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The Trouble(s) with Turkey: Turkey and NATO

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POLICY UPDATE

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What is the purpose of an alliance? Surely alliances exist to unite against a common enemy, to strengthen states in unity against a common foe. Alliances promise mutual support and mutual defence against an external enemy. Dictionary.com defines an alliance as "a formal agreement or treaty between two or more nations to cooperate for specific purposes."[1] The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is often seen as an example of a successful alliance. Does that mean it has a clear purpose and enthusiastic cooperation among member states?

The Preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty (also called the Washington Treaty), which created NATO in 1949, states that members "are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security."[2] And Article 3 states that "by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, [members] will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack."[3] Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the threat to Western Europe, however, NATO has struggled with existential angst as it tries to figure out its purpose and relevance in the absence of an external enemy. It has stayed intact as an alliance, and the treaty remains in place. However as the purpose became less clear, the glue that binds the members has become less sticky.

What happens when a member acts in ways that counter the interests of an alliance? The example used here is Turkey. In recent months there has been much debate about whether Turkey should remain in NATO, given its swing from democracy toward authoritarianism under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.[4] Is being democratic a precondition to membership in NATO? Despite the statement in the Preamble that the alliance is "determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their people founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law,"[5] there is nothing in the treaty that says a member needs to be democratic. Indeed, Article 10 states that the members may "by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty."[6] It doesn't say any other *democratic* state, it simply says any other state.

Portugal, one of the original members of NATO, was not a democracy when it joined the alliance under Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar. Both Greece and Turkey joined NATO in 1952. Both states have had episodes in which their democracy was interrupted. Greece experienced a coup in 1967 and was ruled by the military until 1974. Turkey has had a number of domestic military interventions since it joined NATO – the most recent in summer of 2016. These countries were not removed from NATO. So, although the demand for democracy is stronger now than it was in the early years, and states from Eastern Europe were admitted only as they moved toward democracy, it is not a prerequisite. Besides, Erdogan was elected and is, despite what the West thinks of him, popular in Turkey even as he disregards rights and the rule of law. It is not the presence or absence of democracy that is at the heart of the question of the current relationship between Turkey and NATO.

What does Turkey bring to NATO? Turkey is a large country, and its geographic position means it guards the important southern flank of NATO. We can see how important this location is from the key role Turkey is being asked to play by the European Union to control the movement of people from the Middle East to Europe. It is also a large country in terms of population, with almost 80 million in 2016 – much less than the United States but only just behind Germany. With a young population and a much higher *growth* rate, Turkey will overtake Germany in the near future.[7] Its estimated GDP was about $800 billion in 2014.[8] Although the economic and societal factors are important, however, it is the military capability that is interesting in terms of NATO. According to the CIA *World Fact Book*, in 2012 Turkey spent the third highest per cent of GDP of the NATO member states on military expenditures after the United States and the United Kingdom.[9] The World Bank says that in 2015, of NATO members, only the United States (3.3%), Greece (2.6%) and Poland (2.2%) spent more per GDP than Turkey (2.1%) (France also spent 2.1%).[10] The numbers may differ slightly depending on the source, but it is clear that Turkey is one of the few NATO states that actually meets the desired 2% of GDP expenditure on the military. It has robust military forces – land, sea and air – and it had a *deployable* military of almost 500,000 in 2013, second in NATO only to the US military.[11]

The question is how *effective* the Turkish military will be now given the wholesale purges since the failed military coup in July 2016. Once an extremely popular institution, the military has lost public support, and most Turks did not support the coup. As well, it has lost leadership. The purges since the coup have removed thousands of academics, police, judges, teachers, professors, bureaucrats, reporters and members of the military (some accounts say that up to a third of the military leadership has been removed[12]). This has brought the military under extremely firm government control. Are the people who have been elevated to leadership positions, effective leaders? What has this done for the morale of the armed forces? Will the Turkish military now be focused internally on the messy process of loyalty checks, suspicion and criticism? Do the *numbers* relating to the Turkish military now accurately reflect its *effectiveness*?[13] It's hard to say.

NATO has a number of facilities on Turkish soil. For example, it hosts the Allied Land Command in Izmir, a radar centre as part of NATO missile defence, and a Partnership for Peace Training Center established in 1998. The Incirlik Air Base in particular – which is not a NATO facility but has been made available for NATO/US use – has been important for air forces in the fight against ISIS. In the wake of the coup, there was concern that NATO use of the base would be denied. This has not happened, but anti-NATO and anti-American feeling in Turkey is running high.

President Erdogan blames former close confidante, now enemy, Fethullah Gulen for orchestrating the coup. He also apparently believes in the complicity of the United States and/or NATO in the coup, or at least that they were aware of it in advance. Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdag said in a television interview, "The US knows Fethullah Gulen carried out this coup. Mr. Obama knows this just as he knows his own name. I am convinced that American intelligence knows it too. I'm convinced the State Department knows it…."[14] This has been repeated in the state-controlled media. Gulen lives in the United States and the United States has refused to extradite him until Turkey provides evidence of his involvement in the coup. As well, there are allegations that the

military officers leading the coup had strong ties to NATO, and had served in senior positions in the alliance.[15] This may be a coincidence, but it's an element of the current antipathy to NATO and the United States. Turkey has participated in every NATO mission in the past – from Afghanistan to Libya to counter-piracy operations[16] –but will Erdogan now be willing to send Turkish military forces on NATO missions?

The fight against ISIS/Islamic State is one of NATO's priorities. Turkey's behaviour in this fight can best be described as perfidious. While NATO tries to 'degrade and destroy' ISIS, Turkey's focus has been on the removal of Syrian President Bashir al-Assad – a noble priority, and probably the correct one – but by focusing on Assad, Turkey has allowed its territory to be used by and for the forces of ISIS. A German Ministry of the Interior report leaked in August 2016 claimed that "as a result of Ankara's domestic and foreign policy that has been Islamized step-by-step above all since 2011, Turkey has developed into the central platform of action for Islamist groups in the Middle East region."[17] Turkey is also complicating the fight to take Mosul back from ISIS – as if it weren't complicated enough. The Iraqi government has said that it doesn't need Turkey's help in the fight. It also says that Turkish military forces in Iraq are contravening Iraq's sovereignty and wants them to leave. But the Turkish Prime Minister stated "The Iraqi leadership is being provocative. Turkey does not bow to anyone's threats. Turkey will continue to be present there [in Iraq near Mosul]."[18] The United States is caught in the escalating tension between the Iraqi government and the Turkish government, with the added complexity of the Iraqi Kurds who are also involved in the fight for Mosul.

The other focus Turkey has in the conflict(s) on its borders is the Kurds. Turkey defines its own Kurdish group, the PKK, as a terrorist group.[19] Turkish military forces entered Syria in August 2016, but its campaign in Syria has not targeted ISIS. Rather Turkey is targeting Kurdish forces (the YPG) of the Syrian Defence Forces – the very forces on which NATO is relying heavily to do the ground work against ISIS.[20] Turkey wants to prevent consolidation of Kurdish territory in Syria (and Iraq) as a priority, not stop ISIS. In a speech in early October, Erdogan said of the Turkish military move into Syria/Iraq, "From now on we will not wait for problems to come knocking on our door, we will not wait until the blade is against our bone and skin, and we will not wait for terrorist organizations to come and attack us."[21] But contrary to NATO, when he refers to terrorist organizations he means the Kurds, not ISIS.

And then there's Russia. In November 2015 Turkey was causing grey hairs in NATO when it shot down a Russian warplane for crossing into its airspace. That led to a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia – something that NATO is always anxious to avoid – and the severing of ties and trade between Russia and Turkey.

However, in the post-coup aftermath, President Erdogan has mended fences with Russia (and Israel). Despite NATO/the West's imposition of sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea, and its actions in Syria, President Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin met in August and declared their undying support for each other. Indeed, Russia was the first country Erdogan visited after the coup attempt, and Putin provided strong support to him immediately after the

failed attempt. In an interview with Russian media in August, Turkey's Foreign Minister stated that "Turkey wanted to cooperate with NATO members up to this point. But the results we got did not satisfy us. Therefore, it is natural to look for other options. But we don't see this as a move against NATO."[22] He is also quoted in the Russian media as saying that the West treated both Turkey and Russia as "second-class citizens."[23] How long this meeting of minds between Putin and Erdogan will last – especially given that they're on opposite sides of the war in Syria – is unknown, but again Turkey is out of step with NATO.

Conclusions

Turkey isn't the first NATO country to stray from the path of the alliance. France pulled away from NATO for years, and Hungary is also out of step in terms of democracy and relations with Russia. But Turkey right now is the biggest challenge to the unity of the alliance. NATO clearly has no influence over Turkey's behaviour, and the carrot of EU membership is no longer credible so it no longer affects Turkey's behaviour.[24]

Is Turkey an asset to NATO? Or is it a liability? Is it adding to Western security, or detracting from it? It has strong military capability and it is useful for NATO to have a member that has a connection with the Muslim world, a member that may have a better understanding of the Middle East than most European countries, and as a sign that NATO isn't biased against Muslims. But Turkey is now following a path that is not only not compatible with NATO but actively counter to NATO interests.

Will there be a divorce from NATO – and if so who will divorce whom? Article 13 lays out the procedure to leave the NATO alliance. It states:

> After the Treaty has been in force for twenty years, any Party may cease to be a Party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given to the Government of the United States of America, which will inform the Governments of the other Parties of the deposit of each notice of denunciation.[25]

There is apparently no provision for a member to be evicted – only for a member to withdraw. And, incidentally, there are no provisions for punishment or repercussions for a member that acts contrary to NATO interests.

It seems unlikely that NATO would eject Turkey. It has made public statements denying that there's even a problem. NATO issued a statement in August 2016 about its stance on the attempted coup and Turkey's membership in NATO. It stated that "Turkey is a valued ally" and that "Turkey's membership is not in question."[26] The United States has attempted to mend relations – short of extraditing Gulen – by sending American representatives there, including the Vice-President. James Stavridis, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, said that "Turkey has an enormous ability to influence events [in the Middle East]. Washington needs to be a good

friend." He recommends that NATO/the United States work hard to show Turkey respect, support the government and cooperate with it, particularly in intelligence sharing via NATO.[27]

What is far more likely than being kicked out is that Turkey would withdraw from NATO, perhaps in a fit of pique by President Erdogan, because of a perceived lack of respect shown to Turkey, and annoyance about the never-ending/never-beginning talks about EU accession.

If Turkey withdraws – Turexit – NATO loses significant credibility. Aside from the nightmare of untangling NATO assets, offices and forces, it loses a state that is an important member of the Muslim community, and Turkey's withdrawal would turn NATO into an all-Christian alliance. NATO loses significant military capability, it loses access to the Black Sea, and it probably loses the use of Incirlik base from which to launch air attacks in Syria/Iraq. And, it makes Russia happy. As well, if Turkey is annoyed enough to leave NATO, this probably also means that it will be unwilling to cooperate on migrant flows to Europe.

But the withdrawal of Turkey might help the alliance regain some strategic purpose. It's been difficult enough to hold NATO together in the absence of the Warsaw Pact, but when one of its largest members starts playing different games, on different teams, with different rules, it isn't helpful. The glue holding NATO together is dried out and weak. Certainly the aggressiveness shown by Russia in recent years has quickened the pulse of the alliance, but NATO still claims that it is not targeted at Russia. Perhaps it would be easier to end the debate about Turexit if we knew the purpose of NATO. How can we judge if Turkey should remain in the alliance if we don't know why the alliance exists?

1. See Dictionary.com. Wikipedia defines a military alliance as "an international agreement concerning national security, when the contracting parties promise to support each other in case of a crisis that has not been identified in advance."
2. North Atlantic Treaty, Preamble.
3. *Ibid*., Article 3.
4. See, for example, Doug Bandow, "Invite Turkey to Leave NATO: Ankara Shares Few Values or Interests with the West," Huffington Post, 23 August 2016; Doug Bandow, "Toss Turkey Out of NATO: US Doesn't Need Civilian Dictatorship or Military Junta," *Forbes*, 27 July 2016; Marwan Bishara, "Turexit: Should Turkey Leave NATO?" *Al Jazeera*, 21 July 2016 (also published in *US News*, 27 July 2016); Semih Idiz, "Will Turkey be Expelled from NATO?" *Al-Monitor*, 26 July 2016; Bernd Riegert, "NATO and Turkey: Allies, Not Friends," *Deutsch World/DW*, 2 August 2016; Metin Gurcan, "Is Turkey Abandoning NATO or Vice Versa?" *Al-Monitor*, 18 August 2016; Council on Foreign Relations, "Turkey Update: Erdogan's Outlook and the Consequences of the Failed Coup," interview with Stephen Cook, 19 July 2016; Halil I. Danismaz, "The US and NATO Need Turkey," *Time*, 22 August 2016; Kyle Matthews, "The Increasing Incompatibility of the Turkish-Western Alliance," OpenCanada.org, 12 October 2016; Peter Korzun, "Turkey on the Way to Exit NATO: No Reasons to Stay," Strategic Culture, 22 August 2016; Gearoid O Colmain, "Turkey's New Role: From NATO Lapdog to Emerging Empire?" Global Research, 31 August 2016.
5. North Atlantic Treaty, Preamble.
6. *Ibid*., Article 10.
7. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population Division; and Worldometers.
8. The number $800 billion for 2014 comes from International Monetary Fund (IMF), "World Economic Outlook Database April 2015," April 2015.
9. CIA, *World Fact Book 2016*, Turkey, Military/Armed Forces. According to the CIA *World Fact Book*, in 2012 the United States spent the highest per cent of GDP on military expenditures at 4.35%, the United Kingdom 2.49%, and Turkey 2.31%.
10. The World Bank, "Military Expenditure (% of GDP)," 2016, at http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS. And see SIPRI. "Military Expenditure Database," Stockholm, 2015.
11. Military personnel data from NATO, "Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence," NATO, 24 February 2014. See also "Turkey Military Strength," Global Fire Power, no date.
12. See Doug Bandow, "Toss Turkey Out of NATO: US Doesn't Need Civilian Dictatorship or Military Junta," *Forbes*, 27 July 2016.
13. There were also reports that Turkey's naval capabilities were reduced after the coup attempt. There were rumours that 14 Turkish warships had disappeared after the coup. President Erdogan denied the rumours. See David Axe, "Turkey Denies Its Warships Vanished," The Daily Beast, 20 July 2016; "14 Turkish Naval Vessels Missing since Coup Attempt," Rudaw, 20 July 2016; Georgi Gotev, Sarantis Michalopoulos, "14 Turkish Navy Ships 'Missing' at Sea Since Foiled Coup," EurActive.com, 19 July 2016.
14. Quoted in Semih Idiz, "Will Turkey be Expelled from NATO?" Aal-Monitor, 26 July 2016.
15. For a discussion of the NATO connection, see Peter Korzun, "Turkey on the Way to Exit NATO: No Reasons to Stay," Strategic Culture, 22 August 2016; and Metin Gurcan, "Is Turkey Abandoning NATO or Vice Versa?" *Al-Monitor*, 18 August 2016. For example, Turkey issued an arrest warrant for Vice-Admiral Mustafa Zeki Ugurlu who was Assistant Chief of Staff at NATO Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia. The arrest warrant – issued three days before the coup attempt – charged that he was affiliated with Gulenist movement. Turkey wanted NATO to terminate his posting and return him to Turkey. Ugurlu applied for asylum and has apparently 'disappeared' in the United States.
16. James Stavridis, former Commander, NATO, says "Turkey has sent troops, aircraft, and ships to every NATO mission: to Afghanistan, the Balkans, Syria, Libya and on counterpiracy missions." James Stavridis, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, "Turkey and NATO: What comes Next is Messy," *Foreign Policy*, 18 July 2016.
17. Quoted in Jack Moore, "Leaked German Report Calls Turkey 'Platform' for Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Syrian Rebel Groups," *Newsweek*, 17 August 2016, www.newsweek.com/leaked-german-report-calls-turkey-platform-hamas-muslim-brotherhood-syria-490963.
18. "Iraq Turns Down Turkey's Help in Battle for Mosul," *Al Jazeera*, 22 October 2016; "Battle for Mosul: Turkey Confirms Military Involvement," *Al Jazeera*, 24 October 2016.
19. This is not the time to discuss the suspicious circumstances that ended the ceasefire with the Kurds in Turkey, and the second election that allowed Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) to re-take Parliament – after losing its majority in the June 2015 election – by using a terrorist attack to vilify the Kurds and any opponents of the AKP.

20. For one account, see Ece Toksabay and Angus McDowall, "Turkey Bombs Syrian Kurdish Militia Allied to US-backed Force," Reuters, 20 October 2016.
21. Quoted in *ibid*.
22. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, as quoted in "Turkey Considering Military Ties with Russia as NATO Shows Unwillingness to Cooperate - Ankara," *Russian Times/RT*, 18 August 2016. See also Harriet Mallinson, "Turkey Warns it Could Leave NATO Because of a 'Lack of Support by the West' as the Country Forms Close Ties with Russia," *Daily Mail*, 10 August 2016. In addition to political ties, the Presidents of Turkey and Russia announced in early October 2016 that the pipeline project, put on hold after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, was back on.
23. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, as quoted in "Turkey Considering Military Ties with Russia as NATO Shows Unwillingness to Cooperate - Ankara," *Russian Times/RT*, 18 August 2016.
24. There's fault on both sides here. The EU has clearly illustrated that it's not willing to negotiate seriously with Turkey on accession. Even the promise of visa-free travel for Turks if the immigration plan is implemented – which leaves Turkey holding the bag of hundreds of thousands of immigrants trying to make it to Europe – is not credible. But Turkey is not helping either with its slow implementation of EU standards, and now its reversal of much of the progress it had already made.
25. North Atlantic Treaty, Article 13.
26. NATO, "NATO Spokesperson's Statement on Turkey," Press Release, 10 August 2016.
27. James Stavridis, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, "Turkey and NATO: What Comes Next is Messy," *Foreign Policy*, 18 July 2016. For a different/radical perspective on this, see Gearoid O Colmain who says "if the choice is between a monster the CIA wants out and a monster the CIA wants in, the latter is the best option as it weakens U.S. imperialism." "Turkey's New Role: From NATO Lapdog to Emerging Empire?" Global Research, 31 August 2016.

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Dr. Ann Griffiths received her BA (Hons) from Queen's University, her MA from the University of Calgary and her PhD from Dalhousie University. She is currently the Editor of Canadian Naval Review which is published by the Centre for the Study of Security and Development (formerly the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies) at Dalhousie University. She teaches part-time in the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie University. Her research and teaching interests include security and defence, conflict, warfare, human rights, peacebuilding and democratization.

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