



Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

NATO Watch Media Briefing

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NATO meets under Article 4 to discuss Turkey-Syria crisis

Summary

The North Atlantic Council (NAC), the most senior political governing body of NATO, met earlier today at Turkey's request for consultations within the framework of Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. The NAC, meeting at the level of Permanent Representatives of the 28 member states, discussed the shooting down of a Turkish aircraft by Syria on Friday last week (see [NATO Watch News Brief](#), 25 June). It was only the second time in NATO's 63-year history that members have convened under Article 4 of its charter, after Turkey requested talks about the Iraq war in 2003. The article provides for consultations when a member state feels its territorial integrity, political independence or security is under threat.

Shortly after 11.30 (Brussels time), Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen came to the microphone to read out a short [statement](#) following the NAC meeting. He said that all member states considered Syria's shooting down of the Turkish aircraft as "unacceptable" and "condemn it in the strongest possible terms".

He added that NATO will continue to follow the situation closely and with great concern as the security of the Alliance is indivisible and they would stand together in solidarity. He declined to answer [journalists questions](#) in any detail about what action NATO might take or give any technical details on what the Turkish delegation reported at the meeting. He repeated several times that NATO would "remain seized of developments".

The possibility of a Turkish/Syrian war appears to be growing as a result of [escalating rhetoric](#). The initial calm response by Turkish politicians is slowly evaporating and being replaced by a harder line. It is difficult to assess whether the measured and tight-lipped diplomatic line publicly taken by NATO will reassure Ankara or encourage Turkey to go it alone. NATO is unlikely to be pushed into making an Article 5 declaration since there are too many dissenting voices within the Alliance for that to happen.

The Turkey-Syria crisis: another Cold War legacy

Syria's shooting down of a Turkish military jet on Friday is the latest incident in an escalating crisis with echoes of the Cold War: Russia supplied the Syrians with their air-defence system and the plane was a US F-4 Phantom.

Turkey is the only Middle Eastern and Muslim-majority member of NATO and it joined the alliance originally because of a mutual interest in containing the former Soviet Union. It was a vital geopolitical anchor for NATO during the Cold War because of its size, power and location. Syria is Russia's main remaining ally in the Middle East, a key weapons client and host to its base at Tartus, Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union.



[A Syrian refugee girl looks out from behind the fence at Yayladagi refugee camp in Hatay province near the Turkish-Syrian border 10 April 2012 – photo credit: Freedom House/ flickr]

The contemporary context, however, is the 16-month-old uprising against Syrian President Assad. Western powers are seeking stronger measures against Assad at the UN Security Council, but face stiff Russian and Chinese opposition. Syrian forces have been violating the 910 kilometre Turkey-Syria border regularly in pursuit of refugees from the uprising, with ground forces and artillery fire. Turkey is reported to be participating in the arming of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

At their meeting on Monday, [EU foreign ministers](#) called for full Syrian co-operation with an investigation into the latest incident. "The EU condemns the unacceptable shooting down by Syria of a Turkish military plane on 22 June. It offers its sympathies to the families of the airmen involved and commends Turkey's measured and responsible initial reaction," they said.

Syria claimed that the Turkish jet had been flying at low altitude on a route previously used by Israeli warplanes. Ankara acknowledged that the jet had flown over Syria for a short time, but said such temporary over-flights were common and had not been challenged before.

Tension between the two countries continued to rise with Turkey accusing Syria of firing on its CASA search and rescue plane that had been looking for the wreckage of the

Phantom. And [Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has threatened Syria with retaliation](#) and warned that Turkish armed forces would respond to any further Syrian encroachment on the border. "Any military element that approaches the Turkish border from Syria by posing a security risk and danger will be regarded as a threat and treated as a military target," he said.

Articles 4 and 5: precedents and implications for NATO

Turkey's decision to seek consultation under Article 4, instead of asking for military help under NATO's collective defence provisions, known as Article 5, suggested Ankara was hoping to steer clear of inflaming the conflict. Both clauses have been invoked only once previously: the Al Qaeda attack on the United States on 9/11 led to the first and only Article 5 declaration, while Article 4 was invoked nine years ago, again by Turkey, in the lead-up to the military attack on Iraq. At that time, and despite initial opposition from Germany and France, NATO's [Operation Display Deterrence](#) undertook a number of precautionary defence measures. These included the deployment of surveillance aircraft (AWACS) and PATRIOT missile defences on Turkish territory for 65 days between February and April 2003.

[NATO HQ Brussels – photo credit: NATO]

However, too much can be read into Article 5 being a greater escalatory mechanism for NATO involvement than Article 4. Both articles are the bedrock upon which the security of the alliance is based and both offer NATO allies an opportunity to consult with one another. And Article 5 does not necessarily entail a military response. [As former US Ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker has said](#), "A response under Article 5 could be anything from a statement reiterating the inviolability of security guarantees to members coordinating activities so that they can respond to further attacks on Turkish interests".

With alliance security interests being affected by risks of a wider nature than an armed attack on a member nation (the only grounds for invoking Article 5), it is also likely that Article 4 will grow into a more workable and more frequently used mutual defence mechanism. Acts of terrorism, sabotage and cyber-attacks, and the disruption of the flow of vital resources may in the future lead to consultations among the allies

under Article 4 and, where appropriate, co-ordination of their efforts including their responses to risks of this kind. Indeed, NATO's new Strategic Concept envisages the greater use of timely, broad and thorough consultations both within the alliance and with partners in order to prevent crises from escalating into armed conflict.

Some of these 'unconventional threats' may eventually reach the level of attacks invoking Article 5, but this is unlikely to be the case in the Turkish-Syrian crisis. The shooting down of the Turkish military jet does not seem to have altered the alliance's response to the broader Syrian conflict. NATO has strongly condemned the violence in Syria, but believes that a regional solution to the problem is the best way forward. Secretary General Rasmussen has repeatedly said that NATO will not become involved, not least because there is little appetite among most member states to do so. However, the latest incident may encourage broader 'unofficial' discussions among a coalition of mainly NATO and Gulf states about how to intervene in Syria outside of both the UN Security Council and NATO frameworks.

Conclusion

NATO remains eager not to get involved on the Turkish-Syrian border, for fear of getting dragged into a direct attack on Syria. It would be a mission that could quickly escalate into a gruesomely complex multi-front war involving Syria and all its sectarian groups, Iraq and the non-state of Kurdistan spanning the border, and Iran. On the other hand, NATO has to be seen to be treating an Article 4 request from Turkey with the same degree of seriousness as a request by any other member state, especially given the crisis of credibility within

NATO that followed the divided response to Turkey's previous Article 4 request in 2003. Hence, the low-key NAC statement that emerged today.

The NATO Secretary General will be among those in the international community hoping that cooler heads will prevail in Ankara and Damascus, and that a formal Article 5 request from Turkey does not land on his desk. The intervention in Afghanistan has been a very difficult experience for the alliance and it is not one that NATO would choose to replicate any time soon.



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