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Turkey Turns Cold to European Defense: Implications for Western Security

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In June 2007, Turkey decided to turn its back on European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) after a long series of negotiations with the EU. Although the Cyprus issue has always complicated Turkey's involvement in ESDP, Turkey has been an important actor in Western security architecture for decades, and its withdrawal from the force has profound implications for the United States, Europe, and Western security institutions, including NATO.

Turkey's Growing Military Capabilities

Turkey has always provided an added value to European defense. During the Cold War, Turkey acted as an advanced guard for NATO and Europe, maintaining a large army to defend itself and the West against the Soviet Union. This Turkish-European partnership continued after the Cold War, and although not an EU member, Turkey has actively participated in EU military operations since 2003. Indeed, Turkey was among the few significant contributors to the EU operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), providing the crucial airlift capability that is in short supply in the EU. Until the 1990s, the Turkish army was a large but badly equipped force. An overhaul has produced highly mobile forces with greatly enhanced firepower in accordance with NATO's new strategic concept. The Turkish army has improved its structure while reducing its troop numbers from nearly one million to 650,000. Currently, in addition to four combat divisions, Turkey has forty-five combat brigades. With twenty-six C130/C160 transport aircrafts (and ten Airbus A400Ms to be delivered in 2008), the Turkish military can deploy 50,000 troops to conduct joint operations on short notice. With air refueling capability, the Turkish air force is also able to participate in overseas operations.

More importantly, Turkey has a large number of paramilitary, commando, and special operations units that can be used in counterterrorism operations. Specifically, Turkey has 148,700 Gendarmerie troops, five commando brigades -- equaling approximately 20,000 troops -- as well as sixteen special forces battalions.

With these new capabilities, the Turkish military has actively participated as the lead nation or a major troop contributor in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, as well as in more distant countries such as Afghanistan, East Timor, Sudan, and the DRC.

And while Turkish military capabilities have grown, European militaries have shrunk. Since the early 1990s, EU member countries have dramatically decreased their defense expenses in favor of domestic and social spending. Currently, major EU countries spend an average of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, whereas the United States spends 4 percent and Turkey 5.3 percent. Moreover, most EU countries have abolished conscription, dramatically downsizing their armies. At the moment, while the Turkish army has 650,000 active members, the largest EU forces -- the French and German armies -- have 360,000 and 285,000 troops, respectively.

Turkey's Initial Role in European Common Defense

In the 1990s, changes in multilateral European defense institutions allowed Turkey to enhance its military cooperation with the rest of Europe. In 1991, the EU revitalized the dormant Western European Union (WEU), originally conceived as a Cold War defensive structure consisting of nine European countries, and later enlarged to include other NATO and EU countries, including Turkey. The WEU was instrumental to the EU's ambitions to synergize member country forces under a common headquarters, albeit with multiple categories: full membership for countries that are members of both NATO and the EU such as Italy; associate membership for non-EU members of NATO such as Turkey; and observer status for non-NATO members of the EU such as Ireland.

Since the WEU lacked sufficient military assets, its members sought to create a strong link between the WEU and NATO. In time, Turkey gained prominence in the WEU thanks to its contributions to WEU operations. For example, Turkey's contributions to the 1997 WEU police mission in Albania were greater than those of most full members. Thus, while Turkey remains a WEU associate member on paper, it is now treated much like a full member within the organization's planning body, the WEU Council.

Turkey and ESDP Parting Ways

However, things changed when the EU phased out the WEU in favor of the ESDP. In a December 1998 summit, the UK and France agreed to develop the ESDP from an EU -- rather than a NATO -- perspective. While Turkey was part of the planning and preparation process in the WEU, it has lost that right under ESDP (although the EU asked Ankara to remain a major troop contributor to EU operations). At first, Turkey tried to gain a foothold in the ESDP, but several EU member states, led by France and Greece, resisted any special negotiations with non-EU NATO members.

Since Turkey has no institutionalized role in the ESDP decisionmaking process, it is concerned about possible EU operations in or near Cyprus or the Aegean Sea, and therefore used its veto in 2000 to deny access to NATO assets and capabilities. Because this veto undermined the entire ESDP project, the EU modified its attitude in October 2002 promising "non-EU European Allies will . . . associate themselves with EU decisions, actions, and declarations on ESDP." However, this promise remains unfulfilled, mainly due to French and Greek objections. Since the Greek Cypriot government of Cyprus became an EU member in 2004, it too has blocked Turkey's participation in ESDP. For example, Cyprus vetoed Turkey's membership to the European Defense Agency, an ESDP body created to help EU member states develop their defense crisis management capabilities. When negotiations on Turkey's participation in the ESDP planning process collapsed in June 2007, Ankara withdrew its commitment to contribute units to the EU's forthcoming joint battle group.

Conclusion

It seems clear that neither EU decision -- first to resuscitate the WEU and then to create the ESDP -- was made with Turkey in mind. The lack of clarity regarding Turkey's status in the two organizations has arguably reduced the effectiveness of both. Whatever the reasons were, the latest Turkish decision will likely have implications for the both EU and United States.

European Union. The EU does not have a role in global affairs commensurate with its large economy because it lacks sufficient military power. Most recently in 2006, the EU was unable to abide by its commitment to provide peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, mustering barely half of the 15,000 troops called for by UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

To achieve military strength on a par with its economic power, the EU needs to acquire new military capabilities. To this end, the EU has two options: either member states will have to expand their military budgets and return to at least a partial conscription system -- an uphill battle given domestic opposition to military spending in the EU countries -- or the EU could take advantage of Turkey's military power by

allowing it be a full member of the European security architecture. With its well-trained and well-equipped army, the second largest in NATO, Turkey could provide the EU with valuable defense assets. More importantly, given its vast experience against the Kurdistan Workers Party (the PKK), Turkey has unique abilities in counterterrorism operations.

United States. If excluded further from the European security domain, Turkey might feel compelled to diversify its security partnerships, deepening existing ties with Russia, and establishing relationships with non-traditional partners, such as China or countries in the Islamic world. Moreover, given the complementary nature of the ESDP and NATO, Washington should consider how Turkey's exclusion would impact Ankara's long-term commitment to European defense, especially since ensuring Turkish integration into the European security domain would anchor Turkey firmly to the West.

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