Tarık Oğuzlu

Turkey's Eroding Commitment to NATO: From Identity to Interests

Turkey's view concerning its commitment to NATO is changing. NATO has always been the most prestigious institution binding Turkey to the West, but Turks are beginning to question whether NATO is still indispensable to Turkey's foreign and security policies. During the Cold War, Turkey's commitment to NATO was largely identity-driven.[1] Membership in NATO suited Turkey's goal of pursuing a Western/European identity, and was justified by the Westernization goals of the founders of the Republic. Even though NATO's primary purpose at its inception was to help secure the territorial integrity of its members against the Soviet Union, the Alliance also symbolized the unity of nations which embrace liberal–democratic norms at home and abroad; it offered a security blanket under which European allies could intensify their supranational integration process and turn Europe into a Kantian security community.[2] Joining NATO in 1952 was therefore a logical follow-up step to Turkey's membership in the Council of Europe (1949), and helped Turkey legitimize the claim that it was a Western/European country, representing the Western international community in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, the main question that concerned Turkish elites was how long NATO would remain primarily a European security organization in which Turkey could still feel European. Once it became clear that the survival of NATO as the most legitimate European security actor would increasingly depend on the Alliance's enlargement to include former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as

Dr. Tarık Oğuzlu is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Antalya International University in Turkey. He may be reached at tarik.oguzlu@antalya.edu.tr

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the Alliance's adoption of crisis management operations in the Balkans, Turkey lent its support to such initiatives. For example, Turkey supported the Partnership for Peace (PFP) Initiative launched in 1994, whose goal was to prepare the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe for future membership in the Alliance. (It was assumed that once they were included in this initiative, they would gradually adopt the constitutive norms of the Alliance.) Turkey also let a training center open in Ankara in 1998, which would socialize military personnel of the PFP members to the military, political, operational, and strategic thinking of the Alliance. Additionally, Turkey supported the first round of NATO enlargements to its east in 1999, and sent troops to NATO-led missions in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo.[3] These were manageable risks for Turkey to take if the Alliance sought to exist mainly as a European organization.

The 9/11 attacks, however, produced new dynamics regarding the credentials of NATO's European identity, as well as Turkey's perception of the Alliance. At the risk of the Alliance's non-Europeanization, Turkey has supported NATO's globalization—it sent troops to NATO-led missions in Afghanistan and other non-European locations, as well as took part in the NATO Response Force, which was made operational at the Riga Summit of 2006 and designed to endow the Alliance with a small, agile, and effective military unit of 20,000 troops to be deployed to war zones on short notice. Nevertheless, Ankara has simultaneously adopted a more critical, or skeptical, attitude.

NATO currently suffers from a legitimacy crisis in the eyes of the Turks, and in recent years Turkey has ceased to define its membership in NATO through nonnegotiable identity-related lenses. As Alliance members have been at odds with each other about how to define NATO's purpose moving forward, and as NATO has become a more global and less European organization, Turkish decision-makers are finding it difficult to believe that membership in NATO supports Turkey's Western European identity anymore. In a radical turnabout, Turkey has embarked on a process to build its relations with NATO on the basis of more pragmatic, and less enduring, common interests and concerns. How long those binding common interests endure, however, remains to be seen.

Turkey's Critical View of NATO

The need for European allies to rely on Turkey's security cooperation has decreased since the Cold War, while Turkey's security has simultaneously become increasingly exposed to challenges from the Middle East. Ankara had

perceived its security in the context of conventional threats and valued NATO mainly for its Article V commitments (Article V states that an armed attack against one or more NATO members is considered an attack on them all), but European members of the Alliance have tried their best not to get involved in non-European contingencies. The majority of the European allies have continued to

> **W**ashington has increasingly sought Turkey's strategic cooperation outside NATO platforms.

focus their attention on intra-European affairs, and prioritized the European Union as the most appropriate organizational platform for dealing with them. Europeans have increasingly considered Turkey as part of the Middle Eastern security architecture.[4]

Two occasions in the recent past have led Turkish decision-makers to doubt whether European members of the Alliance would continue to see Turkey's territorial defense as part of their responsibilities. Both took place because of Turkey's proximity to Iraq. In both 1991 and 2003, Turkey asked NATO to deploy early warning systems and Patriot missiles to its territory to guard against the possibility of any Iraqi attack. Both times, some European members of the Alliance hesitated to respond positively to Turkey's appeals. Although it is true that those European allies were generally against the possibility of NATO-ization of the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq, their resistance to calls to strengthen Turkey's defense capabilities vis-à-vis Iraq's ballistic missiles suggest that they did not recognize Turkey's security perceptions.

Also, the reluctance of some Western European Alliance members to recognize the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization and to push for the PKK to end its activities in Turkish territory has worried Ankara. As long as a majority of Turks believes that the PKK owes its existence in part to support coming from European countries, Turkey's commitment to NATO is bound to decrease in the years to come.[5]

In contrast, the United States, the leading member of the Alliance, has gradually adopted a non-European strategic outlook by considering developments outside the continent as more vital to its national security interests. Yet, Washington has begun to value Turkey's security cooperation in more bilateral rather than multilateral platforms. In other words, even though Washington's need to secure Turkey's strategic cooperation has dramatically increased, the Americans have generally tried to achieve this bilaterally, outside of NATO platforms.

Another important factor contributing to the rise of Turkish skepticism toward NATO has been the changing nature of global politics. As the world has

become more multipolar, or even nonpolar, and as interstate relations have increasingly taken shape in more multilateral and interdependent settings, NATO-like collective defense organizations have become outdated. In addition, changing power configurations within the international system seem to have increased Turkey's capability to pursue a multi-dimensional and multi-directional foreign policy. Finally, Turkey's relations with Russia on one hand, and Middle Eastern countries on the other, will likely also shape Turkey's future view of NATO.[6] Turkey is not an exception to the idea that, as the world has increasingly become post-Western, many states have revised their foreign- and security-policy strategies to adapt to the new security environment.

Changes to NATO's Purpose

Since the early 1990s, Turkey has adopted the view that NATO engagements in out-of-area contingencies, either in Europe's peripheries or non-European geographies, should not become the Alliance's core mission, let alone negatively affect Ankara's relations with its neighbors and the Islamic world. Turkey's position on this issue has been in line with the core members of the EU, such as France and Germany. On the other hand, the United Kingdom appears to have supported these out-of-area engagements, similar to the United States. In principle, Turkey has argued that NATO forces might be used in dire humanitarian conditions to help protect civilians.[7] That should not mean, however, that any NATO member can hijack the Alliance for its pure national interests. Turkey does not support NATO's becoming an international platform that confers legitimacy onto some multinational peace operation not authorized by the United Nations. To Ankara, the main source of international legitimacy should continue to rest with the United Nations.

Similarly, Ankara has continuously insisted that NATO's out-of-area missions should never justify unilateral U.S. military operations. Even though Turkey has been aware that without the Alliance adopting out-of-area functions, its days would be numbered in the post-Soviet era, the worry has been that NATO might find itself bogged down in particular contingencies in which Ankara has no vital national interest. Stated somewhat differently, lending support to NATO's out-of-area operations would always carry the risk of Turkey's entrapment in non-wanted contingencies, no matter what the consequences for the Alliance.

This thinking partially explains why Turkish leaders have been anxious to ponder how NATO's involvement in Afghanistan—and the inclusion of Pakistan in the war—would be perceived in the Muslim world. NATO's operations in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s and the current NATO mission in Afghanistan show that Islam, either as a religion or political ideology, has undoubtedly become an issue for the Alliance. Turkey, as the only ally where the

population is overwhelmingly Muslim, would certainly be affected by NATO's encounter with Islam. As a Muslim-majority country, Turkey argued back in the 1990s that NATO should intervene in Bosnia to help Bosnian Muslims withstand Serbian aggression. That NATO's involvement came much later than anticipated, with millions of Muslims killed at the hands of Serbian paramilitary forces, showed Turkey's limits within the Alliance. This also explains why Turkish troops currently deployed in Afghanistan do not perform combat duties. They mainly perform crisis management tasks in and around the Afghan capital of Kabul and take part in civilian nation-building efforts in relatively stable parts of the country.

As part of its efforts to make sure that NATO never becomes an anti-Islamic organization negatively affecting Turkey's growing profile in the Muslim world, Ankara paid close attention to the issue of who would succeed Jaap de Hoop Scheffer as Secretary General of the Alliance in 2009. Turkey initially opposed the appointment of former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, on the grounds that he did not play a conciliatory role during the infamous cartoon crises in 2005 and that he resisted Turkish calls to forbid the broadcasting of Roj TV from Danish territories (Roj TV is a Kurdish satellite television station that Turkey claims is a mouthpiece for the PKK). In Turkey's view, Rasmussen's support for the publication of cartoons insulting the holy symbols of Islam in the name of freedom of thought did not contribute to Western efforts to win the hearts and minds of people across the Muslim world.[8] The crisis over Turkey's potential veto was resolved when Rasmussen promised to adopt a more critical stance regarding Roj TV and appoint a Turkish national to one of the highest positions within the NATO bureaucracy.[9] It is also worth noting that the United States played a key role behind the scenes in allaying Turkey's concerns.

As a corollary, Turkey believes that NATO should primarily remain a European-centered collective defense organization mainly in charge of Article V operations, rather than transform into a global firefighter with out-of-area and non-Article V competences. Similarly, NATO should remain a military defense organization concerned with territorial defense, rather than transform into a political talking shop. Turkey's awareness that without NATO's playing a more global role, the Alliance would eventually perish in Europe's post-modern heaven does not, however, lead it to support NATO's globalization wholeheartedly. Such a role, in Turkey's view, carries too great a risk of aggravating global tension and fueling polarization, an unwanted outcome in Turkey's peaceful rise and development strategy.

Turkey appears to be in favor of NATO's having partnerships with other countries and other regional organizations. However, NATO should not transform into a "league of democracies" by incorporating like-minded regimes such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea.[10] These countries should

remain NATO partners as far as Turkey is concerned. Turkey's position shows that it has viewed this issue through the prism of its relations with the European Union rather than the cohesion of the Alliance. Even though Turkey supports institutional cooperation between NATO and the European Union as part of transatlantic attempts to define security in a more comprehensive manner, it also seems to be the main ally within the Alliance preventing a sustainable NATO–EU cooperation from being realized. The mainstream EU position on the NATO-EU relationship had been that, particularly in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, the EU should make use of NATO's military, operational, and institutional capabilities to become somewhat of an autonomous security organization in Europe, replacing the primacy of NATO.

Both Washington and Ankara insisted that the European Union respect NATO's three Ds when it decided to develop its autonomous defense capabilities in the late 1990s: non-discrimination against particular NATO members not included in the European Union, non-decoupling of Europe from North America, and non-duplication of resources that NATO already possesses. However, the United States has begun to develop a strong interest in the European Union's becoming a credible security actor that could potentially help the United States meet emerging global security challenges, and as a result the Americans have adopted a more conciliatory stance on this issue. It seems that Turkey has been using its membership within NATO as a bargaining chip in its relations with the European Union.[11]

Another issue that demonstrates Turkey's critical stance on NATO's transformation concerns U.S. efforts to develop missile defense capabilities within NATO. (This project was first proposed by U.S. President George W. Bush and later revised by President Barack Obama's administration to address Russia's concerns about missile defense.) NATO members decided in Lisbon in 2010 that NATO will utilize this capability as part of the Alliance's new strategic mission. From the beginning, Turkey has been considered one of the most appropriate sites for the installment of radar stations for missile defense. Due to Turkey's proximity to Iran, its cooperation has been considered vital for the success of the whole project.

Looking at the issue from Turkey's national perspective, though, Ankara conditioned its cooperation on the Alliance meeting some of its concerns. First, Ankara insisted that Iran not be explicitly named within NATO's new strategy document as the major threat to the security of the allies. The installment of the missile-defense capability had to be justified in more general terms without mentioning any particular country as a target. NATO was not to be perceived by other countries, most notably Turkey's neighbors to the north and east, as a security threat. Second, the costs of the project needed to be shared among allies equally. Third, this capability, if deployed, needed to protect the entire territory

of the Turkish Republic rather than serve as a shield only against Iran's alleged ballistic defense capabilities. Fourth, NATO needed do its best to secure Russia's non-resistance to the project, if not full cooperation. Finally, Turkish authorities insisted that the intelligence collected at the facilities based in Turkey not be made available to Israel.[12] These conditions suggest that Turkey tried to make sure that this particular initiative did not negatively affect its improving relations with Iran and Russia.

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Domestic Factors

The most important internal factor that has influenced Turkey's approach toward the Alliance over the last decade has been the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP has decided that NATO's other members should stop treating Turkey, at best, as an ally taken for granted and at worst as a problem in Alliance politics. Turkish leaders recently have urged their NATO partners to consider Turkey as "an owner" of the Alliance.[13] While this is certainly a positive development, suggesting that Turkey very much identifies with NATO, it is noteworthy that this new approach is more demanding and reflects the growing Turkish desire to play an assertive and order-instituting role in its neighborhood. Turkish leaders have been continuously telling their Western counterparts that Turkey's national interests and priorities should be taken into account in shaping the Alliance's policies.

Turkey's growing self-confidence has created a concomitant desire that NATO's transformation should in no way hamper Turkey's improving relations with its neighbors. Unlike the Cold War era anxiety of being abandoned by NATO, Turkey is now more concerned with entrapment in places and issues it would rather avoid. That is why some in the West appear to have concluded that Turkey, under the rule of the AKP, has been turning its face away from the West.

In order to decipher the code of Turkey' new approach toward NATO, one should take a closer look at Turkey's foreign policy vision under the AKP—the strategic depth doctrine of the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu. The doctrine states that Turkey should feel the responsibility to help put its region in order. This is the mission Turkey has inherited from the Ottoman Empire. The idea that Turkey needs to fulfill a particular historical mission is very

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much *idea-politik*. Though the fulfillment of this mission would likely serve Turkey's realpolitik concerns to have stability and security in surrounding regions, the motivating factor of Turkey's various initiatives in this regard is very much identity/ideology driven.[14] The historical mission that Turkey inherited from the Ottoman Empire cannot be implemented by pursuing a uni-dimensional—in this case pro-Western, or pro-NATO—foreign policy.

Turkey would be short of meeting this mission if it did not develop its own strong geopolitical interests. It is particularly in Turkey's interest to have a role in what happens in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire and get involved in disputes between the former subjects of the Empire. Turkey should not leave the stage to other external actors to help maintain peace and stability—it is not in Turkey's interest to define its role as helping to fulfill the strategic interests of extra-regional powers. Capitalizing on its historical and geopolitical depth would enable Turkey to meet this responsibility.[15] The "zero problems with neighbors" policy is a realpolitik calculation of how to achieve regional stability, yet part of the concept comes from the idea that it is in Turkey's interest to help resurrect the pax-Ottomanica, in the sense of common regional consciousness.

One of the interesting things to note here is that the AKP leadership argues that Turkey's membership in NATO and other Western/European organizations, such as the European Union, should never imply Turkey's assimilation into a superior Western/European civilization.[16] Many AKP elites support the idea that it is in Turkey's interest to at times represent the Islamic world in the West, rather than represent the West in the Islamic world. The strategic depth doctrine sees Turkey's eastern connections as leverage in its dealings with the West,[17] and does not put Turkey's membership in Western institutions at the top of national priorities.

This assertive foreign policy formulation has also been a product of Turkey's rising economic and military power in recent years. Turkey is now the 17th largest economy in the world (in 2000 it was the 22nd) and has been growing by 6 to 8 percent annually over the last decade; Turkey is now a member of the G-20.[18] At the same time, Turkish businessmen have gradually internalized the idea that Turkey's growth will depend on the country being integrated into global markets. Turkey needs to have access to various markets for its manufactured goods and attract global investors to set up business ventures in Turkey.[19] The rise of the Anatolian bourgeoisie is noteworthy, for these circles are not only behind the rise of the AKP in Turkish politics, but also are more

supportive of Turkey's continuing efforts to enlarge its economic horizons beyond the West.[20] The Turkish army has sophisticated military capabilities, such as the ability to execute mid-air refuelings and deploy a substantial number of soldiers into war zones on short notice. All such developments suggest that as Turkey has become more powerful and self-confident, and as Turkish economic and security interests have become more globalized, the need for Turkey to rely on NATO for its security and identity has decreased.

Another internal development worth mentioning in this context is that Turkey has recently become a more liberal democratic country than ever, partially because of the EU accession process. This increasing Europeanization has brought a growing primacy of elected civilians, both within the parliament and outside, over appointed bureaucrats, mainly in the military and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[21] Given that the secular bureaucracy has been traditionally the main pillar of Turkey's pro-Western/NATO orientation, the rise of an alternative group of elites appears to have helped develop a more skeptical Turkish approach toward NATO.

From Identity to Interests

Turkey no longer views NATO as part of its own identity, meaning that Turkey's membership is now increasingly valued to the extent that it contributes to Turkey's national interests, rather than helping recognize Turkey's Western or European identity. Turkey now feels part of the East, West, South, and North simultaneously—as much Middle Eastern as Western and European— and NATO is no longer the linchpin of Turkey's national security. NATO is important for Turkey as far as it acts as a force

> NATO is no longer the linchpin of Turkey's national security, but a force multiplier.

multiplier. That the current Turkish foreign minister continuously stresses that Turkey will increasingly become the owner and a principal subject of the Alliance, rather than its object or an issue on its agenda, attests to the increasing salience of this logic.[22] The more Turkey has adopted an Ankara-centric worldview over the past two decades, the more its approach toward NATO has reflected interests, caution, and prudence.

Rather than signaling a negative approach to NATO's transformation or turning the country's face away from the West, the insistence of Turkish decision-makers that Turkey is one of the owners of the Alliance should be interpreted as a function of Turkey's emerging multi-dimensional and multi-directional identity, as well as a general transformation in Turkish

foreign policy. Gone is Turkey's automatic following of Western leadership with a particular view to proving Turkey's Western identity. Now instead, Turkey has a growing determination to improve its relations with neighbors, as well as create a regional order in the image of Turkey's national interests. Turkey does not want to see NATO's policies and actions hamper Turkey's relations with its neighbors, notably Russia and Iran, or diminish its hard and soft power capabilities in the region.

It is interesting to note that, while this particular approach has resulted in a more critical Turkish stance on NATO's policies, such as enlargement and out-of-area missions, Turkey has once again begun to put a great premium on its membership in NATO. Its place in the Alliance helps maintain its links with the West, particularly given the decreasing prospects of Turkey's membership in the European Union, as well as continue the pragmatic strategic cooperation with the United States. In fact, while the majority of Turks have in recent years grown skeptical of the merits of Turkey's membership in NATO, it is the Turkish security and political elites who still see Turkey's membership as relevant to advancing Turkey's national interests.[23] But it is in Turkey's *interest*, rather than an ideational fixation, for Turkey to feel a part of the West and maintain a good working relationship with the United States through NATO, even while its interests deepen in the Middle East and it becomes more active and independent.

The Libya case is an important example of Turkey's evolving approach toward NATO. At the beginning of the crisis Turkey vehemently opposed any NATO role, fearing that this would negatively impact the image of the Alliance in the Islamic world. Ankara wanted to make sure that Turkey, being the only Muslim-majority member of the Alliance, was not perceived to be acquiescing to NATO's intervention in a Muslim country. As events unfolded, however, some members of the Alliance, such as France and the United Kingdom, showed a strong determination to employ NATO in Libya to ensure that Muammar Qaddafi would not commit humanitarian crimes and that he eventually would be removed from power. From that moment on, Turkey decided to play an active role inside the Alliance with a particular focus on shaping the *limits* of NATO's involvement in Libya. Turkey was very involved in formulating NATO's mandate in Libya, through which NATO would oversee the military embargo on Qaddafi's forces from the skies and sea as well as help the opponents of the regime organize and train.

Similar to Libya, Turkey wants to influence NATO's position in Syria. Turkey does not want to engage in a military operation unless there is a full consensus on such action within NATO. Unlike Libya, however, even if there is NATO consensus on a military operation in Syria against Bashar Assad's forces, Turkey's participation would also be affected by the consent of the five permanent

members of the UN Security Council, as well as the position of the leading countries of the Middle East. A military operation in Syria sanctioned only by NATO, at the risk of antagonizing Russia and China on one hand and Iran on the other, would not be supported by Ankara. This Syrian case shows that Turkey is against the idea that NATO be conceived as a military tool to enforce the principle of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P).

That Turkey has criticized some NATO policies in the past does not mean that it will damage the harmony and consistency of the Alliance, for there is no such thing. Turkey's critical stance should not constitute clear evidence of its estrangement from the West in general or NATO in particular. Ankara is not the only ally within NATO that is struggling to find the right balance between emerging regional and global geopolitical realities with its commitment to the Alliance.

Paradoxically, Turkey's critical stance within NATO might benefit the Alliance indirectly. Given that many issues concerning the vital security interests of the Alliance now increasingly emanate from the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Mediterranean regions, the success and legitimacy of the Alliance's policies in these areas will be aided greatly should Turkey, a democratic and Western-oriented state with a predominantly Muslim society, feel itself at home within the Alliance and support those policies.

The shift in Turkey's approach to NATO also matters for the Alliance because Turkey is no longer an ally that can (or should) be taken for granted. Turkey's commitment to NATO needs to be earned by the other members of the Alliance. Turkey's cooperation will increasingly depend on the extent to which the Alliance remains relevant to improving Turkey's hard and soft power capabilities. It appears that the Cold War era abandonment–entrapment balance has now been reversed. Today, Turkey fears the possibility of being abandoned by the Alliance less than the possibility of being entrapped in unwanted contingencies.

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