

Turkey in and out of NATO? An instance of a turbulent alliance with Western institutions

Yaprak Gürsoy | Lecturer, Aston University | @ygursoy 

Ilke Toygür | Analyst, Elcano Royal Institute and Adjunct Professor, Carlos III University of Madrid | @ilketoygur 

Theme

Turkey's links with its Western allies have steadily deteriorated over the past few years. There have been major developments over the past decade that need to be looked at in order to explain the current estrangement with NATO.

Summary

Turkey's problems with its Western allies have frequently been on the table over the past few years. Its accession negotiations for EU membership are unofficially frozen. In relation to the US, the need for a new strategic framework became obvious following the Cold War period. Association with NATO has become ever more complex over the decade due to three major developments: the Arab Spring, the failed coup attempt in Turkey and the improvement in Turkish-Russian relations. This paper looks at these major developments in some detail and concludes that even if there is no clear sign of Turkey dropping out of NATO, the need for a new positive impulse is clear.

Analysis

Introduction: an uneasy alliance from the start?

After the Second World War, the leaders of the Turkish Republic unequivocally anchored Turkey to the Western alliance of states and, among other reasons, justified their decision by linking compliance with democracy, the rule of law and basic freedoms with the country's security in its immediate neighbourhood. The goal was supported by the US in an attempt to improve Turkey's status as a potential balance to Soviet power in the region. While Turkey became part of the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) and the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (the predecessor of the OECD), the US also supported Turkey's associate membership of the European Economic Community when it first applied in 1959. Thus, in the context of the day, US support for Turkey's membership in NATO in 1952 –as one of its earliest members– was not in the least surprising.

Despite the promising start to Turkey's links to the Western alliance, its place in NATO was uneasy at certain periods in its history. The primary cause was Turkey's relations with its NATO ally Greece and its dispute with the latter over Cyprus. President Johnson's letter of 1964 marked perhaps the nadir of relations due to the Greek-Turkish conundrum. In his letter, the US President warned the Turkish Prime Minister against

engaging in military operations in Cyprus and warned that NATO might not be able to protect Turkey in the event of the Soviet Union taking advantage of the conflict.¹ Indeed, in 1974 Turkey entered in the north of the island and the US placed an arms embargo until 1978, inflicting 'great harm to Turkey's armed forces'.² On the US side this was a low point and, since then, the troubled relations have continued with ups and downs.

There have been also other reasons for tension between NATO and Turkey. When Yugoslavia was breaking up, for instance, Turkey demanded that NATO and the UN intervene more swiftly and forcefully against Serbia, and there was a clear difference of approach until NATO finally intervened in Bosnia-Herzegovina in August 1995.³ NATO-EU cooperation was a similar case that led to tension on several occasions. While the EU wants to use NATO assets on its missions, Turkey, as a non-EU country, is worried about the involvement of Cyprus and the possibility of it gaining access to NATO information. This was an issue, for instance, in the EU mission in Kosovo in 2007-08, when Ankara blocked EU-NATO cooperation.⁴ There are many such ups and downs in the history of Turkey's alliance with NATO.

Despite the tensions, however, it is also important to explain that Turkish-NATO relations have not really been unduly affected by the various military coups in Turkey since it became a member.⁵ Such NATO and US acquiescence was the basis of many conspiracy theories underlying the recent decline in relations. That the 2016 coup attempt harmed Turkish-NATO relations shows that the alliance has entered a new scenario that had not been seen before. This paper will look at the main reasons behind the decline in relations since 2011, including the coup attempt, and discuss possible consequences it might have for the future.

Declining relations since 2011

There has been a gradual decline in Turkish-NATO relations since 2011 and an even swifter deterioration since 2016. Although partly due to the absence of a new framework for Turkish-US relations,⁶ there are three interrelated reasons that have speeded up the decline and help explain the current situation: (1) the Arab Spring and the Syrian War; (2) the 2016 coup attempt; and (3) Turkey's cooperation with Russia.

¹ For the original letters, see 'President Johnson and Prime Minister Inonu: correspondence between President Johnson and Prime Minister Inonu, June 1964, as released by the White House, January 15, 1966', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 20, nr 3, Summer 1966, p. 386-393.

² Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu (1983), 'Turkey's Security and the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 62, nr 1, Fall, p. 157-175 (quote from p. 158).

³ Didem Ekinci (2009), 'The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkish parliamentary debates (1992-1995): a constructivist approach', *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, vol. 6, nr 22, Summer, p. 37-60.

⁴ Meltem Müftüler-Baç & Yaprak Gürsoy (2010), 'Is there a Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy: an addendum to the literature on EU candidates', *Turkish Studies*, vol. 11, nr 3, September, p. 405-427, specifically p. 411-414.

⁵ For the reactions of the US and the EU to the 1980 coup, see Senem Aydın-Düzgit & Yaprak Gürsoy (2013), 'Turkey: the counterintuitive transition of 1983', in Kathryn Stoner & Michael McFaul (Eds.), *Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

⁶ Nick Danforth & Ilke Toygür (2017), 'How to dull Turkey's autocratic edge', *Foreign Policy*, September.

(cont.)

The Arab uprisings and the Syrian war

Turkey has had regional power aspirations since the end of the Cold War. With the rise to power of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 these aspirations in the Middle East have become even more visible. Turkey believed that it could use its co-existing Western and Muslim identities, as well as its geographical location, as an asset and be an 'example' in the Middle East. After 9/11 the US also supported such a vision of Turkey as a model Muslim democratic country, especially under AKP rule.⁷

These regional power aspirations were crushed by the Arab Spring. Turkey wanted to lead democratic change and supported groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It hoped that ideological affinities with the new movements in the Middle East would allow it to become a true regional leader for previously repressed populations. Yet the Arab Spring failed in its goals in the Middle East except in Tunisia, with which Turkey had no substantial links. The 2013 coup in Egypt epitomised the failure of Turkish foreign policy in jumping on the bandwagon of change in the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood's defeat was also a failure for the AKP's ideological vision for the region and reminded Turkey's leaders of their country's unsavoury past of military coups and their own victimisation by the secular military in the late 1990s. This prompted Erdoğan to make bitter public declarations against the coup in Egypt and even to refuse to sit at the same table as Abdel Fattah al-Sisi at a dinner organised by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in the UN.⁸

The war in Syria has certainly had more serious implications than Egypt for Turkey's regional power ambitions, security and relations with the US and NATO. Similar to its policy towards Egypt, Ankara insisted that the regime in Syria had to change and that Bashar al-Assad had to go. However, this put Turkey at odds with the reality on the ground and gave the impression that Turkish foreign policy was based on unrealistic assumptions that al-Assad could be defeated over a short period of time. Turkey's position on Syria also jeopardised its relations with the US since Washington has cooperated with the Kurds in Syria against the Islamic State. Turkey views the strengthening of Kurdish forces as a direct threat to its territorial integrity and considers the Democratic Union party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as affiliates of the PKK, officially considered a terrorist group also by the US. In turn, Turkey supports other radical groups in Syria, some of them of a more religious bent with the aim of counterbalancing the YPG in the region.⁹ The mismatch has caused a conflict of interest with the US. Furthermore, the ambitions of both Russia and Iran in Syria have led to fluid alliances, questioning Turkey's devotion to its NATO partners.

⁷ Aslı Aydintasbaş & Kemal Kirişçi (2017), 'The United States and Turkey: friends, enemies, or only interests?', Turkey Project Policy Paper, nr 12, April, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/aydintasbas-kirisci_united-states-and-turkey.pdf.

⁸ 'Erdoğan skips UN luncheon to avoid legitimizing Egypt coup', *Yeni Şafak*, 26/IX/2014, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/erdogan-skips-un-luncheon-to-avoid-legitimizing-egypt-coup-2024565>.

⁹ Francis Ricciardone & Aaron Stein (2016), 'Mitigating US-Turkish Disagreement over the PYD', *Atlantic Council*, 24/II/2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/mitigating-us-turkish-disagreement-over-the-pyd>.

(cont.)

To date Turkey has engaged in three military operations in Syria. In February 2015, in a limited intervention, the Suleyman Shah tomb was relocated to Turkey. The second, stretching for almost a year between the summer of 2016 and the spring of 2017, had as its aim to clear ISIS and certain Kurdish units out of parts of the area west of the Euphrates. The most recent operation, named Olive Branch, began in January 2018 against Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria. Turkish troops took Afrin, with indications that there might be a further move towards Manbij, controlled by the PYD/YPG supported by US forces.¹⁰

Although Turkey officially welcomed the US, French and British air strikes in April 2018,¹¹ its own operations independent of its NATO allies are jeopardising relations. Any attempt to advance further into Syria might bring Turkish and US forces face to face, increasing the tension between the two partners. What happens in Manbij and the possibility of a sustainable agreement between Turkey and the US with the recent appointment of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State have given rise to significant expectations. Indeed, an agreement between the US and Turkey was announced regarding Manbij following meetings between Pompeo and his counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. However, as Amberin Zaman notes, 'differences in interpretation as to [the] actual substance [of the agreement] are ... casting a shadow over the latest stab at salvaging US-Turkish ties and rekindling trust between the two countries.'¹²

The 2016 coup attempt

The second critical event for Turkish-NATO relations was the attempted coup of 15 July 2016 that aimed to topple the AKP government. The unsuccessful coup was orchestrated by a small military clique, most of which were air force personnel.¹³ The government accused Fethullah Gülen, a cleric with millions of followers worldwide, of being the mastermind while at the same time arguing that the US supported him. The alleged evidence for such a claim was: (1) that the US İncirlik air base was used for some of the planes that took off on the night of the coup;¹⁴ (2) that the US was slow in its response to condemn the coup;¹⁵ and (3) that Gülen is resident in Pennsylvania and that, despite

¹⁰ 'After taking Afrin, Turkey looks for new targets in Syria', *The Economist*, 22/III/2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/03/22/after-taking-afrin-turkey-looks-for-new-targets-in-syria>.

¹¹ Pinar Tremblay (2018), 'Turkey's response to US-led Syria strikes: not enough but welcomed', *Al-Monitor*, 15/IV/2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/turkey-responds-syria-strikes-assad-russia-iran-erdogan.html>.

¹² Amberin Zaman, 'Manbij plan raises expectations but not mood in US-Turkey relations', *Al-Monitor*, 7/VI/2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/06/us-turkey-interpret-manbij-plan.html>.

¹³ For more information on the coup attempt see Berk Esen & Sebnem Gumuscu (2017), 'Turkey: how the coup failed', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, nr 1, January, p. 59-73.

¹⁴ For details of the indictment of what transpired on the night of the coup at the İncirlik base, see Sedat Ergin's three-part editorial titled 'July 15 and İncirlik Air Base' published by *Hürriyet* between 15-17/VIII/2017. The first part is available in English at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/sedat-ergin/july-15-and-incirlik-air-base-1-asena-in-the-sky-116824>.

¹⁵ 'US response to coup bid in Turkey disappointing: envoy', *AA*, 13/VII/2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-response-to-coup-bid-in-turkey-disappointing-envoy/860465>.

(cont.)

Ankara's official requests, Washington has taken no action to extradite him. The narrative of the coup concocted by the Turkish government and circulated by the mass media establishes a direct link between the putsch and the US Administration and celebrates the 'heroism' of ordinary citizens on the night of 15 July, portraying them as resisters against foreign occupation. The coup attempt has had serious consequences for democracy in Turkey.¹⁶

Following the coup, relations were further strained by the FBI's arrest of Hakan Atilla, the Deputy Director General of Halkbank, during a visit to New York. Halkbank and Atilla are accused by US prosecutors of violating US-imposed sanctions on Iran and engaging in banking fraud. The case against Atilla was based on the confessions of an Iranian-Turkish businessman whose relations with Turkish government officials have already been exposed. President Erdoğan himself has been accused, particularly by Gülen affiliates, of cooperating in the affair. Hence, Atilla's arrest and trial were seen as a Gülenist conspiracy with the support and collaboration of US officials.¹⁷ With the Turkish economy in continuing decline, sanctions on Halkbank could cause even further distress. Furthermore, the arrest of the American pastor Andrew Brunson –who has been living in Turkey for more than two decades– on terrorism charges has had a big impact on relations and was seen as Ankara's way of retaliating against Atilla's arrest. In addition to Brunson, the arrest of local embassy employees has caused frustration in Washington, giving rise to tension and difficulties in the process of issuing visas.

Aside from leading to problematic relations between Turkey and the US, the coup has also had other consequences affecting NATO. First, ever since the coup Turkey has been accused of backsliding towards an authoritarian regime. This has strained relations with certain European countries. In the case of Austria, Turkey vetoed Vienna's cooperation with NATO in retaliation for the deterioration in bilateral relations.¹⁸ Tensions between Ankara and Athens have also steadily increased following the coup and after eight pilots fled to Greece and sought asylum. The Greek Supreme Court refused Turkey's demands to have them repatriated, giving rise to criticism from Ankara and re-kindling the disputes over the Aegean Sea. As in the past, rising tensions between Greece and Turkey have the potential to further strain the latter's alliance with NATO.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ilke Toygur (2016), 'From a failed coup to state of emergency: democracy in Turkey today', *Expert Comment*, nr 38/2016, Elcano Royal Institute, 22/VII/2016, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/europa/commentary-toygur-from-failed-coup-to-state-emergency-democracy-turkey-today.

¹⁷ 'Turkey slams US court's sentencing of former Halkbank manager Hakan Atilla', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17/V/2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-slams-us-courts-sentence-on-former-halkbank-manager-hakan-atilla-131939>.

¹⁸ See 'Turkey referendum: Erdogan rallies not welcome in Austria', *BBC News*, 27/II/2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39105683>; and 'Nato hit by Turkish veto on Austria partnership', *BBC News*, 23/V/2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-40013507>.

¹⁹ Yaprak Gürsoy (2018), 'The recent crisis between Greece and Turkey: two NATO allies on the brink of war, again', The Foreign Policy Centre, 24/IV/2018, <https://fpc.org.uk/the-recent-crisis-between-greece-and-turkey/>.

(cont.)

A final implication of the coup for NATO is the result of a series of changes within the Turkish armed forces. It was argued before the coup that the military were already split into factions with differing loyalties, ideological positions and convictions regarding Turkey's foreign alliances. While one group was said to be 'Eurasianist', advocating closer relations with non-Western countries such as Russia and Iran, another was argued to be pro-NATO.²⁰ Loyalty to the AKP government, support for democracy and/or adherence to the Kemalist ideology based on the secular and republican principles of the founding father of the Turkish Republic could cut across the various groupings. In the aftermath of the coup, however, thousands of military personnel were expelled and drastic changes were made to military schooling. Should these trends continue, the result might be a military that is against NATO ideologically and more supportive of cooperating with Russia, and perhaps more conservative in outlook, in contrast with the more secular military of previous decades.

Turkish-Russian relations

The third reason why Turkey and NATO have drifted apart is Turkey's closer friendship with Russia. Although relations between Turkey and Russia have fluctuated over the past few years and the two countries do not necessarily share the same interests in Syria, ever since the coup they have raised their level of cooperation. Russia recently started to build Turkey's first nuclear plant, worth US\$20 billion, at Akkuyu, Mersin.²¹ Since the coup attempt in 2016, relations have been marked by an 'intense diplomacy' with Putin and Erdoğan having met at least 11 times face-to-face and having been in frequent communication by telephone.²²

For NATO, one of the most problematic consequences of Ankara's cooperation with Moscow is the possible acquisition of the S-400 air-defence missile system that Turkey intends to purchase from Russia. NATO argues that the system would not integrate into NATO's systems and would require Turkey to share information with Russia.²³ The US has been putting pressure on Turkey to cancel its plans to buy S-400s from Russia.

What does Turkey expect from its cooperation with Russia? First and foremost, it has a bargaining chip to be used against its Western partners. This type of flirtation threatens the alliance and forces the NATO powers to support Turkey's agenda in Syria. However, Turkey is aware that Russia is an unreliable partner and that in the long-run it is no benefit to be outside NATO. That is why, for instance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

²⁰ The divisions in the military were already evident during the Ergenekon investigations that began in 2007 and implicated hundreds of military officers with planning to overthrow the AKP government. See Yaprak Gürsoy (2012), 'The changing role of the military in Turkish politics: democratization through coup plots?', *Democratization*, vol. 19, nr 4, August, p. 735-760.

²¹ 'Putin, Erdogan launch Turkey's first nuclear power plant', *DW*, 3/IV/2018, <http://www.dw.com/en/putin-erdogan-launch-turkeys-first-nuclear-power-plant/a-43238454>.

²² 'Erdoğan-Putin görüşmeleri: Uçak krizinden Akkuyu Nükleer Santrali'ne nasıl gelindi?', *BBC Türkçe*, 3/IV/2018, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-42323920>.

²³ See Christopher Woody (2017), 'Turkey has agreed to buy Russia's advanced missile-defense system, leaving NATO wondering what's next', *Business Insider UK*, 17/VII/2017, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/turkey-agreed-to-buy-russias-s-400-missile-system-concerns-about-nato-2017-7?r=US&IR=T>; and 'NATO: Rusya, Türkiye'deki S-400'ler ile gizli bilgilerimize erişecek', *Kokpit.aero*, 9/III/2018, <http://www.kokpit.aero/nato-s400-sistemi-icin-uyardi>.

declarations continue to stress Turkey's place in NATO and why Turkey continues to support its NATO allies' air strikes against Damascus. It seems that if Turkey is pressed to decide between NATO and Russia, it will continue to choose NATO.

Conclusions

Turkey's relations with the West are troubled. The country's democratic deterioration, the use of populist rhetoric against its Western partners and its fluid alliances in the Middle East while facing many global crises have led to a stalemate. Meanwhile, Turkish foreign policy has also been de-institutionalised. As a result, accession negotiations to the EU have been unofficially frozen. Transatlantic relations are in need of a new framework. The current relationship with NATO is another part of this complex jigsaw. Turkey's association with NATO has been in decline since 2011.

The aftermath of the Arab Spring, the failed attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016 and collaboration with Russia during the past few years have contributed to creating a stalemate. Although Turkey is one of NATO's major contributors, its equivocal relationship with the US and its current intention of buying defence technology from Russia can very well lead to further problems. Turkey does not consider Russia a reliable long-term ally but it benefits from the perception that there is a *rapprochement*. The current situation of Turkey's relations with the EU completes a picture of anti-Western attitudes. The country is seeking a different international family after decades of being devoted to the West. The current status of its relations will continue to be a source of uncertainty unless an acceptable common –and workable– framework can be devised.

Furthermore, Turkey is located in a highly volatile dynamic neighbourhood that faces multiple challenges. The fluid liquid alliances of the Middle East imply that there are changes in the ground-rules from time to time. Thus, relationships must be based on trust and not on satisfying short-term interests.