

# Türkiye, NATO and Extended Deterrence

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## *Abstract*

*This article analyzes Türkiye's evolving role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s nuclear deterrence posture, focusing on its participation in nuclear-sharing arrangements and exercises, such as Steadfast Noon (military exercise). As a member of the Alliance since 1952, Türkiye has played a geostrategically critical role by hosting the United States (US)' tactical nuclear weapons at Incirlik Air Base and supporting NATO's collective defence strategy. The study traces the historical trajectory of Türkiye's nuclear involvement, from Cold War deployments to its current engagement with modernized B61 nuclear bombs and associated readiness activities. It examines the operational contours of Steadfast Noon and the Turkish Air Force's contributions, particularly through its F-16 fleet. The analysis also addresses key challenges, including Türkiye's exclusion from the F-35 program, complications in air force modernization, its geopolitical balancing between the US and Russia, and tensions between its commitments to non-proliferation and assertive strategic discourse. The findings show Türkiye's continued importance to NATO's southern nuclear posture while highlighting how Ankara's pursuit of strategic autonomy introduces uncertainties that the Alliance must carefully navigate to maintain deterrence credibility and cohesion.*

**Keywords:** Türkiye, NATO, Nuclear Deterrence, Extended Deterrence, Incirlik Air Base.

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## **Introduction**

The contemporary international security landscape underscores the continued importance of nuclear deterrence for NATO, characterized by renewed great-power competition and persistent regional instability. The Alliance's official stance, repeated and enshrined in key documents, such as the Washington Summit declaration, is clear, stating that "As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance."<sup>1</sup> This key principle has shaped NATO's nuclear posture and has provided the essential context for understanding the roles and responsibilities of its member states within this framework. The emphasis on nuclear deterrence is not merely a repetition of Cold War doctrines but a direct and considered response to a perceived decay of the global security environment. This includes increased Russian aggression, accompanied by nuclear rhetoric and actions that challenge strategic stability.<sup>2</sup> Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine initially seemed to trigger a collective realization among NATO members that a new era of strategic competition had begun, leading to a new strategic concept explicitly designating Russia as the main threat.<sup>3</sup> Exercises like Steadfast Noon,<sup>4</sup> NATO's premier nuclear readiness drill, are thus framed as crucial demonstrations of resolve and capability in this evolving context, designed to ensure the credibility of the Alliance's deterrent against contemporary threats.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, as a member of NATO since 1952, Türkiye has a unique and pivotal position within this complex nuclear equation.<sup>6</sup> Its geostrategic location, serving as a land bridge between Europe and Asia and controlling critical maritime passages, has historically made it indispensable to

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<sup>1</sup> "Nuclear Deterrence Exercise *Steadfast Noon* Concludes." *Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE)*, October 24, 2024, <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2024/nuclear-deterrence-exercise-steadfast-noon-concludes>

<sup>2</sup> "NATO Flexes with Simultaneous Nuclear Strike and Naval Warfare Exercises," *The War Zone*, last modified October 25, 2024, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/nato-flexes-with-simultaneous-nuclear-strike-and-naval-warfare-exercises>

<sup>3</sup> Dominika Kunertova and Olivier Schmitt, "Assessing NATO's cohesion: methods and implications," *International Politics* (November 2024): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00641-1>.

<sup>4</sup> Steadfast Noon refers to NATO's military drill involving training flights with dual-capable aircraft (that can carry nuclear weapons) from multiple member nations to ensure readiness and signal capability against potential threats.

<sup>5</sup> Newdick, Thomas. "NATO Flexes with Simultaneous Nuclear Strike and Naval Warfare Exercises." *The War Zone* (The Drive), October 25, 2024, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/nato-flexes-with-simultaneous-nuclear-strike-and-naval-warfare-exercises>.

<sup>6</sup> "Türkiye and NATO," NATO Declassified, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified\\_191048.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_191048.htm).

Alliance's security.<sup>7</sup> From the early years of its membership, Türkiye has been an active member in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, most notably as one of the five current host nations for the US' tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> These weapons at Incirlik Air Base represent a tangible commitment to NATO's collective defence and extended deterrence posture.

However, Türkiye's role is complex. In recent years, Ankara has followed a foreign policy characterized by a desire for "strategic autonomy." It has led to actions and alignments that sometimes differ from those of other NATO allies.<sup>9</sup> Its relationship with Russia, a primary focus of NATO's deterrence efforts, further complicates its position within the Alliance's broader strategy.<sup>10</sup> This has been evident in how leaders in Türkiye have maintained "ambiguous" relations with Russia and, at times, opposed seemingly consensual policies (e.g., the initial blocking of Sweden's NATO accession or the delay in approving regional defence plans).<sup>11</sup> This pivotal nature of Türkiye is, therefore, a double-edged sword for NATO. Its geography and substantial military capacity are undeniable assets to the Alliance's deterrent capabilities.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, its "transactional approach" to NATO commitments and its independent foreign policy have introduced some issues into the Alliance's nuclear calculus.<sup>13</sup> This dynamic implies that the stability and credibility of NATO's southern flank nuclear posture are subject to Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy to a greater extent than with some other allies, which requires a continuous and nuanced diplomatic engagement by NATO. Despite these divergences, it is crucial to recognize that Ankara and the Alliance share fundamental threat perceptions, including concerns over Russia's aggressive revisionism,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Alberque, William. "The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements." *Proliferation Papers*, no. 57. Paris: Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), February 2017,

[https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated\\_files/documents/atoms/files/alberque\\_npt\\_origins\\_nato\\_nuclear\\_2017.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/alberque_npt_origins_nato_nuclear_2017.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> NATO, "Türkiye and NATO."

<sup>10</sup> Sophia Epley, "Turkey's Balancing Act in the Ukraine Conflict—Again," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)*, March 5, 2025, [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op\\_eds/2025/03/05/turkeys-balancing-act-in-the-ukraine-conflict-again/](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_eds/2025/03/05/turkeys-balancing-act-in-the-ukraine-conflict-again/).

<sup>11</sup> Dominika Kunertova and Olivier Schmitt, "Assessing NATO's Cohesion: Methods and Implications," *International Politics* 62 (2024): 1097–1110, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00641-1>.

<sup>12</sup> NATO, "Türkiye and NATO."

<sup>13</sup> Max Hoffman, *Flashpoints in U.S.-Turkey Relations in 2021* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, January 19, 2021): <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/flashpoints-u-s-turkey-relations-2021/>

terrorism, and the risks posed by regional instability on NATO's borders.

In this context, the article argues that Türkiye remains an important member of NATO and that its extended deterrence policies, despite some challenges, remain important. While its continuing role is evident in its active participation in nuclear readiness exercises such as Steadfast Noon, there are some challenges to address. The Turkish role in NATO's extended deterrence policies should take into account Türkiye's evolving strategic posture, challenges in modernizing its air power, and complex geopolitical relationships, as these factors both contribute to and pose challenges to the Alliance's nuclear cohesion and credibility. The following sections explore this argument by detailing NATO's nuclear deterrence architecture, including the principles of extended deterrence and nuclear sharing. In addition, it examines the historical and ongoing strategic importance of Türkiye within this framework, with a specific focus on the role of Incirlik Air Base. Furthermore, the article analyzes Türkiye's participation in Steadfast Noon exercises and examines the capabilities of the Turkish Air Force. Finally, it navigates the multifaceted challenges and dynamics influencing Türkiye's nuclear role, as its air power modernization, geopolitical balancing act, and national stance on nuclear weapons guide us into the future. Ultimately, the article concludes with offering final remarks on the future outlook.

## **The Architecture of NATO's Nuclear Deterrence**

NATO's nuclear deterrence posture is fundamentally anchored in the collective defence commitment of Article 5, serving as the supreme guarantee of Alliance security. NATO's approach to nuclear deterrence is multifaceted and intricately woven from historical precedent, strategic imperatives, and intricate burden-sharing arrangements. The fundamental principle of deterrence, along with extended deterrence, is primarily supported by the US and manifested through nuclear-sharing agreements with select non-nuclear member states. These arrangements are designed to ensure Alliance cohesion, deter aggression, and maintain strategic stability in an unpredictable security environment.

As part of Türkiye's involvement in deterrence discussions, extended deterrence plays a relatively greater role. In the NATO context, extended deterrence refers to the explicit guarantee by the US to extend its nuclear "umbrella" to protect its allies.<sup>14</sup> This means that an attack, especially a

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Peters, 'Extended Deterrence: A Tool That Has Served American Interests Since 1945,'

nuclear one, on a NATO ally could be retaliated against with a US response, with the potential use of nuclear weapons. The underlying logic of this posture is twofold: militarily, it signals to adversaries that the costs of aggression would outweigh any benefits; politically, it reduces the incentives for allies to develop their own independent nuclear arsenals, thereby supporting broader non-proliferation goals.<sup>15</sup> From the US perspective, it serves crucial national interests by maintaining global stability and reducing the likelihood of conflicts that could necessitate a large-scale conventional intervention. Furthermore, extended deterrence is not a unilateral provision of security; it is often conceptualized as a “two-way street,” where allies, in return for the US security guarantee, contribute to overall Alliance security by augmenting American military power through basing, logistical support, and conventional force contributions.<sup>16</sup>

The credibility of the extended deterrence is its most important aspect. For deterrence, extended deterrence in this case, to be effective, a potential adversary must believe in both the capability and the willingness of the US to follow its commitments. However, this credibility has been questioned from time to time. As some analysts suggest, it is currently experiencing “creeping uncertainty” due to factors such as internal US political polarization, a strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific, and the rapid expansion of nuclear arsenals by adversaries like Russia and China.<sup>17</sup> This tension is at the centre of what has been termed the “alliance security dilemma,” which describes the balance between the risk of an ally being abandoned in a crisis and the risk of being drawn into a conflict that does not concern them.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, maintaining this credibility requires continuous political signalling, military exercises, and modernization of capabilities.

In more detail, NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements are a unique feature of the Alliance. It has allowed non-nuclear-weapon state (NNWS) allies to participate in the planning, training for, and, in the event of conflict, the

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*The Heritage Foundation*, April 2, 2025, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/extended-deterrence-tool-has-served-american-interests-1945>

<sup>15</sup> Zuzanna Gwadera, “US Allies Question Extended Deterrence Guarantees, but Have Few Options,” *Military Balance Blog* (International Institute for Strategic Studies), March 20, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2025/03/us-allies-question-extended-deterrence-guarantees-but-have-few-options/>.

<sup>16</sup> Peters, *Extended Deterrence: A Tool That Has Served American Interests Since 1945* (April 2, 2025), <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/extended-deterrence-tool-has-served-american-interests-1945>.

<sup>17</sup> Gwadera, “US allies question extended deterrence guarantees, but have few options.”

<sup>18</sup> Kunertova and Schmitt, “Assessing NATO’s Cohesion: Methods and Implications.”

potential delivery of US tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>19</sup> These arrangements involve close consultations and common decision-making on nuclear weapons policy, typically within NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which includes all member states except France (which maintains its own independent nuclear deterrent outside the NPG structure).<sup>20</sup> Participating host nations also maintain dual-capable aircraft (DCA) – aircraft certified to deliver both conventional and nuclear munitions.<sup>21</sup>

Currently, five NATO members host US B61 tactical nuclear bombs on their territory: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Türkiye.<sup>22</sup> Historically, Canada (until 1984) and Greece (until 2001) also hosted US nuclear weapons under these arrangements. The US retains full custody and control over these weapons in peacetime. The Permissive Action Link (PAL) codes, which are necessary to arm the weapons, remain under exclusive American control, ensuring that the weapons cannot be used without explicit authorization from the US President. In a wartime scenario, if the NPG made a decision and it was authorized by the US President (and, for UK-based US weapons historically, the UK Prime Minister), the weapons would be mounted on the DCA of the participating host nations for delivery.<sup>23</sup>

The legal and treaty basis for these arrangements has been heavily debated. NATO and the US have historically argued that nuclear sharing does not violate the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The reason for this argument is that no transfer of ownership or control of the weapons occurs in peacetime.<sup>24</sup> According to some analysts, the NPT was negotiated in the 1960s with the Soviet Union to accommodate existing NATO arrangements while constraining further proliferation.<sup>25</sup> While the Soviet Union tacitly accepted this interpretation at the time, modern Russia argues that nuclear sharing is in breach of Articles I and II of the NPT, which prohibit the transfer of nuclear weapons to NNWSs and the receipt or manufacture of such weapons by them, respectively.<sup>26</sup> These different

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<sup>19</sup> Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Gwadera, "US allies question extended deterrence guarantees, but have few options."

<sup>21</sup> Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 15-25.

<sup>24</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization. *NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*. Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division (PDD), Press & Media Section, February 2022, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220204-factsheet-nuclear-sharing-arrange.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220204-factsheet-nuclear-sharing-arrange.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> William Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's Answer to a Russian Media Question

interpretations will continue to be discussed in international arms control discourse for a long time. However, for NATO, these arrangements were decided in NATO's strategic documents, such as DC 6/1 in 1949, which addressed strategic bombing with all types of weapons, and the 1957 NATO Summit agreement to store nuclear warheads in Europe.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond these legal discussions, the principle of "Burden sharing" is integral to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>28</sup> It points to a collective approach in which the benefits, responsibilities, and risks associated with nuclear deterrence are shared across the Alliance. It is considered an institutionalized way of assessing costs and benefits for collective defence.<sup>29</sup> However, this principle has faced some challenges before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some host nations publicly debate the continued necessity and desirability of hosting US nuclear weapons. For instance, political factions in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands have periodically introduced parliamentary motions or coalition debates questioning the presence of these weapons, citing disarmament obligations and public opposition. These discussions created concerns that if some were to opt out, the political and strategic burden on the remaining hosts, such as Türkiye and Italy, would intensify.<sup>30</sup> Such a development could damage the Alliance's solidarity and potentially lead the remaining nations to re-evaluate their commitments or to seek other incentives or support from NATO to continue their participation.

This would also be seen as a vulnerability, as a decrease in the number of host nations could be perceived as a weakening of collective resolve. This would be interpreted as the concentration of risks and potentially make the remaining host nations more prominent targets or points of political pressure for adversaries. Furthermore, in the specific case of Türkiye, the removal of nuclear assets would likely be perceived not as a safety measure but as a vote of no-confidence by the Alliance. Such a move would risk triggering a 'cascading decoupling,' where the erosion of trust in Ankara prompts other host nations to question the immutability of their own security guarantees, thereby unravelling the political cohesion that nuclear

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Regarding U.S. Ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher's Statement on the Possibility of Relocating U.S. Nuclear Weapons Based in Germany to Poland." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, updated May 19, 2020, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/733-19052020](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/733-19052020).

<sup>27</sup> Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 14-15.

<sup>28</sup> NATO, *NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*.

<sup>29</sup> Kunertova and Schmitt, "Assessing NATO's cohesion: methods and implications," 4-6.

<sup>30</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey," *Arms Control Today* (June 2010), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010-06/reassessing-role-us-nuclear-weapons-turkey>

sharing is designed to cement.

The cornerstone of NATO's shared nuclear deterrent is the US B61 tactical nuclear gravity bomb. An estimated 100 of these weapons are currently deployed across six air bases in the five European host nations previously mentioned.<sup>31</sup> Türkiye is estimated to host between 20 and 30 of these B61 bombs at Incirlik Air Base, although precise numbers are classified and estimates vary across different public sources.<sup>32</sup> These weapons are stored in highly secure underground vaults, known as WS3 (Weapon Storage and Security System), typically located within hardened aircraft shelters.<sup>33</sup>

The B61 has received significant modernization over time. Known as the B61 Life Extension Program (LEP), it has focused on consolidating several older variants (B61-3, -4, -7, and -10) into the new B61-12 model.<sup>34</sup> Crucially, this modernization is linked to the transition of delivery platforms. The F-35A Lightning II is certified to carry the B61-12, representing a significant capability upgrade due to its stealth characteristics, which enhance survivability in contested airspace compared to older aircraft.<sup>35</sup> This program, with an approximate cost of \$9 billion, was concluded with its last production unit in December 2024.<sup>36</sup> However, the B61-12 does not offer a completely “new” nuclear weapon in terms of increasing the stockpile size. There are two important components here. First, it reuses the physics packages from older bombs. Second, it incorporates a new guided tail kit for improved accuracy and a “dial-a-yield” feature that allows variable explosive power.<sup>37</sup> This enhanced precision allows for reduced yields to achieve similar effects against targets, potentially lowering collateral damage.

In a more recent development, the US has also begun production of the B61-13, a variant based on the B61-12 but with a much higher maximum yield, similar to the older B61-7 it is intended to replace.<sup>38</sup> One important point is

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<sup>31</sup> Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, et al., “United States Nuclear Weapons, 2025,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 81, no. 1 (January 13, 2025), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2024.2441624>.

<sup>33</sup> Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 14-15.

<sup>34</sup> “Nuclear Disarmament Turkey Fact Sheet,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, updated October 8, 2024, <https://www.nti.org/education-center/fact-sheets/nuclear-disarmament-turkey/>

<sup>35</sup> Newdick, “NATO Flexes with Simultaneous Nuclear Strike and Naval Warfare Exercises.”

<sup>36</sup> Aaron Mehta, “US Completes \$9B B61-12 Nuclear Warhead Upgrade,” *Breaking Defense*, updated January 7, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/01/us-completes-9b-b61-12-nuclear-warhead-upgrade/>

<sup>37</sup> Mehta, “US completes \$9B B61-12 nuclear warhead upgrade.”

<sup>38</sup> “US completes \$9B B61-12 nuclear warhead upgrade.”

that the B61-13 is designated for US military use only and will be delivered by strategic bombers such as the B-2 Spirit and the forthcoming B-21 Raider. Therefore, it is not planned to be part of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>39</sup> This distinction highlights a dual-track approach in US nuclear modernization relevant to Europe. In this context, it is safe to state that the B61-12 aims to enhance the credibility of the shared deterrent available to NATO allies, while the B61-13 improves US-only strategic capabilities. However, this bifurcated approach has generated debate. While some view the B61-13 as a necessary reinforcement of the US strategic umbrella, others argue it risks creating a "two-tier" alliance structure. In this view, the most potent capabilities remain under exclusive US control, potentially weakening the political symbolism of the shared B61-12 mission and raising questions about the "coupling" of US strategic forces to European defence in a crisis. The primary delivery aircraft for NATO's B61 bombs have traditionally been the F-16 Fighting Falcon and the Panavia Tornado.<sup>40</sup>

### **Türkiye's Enduring Strategic Significance in NATO's Nuclear Framework**

It is almost impossible to think of Türkiye's role within NATO's nuclear framework without reference to its history with the Alliance and its unique geostrategic position. However, to understand its enduring importance, one must first examine the evolving threat perceptions that drive Ankara's security calculus.<sup>41</sup>

Türkiye joined NATO on February 18, 1952, and the primary driver of Türkiye's membership was the pursuit of robust security guarantees against the Soviet Union's expansionist ambitions. It is important to note here that the Soviet Union had made territorial claims and sought greater control over the Turkish Straits following the end of World War II. Therefore, for Ankara, NATO membership was both a military necessity and a political decision to align with the West in the bipolar Cold War environment. NATO, in turn, recognized Türkiye's strategic value, acknowledging its capacity to provide land and sea bases, its substantial military forces, and

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<sup>39</sup> "Far More Powerful B61-13 Guided Nuclear Bomb Variant Joins U.S. Stockpile," *The War Zone*, updated May 19, 2025, <https://www.thewaronline.com/2025/05/far-more-powerful-b61-13-guided-nuclear-bomb-variant-joins-u-s-stockpile/>

<sup>40</sup> Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Muhammed Ali Alkış, *Türkiye in the New World Order: The Nuclear Debate* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, May 2023), 7, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/alumninotes-muhammedalikis-may2023>

its critical geographic position on the southeastern flank of the Alliance, bordering the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup>

For these reasons, Türkiye immediately became involved in NATO's evolving nuclear posture. The US began deploying nuclear weapons to Turkish territory as part of the broader NATO Atomic Stockpile agreement. The agreement aimed to reinforce deterrence against the Soviet bloc and included training allied forces to use these weapons.<sup>43</sup> Early US nuclear deployments included PGM-19 Jupiter Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs), which were stationed in Türkiye from 1961.<sup>44</sup> These missiles, however, became a focal point during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and were withdrawn in 1963 as part of the secret US-Soviet agreement that resolved the crisis. This withdrawal, known as the Türkiye-for-Cuba missile trade, was opposed by Ankara, which feared it would weaken Alliance security and its own position against the Soviet threat.<sup>45</sup> This experience may have left a lasting impression on Turkish strategic thinking. It could be argued that it led to a sense that its core security interests could be subordinated to broader great-power rivalry. In contemporary terms, this historical precedent could inform Ankara's pursuit of strategic autonomy. It might further be argued that these policies aim to reduce over-reliance on external actors for fundamental security needs.

Beyond the Jupiter missiles, other US nuclear systems were deployed in Türkiye, including tactical gravity bombs from February 1959, MGR-1 Honest John surface-to-surface missiles from May 1959, and nuclear-capable 8-inch M110 howitzers from June 1965.<sup>46</sup> These deployments reinforced Türkiye's frontline status and its integral role in NATO's forward defence strategy during the Cold War.

In all these arrangements, Incirlik Air Base, located near Adana in southern Türkiye, has been central to Türkiye's role in NATO's nuclear posture. Constructed by the US Army Corps of Engineers between 1951 and 1954, it became operational in 1955, initially named Adana Air Base and renamed Incirlik in 1958. A joint use agreement between the Turkish General Staff

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<sup>42</sup> Alkiş, “*Türkiye in the New World Order: The Nuclear Debate*” (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> William Burr, “Nuclear Weapons and Turkey Since 1959,” *National Security Archive*, The George Washington University, October 30, 2019, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nuclear-vault/2019-10-30/nuclear-weapons-and-turkey-1959>

<sup>44</sup> Kibaroglu, “Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey.”

<sup>45</sup> Aaron Stein, “Turkey and Tactical Nuclear Weapons: A Political Love Affair” (EDAM, 2012), [https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Turkey\\_TacticalNuclearWeaponsCleandraft.pdf](https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Turkey_TacticalNuclearWeaponsCleandraft.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> Burr, *Nuclear Weapons and Turkey Since 1959*.

and the US Air Force was signed in December 1954, formalizing its role as a key NATO facility.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout the Cold War and beyond, Incirlik proved its strategic value not only in deterring the Soviet Union but also as a vital staging and logistical hub for responding to crises in the Middle East and for power projection.<sup>48</sup> It was used, for example, for U-2 reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union until Francis Gary Powers' aircraft was shot down in 1960.<sup>49</sup> The multifaceted importance of Incirlik provides Türkiye with significant leverage, extending its role beyond its nuclear mission to encompass critical logistical and power-projection capabilities for NATO in a volatile region. At this point, one clarification might be useful. In this context, access to Incirlik for operations not under a NATO flag but often US-led has historically been subject to Turkish political approval, creating a complex interdependence. The 1975 Turkish suspension of non-NATO US activities at Incirlik in response to a US arms embargo following the Cyprus intervention is a case in point.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the security and operational status of US nuclear weapons at Incirlik cannot be entirely decoupled from the broader US-Türkiye bilateral relationship and Türkiye's regional foreign policy objectives.

Currently, Incirlik Air Base is believed to be one of the six European air bases hosting US B61 tactical nuclear bombs under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>51</sup> Estimates suggest that approximately 20 to 30 B61 bombs are stored at the base. These weapons are under the guardianship of US Air Force (USAF) personnel, and the PAL codes required for their arming remain under strict US control.<sup>52</sup> The facilities at Incirlik, including the underground WS3 weapon storage vaults, have received security upgrades and modernization over time. These were partly to ensure compatibility with newer systems and maintain security standards.<sup>53</sup> However, periods of political tension between Türkiye and the US, as well as regional instability, have led to recurring speculation about the potential withdrawal of these weapons from Incirlik. There have been discussions

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<sup>47</sup> “Is It Time to Withdraw US Nuclear Weapons from Incirlik?,” *Military.com*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/11/14/time-withdraw-us-nuclear-weapons-incirlik.html>.

<sup>48</sup> “Incirlik Air Base History,” *U.S. Air Force*, updated November 2018, <https://www.incirlik.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/300814/incirlik-air-base-history/>.

<sup>49</sup> Micallef, “Is It Time to Withdraw US Nuclear Weapons from Incirlik?”

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Alberque, *The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, 12-15.

<sup>52</sup> Hans M. Kristensen et al., “United States Nuclear Weapons, 2025.”

<sup>53</sup> Newdick, “NATO Flexes With Simultaneous Nuclear Strike And Naval Warfare Exercises.”

about alternative locations, such as RAF Lakenheath in the UK, as contingency air bases.<sup>54</sup> Yet, strategic planners generally recognize that such a removal would transcend mere logistical relocation; adversaries would likely interpret it as a ‘geopolitical retreat.’ Removing the nuclear stockpile from the Southern Flank would signal a diminishing US commitment to the region, potentially emboldening Russia or Iran to test NATO’s resolve in a way that the current presence deters.

From the Turkish perspective, Ankara has viewed its NATO membership and nuclear sharing arrangements as important aspects of its national defence and security policy. Ankara has valued the deterrent effect of US nuclear weapons on its territory, especially against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>55</sup> A key principle underpinning Türkiye’s participation in NATO’s nuclear posture is that of “burden sharing.” Türkiye has strongly subscribed to this concept since joining the Alliance, a commitment demonstrated even before membership by its significant troop contributions to the United Nations forces during the Korean War.<sup>56</sup> In this line, Ankara’s position aligns with other NATO host nations to maintain their hosting of nuclear weapons, given that this has been seen as essential for Alliance solidarity.<sup>57</sup> This position is not only about the equitable distribution of physical risk but also about ensuring broad political buy-in and solidarity across the Alliance for the nuclear mission. From Ankara’s perspective, a wider distribution of hosting responsibilities reinforces the collective nature of nuclear deterrence. Therefore, it makes it more difficult for any single host nation to be singled out or unduly pressured. Ultimately, any move towards moving US nuclear weapons out of Europe or to fewer European locations could be interpreted as a potential weakening of NATO’s collective political resolve on nuclear deterrence.

Beyond hosting nuclear weapons, Türkiye also contributes to NATO with conventional capabilities. Ankara has the second-largest army in the Alliance and a rapidly developing indigenous defence industry. It also maintains diplomatic relations with the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Furthermore, Türkiye controls the Turkish Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) in accordance with the 1936 Montreux Convention. These straits are of strategic importance to NATO, especially

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<sup>54</sup> Hans Kristensen, “NATO Tactical Nuclear Weapons Exercise and Base Upgrades,” (October 14, 2024), <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2024/10/steadfast-noon-2024/>

<sup>55</sup> Alkiş, *Türkiye in the New World Order: The Nuclear Debate*, 6-7.

<sup>56</sup> Kibaroglu, “Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey.”

<sup>57</sup> Stein, “Turkey and Tactical Nuclear Weapons: A Political Love Affair.”

for naval movements in the Black Sea.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its fundamental reliance on NATO for security, Türkiye's relationship with the Alliance has not been without its challenges. Historical experiences, such as initial European reservations about its membership and the impact of the 1974 US arms embargo following the Cyprus intervention, have raised some Turkish doubts about the unconditional nature of NATO's Article V- collective defence commitment.<sup>59</sup> These experiences, heightened by the belief that its security priorities were not always fully appreciated by all allies, have contributed to Ankara's more proactive and sometimes assertive stance in NATO decision-making processes, as it seeks to ensure its national interests are adequately addressed.<sup>60</sup>

In the contemporary security environment, Türkiye's primary threat perception has shifted from a singular Cold War focus to a complex, multi-dimensional landscape. The renewed aggression of Russia, particularly following the invasion of Ukraine and the militarization of the Black Sea, has reignited concerns regarding conventional imbalances and nuclear coercion in Türkiye's immediate neighbourhood. Simultaneously, the instability on its southern flank, specifically in Syria and Iraq, along with concerns over potential Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation by neighbours like Iran, reinforces Ankara's reliance on NATO's security umbrella. In this context, extended deterrence serves a dual purpose for Türkiye: it provides a guarantee against nuclear blackmail from major powers while serving as a hedge against regional instability.

### ***Steadfast Noon: Türkiye's Participation in NATO's Premier Nuclear Exercise***

Steadfast Noon is NATO's main annual exercise, designed to test and validate its nuclear deterrence posture. It plays an important role in ensuring the readiness of Allied forces and reinforcing the credibility of the Alliance's nuclear capabilities. Türkiye, as a host nation for tactical nuclear weapons and a country with a considerable air force, takes a role in these exercises.

The primary objective of Steadfast Noon is to ensure the credibility, effectiveness, safety, and security of NATO's nuclear deterrent mission.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> NATO, "Türkiye and NATO."

<sup>59</sup> Stein, "Turkey and Tactical Nuclear Weapons: A Political Love Affair."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> "Nuclear deterrence exercise Steadfast Noon concludes."

It is consistently described by NATO as a “routine and recurring training activity,” typically held in October and planned well over a year in advance.<sup>62</sup> Officials emphasize that the exercise is not linked to specific ongoing world events but is a fundamental part of maintaining readiness. The exercise focuses entirely on nuclear deterrence, involving training flights with DCA but without carrying live warheads. It serves to practice NATO’s nuclear strike mission, integrating DCA from host nations with the US B61 tactical nuclear bombs deployed in Europe.<sup>63</sup>

Steadfast Noon typically involves around 13 to 14 Allied nations, mobilizing more than 60 aircraft of various types, and approximately 2,000 military personnel. The aircraft participating include DCA (such as F-16s, F-35As, and Tornados), conventional fighter escorts, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft (e.g., AWACS), air-to-air refuelling tankers, and often US Air Force B-52 strategic bombers flying from the US or forward-deployed locations.<sup>64</sup> The exercise scenarios are designed to be complex and realistic, “stressing the overall system” by placing personnel in high-tempo operational environments and challenging their ability to coordinate actions “literally down to the minute of when we would put a weapon onto a target” against a fictional adversary.<sup>65</sup>

The strategic significance of Steadfast Noon lies in many elements. First and foremost, it sends a clear message to any potential adversary of NATO’s capabilities. It also exemplifies the collective resolve to protect and defend all Allies. In addition, it reinforces Alliance cohesion by demonstrating solidarity and practicing interoperability among member states in the most sensitive of military operations.<sup>66</sup> The increasing visibility and explicit messaging accompanying Steadfast Noon in recent years suggest a deliberate NATO strategy. It serves to enhance the signalling value of these exercises in a delicate global security atmosphere.<sup>67</sup> This places participating nations, including Türkiye, more directly in the geopolitical spotlight. Therefore, it reinforces their commitment while potentially exposing them to adversaries who closely monitor such exercises.

The Turkish Air Force (TAF) has consistently participated in Steadfast

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<sup>62</sup> Newdick, “NATO Flexes with Simultaneous Nuclear Strike and Naval Warfare Exercises.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “Nuclear deterrence exercise Steadfast Noon concludes.”

<sup>66</sup> “From High Noon to Steadfast Noon,” *In Depth News*, updated October 14, 2024, <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/opinion/4922-from-high-noon-to-steadfast-noon>.

<sup>67</sup> Newdick, “NATO Flexes with Simultaneous Nuclear Strike and Naval Warfare Exercises.”

### ***Türkiye, NATO and Extended Deterrence***

Noon exercises. Türkiye joins with its large fleet of F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft. It is important to note here that Ankara is the second-largest operator of F-16s within NATO, with over 250 units in active service, making this aircraft the backbone of its air power. Historically, the TAF's role in nuclear sharing involved training its pilots and crews in procedures for loading, transporting, and employing US B61 tactical nuclear weapons with its designated DCA (which, over the years, included F-100s, F-104s, F-4s, and F-16s).<sup>68</sup>

However, some analyses, especially from the early 2010s, imply a potential evolution or clarification of the TAF's role in these exercises. It is argued that Turkish F-16s might be focusing more on training as non-nuclear air defence escorts for other NATO nuclear-capable fighter wings, instead of practicing direct nuclear delivery missions.<sup>69</sup> If this shift is accurate and has been sustained, it could represent a subtle but significant recalibration of Türkiye's operational involvement in the nuclear delivery aspect of sharing. Such a change might be attributable to various factors, including issues related to aircraft modernization and certification for the newest B61 variants, especially in light of Türkiye's exclusion from the F-35 program. The suggestion of an escort role would still allow Türkiye to maintain its political participation in nuclear sharing by hosting weapons, participating in the NPG, and joining exercises. However, it would decrease its direct operational stake in the nuclear delivery mission itself. This could change the dynamics of "burden sharing" and the specific military contributions Türkiye makes. This should be considered within the broader perspective of potentially impacting perceptions of its full commitment or creating a tiered level of participation within the nuclear sharing framework.

Regardless of the precise nature of its current role in simulated delivery, Türkiye's participation in Steadfast Noon is vital for maintaining the TAF's interoperability with other Allied air forces and for adapting its combat strategies to the latest technologies and operational methods employed by NATO partners. The exercises also provide insights from post-exercise evaluation, which can inform TAF modernization planning and the development of more effective military doctrines. The modernization of Türkiye's F-16 fleet is already ongoing, while the US has approved the sale of 40 new F-16 Block-70 Viper aircraft and 79 upgrade kits for its existing fleet. Lockheed Martin is involved in these upgrades, which include advanced AESA radar systems, enhanced avionics, and extended structural

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<sup>68</sup> Kibaroglu, "Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey."

<sup>69</sup> Stein, "Turkey and Tactical Nuclear Weapons: A Political Love Affair."

life. At the same time, Türkiye is pursuing indigenous upgrade programs for its F-16s, such as the Özgür-II project.<sup>70</sup>

Crucially, however, the shift in platforms impacts the technical execution of the deterrence mission. While legacy F-16s can carry the B61-12, they may be limited to employing it in an ‘analog’ or ballistic mode, using it as a standard gravity bomb. Full utilization of the B61-12’s digital capabilities—specifically its guided tail kit, which provides high-precision targeting—requires advanced digital avionics integration found in the F-35 and F-15E. While the new F-16 Block 70 Vipers feature advanced mission computers, the level of their certification for the B61-12’s full digital interface remains a critical variable. If the Turkish fleet is technically restricted to analog delivery, the operational logic suggests a permanent shift in the TAF’s role: moving from a primary nuclear strike force to a suppression of enemy air defence and high-value escort force, supporting other Allies’ fifth-generation nuclear carriers.

### **Navigating Complexities: Challenges and Dynamics of Türkiye’s Nuclear Role**

Türkiye’s participation in NATO’s nuclear framework, while strategically significant, is increasingly shaped by complex challenges and evolving dynamics. These include the political and military ramifications of its exclusion from the F-35 fighter program and its intricate geopolitical balancing act between Western allies and Russia.<sup>71</sup>

A major complication for Türkiye’s future role in NATO’s nuclear mission is its 2019 expulsion from the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II program. This decision by the US was a direct consequence of Ankara’s acquisition of the Russian S-400 Triumf air defence system, which Washington and other NATO allies viewed as incompatible with NATO systems and a potential threat to the security and stealth capabilities of the F-35. The concern was that the S-400’s advanced radar systems could collect sensitive data on the F-35, which might then be compromised or shared with Russia.<sup>72</sup>

This expulsion had significant implications for the Turkish Air Force (TAF). Türkiye had planned to acquire at least 100 F-35A jets, intended to

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<sup>70</sup> “Turkish Air Force: Prospects and Challenges Ahead,” *Trends Research & Advisory*, updated March 19, 2025, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/turkish-air-force-prospects-and-challenges-ahead/>.

<sup>71</sup> Alkış, *Türkiye in the New World Order: The Nuclear Debate*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

form the next generation of its fighter fleet and to serve as a key platform for delivering the modernized US B61-12 nuclear bombs, for which the F-35A is certified. Six F-35s that had been produced for Türkiye prior to its removal remain in storage in the US.<sup>73</sup> The denial of this 5th-generation aircraft has created a notable capability gap. While Türkiye is undertaking extensive modernization of its existing F-16 fleet, including the procurement of new F-16 Block 70 Vipers and domestic upgrade programs like Özgür-II, these are 4th-generation aircraft.<sup>74</sup> Although F-16s are also certified to carry the B61-12, indications suggest that not all F-16 variants may fully utilize the bomb's precision-guidance capabilities, and they lack the survivability of a stealth platform like the F-35 in contested airspace.

Ankara is also exploring the acquisition of Eurofighter Typhoons as a solution. At the same time, it is also developing its own indigenous 5th-generation fighter, the TF-X KAAN, which is projected to enter service from 2028 onwards.<sup>75</sup> However, achieving NATO nuclear certification for KAAN would be a lengthy and complex process with no guarantee of success if Ankara plans to do so. Furthermore, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticized the F-35 exclusion, particularly in light of potential US offers of the aircraft to other non-NATO partners, such as India. While Ankara has expressed a desire to rejoin the F-35 program, the US maintains that the complete removal of the S-400 system from Turkish soil is a non-negotiable precondition. This impasse directly affects Türkiye's long-term capacity to contribute to NATO's high-end conventional and nuclear deterrence missions with the most advanced, interoperable platforms. The situation could lead to a de facto marginalization of the TAF's role in actual nuclear delivery missions, even if it continues to host weapons and participate politically, potentially impacting the perceived credibility of nuclear sharing in NATO's southern region.

In addition, Türkiye's strategic behaviour is best understood through the lens of Glenn Snyder's 'alliance security dilemma'.<sup>76</sup> Ankara is constantly recalibrating its position to mitigate two distinct and opposing fears: abandonment by its Western allies amid regional threats, and entrapment in

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<sup>73</sup>“Turkish Air Force: Prospects and Challenges Ahead,” *Trends Research & Advisory*, updated March 19, 2025, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/turkish-air-force-prospects-and-challenges-ahead/>.

<sup>74</sup> Trends Türkiye Virtual Office, “Turkish Air Force: Prospects and Challenges Ahead.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183>

a direct conflict with Russia that does not serve its immediate national interests. While a long-standing NATO ally, Türkiye has increasingly pursued what it terms a policy of “strategic autonomy” to manage this dilemma, driven by its own national security imperatives and regional ambitions.<sup>77</sup> This has led to deeper economic ties with Russia, including cooperation on the Akkuyu nuclear power plant built by Rosatom, and to Türkiye’s positioning as a key mediator in conflicts involving Russia, such as Russia’s war on Ukraine.<sup>78</sup>

This balancing act, while potentially offering Ankara diplomatic leverage and economic benefits, inherently creates unease and mistrust within the NATO Alliance. The unity formed by common interests is the centre of gravity for any alliance, and is therefore a primary target for an adversary.<sup>79</sup> Allies have expressed concerns about Türkiye’s reliability and the potential for its closer ties with Moscow to be exploited by Russia to weaken NATO cohesion.<sup>80</sup> Tensions with the US have extended beyond the S-400/F-35 issue to include differing approaches to regional conflicts, particularly in Syria regarding the terrorist organization PYD/YPG, and broader concerns in Washington and some European capitals about the democratic situation in Türkiye.<sup>81</sup>

Russia, for its part, views NATO’s eastward expansion and its nuclear sharing arrangements as direct threats to its security.<sup>82</sup> Moscow considers NATO’s stationing of US nuclear weapons on the territory of non-nuclear member states. The training of these states’ pilots for nuclear missions is a violation of both the NPT and commitments made in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, which stated NATO had “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members”.<sup>83</sup> The presence of US nuclear weapons on Turkish soil thus becomes an even more sensitive issue in the context of Ankara’s multifaceted relationship

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<sup>77</sup> NATO, “Türkiye and NATO.”

<sup>78</sup> Muhammed Ali Alkış, “Why Russia May Control Turkey’s Nuclear Energy for the Next 80 Years,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, February 21, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/02/why-russia-may-control-turkeys-nuclear-energy-for-the-next-80-years/>

<sup>79</sup> Kunertova and Schmitt, “Assessing NATO’s cohesion: methods and implications.”

<sup>80</sup> NATO, “Türkiye and NATO.”

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Shannon Bugos, “Putin Orders Russian Nuclear Weapons on Higher Alert,” *Arms Control Today*, March 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-03/news/putin-orders-russian-nuclear-weapons-higher-alert>.

<sup>83</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova’s Answer to a Russian Media Question Regarding US Ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher’s Statement on the Possibility of Relocating US Nuclear Weapons Based in Germany to Poland,” [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1433196/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1433196/).

with Moscow, given that no further sharing could be done in the region.

Türkiye's decisions within the Alliance, such as its initial opposition to Sweden's accession, further show the balance it maintains between the Alliance and its national interests. Like Hungary, Türkiye had an opposition to Sweden's NATO accession as Ankara criticized Sweden's support of terrorist groups seeking asylum in Sweden, which delayed Sweden's entry into the Alliance.<sup>84</sup> This stance drew criticism from other NATO members, who saw it as a barrier to strengthening collective security, especially amid heightened tensions with Russia. However, after Sweden addressed Türkiye's concerns by amending its constitution to bolster anti-terrorism laws and taking other relevant steps, Türkiye approved Sweden's accession. This episode underscores Türkiye's readiness to leverage its NATO position to address national security priorities, while also demonstrating its capacity to realign with NATO's interests when its demands are met.<sup>85</sup>

Officially, Türkiye is a party to the NPT and has signed and ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Ankara's stated policy supports global disarmament and robust non-proliferation instruments. As a NATO member, Türkiye endorses Alliance statements that affirm the importance of nuclear deterrence and the potential use of nuclear weapons on its behalf as part of collective defence. Consistent with NATO's collective stance, Türkiye has not signed or ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and has consistently voted against UN General Assembly resolutions promoting the TPNW, aligning itself with the US and other nuclear-hosting allies.<sup>86</sup>

With concerns about potential nuclear proliferation by neighbours, especially Iran, Türkiye also considers its geographical disadvantage in its security calculations. Some Turkish military and diplomatic circles have viewed the presence of NATO nuclear weapons on Turkish soil as a credible deterrent against such regional threats.<sup>87</sup> From the Iranian perspective, the US and NATO presence in the region, including the nuclear weapons in Türkiye, are interpreted as part of a broader Western strategy that is

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<sup>84</sup> Adérito Vicente, Muhammed Ali Alkış, and Iryna Maksymenko, "The Impact of Russia's War against Ukraine on Finland and Sweden's Decision to Join NATO: Effects on the Global Nuclear Order," in *Russia's War on Ukraine: The Implications for the Global Nuclear Order*, ed. Adérito Vicente, Polina Sinovets, and Julien Theron (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, September 2023), 229–46, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32221-1\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32221-1_16)

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Alkış, *Türkiye in the New World Order: The Nuclear Debate*, 4–8.

<sup>87</sup> Kibaroglu, "Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey."

designed to contain Iranian influence.<sup>88</sup> Despite this, Iran has also acknowledged and appreciated Türkiye's role in mediating nuclear negotiations between Tehran and Washington, underscoring the complex web of regional relationships in which Türkiye's nuclear-hosting role is embedded.

## **Conclusion**

Türkiye's role in NATO's nuclear extended deterrence is undergoing a critical evolution. For decades, Ankara's contribution was defined by the active hosting of tactical nuclear weapons at Incirlik Air Base and the direct integration of its air force into nuclear strike missions. However, the exclusion from the F-35 program and the subsequent reliance on legacy platforms have created a capability gap that challenges this traditional posture. Combined with Ankara's pursuit of strategic autonomy and its transactional diplomacy with Russia, these factors introduce a layer of unpredictability that the Alliance must carefully manage to ensure cohesion on the Southern Flank.

The future of Türkiye's involvement in NATO's nuclear deterrence will likely remain characterized by a dynamic tension. Ankara will probably seek to retain the security guarantees and international status that participation in nuclear sharing requires. Its ambition for greater strategic autonomy and its willingness to engage in transactional diplomacy will continue. In return, this will require continuous and delicate management by NATO. Therefore, the Alliance must balance the need for reassurance and solidarity with clear expectations regarding commitments and interoperability. Moreover, NATO must pay greater attention to Türkiye's strategic and security needs, particularly by supporting its air force modernization and addressing regional threat perceptions, to ensure Ankara's steadfast commitment to the nuclear mission, especially given the implications of Russia's war against Ukraine for Europe.<sup>89</sup>

For NATO, Türkiye remains an indispensable but sometimes challenging ally. Ultimately, the credibility of extended deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic area does not rest solely on the host nation's kinetic capability to deliver the weapon. In the context of nuclear deterrence, symbolism often functions as

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<sup>88</sup> Utku Çakırözer, *Iran's Threat to Regional and Euro-Atlantic Security* (April 16, 2025), <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-irans-threat-regional-and-euro-atlantic-security>.

<sup>89</sup> Rebecca Lucas, "Turning Towards Turkey: Why NATO Needs to Lean into Its Relationship," *RAND Commentary*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/03/18/turning-towards-turkey-why-nato-needs-to-lean.html>.

### **Türkiye, NATO and Extended Deterrence**

substance. Even if Türkiye's role evolves from a direct delivery agent to a logistical host and conventional escort due to the F-35 exclusion, the presence of B61s at Incirlik remains fundamentally sufficient for deterrence. These weapons serve as an irremovable 'tripwire,' physically coupling US strategic assets to Turkish territory. This forces any potential adversary to calculate that a strike on Türkiye involves the risk of triggering a nuclear response, regardless of which specific airframe delivers the retaliation. Conversely, any initiative to withdraw these assets—regardless of the operational justification—would be strategically self-defeating. It would likely be perceived in Ankara as a tacit annulment of the extended deterrence guarantee, irreparably fracturing the political trust that underpins the Alliance's southeastern defence. Thus, the symbolic weight of the stockpile, combined with Türkiye's conventional escort capabilities, provides a political anchor that maintains the integrity of NATO's southern flank. Navigating this complex relationship is therefore not about restoring a past status quo, but about adapting the Alliance's nuclear architecture to a new reality where Türkiye's value is defined by its geostrategic indispensability and the powerful symbolism of its nuclear burden-sharing.