

Briefing Note

Dr. Bahadır Kaleağası, President of Institut du Bosphore (Paris Bosphorus Institute)

16.IX.2025

Türkiye, NATO, and the EU's SAFE Defense Mechanism: Strategic Implications

I. Context

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte recently used a meeting with EU representatives in Brussels to argue strongly for Türkiye's inclusion in the European defense mechanism SAFE (Strategic European Security and Defense Facility). His remarks underscore the rising importance of aligning EU defense initiatives with NATO priorities — and the central role of Türkiye in ensuring that alignment.

This intervention comes at a time when the EU seeks to reinforce its defense autonomy while remaining anchored in the NATO framework. It also reflects broader questions about trust, interoperability, and the management of sensitive defense-related information between the EU, NATO, and individual allies.

This debate unfolds against a deteriorating security environment. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has sharpened NATO's focus on its eastern flank, while instability across the Middle East from Syria and Iraq to Iran's regional posture and the continuing Israeli–Palestinian crisis highlights the need for a broader regional lens. At the same time, emerging domains such as cyber defense, hybrid warfare, and space security are testing Europe's resilience. Taken together, these dynamics show that any credible and comprehensive SAFE architecture will necessarily require Türkiye's active participation.

II. Türkiye's Capabilities and Strategic Value

- **Defense Industry Strength:** Türkiye has developed a robust defense industrial base (drones, naval platforms, missile systems), with significant export growth and global market penetration.
- **Operational Experience:** Türkiye is among NATO's most active members in terms of operations and military deployments, contributing across regions from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and the Middle East.
- **Geopolitical Position:** Türkiye controls access to the Black Sea via the Straits, borders key instability zones, and serves as a critical hub between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Rutte stressed that overlooking these capabilities would be a strategic blind spot for EU members, particularly at a time when the Union seeks credible defense capacities that complement NATO.

III. The Issue of Sensitive Information

A central friction point is the sharing of **defense industry standards and technical data**.

- **EU Need:** To produce systems compatible with NATO, the EU requires access to standardization documents and procedures.
- **Current Situation:** Non-classified information has been shared with the EU, provoking a sharp reaction from Türkiye.

- **Türkiye's Position:** For classified information, NATO requires unanimous approval from its 32 members. Türkiye has consistently withheld consent, citing political mistrust and exclusion from EU structures.

Rutte suggested that including Türkiye in SAFE could incentivize Ankara to lift its objections, thereby unlocking smoother EU–NATO technical cooperation.

IV. Strategic Calculus

Rutte's remarks reflect a **strategic bargain**:

- **For the EU:** Incorporating Türkiye into SAFE strengthens interoperability, operational reach, and credibility in defense ambitions.
- **For NATO:** It ensures that the EU's defense integration does not bypass NATO but instead reinforces transatlantic cooperation.
- **For Türkiye:** Participation in SAFE would signal goodwill, counter exclusion perceptions, and enhance its role in European defense governance.
- **For the USA:** Türkiye's integration into SAFE would significantly ease Washington's concerns about an EU–NATO decoupling, reinforcing the transatlantic framework and strengthening burden sharing, while long-standing issues such as Ankara's purchase of the S-400 system, diverging approaches in Syria, and CAATSA-related frictions would remain on the agenda for continued diplomatic engagement.

V. Risks and Challenges

1. Political Resistance in EU Capitals

- Some EU members may resist Türkiye's inclusion due to bilateral disputes (e.g., Cyprus, Eastern Mediterranean tensions, rule-of-law concerns).
- *Risk:* EU divisions could deepen, undermining both SAFE and NATO cohesion.

2. Information Security Concerns

- EU reluctance to extend access to sensitive information to Türkiye may persist, even with SAFE participation.
- *Risk:* A continued stalemate could lead to incomplete interoperability.

3. Türkiye's Bargaining Leverage

- Ankara could use SAFE membership as leverage in wider EU–Türkiye negotiations (Customs Union modernization, visa liberalization, energy cooperation).
- *Risk:* Transactional dynamics may complicate trust-building.

VI. Opportunities

1. Enhanced NATO–EU Burden Sharing

- A cooperative solution would reduce duplication, increase cost-efficiency, and strengthen collective defense across both organizations.

2. Improved Transatlantic Relations

- Anchoring Türkiye in a European defense initiative would signal EU alignment with NATO priorities, easing US concerns about EU “strategic autonomy.”

3. Regional Stability and Resilience

- Türkiye’s inclusion would expand SAFE’s geographic reach - particularly in the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Middle East — where EU presence is otherwise limited.
- This would also support the EU’s transformative influence on Türkiye’s urgently needed structural reforms: judiciary independence, education, public procurement, financial systems and labor markets.

4. Business, Investment, and Technology Cooperation

- **Defense Industry Partnerships:** Joint ventures between European and Turkish firms in aerospace, UAVs, naval defense, cyber defense, and AI-driven military technologies.
- **Dual-Use Technologies:** Opportunities for co-investment in space, communications, AI, and quantum technologies with civilian applications.
- **Supply Chain Resilience:** Integration of Türkiye’s manufacturing base into European and American defense supply chains, reducing overdependence on Asia.
- **Capital Flows & FDI:** SAFE cooperation could attract transatlantic investment into Türkiye’s defense and technology sectors, stimulating growth while deepening EU–Türkiye commercial ties.
- **Energy Security & Infrastructure:** SAFE-linked cooperation could extend into energy corridors, pipelines, and strategic infrastructure — areas where Türkiye already plays a hub role.
- **Alignment with EU’s European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS):** Türkiye’s advanced drone and naval industries could complement EU efforts if barriers to cooperation are opened.

VII. Scenarios

Scenario A: Türkiye Excluded

- EU continues to build SAFE without Türkiye.
- Türkiye blocks NATO–EU information sharing, reinforcing mistrust.
- *Risk:* Duplication and fragmentation grow; NATO cohesion is weakened.

Scenario B: Türkiye Included under a Conditional Framework

- EU agrees to limited or phased Turkish participation.
- Ankara reciprocates by easing objections on information sharing.
- *Result:* Trust is slowly rebuilt, though political tensions remain.

Scenario C: Comprehensive Integration

- Türkiye is fully integrated into SAFE, including governance mechanisms.

- EU and NATO interoperability is strengthened significantly.
- *Result:* Broader EU–Türkiye relations (Customs Union, visa liberalization, business flows) are positively impacted.

VIII. Conclusion

Rutte’s intervention positions Türkiye not as a peripheral issue, but as a central test of EU–NATO alignment. The strategic logic is clear: without Türkiye, European defense efforts risk being incomplete, fragmented, and politically fragile. With Türkiye, SAFE could become a platform for deeper transatlantic cooperation, improved burden sharing, stronger business partnerships, and greater resilience in Europe’s contested neighborhood. Ultimately, EU capitals must weigh short-term political discomfort against long-term strategic necessity and economic opportunity.