Turkey's Security Challenges and NATO

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Turkey and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have had an enduring relationship since Ankara joined the Alliance in 1952. While the security challenges for both Turkey and NATO have profoundly changed over time, Turkey's role within the Alliance and how Turkey perceives the benefits of being a member of NATO in terms of its own national security have also gone through changes.

If one were to look at this continuous relationship in three phases, the first phase would constitute a period of dominant collective defense for both Turkey and NATO. The second would be an increased emphasis on collective security, mutually shared by Turkey and NATO, and the third phase would be Turkey's engagement as a strategic partner for NATO in regional crisis management.

Since this year is the sixtieth anniversary of Turkey's entry into NATO, it might be an opportune time to look back to 1952. Much has been forgotten about the circumstances that led to the Truman Doctrine and subsequently to NATO's first enlargement in 1952. Yes, there was a tangible threat in the form of the Soviet Union. The late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of great transition with old power balances erased after the Second World War and new realities emerging with rising superpowers and their global agendas. But, it was also a time of great vision—a vision that foresaw the gradual building of a liberal international order through the power of international institutions and the norms and values that were embedded in them. Therefore, bringing Turkey into the fold of a newly emergent transatlantic security community was not just the result of a shared perception of a common threat—a necessity of the moment—but it was also a wider acquiescence to an international normative order.

This is because NATO has been but one aspect, albeit a central one, of a wider Western grand strategy. Formulated at the end of the Second World War, this grand strategy rested on the establishment and maintenance of a world order based on the Wilsonian principles of peace and stability, democratic governance, and free market economies. This, in turn, depended on two things: the rehabilitation of Europe and the containment of the Soviet Union, which existentially opposed the ideas behind this new world order. The establishment of postwar institutions, from the Bretton Woods system to NATO and the European communities, formed the skeletal framework for operationalizing this vision. Thus, the security community has always been more than NATO.

Since Turkey's relationship with NATO has endured for sixty years, we can argue that Turkey's entry into the Alliance was not merely a necessity of the moment. But if we say that Turkey joined NATO because it fits in with a wider set of Western norms embedded in this liberal international order, we are presented with a puzzle. It is also possible to argue that some of the essential norms of this community such as democratic governance, free markets, and human rights were not consistently adhered to by many of its member states, including Turkey. One way of explaining this dilemma

is to see these norms as being loosely defined under a "Western" identity. Because these member states firmly belonged to a geographically and ideologically defined "Western bloc," their place and identity within the transatlantic security community were unquestionably solid.

From the point of view of the Alliance, and particularly the United States, Turkey was initially considered a strategic asset in the Middle East rather than Europe. This corresponds to the early Cold War period and the signing of the Bagdad Pact, the unification of the strategically defined "Northern Tier" countries, and the overall objective of countering Soviet designs in the Middle East. Therefore Turkey's position as a "functional" asset for transatlantic security predates its entry into NATO. Once Turkey joined NATO, it became not just an important asset in the defense of the Middle East but also an essential component of the defense of Western Europe. In this sense, Turkey's geostrategic location, its armed forces, and its position as a flank country were indispensable assets in the Alliance's attempts to address the military imbalance in Europe in the face of the Soviet threat.

After the fall of the shah in Iran in 1979, and once again particularly for U.S. policy planners, Turkey's strategic role in the Middle East grew in prominence. Throughout this period, for NATO Turkey was a "functional ally"—one that had a crucial geostrategic location and a powerful, large army. Normatively, Turkey was not one of the drivers of the broader Western grand strategy of a liberal world order.

We can argue that the functional nature of this relationship continued into the early post–Cold War period when NATO shifted its emphasis from collective defense to collective security. Turkey's regional prominence grew, with Turkey transformed in strategic importance for the West from being a flank country to a frontline country during the first Gulf War in 1991. But it was still not a driver of regional grand strategy. Its newfound strategic importance after 1991 was still perceived within the Alliance as an "asset," albeit a different one with perhaps a more significant role to play. Turkey was still the "functional" ally despite the fact that it was one of the most significant contributors to the Alliance's out-of-area operations throughout the 1990s.

Since the September 11 attacks, the Alliance has been in a state of perpetual flux, vacillating between trying to find a new grand strategy—a new normative reason to exist—and grappling with the inadequacy of its capabilities to meet new security challenges. In fact, the latter has dominated the NATO agenda since the Prague summit of 2002. It now takes the form of the ever-talked-about Smart Defense Initiative. While NATO focused on the "capability gap" during this time, it also found itself in Afghanistan embroiled in a mixture of 1990s-style, out-of-area collective-security "state building" intervention as part of a new kind of collective defense—albeit one without borders. This was to set the stage for NATO's new dilemma: executing "benign" interventions to put things right in places where "bad" governance led to regional instability and human rights abuses, alongside the necessity to protect Alliance members under Article 5. Except this time, Article 5 was not relegated to in-area defense alone but was directed wherever situations emerged that could threaten alliance security.

This was a new, borderless collective defense. However, throughout this process, Turkey continued to contribute to Alliance operations, not necessarily playing a combat role but continuing its peace-building roles from the 1990s. In this sense, Turkey's contribution to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, where it took on the command of the mission more than once, has been quite significant. Meanwhile, Turkey continued to contribute to the ongoing missions—the Kosovo Force (KFOR), the Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR), and its follow-on mission led by the European Union (EU), EUFOR Althea.

It is remarkable that despite this rather active role on the operational side of the Alliance, Turkey was still relegated to the sidelines in wider strategic thinking. This had something to do with the fact that the Alliance was also very unsure about its own direction in grand strategy and its normative role in a changing world with new threats. It was no longer enough to defend the Alliance's "values" through peace-building operations that did not directly constitute threats to its members, NATO members had to directly engage not-so-tangible threats of a new nature as well. There was also the problem of Alliance cohesion, particularly after the transatlantic fallout over the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003. Surprisingly enough, as the diplomatic battles raged between the United States and some of its allies on the one

hand and others led by France and Germany on the other hand, Turkey's crucial role at this juncture of renegotiating transatlantic relations was overlooked.

Apart from this, Turkey's own internal transformation affected its prioritization of its own security priorities. It was now a different country from the inward-looking state of the 1990s, when many of its security debates focused on Islamic fundamentalism and Kurdish separatism and Turkey's relations with the West foundered on the stalled European Community accession process. From 2002 onwards, Turkey started to play a more regionally assertive role, as a more confident and positive EU accession process emerged and as internal security challenges were reprioritized within the context of regional shifts of power. Yet this transformation was also lost on Turkey's European sllies and the United States, which had been preoccupied with NATO enlargement, dealing with a shortage in capabilities to counter new threats, and the transatlantic crisis caused by Iraq in 2003.

Yet ironically, it was during that crisis that Turkey played a crucial role that went entirely unnoticed in the wider transatlantic debate that was to ensue. Turkey's position in the crisis affected two crucial developments: first, the Turkish parliament's refusal to allow U.S. troops to cross into northern Iraq over Turkish territory, thus preventing the opening of a second front in the war; and second, the internal crisis in the Alliance caused by the initial refusal of three European allies to support the deployment of the Allied Mobile Force as a preventative measure in Turkey before the war with Iraq commenced. If we look at the debate that followed on both sides of the Atlantic over the Iraq war, Washington only saw Turkey as the "surprising" ally who refused to help, and the debate in Europe completely dismissed Turkey's role in transatlantic relations, instead focusing on power politics between the European big-three countries and the United States. Therefore, it would be safe to say that up until around 2007, Turkey's role in transatlantic relations was relegated to the margins by its Western allies.

The 2007 crisis between Turkey and its allies. when the U.S. deferment of Turkey's request for support in dealing with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) threat in northern Iraq reached a climax, was a turning point. After the escalation of attacks by the PKK against Turkish armed forces, the Turkish parliament passed a resolution authorizing a major military incursion into northern Iraq to eradicate the PKK problem at its roots. What was new about this particular crisis was that it forced the issue of reevaluating Turkey's strategic partnership with its Western allies. It shifted the U.S. position, which it had maintained since 2003, of "damage limitation" in its relations with Turkey to a more proactive concern for Turkey's security interests in the region. It also indicated that Ankara's hard power still influenced shifting Western perceptions of Turkey.

From 2009 onwards, a new phase of Turkey's transatlantic relationship began to take shape. Ankara left behind its functional-ally status of the Cold War and the 1990s as well as the ambiguous position it had occupied in transatlantic relations since 2001, and emerged as a much more regionally assertive power with regional influence. This new phase is characterized by Turkey's soft power in the region. It has undergone a remarkable transformation from essentially a functional ally reliant on its hard power for much of the Cold War and early post–Cold War era to a strategic partner that is more reliant on its soft power. Ironically, this has come about at a time when NATO's regional influence has become more functional, as the Alliance is expected to take on a much more technocratic role in concert with other actors in the region, in contrast to NATO's leading role as a normative organization with hard power in Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the western Balkans in the 1990s. Yet, while Turkey added to its list of crucial contributions to NATO operations with its role in Operation Unified Protector in Libya, it has also stepped into a leading role in shaping the evolving transatlantic grand strategy in the region. It is almost as if Turkey and NATO had a role reversal.

NATO has to adjust to a more assertive Turkey within the Alliance and there may be divergences in security prioritization between Turkey and its NATO allies somewhere down the road. This is likely to happen as Turkey becomes a much more indispensable strategic partner in the Middle East, not just for NATO but also for the EU. That may lead to a more sustained and constructive partnership in shaping the future of the region—or it could crack open fault lines of disagreement.

To some extent, this was already observed in the difficulties surrounding the agreement for Turkey to host the radar component of the NATO missile defense system. Turkey was initially reluctant to host the radar, therefore on one level it resisted its old functional role. But Ankara had a long-term strategic interest in being involved in the European Phased

Adaptive Approach (EPAA) in part for the development of its own missile defense system in the future. In the long run, the EPAA opens up issues with regard to threat perceptions in the Alliance. It is unclear how the development of the EPAA will affect Turkey's regional relations, especially with Iran.

However, much of the widening gap in threat perceptions over regional nuclear deterrence depends on how one views classical deterrence theory. Turkey has insisted that the missile defense system is directed against generic threats and has expressly avoided naming specific names. If a country strictly adheres to classical deterrence theory, it would see the function of a missile shield as part and parcel of a political signal to deter a first strike. In this case, the naming of the threat becomes important. However, despite naming Iran as the immediate regional threat in the short run, the United States for example tends to view the missile defense system as a "usable" deployment to be employed against any threat that emerges. In this context, the Turkish and U.S. views are much more closely aligned than anticipated. Therefore in the short run, the EPAA could bring about a convergence between some NATO allies. Yet, in the long run, from Ankara's perspective, the stipulations of full coverage of Turkey's territory and Alliance solidarity—that is, Turkey's insistence on fair risk and burden sharing among all NATO allies regarding the EPAA—indicates that any divergence from these agreed principles will also lead to Turkey's reevaluation of its position in EPAA.

As both NATO and Turkey are finding each other useful for new reasons in the region, Turkey has also recently found NATO to be a useful diplomatic tool for regional military engagement. Turkey's interest in the EPAA also stems from this. When the Obama administration announced the EPAA, Turkey had an interest in integrating this U.S. plan for a global missile defense system with ongoing NATO missile defense plans. For Turkey, presenting transatlantic missile defense as a NATO rather than as a U.S. plan, which had previously been proposed by the Bush administration, seemed to be a more acceptable choice, especially in terms of presenting the plan to Russia, a key energy partner for Turkey. Although discussions of potential Russian cooperation with the NATO missile defense system seemed to make some headway after the Lisbon summit, Russia's insistence on legal and technical guarantees and the U.S. refusal to accommodate these stipulations has led to a cooling of relations over Russian-NATO cooperation on missile defense.

A breakdown of relations with Russia over this issue in the future could impact Turkey's position within the EPAA. In a recently published article, the Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, advocates a new wave of military expenditure, involving a substantial upgrade of Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal with the capability to launch a second strike, as a specific asymmetric response to the U.S. global missile defense shield and its European component in particular, the EPAA. Any shift of this kind in Russian power and security prioritization will undoubtedly have an effect on Turkey's relations with the Alliance and the future of the EPAA.

A return to Cold War nuclear deterrence posturing and a new strategic nuclear arms race are not out of the realm of possibility, but the real danger is that today the international environment is far less stable, the players are far too many, and regional power plays have different connotations for global power management than during the Cold War. In fact, the British foreign minister, William Hague, recently warned that if Iran should acquire a nuclear weapons capability, it would lead to a new Cold War in the Middle East with many more players also acquiring nuclear weapons—Saudi Arabia among the forerunners in proliferation scenarios. This is profoundly different from the Cold War. Turkey's security preferences today would not be relegated to collective defense in a bipolar global order. There would be far more regional players involved and Turkey would be one of them.

However, in the foreseeable future Turkey may see NATO as a useful multilateral tool in the region. This was evident in Turkey's insistence on putting NATO in control of the Libyan intervention. While officially Turkey was initially reluctant to support any intervention in Libya, once France and the United Kingdom, with U.S. support, started to launch an aerial campaign using NATO assets, Turkey decided lobby for bringing the whole operation under the control of NATO. It was only after political control of the operation came under the North Atlantic Council that Turkey became an active participant in Operation Unified Protector, though it did not play a direct aerial combat role. Having NATO take the lead in operations rather than letting ad hoc coalitions or U.S.–led initiatives roam in the region seems to be a Turkish desire that is likely to endure.

While it would seem that Turkey and NATO will have more of a working relationship in terms of regional management, when looking at some of NATO's more strategic global priorities in the future, Turkey's and NATO's positions may diverge. Strategically NATO had two global priorities for the near future: deterrence and partnerships. However, on a regional level it is engaged more as functional, technocratic organization that takes on roles in security-sector reform, training and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.

Globally, the Alliance's projections are long term. By NATO's count, 30 countries around the world are presently developing a missile capability. Not all 30, even if they were to acquire the capability, will become a threat to the Alliance, but these are indeed very long-term threat perceptions nonetheless. In the near term, Turkey is much more focused on immediate regional issues, such as stability in Syria, the Middle East peace process, the Iranian nuclear issue, Palestinian statehood, postconflict reconstruction Libya, and the PKK presence in northern Iraq. For now, emerging missile threats are not at the top of the security agenda for Turkey.

NATO's prioritization of global partnerships may be another point on which Turkey's and Ankara's interests diverge. Turkey is now forging regional and wider partnerships on its own terms with the Arab world, Russia, China, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. NATO's outreach to "like-minded democracies," for example NATO's global outreach to Australia or Japan, is less likely to be attractive for Turkey. Turkey and the Alliance differ on whether to shift from "normative" values as the main indicator of whom to work with to strategic management of regional interests. NATO is still in the first category, prioritizing global outreach normatively. Turkey is far more interested in the strategic management of regional interests in the Arab world, in the wider region, and with Russia. NATO and Turkish interests are more likely to converge on the preservation of stability of the global commons: air, sea, space, and cyberspace.

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