

### TURKEY–NATO RELATIONS AT THE 60<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

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After 60 years of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey's role in the alliance stands strong amid new security threats and challenging regional change. It also largely corresponds to the New Strategic Concept of the 2010 Lisbon Summit, outlining the range of principles to which the members must adopt in order to continue effective cooperation and meet new responses, capabilities and partners (NATO, 2010). In light of this, Turkey's strategic geography is crucial for the new security environment in the Euro-Atlantic region and beyond. Taking the recent examples of the intervention in Libya and the missile defense system, this policy update will highlight the importance of Turkey's role within NATO regardless of initial foreign policy disagreements with the alliance and recent negative trends in Turkish public opinion towards the West.

#### Historical Overview

Since its entrance to NATO on February 18, 1952 and throughout political change, Turkey has continued to play a central role for Euro-Atlantic cooperation and stability. During the Cold War, Turkey's geographical position as the alliance's "southern flank" was of high importance to the West in containing the Soviet Union (NATO, 2011). Even though Turkey's relations with NATO suffered following the lack of alliance support in the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Turkey and NATO remained allies and continued cooperation (Pearson, 2008, p. 64).

With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the beginning of a new, uncertain world order, new members were incorporated into NATO from the former Eastern bloc, in turn testing Turkey's strategic importance in its relations with the Western world. The perception of Turkey as a determined ally to NATO persisted, however, through its engagements by the US in the first Gulf War (Pearson, 2008, p. 65). While the underlying political structures had changed in the post-Cold War era, NATO and Turkey worked together to respond to the range of new risks and challenges resulting from an increasingly changing world order.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, NATO adopted its act of collective defense against external threats under Article 5. Since then, the more diverse security environment led to NATO engagements far beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, and provided new importance to Turkey given its geographical and cultural position in contemporary "out of area" missions (Davutoğlu, 2012, p. 9-10, 16). For example, Turkey's strategic geography has helped facilitate European involvement in Afghanistan where Turkish troops have been stationed since 2001, holding command of the Kabul-based International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) both in 2002 and 2005 (Pearson, 2008, p. 62; Özcan, 2012, p. 110).

In recent years, Turkey's role in NATO has increased markedly. The Turkish military is the second largest in the alliance after the United States. Its overall contributions to NATO's missions reach some 3,250 troops, of which 1,840 are deployed to ISAF. Turkey has also employed close to 600 personnel as part of the joint coalition Operation Unified Protector in Libya, and has been one of the main contributors to the Operation Active Endeavour in deterring terrorist activity in the Mediterranean Sea (NATO, 2011). In addition to participating as equals in all NATO activities, Turkish military has shown its ability to take a lead in alliance missions when requested: besides ISAF, it has too taken over command of the Multinational Tasks Force South in southern Kosovo in 2007 (Pearson, 2008, p. 61-62). Turkey has further played a constructive role in the alliance's partnerships, e.g. the Mediterranean Dialogue for cooperation with non-NATO Mediterranean countries, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative of the 2004 Istanbul Summit for strengthened relations and security in the broader Middle East region (Nişancı, 2005, p. 5).

Today, NATO's Military Command Structure is undergoing a reformation in which the current thirteen headquarters will be limited to seven in operation. As a result, the air command in Izmir will be replaced with a new land command base, resulting in Turkey comprising one of the major NATO headquarters on its territory (NATO, 2011).

According to Ambassador Hüseyin Dirioz, head of the defense policy and planning at NATO, the increased Turkish role in NATO results partly from geopolitical change and the ways in which Turkey's strategic interests overlap with those of other member states. Partly, it also corresponds to Turkey's role as key contributor to NATO, and to its active foreign policy (NATO, 2011).

### **Turkish Foreign Policy and Public Opinion Trends**

Turkey's ruling Justice and Developments Party (AKP) has moved to develop foreign policies that are less dependent on the West than previously. In 2012, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, confirmed that Turkey is no longer a "wing-country" under NATO: "NATO's strategic concept [...] has evolved in the post-Cold War era – and so has Turkey's calculation of its strategic environment" (Davutoğlu, 2010). This involves Turkey's vision to take on a more regional role amid crisis in the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East. While having ongoing tensions with countries such as Armenia, Cyprus, and Israel, AKP has been able to improve markedly its relations with neighboring countries in the Middle East (Cook 2011). On the one hand, Turkey may play an increasingly meaningful role to NATO not only due to its military capacity, but also with regards to its enhanced diplomacy towards many countries beyond the Europe-Atlantic region. For Davutoğlu, "in soft security terms – reaching out to Central Asia, Caucasus, Middle East and Northern Africa through NATO membership mechanisms, Turkey has proven to be a staunch member of the alliance" (Davutoğlu, 2012, p. 16). Yet some argue that in keeping an active foreign policy towards neighbors, AKP politicians also keep a distance from the West as their policies diverge, e.g. disagreements regarding Turkey's problematic relations with Israel, or US' interests in deterring Iran (Özcan, 2012, p.110).

At the same time, the Turkish public's support for the West and NATO has decreased. In a Transatlantic Trends survey from 2010, when asked if NATO is essential to their country's security, only 30 percent answered affirmatively. This represented a decrease after 2004 (53 percent); in contrast, the support of other member countries remained high (Transatlantic Trends, 2010, p. 37). Again in 2011, although the Turkish public's support for NATO had increased to 37 percent, it still held the lowest support amongst members, approximately 20 percent less than other publics (Transatlantic Trends, 2011, p. 32). For Yurter Özcan, chief of the Turkish Policy Center in Washington, DC, the negative public opinion of the West in Turkey is inseparable from the

negative foreign policy rhetoric used by the Turkish government against Western initiatives (Özcan, 2012).

Yet, in spite of initial disagreements with NATO on several occasions, Turkish politicians have been keen not to undermine the alliance's policies. This was demonstrated recently by Turkey's shifted stance in both the case of the intervention in Libya and in developing the missile defense capability.

### **Stability in Middle East and North Africa (MENA): The Intervention in Libya**

When the Arab Spring erupted across the MENA region in 2011, Turkey initially opposed an intervention in Libya. When the situation intensified in the end of February, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated his position against foreign involvement in the country: "What has NATO to do in Libya? NATO's intervention in Libya is out of the question. We are against such a thing" (Quoted in Today's Zaman, 2011). From early to mid-March, Erdoğan repeated this approach, concerned that foreign intervention would exacerbate the situation and endanger the region at large. However, following the UN Resolution 1973 on March 17, 2011, with the support from the Arab League, Turkey decided to assist multilateral action and sent submarines and navy ships to help enforce NATO's arms embargo (Head, 2011).

For Ambassador Diriöz, Turkey's engagement in Libya can be viewed as a recent example of the equal role of member states to influence initiatives and decisions in NATO. Once Turkey had turned in support of humanitarian intervention, according to Diriöz, it was an important player in the political process leading up to enforcing Operation Unified Protector to Libya, signifying the alliance's capacity to implement collective decision-making (NATO, 2011).

Moreover, Turkey's increasing regional role makes it a strategic ally to NATO following dramatic changes in many Middle Eastern and North African countries. As these countries still transform, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen sees Turkey's role in this region as crucial for the new strategic environment and future partnerships not only because of its size and location, but also with respect to its cultural and historical experience with neighboring countries (Rasmussen, 2012, p. 4-5). Further, the Turkish Defense Minister İsmet Yılmaz believes that Turkey's economic growth, Muslim identity, democratic values, and links with the West both as a EU-candidate country and military ally serve as criteria by which Turkey can act as a model for many countries in the MENA region. With this in mind, he states, "Through cooperation, we can provide peace and stability in the Middle Eastern region" (NATO, 2012), as was endeavored with the mission in Libya.

### **NATO's Strategic Interests: The Missile Defense System**

Turkey's role in NATO is also central to the alliance's strategic interests in developing the missile defense capability, protecting European territories from threats of ballistic missile proliferation. During the Lisbon Summit in 2010, the alliance agreed to adopt the missile defense system to NATO, a previous US initiative for defense integration with Europe against Iranian ballistic missiles (Ülgen, 2012, p. 10). As a result, Turkey agreed to host parts of NATO's missile defense on its territory, and today an early warning radar, the first part in the process of operating the missile shield, has been established in the city of Malatya, located southeast of Ankara (CNN, 2012).

The agreement with the US and NATO to host the radar followed negotiations and concerns from the Turkish side. From the beginning, Turkey demanded full coverage of the defense system and the right to oversee its entire territory while stressing that neighboring countries, including Syria and Iran, should not be mentioned as specific threats (Ülgen, 2012, p. 10). In a recent

statement amid international concerns, Davutoğlu publically ensured that the system is not to harm relations in its region: “We would never accept any attack on any of our neighbors from our soil. We don't want such a perception of threat to exist, especially against Iran” (Quoted in Demerelli, 2012).

Nonetheless, the missile defense system based in Turkey has attracted controversy at the international level. Sinan Ülgen, visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe, says Turkish-Iranian relations are affected despite cautious diplomatic statements from the Turkish side: “the deterioration of Turkey’s relationship with Iran is likely to have consequences for the importance attached by Turkish policymakers to their security relationship with the United States and the credibility of NATO’s extended deterrence” (Ülgen, 2012, p. 10-11). Also, Russia is another country that has opposed the development of NATO’s missile shield. While NATO has planned for talks on missile defense cooperation with Russia prior to the Chicago Summit, to be held in May 20-21, 2012, the two parts has not yet reached progress for an agreement (Demerelli, 2012).

Still, the missile defense system demonstrates the importance of Turkish agreement with the alliance’s strategic interests. For Defense Minister Yılmaz, NATO’s strategic interests are strongly linked to the concept of “smart defense,” spending money collectively and more efficiently within the alliance. Indeed, in Yılmaz view, the Turkish decision to host the radar for NATO purposes is “the best example of smart defense” and “has been a big step in providing a joint and more efficient defense system to NATO [...] with Turkey doing its part” (NATO, 2012).

### Conclusions: Looking Ahead of the 60th Anniversary

After 60 years of membership in NATO, both Turkey and NATO have vested interests in continued cooperation. Turkey’s role in the alliance remains important due to its strategic geography in reaching beyond the Euro-Atlantic region. Despite recent trends of low public support and an often critical stance towards NATO initiatives from the Turkish side, Turkey seems to act carefully not to undermine transatlantic cooperation. To this end, Ülgen sees Turkey’s presence in NATO as likely to intensify if obstacles, e.g. with respect to EU-membership, remain. In that case, he believes “NATO will remain almost the sole platform for Turkish policy making where there is a sort of transatlantic agenda set” (NATO, 2012b).

During the NATO Chicago Summit in May, the alliance is set to agree on a range of key priorities, including smart defense, stability in North African and Middle Eastern countries, and the missile defense capability, to which Turkey’s position is crucial. While Turkey is key to all of these issues, Turkey-NATO relations are in process of mutual adaptation, facing new security threats and shifting geopolitical realities. Whether or not the upcoming summit will demonstrate, as predicted by Rasmussen “that after 60 years of unchanging commitment and solidarity, NATO and Turkey are still ready, and able, to meet the challenge of change” (Rasmussen, 2012, p. 5) remains to be seen.

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