

Aftermath of a Potential Break Up: Turkey-NATO

Since early 2016, there has been an overt and unusual rapprochement between Turkey and Russia, while Turkey's relation with NATO allies have been worsening. High over the zig-zags of Turkish daily politics, it is hard to miss the emergence of a policy line favoring Russia over NATO partners.

Turkey-Russia rapprochement accelerated after 15 July 2016 "coup attempt". Turkey blamed NATO and US with masterminding the attempt and started a massive purge which included NATO-aligned officers. Turkey reversed its position on Russian involvement in Syria such that by January 2017, the two air forces were conducting combined air operations over Syria. A most controversial step came with Turkey's decision to procure S-400 Long Range Air and Missile Defense system from Russia. The event constituted the first major weapon system acquisition from Russia by a NATO member¹. The S-400 decision highlighted the sharp contrast in Turkish warming stance towards Russia, for less than a year ago, Turkey had called for NATO to support air defense² in the southern borders after shooting down a Russian jet at the Syrian border. NATO is facing a Turkey problem. Beneath the temperate discussions of S-400 incompatibility with NATO systems, lies the fear of a trojan horse and a question of loyalty. A new possibility is emerging: Turkey-NATO relations can worsen and eventually break through gradual distancing or a shock. At a time where NATO-Russia relations have lost the post-cold war euphoria and Russia started to reassert influence in its periphery, question arises: If Turkey leaves NATO, what would be the implications for the alliance?

Understanding Turkey's role in NATO since its acceptance in 1952 helps clarify potential implications of Turkish policy shift. Throughout Cold War, Turkey acted as a "bulwark"³ against Soviet reach to the Mediterranean. The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits controlled access into Black Sea and Turkish bases proved essential in blocking such access. Turkey also hosted nuclear weapons, served as a logistic hub and was a potential strong point from which to mount air attacks against an invading Soviet Army moving east to west across Europe. The bases have also been important to actions taken in the First Gulf War, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and ongoing Anti-ISIS coalition campaign⁴.

¹ A number of current NATO members use legacy Russian system which were acquired before they joined NATO. Greek use of Cypriot S-300 was a compromise between Turkey and Greece after the S-300 crisis in 1997

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-nato-exclusive/exclusive-nato-agrees-turkey-air-defense-package-seeks-predictability-idUSKBN0U123520151218>

³ *"From the NATO perspective, ... Your geo-strategic position in the East-West context; your role as a bulwark in a region of dangerous upheaval; your massive land army in the front-line defense of the West; the role of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles in any major conflict-all these have a continuing relevance and importance in Alliance thinking today"* "Turkey and NATO" - Speech By The Sec Gen of NATO The Rt. Hon. The Lord Carrington at the University of Istanbul, 17/11/1987, <http://archives.nato.int/turkey-and-nato-speech-by-sec-gen-of-nato-rt-hon-lord-carrington-at-university-of-istanbul>

⁴ NATO, Operations and missions: past and present, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm#, 04/08/2018

Besides, geostrategic advantages, Turkey actively supported many other NATO operations. Former SACEUR⁵ Stavridis expressed that, Turkey had been present “in virtually every NATO operation with significant impact”, listing a range of missions conducted from Balkans to Afghanistan to Gulf of Aden. Turkey also contributes 4% of the NATO budget⁶, spends 1,5% of its GDP on defense, and continues to hold one of the largest armed forces in NATO, albeit severely degraded due to ongoing purges.

Turkey-NATO breakup would have immediate effect in the Syrian civil war and migrant crisis. NATO is playing roles in both security challenges. Turkey is hosting more than 3 million Syrian refugees and hasn't shied away from using them as a political blackmail against Europe⁷. Furthermore, internal stability of Turkey might be at peril due to tensions between the regime supporters and the secularists. In that case, Europe could be looking at a migrant crisis far worse than Syria.

However, more consequential effects for NATO will be in the new geopolitical landscape. NATO's new borders will shift 1600km to west with decreased access to Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean and most problematic regions of the Middle East. NATO capability to deal with the security challenges from Middle East will decrease significantly without Turkey's geographic proximity. Russia will have an influence in a colossal region extending from Black Sea all the way to southern borders of Syria including Eastern Mediterranean. In sum, the situation will take a grave turn if Turkey succumbs to the “Eurasian”⁸ politics and follows a Russian-Iranian policy line⁹.

The Turkish straits are the only waterway to access Black Sea. Turkey governs the access per Montreux Convention which grants Turkey complete discretion if it considers itself threatened with “Imminent Danger of War”¹⁰. The League of Nations was designated to oversee Turkish implementation,¹¹ but obviously the League doesn't exist anymore. Besides, the Montreux Convention has gone past its original time limit but still runs intact due to lack of a challenger¹². Simply put: Turkey has been the near sole responsible gatekeeper of a delicate

⁵ SACEUR-Supreme Allied Commander of Allied Forces Europe is the historic title for the commander of Allied Command Operations, top military commander responsible for NATO operations.

⁶ Funding NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm, 04/06/2018

⁷ Anthony Skinner, “For Erdoğan, migration crisis is an opportunity”, Politico, 11/18/16, <https://www.politico.eu/article/for-recep-tayyip-erdogan-refugee-crisis-an-opportunity/>

⁸ Term is used by its proponents to describe an anti-American, pro-Russian, Pro-Iranian policy line

⁹ Sochi and Istanbul Conferences on settlement of Syrian war hosting Russia, Iran and Turkey - sidelining US and EU- showed indications of such alignment.

¹⁰ For text of Montreux Convention, http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Montreux_ENG.pdf

¹¹ The convention requires Turkey to inform League of Nations and the 2/3rd majority of the League combined with the majority of signatories may find Turkish measures unfounded.

¹² Convention was to be effective 20 years with automatic renewal afterwards. However participants can leave the convention with 2 years of warning time or propose review every 5 years.

balance between Russian and NATO access to Black Sea. A non-member, Russia-aligned Turkey could very well impede NATO access¹³ to Black Sea giving Russia more influence in the region.

The current NATO Strategic Concept asserts that out of area operations will continue aiming “to prevent crises, manage crises, stabilize post-conflict situations and support reconstruction”¹⁴. Turkey borders three of the most problematic countries in the Middle East: Iran, Iraq, and Syria. NATO is currently supporting the coalition operations in Syria from Turkey. Turkey hosts a US Ballistic Missile Defense radar at Kurecik “for the protection of NATO European territory, populations, and forces”¹⁵ from potential Iranian threat. Any future NATO contingency in this region will rely upon and benefit from the Turkish bases. In the absence of Turkish bases, NATO may seek to use bases of partner nations in the region, but these are both few and not as fully developed. Although NATO has several partners in the region through Mediterranean dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, political agreement is always a challenge when it comes to foreign troops and basing. In any case, increased distance between bases and operations area will either reduce operational responsiveness or introduce additional requirements. For example, Turkish denial of bases in 2003, cost US the opportunity to open a second front in Iraq¹⁶.

As the alliance draws its strength from unity and solidarity, the normative effects of a potential NATO-Turkey break up also deserves attention. The first of its kind, such break up would be viewed as a major win for Russia and the first chink in the NATO armor. At the same time, it would bring the question of whether other leaders¹⁷ with authoritarian tendencies will follow Turkish example, especially if NATO values becomes too constricting for inner politics. Also, as the only member with a predominantly Muslim population, Turkey is falsifying the “Christian Club” argument on the identity of NATO¹⁸. Thus, a possible Turkish exit would strengthen such claims and increase anti-NATO and anti-Western sentiments within Muslim majority countries. Such perception would also bring about arguments for ulterior motives and prove detrimental to the NATO operations in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Facing such adverse outcomes, NATO policy makers must take care to understand the root causes of Turkey’s axis-shift. There are no indications to show that the underlying causes of

¹³ Romania and Bulgaria would have access to black sea but no outlet. Naval protection of these countries in a NATO-Russia conflict would be practically non-existent, leaving them more open to coercion and blackmail.

¹⁴ Strategic Concepts, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm#, 4/9/2018

¹⁵ NATO, “NATO Ballistic Missile Defence”, July 2016, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160630_1607-factsheet-bmd-en.pdf

¹⁶ Harry de Quetteville, “US troops pack up and go as Turkey refuses any help”, The Telegraph, 03/24/18, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/1425507/US-troops-pack-up-and-go-as-Turkey-refuses-any-help.html>

¹⁷ Victor Urban’s Hungary has experienced degrading democracy, although not to same degree with Turkey. Freedom House, “Country Report”, 04/02/2018 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/hungary>, Economist, “The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index”, 4/2/2018, <https://infographics.economist.com/2017/DemocracyIndex/>

¹⁸ Such argument is widespread in extremist and populist rhetoric in MENA region. https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogan-ab-hiristiyan-kulubu-degilse,YgpH_IDInEuHRMwWwwGYkA <http://t24.com.tr/haber/dilipak-natodan-cikalim-uslerini-kapatalim-hristiyan-avrupa-bizi-niye-korusun-ki,349339>

the policy shift are related to changes in geopolitical landscape or western world's political orientation towards Turkey. Claims regarding a deep cultural incompatibility concerning the NATO-Turkey relationship are negated by historical evidence. Rather paradoxically, the shift in foreign policy is rooted in internal politics. Change in Turkish policy line corresponded to the rise of autocratic tendencies and subversion of state apparatus¹⁹. Both Freedom House and Economist democracy indexes showed sharp decrease for Turkey after 2015²⁰. Ongoing state of emergency has eroded fundamental human rights of speech, assembly, religion and property²¹. These tendencies fundamentally contrast the NATO's founding treaty. Washington treaty preamble lists the affirmation of the signatories as *"They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law"*²². Unable to find support for autocratic practices, Turkish regime turned to Russia, which was more than willing to turn a blind eye. One might argue that today the NATO-Turkey relationship is as important as ever: important geo-strategically and important normatively.

NATO is facing a unique challenge; a member nation is sliding away both in terms of values and foreign policies. A potential NATO-Turkey break up will constitute the largest geopolitical axis change since the cold war and will present NATO with geostrategic challenges in the most troubled region in the world while presenting perception problems in NATO identity and solidarity. Such break up would no doubt be a vast geostrategic gift for Russia. Turkish foreign policy shift is rooted in internal changes which adds another complicating dimension. Thus, the question NATO must seek to answer is this: How sustain a strong NATO-Turkey relationship and help Turkey make its flirtation with authoritarianism temporary?

¹⁹ A 2013 report written by former US Ambassadors to Turkey recognizes that stable Turkish foreign policy depends on the quality of liberal democracy in the country and recommends that "After a decade of focusing on Turkey's role in the region, American policymakers should, for now, focus more on the stability of its political institutions, freedom of its society, and dynamism of its economy". Unfortunately, democracy and liberal institutions has eroded much more since exacerbating the problems.

Ambassadors Morton I. Abramowitz and Eric S. Edelman, "From Rhetoric to Reality: Reframing U.S. Turkey Policy", October 2013.

²⁰Freedom House, "Country Report", 4/2/2018 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/turkey>
Economist, "The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index", 4/2/2018,
<https://infographics.economist.com/2017/DemocracyIndex/>

²¹ Recent UN Human Rights report lists "profound" human rights violations

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22853&LangID=E>

²² Washington Treaty Text, https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm