

Turkey and NATO in Retrospect: Hard to Classify as a “Win-Win” Relationship

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Mustafa KİBAROĞLU

Prof., BİLGESAM President, Dean of MEF University



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Most of the allied countries, and the United States in particular, have long seen Turkey as their “staunch ally” thanks to its significant contributions to the security and defense of the West against the threats posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold war era.

Yet, there have been tough times as well in this relationship, especially when Turkey and Greece have been at odds with each other over a host of issues, either in Cyprus or in the Aegean that brought the two NATO allies to the brink of hot confrontation.

There were also heavy criticisms towards Turkey, time and again, from the leading members of the Alliance, such as the one that surfaced prior to and during the Lisbon Summit in November 2010 where the “Missile Shield” was a key issue on the agenda and Turkey was (wrongly) blamed for obstructing the implementation of the project, which was not the case, at all.

Despite ups and downs in the alliance relations, neither Turks, nor their Western allies have felt the need to call Turkey’s membership into question until recently.

The tide seems to have turned several years ago, especially when Turkey sought cooperation and collaboration with China over the procurement of air defense systems, after a series of failed attempts to do so from its Western allies.

The situation has further deteriorated with the signing of the contract between Turkey and Russia over the sale of an elaborate air defense system, namely the S-400s.

This controversy between Turkey and the allied countries had ramifications as well as repercussions, particularly, in the public domains of both sides.

Voices have been heard, for instance, among the Turks, questioning NATO’s added value to Turkey’s security and defense, as well as among the Westerners, suggesting taking a tougher stance against Turkey so as to punish its initiatives to collaborate with the rivals of the Alliance like China and Russia.

But, the tone of criticism towards each other reached its peak in the aftermath of the coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016 by a group of military officers who have long been embedded in the Turkish Armed Forces, but who were inde-

ed devoted members of a cult, now labeled as the “Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü (FETÖ)”.

Because, the coup plotters used, among others, the refueling aircraft that belonged to the Turkish Air Force, but allocated to NATO operations over the Syrian airspace and thus stationed at the Incirlik base, operated largely by the US military.

This incident gave way to endless and relentless accusations among the Turks, of all walks of life and all ranks, towards NATO of being complicit with the coup plotters in order to topple the democratically elected government in Turkey.

Hence, the value of NATO as an organization that was supposed to enhance Turkey’s security as well as to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity has lost almost all of its currency among Turkish citizens.

Interestingly, the very same incident has also become the source of serious concerns among a number of “security experts” in the West who frequently argued that the tactical nuclear weapons, which belong to the United States, but stationed at the Incirlik base, were not anymore safe and that they should be withdrawn from Turkey immediately.

Some have even gone farther away to argue that the Turkish government would seize these nuclear weapons and use against the US and/or its partner countries, such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies in the Middle East.

These security “analysts” argued that Turkey would no more deserve the positive security assurances provided by its NATO allies and that it should be “kicked out” of the Alliance at an early date.

The Brussels Summit of the Alliance to be convened on July 11-12, 2018, on the days this article is being finalized, will hopefully not feature such groundless accusations or meaningless arguments on its agenda.

But, outside this official sphere, some “experts” on NATO issues will most likely continue to propagate their “analyses” and their conclusions as to how Turkey has become a security burden for the West and why the members of the Alliance should alienate it.

Amid such debates, both inside and outside of the country, as to whether Turkey should continue to be a NATO ally, this article will discuss, in Part I, how, indeed, Turkey’s membership in the Alliance has created major obstructions in its fight against





NATO Leaders Summit, Brussels 2018

terrorism for decades since the late 1970s and, in Part II, how Turkish governments have found their own solutions, in one way or another, by seizing the opportunities that emerged out of the conjunctural changes taking place in the world, without tangible support coming from their allies.

Part I - Limitations Caused by Turkey's NATO Membership in its Fight Against PKK Terrorism

The most important challenge that Turkey had to deal with, during the 1980s and the most part of the 1990s, was rather the wide-ranging support that was given to the PKK primarily by Turkey's immediate neighbors to its south, namely Syria, Iraq, and also Iran, to some extent.

From the early 1980s until the mid-1990s, Turkey's counterterrorism efforts were significantly undermined because of the limitations that Turkey faced in deterring the countries that have supported the PKK.

These limitations, however, were not necessarily emanating from Turkey's weaknesses politically or economically, or lack of military capabilities.

Limitations caused by NATO's Strategies on Turkey's Force Posture

Turkey's inability to deter its southern neighbors from providing shelter and all sorts of logistical support to the PKK was mainly stemming from its responsibilities within the North Atlantic Alliance.

This may, at first, sound as a highly controversial statement, and one may ask "how in the world NATO membership would negatively affect the ability Turkey, being a 'staunch ally' and doing its

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utmost to contribute to the defense of the North Atlantic Alliance, to effectively fight against PKK terrorism?”

For this to be properly understood, one must explain how Turkey's role in the Alliance strategies undermined, unintentionally though, its capacity to deter its southern neighbors who supported the PKK for many years, due to the deep divergences of opinion, between Turkey and the NATO allies, as to how to deal with the PKK terrorism.

Starting from the mid-1980s, in addition to the Armenian terrorist organization ASALA, which was responsible for the assassination of more than 30 Turkish diplomats, Syria has supported the PKK terrorist organization that waged irregular warfare against the Turkish security forces with the objective of separating the southeastern parts of the country, which is heavily populated with the Kurdish citizens of Turkey.

The head of the PKK, namely Abdullah Öcalan, was able to run his terror organization from his apartment in Damascus, Syria's capital city.

Despite its Kurdish separatist rhetoric, the PKK specifically targeted Kurdish villagers who have not supported their separatist claims and killed civilians, including women and children.

At the beginning, Turkey was caught unprepared to effectively counter such attacks. The security forces had to be reorganized, restructured, and redeployed so as to develop a military capability commensurate with the dimensions of the threat posed by the PKK to the security of the citizens and the unity of the nation.

By the time the PKK emerged as a major security problem for Turkey, the primary concern of the Turkish military was the threat perceived from the Soviet Union. Hence, the task of conducting counterterrorist operations was left to the Gendarmerie and the Police until after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

PKK's attacks on the villages and the fighting between the security units and the PKK terrorists claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people on both si-

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The Turkish General Staff took over the responsibility to conduct the counterterrorism campaign since 1994 and brought to an end with the capture of Öcalan in February 1999. Getting this result, however, was not easy and brought Turkey and Syria to the brink of war.

Difficulties in Detering Syria from Supporting the PKK

Turkey had warned Syria, time and again, on its support to the PKK (and to the Armenian terrorist organization ASALA, previously). Nevertheless, the Syrian authorities, throughout the 1980s and also 1990s, have taken none of Turkey's warnings seriously.

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Hence, Turkey was not able to push the Syrian leadership toward cooperation any further partly because of the lack of enough military capability along the Syrian border that could be put behind the political stance toward Syria.

This was also partly due to the warnings of especially the European members of NATO advising Turkey to stay away from getting involved in any conflict with its Middle Eastern neighbors, due to their fear of escalation to a conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact because of the close links of the Soviet Union and Syria.

To put it simply, NATO member Turkey could not deter Syria from supporting the PKK because of its responsibilities arising from being a NATO member! Sounds strange! But, let's see why and how that was the case:

Prof. Dr. Ali Karaosmanoğlu from Bilkent University used to say that when Turkey joined NATO, the parties tacitly agreed that Turkey would help contain



Operation Olive Branch

the Soviet Union. Should deterrence have failed, Turkey would have made its facilities available to NATO and would have distracted as many Soviet forces as possible from a campaign in Central Europe.

In other words, Turkey risked its own devastation and invasion as a NATO ally by sitting in the immediate neighborhood of the Soviet Union simply because the military thinking of the Alliance focused on the central front as the main area of Soviet-Warsaw Pact threat, putting an overwhelming emphasis on the contingency of a massive attack through Germany into Western Europe. NATO's strategic calculations developed around this priority, and Turkey's contribution was considered in function of such a contingency.

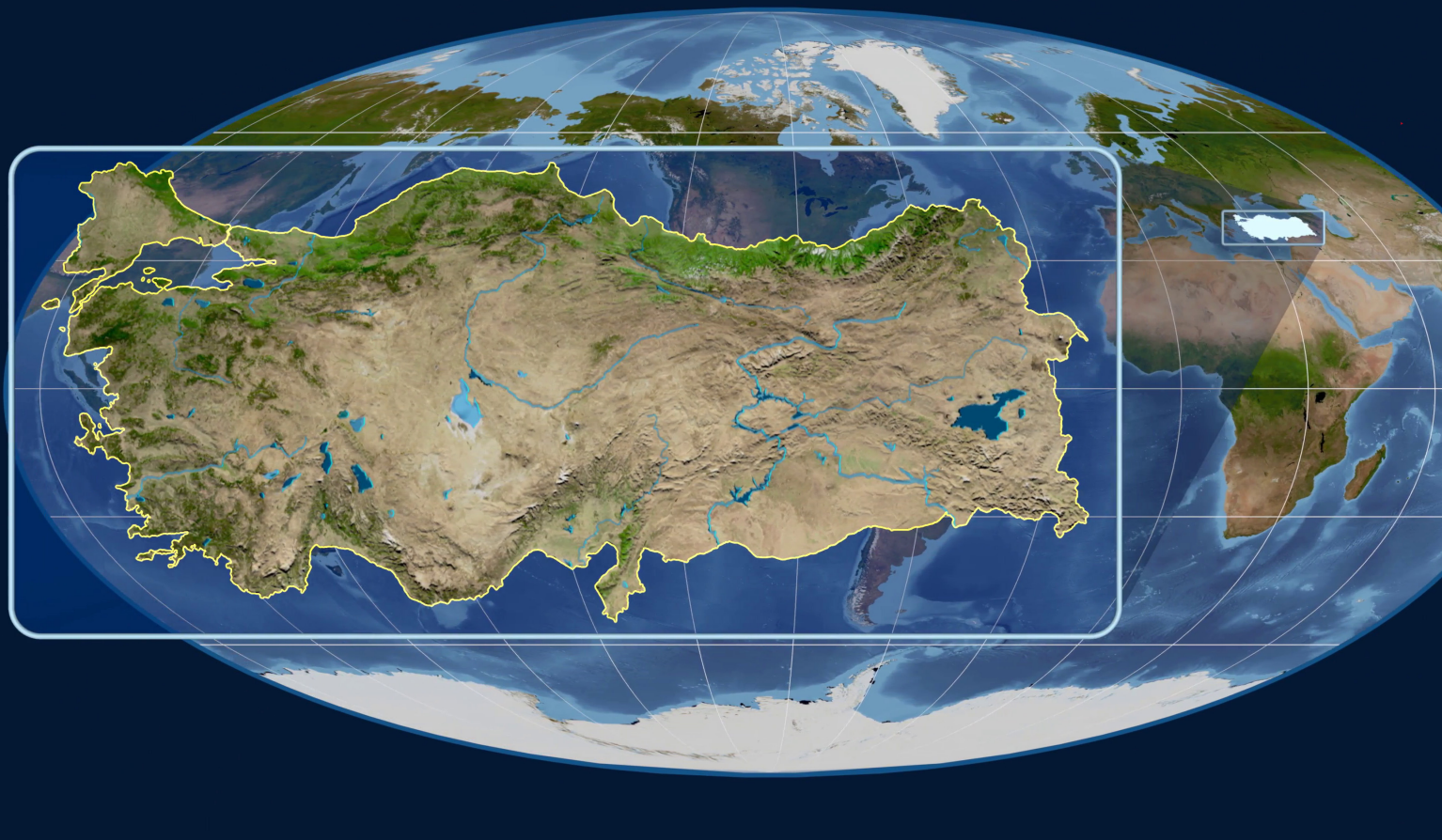
Turkish Army, largest in NATO after the United States, tied down around 25-30 Warsaw Pact divisions on the Soviet and the Bulgarian borders. Due to the fact that the Soviet Red Army had to deploy a sizeable portion of its capabilities in the Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani Soviet Republics neighboring Turkey's eastern provinces, its ability to launch a powerful assault on the Western European nations had diminished significantly.

On the contrary, the ability of the Soviet Union to invade large segments of the Turkish territory from the east had grown considerably. Moreover, the Soviet Army across the border needed only a few days to get ready in order to launch a surprise attack on Turkey.

Now let's see how Turkey's NATO membership had serious implications for its relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors.

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Middle East as NATO's "Out-of-Area"

Since the early days of the creation of the Republic in 1923, Turkish political and security elite saw the Middle East as a zone of intricacies that must be stayed away from interfering with local political and military affairs. This has been one of the unwritten rules of Turkish foreign policy for most of the twentieth century.

Turkey's membership in NATO has further consolidated the policy of staying aloof from Middle Eastern politics. The impact of NATO was mainly due to the limitations in its primary area of responsibility, which had originally excluded the Middle East.

In the eyes of the most Western European members of NATO, the Middle East has long been considered to be out of the area of their responsibility to defend against the Soviet encroachment, with the exception of some limited planning covering the oil-rich Gulf region.

There were a number of reasons for considering the Middle East as "out-

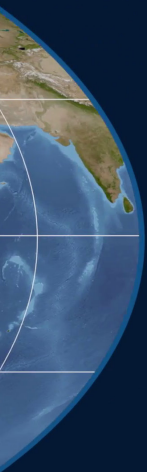
Another reason why Turkey's membership in NATO has further consolidated Turkish policy to remain aloof from the region was Turkey's force posture, which heavily depended on the threat perceived from the Soviet Union on the northeastern frontier and Bulgaria on the northwestern frontier.

of-area." First and foremost, the North Atlantic Alliance was formed, in the first place, against the threats posed by the Soviet Union to the Western European nations, even if it was not explicitly stated in the text of the Treaty.

Hence, anything that would increase the threat level perceived from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact would be unacceptable to especially the Western European members of NATO.

In this respect, Turkey's relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors, particularly Syria and Iraq, both of which were close friends of the Soviet Union, would carry the risk of involvement of the Soviets in any conflict between them and Turkey.

Turkey's relations with Syria and Iraq were not good, not only because of their support to the PKK but also because of the deep divergences of opinions regarding, for instance, the ways and means of using of the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers that are originating from Turkey and flowing through the Syrian and Iraqi territories all the way down to the Gulf.



Considering the role of the military power in backing political decisions, number one rule of effective deterrence, Turkey's ability to deter its neighbors from advancing their policies, such as supporting terrorism that were damaging Turkish national interests was limited because of the limited military capabilities, which couldn't be allocated to contingencies that would involve its Middle Eastern neighbors.

Moreover, Turkey and Syria have also disagreed over the status of Hatay district of Turkey, which was annexed to Turkey in 1939 after a period of French occupation when Syria was governed under the French mandate following the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1920.

Hence, if Turkey entered in a conflict with Syria and/or Iraq because of such contentious issues, and if NATO had to honor its Article 5 commitment and involved in the conflict on the side of Turkey, the Soviet Union would most likely side with its Middle Eastern allies Syria and Iraq.

Such eventualities would run the risk of escalation of a bilateral local conflict to one between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and also possibly to a superpower confrontation that might even lead to a nuclear exchange.

No members of NATO would, therefore, like a conflict between Turkey and Syria or Iraq to break out that could pave the way to an East-West confrontation.

With these in mind, Turkey was advised (informally though) by its NATO allies not to act in such a way that would cause a confrontation with Middle Eastern neighbors and to keep the profile of its relations low with the regional states.

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The bulk of Turkey's military capabilities were allocated to the contingencies involving a Soviet offensive on Turkey's eastern provinces, possibly with a concomitant attack of Bulgaria from the Thrace region.

As such, Turkey was left with hardly any meaningful military capability, especially the land forces that could be deployed along its southern and southeastern frontiers neighboring Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

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To be continued ...■

