

# Turkey and NATO

TARIK OĞUZLU

*Antalya International University*

## ABSTRACT

This article aims at discussing the shift in Turkey's approach towards NATO, especially after the end of the Cold War, in order to provide a deeper understanding on the very characteristic of the security cooperation between Turkey and the West in the post-Cold War era. The reasons that made Turkey more critical and questioning towards the Alliance in the last two decades will also be analyzed through the concepts of "security" and "identity", as divergences have become much more common than convergences between Turkey and the West for some time. Notwithstanding Turkey's critical attitude within the Alliance, troublesome issues ranging from Iran's nuclear program to Syrian Civil War, from sectarian politics in Iraq to Kurdish assertiveness in Turkey's vicinity, forced Turkey to reevaluate its stance towards NATO and the vitality of it for Turkey's security and foreign policy goals.

**Key Words:** Turkey, NATO, Cold War, security, identity, interests, security cooperation.

# Türkiye ve NATO

## ÖZ

Bu makale, Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde, Türkiye'nin NATO'ya yaklaşımındaki değişimi tartışarak, bu dönemde Türkiye ve Batı arasındaki güvenlik işbirliğinin niteliğini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bir süredir Türkiye ve NATO arasındaki yaklaşım farklılıkları uzlaşmaların önüne geçtiği için, Türkiye'nin takındığı eleştirel ve sorgulayıcı tavrın sebepleri, "güvenlik" ve "kimlik" kavramları çerçevesinde değerlendirilecektir. Türkiye'nin NATO'ya yönelik eleştirel tutumu bir yana, İran'ın nükleer programı, Irak'taki merkezi otoritenin mezhepçi politikaları, Suriye'de devam etmekte olan iç savaş ve Kürt meselesi gibi problemlili konular, Türkiye'nin bu tutumunu ve NATO'nun kendi dış ve güvenlik çıkarları açısından önemini bir kere daha gözden geçirmesine sebep olmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, NATO, Soğuk Savaş, güvenlik, kimlik, çıkarlar, güvenlik işbirliği.

Turkey has been one of the most important members of NATO since its accession to the Alliance in 1952. Having defined for many years its foreign, defense and security policies on the basis of NATO membership, Turkey began to adopt a more questioning and critical perspective towards the Alliance with the end of the Cold War. Although NATO continues to maintain its importance in Turkish foreign and security policy thinking, it would be wrong to suggest that this is at the same level as it was during the Cold War era. Some public opinion polls show that not many people in Turkey consider NATO membership as essential for the security of the country (*Transatlantic Trends* (Anon., 2011: 24)).

Even though elite groups maintain their commitment to NATO, there is a rising skeptical approach in public towards the West in general, and the U.S. and EU members in particular. Apart from temporal and conjectural convergence between Turkey and Western countries at some times, for instance during the course of the Arab Spring, the trend is that Turkey has been relatively getting estranged from the Western world for the last decade. The degree of divergence between the basic dynamics of Turkey's foreign and security policies and those of the western world has witnessed an increase over the last two decades. This article will put an emphasis on Turkey's changing approach towards NATO in order to better gauge the scope of security cooperation between Turkey and the West.

In doing so, this study will examine the factors that have been shaping Turkey's approach towards the Alliance since the end of the Cold War era up to now from an analytical perspective. There are two main arguments. First, the two major lenses through which observers can shed light on Turkey's commitment towards NATO are *identity* and *security*. Second, Turkey's perspective on NATO has turned out to become more *critical and questioning* as Turkey's identity and security interests have been exposed to new definitions over the last two decades.

## THE COLD WAR PERIOD

After the Second World War ended, Turkey wanted to join NATO from a security oriented perspective. Not possessing the means to cope with the threats stemming from the Soviet Union on its own (for instance, Moscow's territorial demands on the Straits and the provinces of Kars and Ardahan in eastern Anatolia) Turkey wanted to secure western help by joining the multilateral security organization NATO. As the *Realist* International Relations theory presumes, Turkey desired to become a member of NATO with a view to shoring up its resistance capability against the threats emanating from outside sources. From the very beginning, NATO has primarily been a *collective defense* organization for Turkey.

The most important factor that facilitated Turkey's accession to the Alliance was that the United States, as being the most important NATO member, attributed a tremendous importance to Turkey's geopolitical position and military capacity in the context of Cold War's security dynamics. The assumption on the part of the US strate-

gists was that the task of fulfilling NATO's *containment* and *deterrence* strategies vis-à-vis the Soviet Union would be much easier if Turkey joined the Alliance and prevented the Soviet penetration into the eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions. Joining a multilateral collective defense organization like NATO meant that Turkey had left the policy of remaining neutral among great powers behind. Gradually, Turkey aligned its national security interests and policies with those of the NATO Alliance.

However, while NATO membership strengthened Turkey's hand against the communist danger, it also simultaneously limited its maneuvering capability in its neighborhood and turned Turkey into a battle ground of East-West confrontation.

Even though Turkey's decision to send soldiers to the Korean War in 1950 proved to be effective in easing the objections of those who initially opposed to Turkey's membership in NATO, the most important development that made Turkey's membership possible was that the then-US Administration came to the conclusion that the Soviet Union would pursue expansionist policies in regions around Turkey (Leffer, 1985). Another factor that facilitated Turkey's membership was Turkey's continuous refusal to be included in a UK-led multilateral security organization in the Middle East as well as sign off to a bilateral security relationship with the United States outside NATO framework. Given that Western countries did not want to see Turkey pursue an *active neutrality* policy, as it did during the Second World War, they soon came to the conclusion that the best way to ensure Turkey's placement within the western camp would be to let Turkey in the Alliance.

Another factor that initially pushed Turkey to seek membership in NATO and later on proved to be one of the main reasons for its justification in the eyes of Turkish people was that NATO membership was considered as an important milestone in Turkey's decades-old Westernization/Europeanization/modernization process. Thanks to NATO membership, Turkey could argue for many years that it was a Western/European state. Turkey, which saw joining other Western international organizations from a similar perspective, could not have stayed outside the most important security organization of the West. Compared to other western international organizations, it proved to be much easier for Turkey to help legitimize its Western/European identity through NATO, for the alliance was in dire need of having an access to Turkey's geographical location and military capabilities. It was within NATO that Turkey's bargaining capability vis-à-vis the West was the highest.

Unlike the European Union membership process, Turkey was not asked to meet detailed membership criteria beforehand (Kayaoğlu, 2009). Paradoxically, it might be argued that Turkey's internalization of Western values and norms proved to be much easier following the accession to NATO. After all, given that NATO has from the very beginning represented the unity of countries believing in liberal-democratic values, Turkish leaders could be acquainted with those values more easily under the roof of NATO. Furthermore, the impact of NATO membership on the evolution of civilian-military relations in Turkey to more European and Western standards should not be underestimated (Karaosmanoğlu, 2011).

On the other hand, this positive role of NATO membership in the adoption of western values and norms by Turkish elites seems to have been overshadowed by another side effect of membership. To be considered as an asset by the West due to its military capacity and geographical position, and the fact that the US, as the most important member of the Alliance, supported Turkey's integration in Western institutions mainly from a military-strategic perspective, might have indirectly led Turkish elites to think that Turkey's liberal-democratic transformation would not be a precondition of becoming a part of the Western international society. This thinking appears to have weakened Turkey's ability to comply with the EU membership criteria later on.

Given that Turkey and other NATO members regarded the Soviet Union as the common enemy during the Cold War, Turkey was able to pursue NATO-oriented foreign and security policies. Despite the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the Johnson Letter crisis in 1964, the arms embargo crisis in 1975, and the anti-U.S. sentiments running high in the country from time to time; NATO preserved its privileged position in Turkey's security thinking during much of the Cold War period. The most distinctive characteristic of Turkey's approach towards the Alliance during this period was that Turkish elites interpreted the risks of being abandoned by NATO much more important than the risks of being entrapped by some alliance policies. Even though skepticism towards NATO and the U.S. increased from time to time, and certain groups contended that it would be more appropriate for Turkey to withdraw from membership and seek closer strategic relations with the Soviet Union and Third World countries, the advantages of remaining within NATO seem to have far outweighed the costs of membership (Türkmen, 2010).

## POST-COLD WAR PERIOD: NEW DEFINITIONS OF INTERESTS AND IDENTITY

After the Cold War ended and the threat stemming from the Soviet Union disappeared, Turkey's attitude towards the Alliance has begun to change. In order to understand the dynamics of Turkey's changing attitude towards the Alliance better, it would be of use to shed light on how Turkey's security and identity definitions evolved.

The *Realist* International Relations theory, which attributes great value to countries' power capabilities might help observers in this context. The last two decades have seen that compared to its neighbors Turkey's hard and soft power capabilities have tremendously improved. Simultaneously, Turkey has begun to play more active foreign policy roles. Turkey's efforts to reach out to non-western geographies and actors have increased. Besides, the international system has gradually gained a *multipolar* character, with the strict limitations of the Cold War era coming to an end. Such factors have gradually rendered the unidimensional and NATO-centric definition of Turkey's foreign and security policies obsolete.

Furthermore, threats leveled against Turkey's national security have changed during this process. While the end of Cold War reduced the threats stemming from the Soviet Union and positively affected Turkish-Russian relations, developments in the Middle East, Balkans and Caucasus have started to become more important in the context of Turkey's security. It is necessary to note that the threats stemming from the aforesaid regions have never been as *vital* as the threats that once originated from the Soviet Union. Developments in such regions appeared to be more *risks* and *challenges* than *threats*. This situation has weakened NATO's special and privileged position in the definition of Turkey's foreign and security policies, for the need to rely on NATO's nuclear security umbrella has dwindled. Besides, as Turkey's maneuvering capability increased and its capacity to help shape regional developments became stronger, it has gradually become a necessity that Turkey adopts different methods and tools in its foreign policy.

Given that NATO was considered to be a collective defense organization in the context of European security, it might even be suggested that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the gradual amelioration in European security feeling helped dilute NATO's primacy as a European security organization. That a quite number of observers have begun to contest the ability of NATO to persist as a collective defense organization in the absence of the common Soviet threat appears to make it easier to understand why NATO has lost some of its appeal in the eyes of Turkish elites.

Another factor that has proved to be effective in shaping Turkey's attitude towards NATO in the post-Cold War era is that the quality of Turkey's relations with European allies have begun to be much more dependent on the pace of Turkey's accession process with the European Union. As Turkey's contribution to Europe's security within the NATO has gradually become less-emphasized absent the common Soviet threat, Turkey's relations with European states have become very much linked to the developments in Turkey's EU membership process.

Nevertheless, given that NATO proved effective in ending the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans in 1990s, one could argue that the Alliance continued to preserve its position in European security for sometime. However, the 1990s should be seen as aberration. As the ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo came to the end and the majority of Balkans wanted to be a part of western institutions, these regions no longer posed threats to Europe's security. During the 1990s NATO contributed to European security through enlarging first towards central and eastern Europe and then the Balkans. However, as the developments in European continent no longer posed potential threats to European security, NATO's identity as a European defense organization has gradually become pointless. In an environment in which the number of people who argued that NATO would remain either out of area or out of business increased and Turkey's security began to be increasingly affected by the developments taking place in non-European geographies, it has become more difficult to build Turkey's foreign and security policies primarily on the western axis, of which NATO has been the most important component.

This transformation in Turkey's foreign and security policy thinking has gained a more visible character with the advent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to government in the early 2000s. During the reign of successive AKP governments over the last decade Turkey has been taking great pains to improve its relations with neighboring countries and create zones of peace and stability in its environment. Had Turkey, which has seen the improvement of relations with neighbors vital and increased its efforts to help eliminate potential security threats originating from its neighborhood, continued to follow a primarily NATO-oriented foreign and security policy, it would have most likely failed to achieve its goals. Worth noting in this regard is that Turkey's relations with Russia and Iran have dramatically improved as Turkey has gradually left the NATO-centered foreign and security policy mentality behind.

The *identity*-based considerations that had been very much instrumental in shaping Turkey's attitude towards NATO during the Cold War years have also begun to change with the advent of the 1990s. Even though identity related motivations have gained primacy during the reign of the AKP governments, the footprints of such concerns were quite evident in the first decade of the post-Cold War era. The common attitude adopted by all governments over the last two decades is that Turkey's national identity cannot be defined only in reference to the western world. There has been a continuing emphasis to highlight Turkey's multiple identities. Of particular note is that Turkey has been seen by many as a country that could bridge and bind different civilizations and identities to each other (Yanık, 2009). The aforesaid trend has gained more momentum over the last decade. The idea that Turkey is the inheritor of the Ottoman Empire and should make use of the Ottoman legacy in the fields of culture, religion and politics has found sympathetic chords with the AKP governments.

To AKP governments, Turkey should be defined as a *central country*, suggesting that Turkish rulers adopt a Turkey-centric worldview in defining national interests and policies. In addition, Turkey should be in a position to feel itself as a part of each and every geographical location. It would be quite normal for Turkey to see itself *eastern* in the East, *western* in the West, *northern* in the North, and *southern* in the South. The main foreign policy objective of Turkey should be to help shape regional developments decisively and to forge interests-based *pragmatic* relationships with key global actors. Turkish foreign policy should be defined and conducted in a *multi-lateral* and *multi-dimensional* fashion to make sure that regional and global developments do not negatively affect the liberal democratic transformation and economic development processes at home. Being a country that takes regional and global initiatives, help mediate interstate and intrastate conflicts and fully adopts a global consciousness is not only in the interests of Turkey but also an historical responsibility bequeathed from the Ottoman Empire.

## BASIC PARAMETERS OF TURKEY'S CHANGING ATTITUDE TOWARDS NATO

Turkey's changing approach towards the Alliance, which has been to a significant extent informed by new definitions of national interests and identity, can be noticed in multiple ways.

The first point to emphasize is that Turkey has been striving to play a more *possessive* and *shaping* role in the transformation process of NATO in the post-Cold War environment. Even though Turkey's success in affecting NATO's transformation process in its interest is open to debate, what seems to be non-debatable is that Turkey has begun to take initiatives during this process. As Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has been quiet often stating in recent years, Turkey strives to be the *subject* and *owner* of the Alliance, instead of being a mere *object* of NATO's policies (Davutoğlu, 2012). Turkey's objective in this regard has been to play more effective roles in NATO's transformation process to ensure that the policies to be adopted by NATO allies do not negatively affect Turkey's *multi-lateral* national identity, and *multi-dimensional* and *multi-directional* foreign policy interests. The idea here is that the closer relations Turkey has established with neighbors and the peace and stability that Turkey has been striving to bring into existence in its region should not be jeopardized by policies NATO allies could adopt on the issues pertaining to the transformation process. Turkey's Achill's heel during this process has been to remain in between its traditional partners within NATO and its neighbors to the east, south and north.

Some examples of Turkey's new attitude towards NATO as described above are as follows: Turkey provided military support for the peace-keeping operations carried out by NATO in Balkans (especially in Bosnia and Kosovo), Turkey supported NATO's expansion toward Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary (Karaosmanoğlu, 1999), Turkey encouraged the Alliance in its efforts to help radiate NATO's values to the countries, which are not to be NATO members, within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace Program.

On the other hand, Turkey has taken great pains to walk a fine line between the Alliance and Russia. From Turkey's perspective, NATO should take into consideration Russia's concerns and sensitivities. In Turkish eyes, NATO's expansion towards Russia and efforts to increase its military presence around the Black Sea region might be perceived as threatening by Russia and consequently might lead Russians feel besieged. This situation would likely result in Russia pursuing more nationalist and expansionist policies. This might in turn lead Turkish-Russian relations to be defined on the basis of rivalry and hostility again, as it was during the Cold War.

As a matter of fact, since the end of the Cold War, Turkish-Russian relations have been developing on the basis of cooperation and friendship (Kınıklıoğlu, n.d.). In this context, Turkey's position on NATO-Russia relations was quite similar to that of the



European allies of NATO, to which the Alliance would do well to calculate the potential consequences of Georgia and Ukraine's membership and the risks that might arise following NATO's military penetration into the Black Sea. Similar to other European allies, particularly Germany and France, Turkey also holds the view that Russia's concerns should be taken into account while developing NATO's missile defense shield systems.

Secondly, Turkey has adopted a more *questioning* and *critical* stance throughout NATO's transformation process. Turkey's main objective has been to prevent the transformation process of NATO from negatively affecting its relations with its neighbors as well as the positive perception of Turkey in the Islamic world. For instance, Turkey has evaluated NATO's missile defense shield system in the context of its relations with Iran. The assumption held by the security circles in Turkey was that in case some parts of this system were installed in Turkish territories, Iran might have considered it as a threat against itself and adopted a more hostile attitude towards Turkey. This very much explains why Turkey increased its efforts to ensure that NATO's new security document to be adopted in Lisbon in November 2010 does not mention Iran as a threat and emphasize that the radar component of the system to be deployed in Turkey is for purely defensive purposes.

A similar situation could also be observed in the appointment process of NATO's new Secretary-General in 2009. Turkey initially opposed to the appointment of Denmark's then-Prime Minister Rasmussen as NATO Secretary-General. The offensive attitude adopted by Rasmussen in the cartoon crisis against Muslims in 2005 was effective in Turkey's opposition. Had Turkey tolerated and approved the appointment of a person, who finds it right to criticize and satirize sacred values of Islam on the grounds of freedom of expression, this might have negatively affected Turkey's soft power and improving image across the Muslim World in recent years. Eventually, following the last-ditched efforts of US President Obama Turkey lifted its objections to Rasmussen's candidacy.

Similar Turkish concerns can also be noticed in the context of NATO's role and mission in Afghanistan. Turkey sent troops to the international ISAF forces under the command of NATO, but wanted these troops to perform civilian duties rather than combat roles. Turkey demonstrated a maximum effort for NATO's fight against Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces not to be perceived as a fight against Islam.

The third character of Turkey's changing attitude towards NATO is that despite adopting a critical and questioning attitude on some of the issues coming to the agenda of the Alliance, Turkey has paid an utmost care not to veto any particular decision should all other allies agreed on. Turkey has not wanted to be seen as the maverick within the Alliance. The best example of this attitude took place on the occasion of NATO's military operation in Libya. Turkey initially opposed to NATO's intervention in Libya. This operation was at the beginning launched by England and France outside NATO framework and then taken over by the Alliance. Turkey was extremely sensitive on the possibility of this NATO operation causing severe human losses in Libya and negatively affecting Turkey's image across the Islamic world. However, once the allies



sorted out their disagreements and decided that NATO should take over the operational responsibility, Turkey became a part of this consensus. However, Turkey played an important role in setting the limits and operational mandate of the operation to be carried out in Libya. Turkey was highly sensitive that ground troops not be used during the operation and the primary mission to be controlling the embargo imposed on Gaddafi forces from the sea and air.

Another characteristic of Turkey's changing approach towards NATO is that Turkey wants to play an active role in NATO's efforts to reach out to the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf regions. For example, Turkey actively supported NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiatives (ICI). Turkey lent its support to NATO's efforts to develop lasting security cooperation with the countries in those regions and to project its values.

Another characteristic of Turkey's changing approach towards the Alliance is that Turkey's new attitude has been informed by more interests-based calculations than identity-related considerations. This can be best observed in Turkey's position on the institutional relationship between NATO and EU. Turkey has wanted to make use of its membership in NATO in the context of EU's attempts at having access to NATO's military capabilities and operational facilities. Turkey's stance on this issue cannot be dissociated from the dynamics of Turkey's relations with the European Union, particularly the slow-going accession process. It would not be wrong to argue that Turkey did not ease the way for the EU to have access to NATO's facilities and capabilities so long as the EU members adopted a reluctant attitude towards Turkey's accession to the EU and questioned the credentials of Turkey's European identity and place in European security architecture.

Lastly, Turkey's new attitude towards the Alliance seems to have been informed by more the risks of being entrapped by NATO's policies than the risks of being abandoned by the Alliance. As Turkey's dependency on NATO in terms of security and identity decreased, Turkey has adopted a more questioning attitude towards the Alliance. This attitude, however, by no means suggests that Turkey underestimates NATO's vitality in the materialization of Turkey's security interests in the emerging security environments at regional and global levels.

## CONCLUSION

Although this analysis might lead observers to conclude that Turkey's dependency on NATO is decreasing and that the Alliance is losing its erstwhile privileged position in the context of Turkey's foreign and security policies, Turkey still attaches importance to NATO and the security guarantee it provides to Turkey. Turkey's reliance on NATO has recently become conspicuous as the developments associated with the so-called Arab Spring have begun to affect Turkey's security interests negatively and resulted in further chaos and instability in the Middle East. Turkey's security feelings have deteriorated as

Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons have increased and Iran's influence in Iraq expanded. The civil war in Syria, the sectarian policies adopted by Maliki in Iraq, the growing possibility that Israel might strike at Iran's nuclear facilities and the new dynamics of Kurdish movement across the region have also added up to Turkey's insecurity feelings.

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, regional rivalries and polarizations have intensified in the region. Such developments appear to have led Turkish decision makers to reevaluate NATO's role in Turkey's security calculations. As of today, it seems that Turkey has rediscovered the usefulness of the Alliance particularly given that the ongoing internal war in Syria carries the risk of putting Turkey's territorial security into jeopardy. Turkey's decision to ask for the Alliance to deploy surface-to-air Patriot missiles along the Syrian border is of particular note in this context.

Another reason that continues to justify Turkey's coming closer to NATO is that through this way Turkey could re-establish bolder strategic relations with Western countries, particularly the US. Membership in NATO is still the most important evidence of Turkey's place in the western international society. Withdrawing from NATO or adopting an obstructionist attitude within the Alliance would bring into existence serious suspicions on Turkey's foreign policy intentions and interests. This situation would not only affect Turkey's relations with Western actors negatively, but also decrease Turkey's soft power across the world.

To recap, NATO is still important for Turkey, yet Turkey's changing identity and interests will continue to lead Turkish decision makers to adopt more questioning and critical attitudes towards the Alliance in the years to come. NATO will hardly maintain its privileged position in Turkish security thinking it used to possess in the past.

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