Metis

Study

What future for Turkey as a member of NATO?

No. 03 | April 2018

Institute for Strategy & Foresight

Summary

Among the states with increasingly authoritarian political systems, Turkey is of special interest to Germany, as it is a NATO partner and, additionally, because Germany is home to a large Turkish minority. Recent developments require a politico-military reevaluation of German-Turkish relations and, if necessary, adjustments, particularly in light of Turkey's obstructionist attitude within NATO over the past few years. Germany must develop a strategy to bind Turkey to the West in the post-Erdogan era. This requires bilateral attempts as well as an approach at the EU/NATO level.

From model student to problem child

In the fragile Middle East, Turkey was long considered an anchor of stability. As the first democracy with a mainly Muslim society, Turkey acted as a mediator between the Eastern and the Western world – the only majority-Muslim country within NATO, with the prospect of joining the EU. However, particularly after the failed coup of 15 July 2016, Turkey has increasingly been pivoting away from the West. It is becoming more and more authoritarian, obstructing the initiatives of its NATO partners and cooperating closely with the Russian Federation and Iran in Syria, although the interests of Ankara and Moscow diverge when it comes to the future of the Assad regime.

Turkey's transformation into a more autocratic system is the result of a longer chain of events. Since 1960, the country has seen four coups d'état (1960, 1971, 1980, 2016), most of which were silently tolerated by the other members of NATO. Additionally, in between coups, the Turkish military intervened domestically on a number of occasions (1993, 1997, 2003, 2004, 2007).

These military interventions, on the one hand, are problematic, as they run counter to the Western understanding of a state based on the rule of law. On the other hand, the military has acted as a guarantor of Kemalism and the separation of religion and the state, thus ensuring Turkey's Western orientation and its secularism. For years, Turkish society has inclined towards conspiracy theories (Sèvres syndrome)[1] such as the belief that the *Project for a New American Century* is a Western plot to bring about Turkey's downfall. Since 2002, when the AKP took the reins of government, the military has been gradually edged out of politics. Additionally, pro-Western tendencies in Turkish society have increasingly been discredited. To achieve its aims, AKP has taken advantage of the Sèvres Syndrome. In various trials over the years, several high-ranking officers accused of plotting to overthrow the government received long prison sentences, and senior command personnel of the police and military has gradually been replaced with AKP loyalists. In the wake of the failed 2016 coup, more members of the Turkish armed forces and civil servants throughout the public sector as well as opposition members and journalists suspected of belonging to the Gülen movement or considered as "too Western" were detained, suspended and/or sacked on a large scale. So far, 160,000 people have been affected, among them 38 % of Turkish generals and 11,000 officers, 400 of whom belong to NATO staffs. Their replacement with less-qualified Erdogan loyalists, some of whom are actively hostile towards

1 The Sèvres syndrome refers to the Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920, which laid out the partition of the Ottoman Empire by the victors of World War I. The treaty also outlined the establishment of Armenia and Kurdistan and of further occupation zones. However, it was effectively consigned to the scrap heap of history by the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1923) and, in 1923, was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, which established the borders of modern-day Turkey.

NATO and sympathize with Russia, has led to a change in the command echelons of the armed forces. Many of the officers and intellectuals who fled Turkey have applied for asylum in EU countries, which in most cases has led to further bilateral spats between Ankara and the respective countries. The gradual "Erdoganization" or "AKP-ization" of the Turkish state has far-reaching consequences for the rule of law. Since the attempted putsch, the national state of emergency has already been extended seven times. In the 2017 Rule of Law Index, Turkey was ranked 99 out of 113. In addition, more journalists are currently imprisoned in Turkey than anywhere else in the world.

The geopolitical challenges of Turkish foreign and security policy

Due to its geographical exposedness at the crossroads of three continents, Turkey is more vulnerable to threats and security risks than any other NATO member. Moreover, it is involved in a direct power struggle with Iran and Saudi Arabia for primacy in the Middle East. The internationalized civil wars in Iraq and Syria are a manifestation of this conflict and have in the past years directly threatened Turkish national territory. Turkey supports militias of Turkish origin in both countries and anti-Assad forces in Syria. Its special forces are indirectly and its conventional forces are directly involved in the fighting. These interventions are primarily aimed at protecting Turkish minorities, fighting Kurdish militias and defending Turkish national territory. Moreover, they represent attempts to shift the balance of power between Iran, which supports the Syrian and Iraqi governments along with Hezbollah, and Saudi Arabia, which backs Sunni militias in Syria and Iraq, to Turkey's advantage and to prevent Kurdish autonomy in Syria and Iraq.

Ankara now competes directly with Israel, formerly a closer partner, for spheres of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean along with access to offshore natural resources. The new Israel-Cyprus-Greece axis, which took shape after the Gaza flotilla raid (MV *Mavi Marmara* incident on 11 February 2011), is regarded by Turkey as a direct threat to the Turkish Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), even though Turkey has neither signed nor ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The decades-old conflict in Cyprus and the concomitant refusal to recognize Cyprus, an EU member, Turkey's support of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which has not been recognized internationally, and the presence of Turkish troops on EU territory cast a shadow on the Turco-European relationship. Another permanent conflict is the Greco-Turkish sovereignty dispute in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the non-recognition of the territorial integrity of a neighboring EU member and a NATO partner on the basis of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923).

Domestically, Turkey is also faced with particular challenges. Since its beginning in 1978, the conflict between Turkey and the PKK (and, more recently, the YPG) has claimed at least 50,000 lives, and has extended beyond Turkey's borders since 1983. The Kurdish-Turkish conflict, along with Islamic State terrorist cells and, to a lesser extent, anarchist and nationalist groups are responsible for the fact that Turkey, since 1970, has had one of the highest rates of terrorism in the world (see Table 1). Moreover, in the course of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, Turkey had to receive more than five million refugees. On top of that, there are approximately two million economic migrants from Africa and Asia waiting for an opportunity to cross over to Europe. Due to the refugee crisis, organized crime, in the form of human trafficking, is flourishing, generating an estimated profit of up to five billion dollars per year.

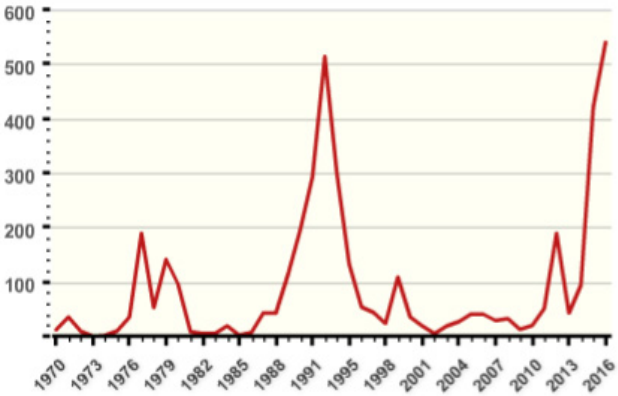

Table 1 *Number of terrorist attacks in Turkey since 1970 (Global Terrorism Database)*

Turkey has always used its challenges at the domestic and foreign policy levels to justify more restrictive laws and a stronger executive. In the pursuit of Turkish national interest, this includes sometimes acting against the positions of NATO allies, using demonstrations of military power to enforce interests or, if need be, even intervening in neighboring countries.

Turkey and NATO: A lasting estrangement

Under Erdogan, Turkey has largely abandoned the basic principles stated in the preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty: democracy, individual freedom and the rule of law. Even before the abortive coup d'état in 2016, however, NATO had been concerned about Turkey's creeping transformation into an authoritarian state.

Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been pursuing a nationalist agenda that brings the country into conflict with its responsibilities towards NATO allies. As NATO lacks an internal conflict management mechanism, the risk of an inter-NATO armed conflict between Turkey and Greece has existed since 1996. This is a problem for the Alliance not least because Greece is also a member of the

EU – thus, neutrality could be expected from NATO, but not from the EU. Moreover, since the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003, there has also been tension between the Turkey and the United States, both partners in NATO. At the time, Turkey did not allow the United States to station troops in the country and did not grant limited overflight rights until three days before the beginning of the operation *Iraqi Freedom*. Additionally, Turkish troops operated in Northern Iraq against the explicit wishes of the United States. The relationship between the US and Turkey has since been troubled, and other NATO countries have also registered a deterioration of bilateral relations with Turkey.

In 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2008, Turkey staged several military interventions against Kurdish militias in Northern Iraq and, since 2015, in Syria. None of these operations were backed by a Security Council resolution binding under international law. Moreover, in some cases, militias that were directly or indirectly supported, equipped or trained by other NATO partners were attacked. Beginning in 2016, if not before, Turkey entered into closer cooperation with the Russian Federation to enforce its interests, particularly in Syria, thus signalizing that it has security-policy alternatives besides NATO and the United States. At the same time, Turkey points to the pro-Kurdish policies of some NATO partners as evidence of their anti-Turkey bias, and doubles down on its position by announcing that if need be, it is willing to open fire on US forces embedded in the Kurdish regions of Northern Syria.

Another bone of contention is Ankara's recent purchase of an S-400 air defense system. This raises concerns because Turkey, as one of the developers and buyers of the F-35, will have access to NATO's newest multirole fighter jet. Russian training units accompany the setup of the S-400, and so worries that Russian intelligence services could gain technological insight into the F-35 project and potentially directly test the air defense capabilities of the S-400 against the F-35 are justified. Further recent incidents include blocking Israel's participation in NATO forums during the Gaza flotilla raid crisis or excluding Austria from NATO partnership programs because of Vienna's misgivings about granting Turkey full EU membership. On the whole, Turkey's behavior suggests that efforts must be made to find comprehensive solutions to its profound differences with the US as a key NATO state as well as with individual EU members on a bilateral level.

Turkey and Germany: A difficult partnership – back to pragmatism!

Turkish-German relations have reached a historic low. This too is the result of a longer process. Germany's proposal of offering Turkey a privileged partnership instead of full EU membership has always been taken by Ankara as an affront. The most recent debates have centered around the use of German military equipment against the Kurds or Germany's Armenia resolution. Other quarrels pour more oil on the fire: the detention of German nationals and Germans of Turkish origin, Turkey's refusal to grant visiting rights to German parliamentary delegations, the withdrawal of the German armed forces from Incirlik, asylum procedures for Turkish officers who fled Turkey, and German involvement in the training of Kurdish security forces in Northern Iraq. From Turkey's point of view, Germany is not a reliable ally. Moreover, Turkey accuses Germany of providing a safe haven for PKK and Gülen followers. The arrest of two Greek soldiers on charges of espionage in March 2018 and the detention of German nationals without charges suggest that Ankara is planning, if necessary, to use prisoner exchanges to get hold of PKK and Gülen followers who have applied for asylum in Europe.

Additionally, the refugee agreement between Turkey and the European Union, which was negotiated mainly by Germany, offers an asymmetrical advantage to Turkey. Ankara now disposes of a "valve" that allows it to influence German and European policy by regulating the number of incoming refugees. For the long term, Germany should thus aim to increase interdependence at the economic and energy-policy levels and to improve cooperation with Turkey in the area of external security. Due to economic considerations, Ankara would then have to assume a less-aggressive and less-unpredictable position towards its NATO partners. Strengthening the concept of joint security could also decrease the importance of Russia for Turkish security. In the long run, this could be the basis for closer cooperation between Germany and Turkey in the post-Erdogan era.

A future Turkey as a reliable NATO member and a bilateral partner of Germany

Despite all disagreements, NATO and Germany depend on close cooperation with Turkey. With NATO's second-largest military, its securing of NATO's external border and its fight against domestic IS cells, Ankara is an important contributor to the security of the Alliance. NATO, particularly the US and Germany, should thus bear in mind the geopolitical and domestic challenges that Turkey faces to better understand and evaluate its behavior and positions. Ankara, besides enforcing its own interests, also particularly desires recognition, status and prestige. Turkey wants to be seen as an equal partner by the NATO Big Five (USA, GBR, FRA, DEU, ITA). Letting Turkey join NATO QUINT might satisfy that need. The responsibility and the role of Turkey in regional security cooperation schemes such as the Turkish initiative BLACKSEAFOR could also be emphasized. BLACKSEAFOR, a cooperation program between countries of the Black Sea littoral, has been suspended since the Ukraine crisis began; however, NATO could revive the project as a Turkey-led NATO initiative to promote stability in the region as well as to affirm the importance of Turkey by assigning it greater responsibility.

This outlook also includes the realization that for Turkey, politics and policy are inextricably linked and could, for instance, carry bilateral quarrels over into international organizations as well. For instance, a fight over election campaigning in Germany affects NATO agreements, common refugee policy or the preservation of rule-of-law principles. In short, Turkey internationalizes bilateral conflicts and bilateralizes international conflicts. Moreover, in questions of international law, it attempts mainly to find bilateral solutions. To maintain a positive, bilateral partnership between Germany and Turkey without questioning national normative principles, resolving other disputes and conflicts between Turkey and NATO or EU countries must be pursued at the same time. Without such a global strategy, the progress made in individual policy areas might vanish because of new or recurring disputes.

At a NATO level, it is about continuing to treat Turkey as an integral part of the Alliance, binding Turkey to the West by means of armaments cooperation programs, strengthening Turkish self-esteem by assigning the country more tasks and responsibilities, and conceding to it the status and prestige Erdogan desires. Specifically, Germany and its partners could, in the various areas of policy, assume the following positions vis-à-vis Turkey:

Suggestions for NATO/EU level

NATO QUINT
- Assess whether Turkey could participate in the informal NATO QUINT forum when questions are discussed that touch upon Turkey's security policy interests.
- This would tie Turkey closer to the large NATO countries and, at the same time, satisfy its desire for prestige.

NATO Black Sea Force and BLACKSEAFOR
- Strive to revive BLACKSEAFOR as a NATO initiative.
- Turkey could formally be assigned the command over the task force.
- The objective is to enhance Turkey's status and its role within NATO.

NATO external border
- Revive the projects to support Turkey in protecting the NATO external border.
- Evaluate a possible *NATO External Border Force*.
- Begin negotiations about which pro-Western Kurdish units in Syria might be accepted by Turkey and could be deployed for border protection.

Armaments cooperation programs and exports
- Continue joint armament projects to bind Turkey to the West even though basic protection of minorities, the rule of law and human rights are currently not guaranteed.
- Use delays in armament projects as a means to exert pressure when rule-of-law principles are infringed.
- Block the delivery of F-35 fighters as long as Turkey intends to operate the S-400 air defense system.
- Germany too should promote Turkey's increased participation in MBDA/EUROSAM.

Cyprus conflict
- At the EU and NATO level and under the aegis of the UN, push Turkey to recognize Cyprus.
- A drawdown of Turkish troops in Cyprus might be taken as a sign of reconciliation.

Eastern Mediterranean
- Create economic incentives for Turkey to become a contracting party of UNCLOS and create wealth from maritime resources along with other countries of the littoral.
- Support demarcation projects of the EEZ between Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Lebanon and Israel.
- Request that Turkey recognize the International Maritime Court so that an international arbitration court can be called upon in case of territorial or economic disputes.
- With regard to Israeli-Turkish differences, Germany could offer to take over the role of mediator.
- Review by the UN Security Council of Turkey's actions in Syria.

Refugee policy
- Assess the option of installing hotspot centers in Turkey (the current refugee agreement serves as leverage for Ankara; Turkey can permit another wave of refugees into Greece and Europe at any time).
- Initiate financial support and EU development aid projects for Turkey and Syria to decrease future migration and to allow for repatriation after the conflict in Syria has ended.

Suggestions for the bilateral level

Energy policy
- Strengthen bilateral cooperation in the area of energy policy (for instance, when planning pipelines).
- German-Turkish joint ventures in the field of renewable energies.

Politico-military cooperation
- Strive for a partnership of dialogue and cooperation with the Turkish armed forces to maintain and increase their level of democratization (via military diplomacy, training programs and logistic cooperation).
- Review the option of joint maneuvers.

Security policy
- Closer cooperation to identify and prosecute IS sympathizers returning to Europe.
- Review the transfer of technologies to secure borders and fight terrorism.

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Publisher

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for Strategy and Foresight
Bundeswehr University Munich
metis.unibw.de

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Cover image

Daniel Burka on Unsplash

Original title

Wie weiter mit dem NATO-Partner Türkei?

Translation

Federal Office of Languages

ISSN-2627-0609