political economy has suffered from years of international isolation and from the prolonged effects of low oil and gas prices. An ambitious military modernization programme has been curtailed by budgetary constraints, though Russia's operation in Syria was partially successful, preserving the Assad regime despite not restoring the latter's authority over the whole of pre-war Syrian territory. Despite Russia's limping economy, the government still pursues an overall strategy of restoring its power relative to the West by any practical means. EU sanctions remain in force, though Russian diplomats have been aggressively making the case that Russia's participation in the Iranian nuclear deal and its work towards a ceasefire in Syria merit reconsideration of those policies. In contrast to developments in some other nations, revelations about the elite's offshore wealth have not manifestly damaged the Russian government; this partly reflects an aggressive media strategy on the part of the Putin regime.

**Saudi Arabia:** Saudi Arabia has managed to retain a sizeable share of global oil markets, but oil prices have failed to reach levels that would provide the government with adequate fiscal resources. The government maintains substantial financial reserves, but these have dwindled further since 2016. The pace of domestic reforms has been slow. Saudi Arabia's regional involvement has grown as it has become less reliant on US leadership.

**Syria:** A ceasefire agreed in 2016 has largely frozen the Syrian conflict, without resolving it. With Russian aid, the Assad regime has regained control over the western third of the country. The remainder of the country is held by various rebel groups, including various factions of the Free Syrian Army, several different Kurdish factions, and a diminished ISIS still in control of the area around Raqqa. While the ceasefire has largely held for over a year, thanks mostly to the exhaustion of the various forces involved, a lasting political solution remains entirely out of reach. (Please note: Syria will not be played by a participant during the scenario exercise, but a Syria expert will be on hand to answer questions about how elements within the country may react to certain actions.)

**Turkey:** Thanks to a 2016 deal over refugees, Turkey is once again being considered for membership of the EU, but the final decision will not be made for years to come. Meanwhile, Turkish frustration with the US and the EU has continued, and the country's growing authoritarianism has further soured relations. Turkey continues to clash with the Kurds, blaming them for a succession of bombings in Istanbul and Ankara and responding with airstrikes and raids in the southeast. Growing restrictions on academic and press freedom – justified by the authorities

as counterterrorism measures – have led to criticism from the US and, in somewhat more muted form, from European governments.

**United Kingdom:** A close vote in the 23 June referendum kept the UK within the EU.<sup>9</sup> The result has, for now, staved off nationalist tendencies within the Westminster parties and Scotland, though tensions remain within the major British political parties around the handling of the referendum and the future of UK/EU relations. UK military forces have continued to shrink since 2016, though at a slower rate than previously, and the country's independent power-projection capacity remains limited.

**United States:** The 'pivot' towards Asia of the previous administration has continued, but the US continues to have substantial engagement with the Middle East and Europe. A significant proportion of the American public remains concerned about terrorism, but is reluctant for US forces to get involved in another major conflict overseas. The strains of isolationism that began to emerge in the wake of the Iraq War have largely receded in popular American discourse, though the public remains wary of major military engagements where the national interest is not directly threatened. A sweeping victory in the 2016 elections means that the Democrats control the White House and the Senate, though the House of Representatives remains under the control of the Republican Party, which has been taking an increasingly nationalist and inward-looking tone as it seeks to position itself for the 2018 mid-term elections and 2020 elections.

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<sup>9</sup> This scenario, held on 26–27 May, predated the 23 June 2016 referendum.

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