

Turkey's Relations with and Relevance for NATO

Eugene Kogan

It should be remembered that Turkey's relations with NATO were not as smooth as perhaps some experts wish to think, even before the failed coup on 15 July 2016. For instance, back in November 2009 the AKP government was adamant that despite Turkish soldiers' participation in the ISAF mission they were not combat troops.

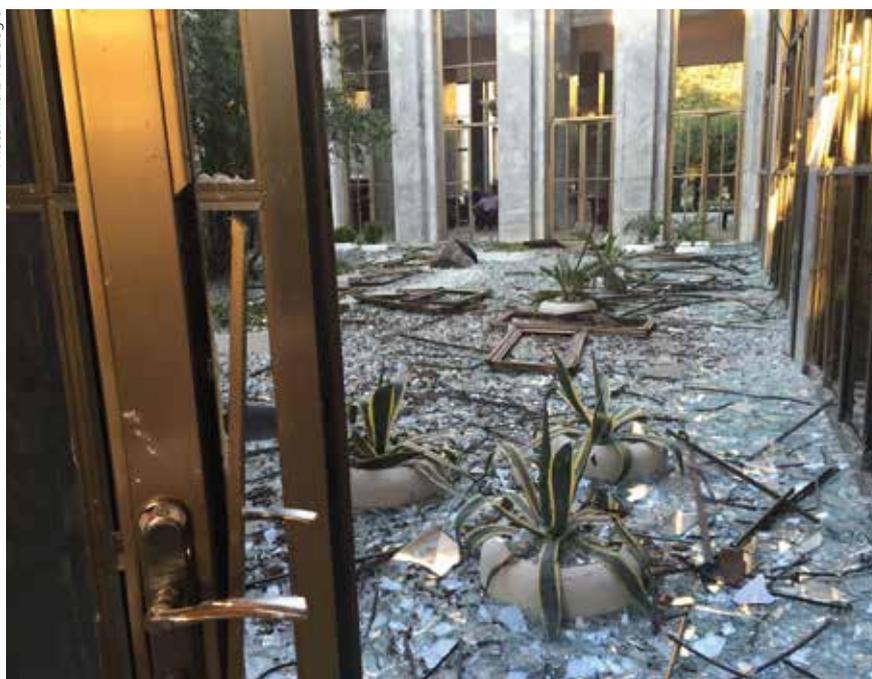
Turkey's position at the time irked allies in NATO and the US in particular, and it has not changed since then. Although Prime Minister Erdogan played hardball in the April 2009 decision against the nomination of new NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, it did not help at the time to assuage Turkey's grievances, and it only irritated EU NATO leaders and contributed to the already strained relations between the EU NATO member states and Turkey.

There is no doubt that relations between Turkey and NATO further worsened after the failed coup, with plenty of uncertainty at the NATO Headquarters on what exactly did happen in Turkey. The massive arrests following the failed coup and in particular those arrests of the highest echelons of the Turkish military further contributed to the strained relations between Turkey and its NATO partners. The numbers of the military purged are staggering. Since the mass purges beginning on 27 July 2016, about 44 percent of the land force generals, 42 percent of air force generals, and 58 percent of naval admirals were removed from the office.

Simply Surviving as an Institution

Admiral James Stavridis, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO Allied Command Operations (SACEUR), said shortly after the failed coup in August 2016 that: "The importance and service capability of the Turkish armed forces in NATO is likely to decrease. Unfortunately, it is likely that the military in the wake of

Photo: Yildiz Yazicioglu



Parts of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey were destroyed during the coup on 15 July 2016.

the coup will be laser-focused on internal controversy, endless investigations, and loyalty checks – and simply surviving as an institution. This will have a chilling effect on military readiness and performance. While some operations have resumed at the crucial Incirlik Air Base, co-operation is already frozen across many US and NATO channels."

The current SACEUR General Curtis Scaparrotti conceded in December 2016 that the purge of Turkish staff at the NATO Headquarters "impacted [on NATO's integrated command] because it was largely very senior personnel, and you lose a good deal of experience. I had talented, capable people here and I am taking degradation on my staff for the skill, the expertise and the work that they produced." General Scaparrotti added that the purge has also affected Turkey's military readiness. "One of the ar-

eas is their air force. Those [removed] were the senior pilots, so they are working now to train younger pilots. It had an impact. I would not say it was serious, but I would say it is noticeable."

Asylum-Seeking Military Staff

One also needs to remember that an unknown number of Turkish military personnel stationed in NATO member states such as Belgium, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Norway and the US, to name just a few, asked for asylum. President Erdogan issued a warning to NATO countries against granting asylum to the military in November 2016. He said at the time that: "NATO cannot entertain accepting asylum requests of this kind. Those in question are accused of terror." Jens Stoltenberg,

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Photo: Mstyslav Chernov

Demonstration of supporters of President Erdogan right after the coup in 2016

NATO Secretary-General, said at the same time that “the officers’ asylum requests would be processed by the concerned NATO members independently and the alliance would not interfere into this process.”

Stoltenberg’s statement irked Erdogan but the latter decided not to respond. What is clear is that both asylum-seeking officers’ requests and Erdogan’s warning further exacerbated already-strained relations between Turkey and NATO. It is too early to make any forecast on the nature of the implications.. However, one thing is certain – the implications of the asylum applicants and Erdogan’s unyielding demand to extradite these military personnel will be a protracted process for both parties concerned.

Core Values of Democracy and Rule of Law

In addition to the aforementioned facts, the EU decision (made in late April 2017) to stall negotiations with Turkey regarding its potential membership indicates that Turkey’s place in the Alliance comes under closer scrutiny since EU NATO leaders’ perception of Turkey has substantially changed. If the Alliance was [and still is] as Stoltenberg said in March 2017 “based on the core values of democracy, rule of law and individual liberties” then the leadership of Turkey is no longer abiding by these principles. As a result, the Alliance is put in a tight spot, and so far the Alliance has failed to address the issue of democratic values by simply hoping that things in Turkey will get better. However, we know today, 11 months after the failed coup, that Turkish democracy remains under siege. The Things in Turkey

have not improved thus far and may not get better before the next presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for November 2019.

Even if, as Stoltenberg says, “Turkey is a key country for the security of Europe and without doubt, NATO would suffer from weakness without Turkey,” the opposite is also likely to be correct; namely, that NATO without Turkey may become more resilient, since Turkey is currently an impediment to NATO’s further development, as previously mentioned.. Furthermore, the idea that Stoltenberg has finally given voice to the concept of NATO without Turkey is, in itself, a breakthrough for the NATO vernacular known for its caution and careful wording. It means that finally the genie is out of the bottle and the issue of NATO without Turkey is no longer a taboo for the public debate.

Yes, it is correct that NATO has included non-democratic states among its members for a very long time. Yet, today, it will have to ask itself whether or not it can permanently endure the tensions arising from an increasingly authoritarian, less democratic, and more pro-Islam state in its ranks. For now, the only thing that prevents serious discussions of a Turkish exit (or Turxit) from NATO is the fear of what might happen if Turkey were not to be an ally, but an opponent sided with Russia. Russian leadership is certainly grinning with delight, since it has wanted Turkey to drift into Russia’s orbit for a while and sees what is happening. The cosiness in Turkish-Russian relations has made the Alliance wary of its own member and there might be an understanding at the NATO Headquarters that to a certain degree the Russians have sub-

ordinated Turkey in the Black Sea region. The recent case of Turkey potentially purchasing the Russian-built S-400 air-defence system has added further suspicion to and aggravated already-strained relations between Turkey and the Alliance. I dare say that the relevance of Turkey to NATO under the aforementioned circumstances comes under a big question mark.

It is a known fact that Turkey possesses limited capabilities to affect its relations with its NATO partners. Turkey can only suspend or halt participation in the NATO joint projects to its own detriment. On the other hand, as was highlighted in the recent case of blocking the participation of Austria, a non-NATO member state, mostly in military training (after Vienna’s repeated statements that the EU should end Turkey’s membership talks), Turkey has the right to contradict and will take advantage of this right when it deems it appropriate. Just to remind the reader that back in 2009 the Turkish government refused to approve NATO activation orders for both Kosovo and Afghanistan operations that involved cooperation with the EU, since Turkey is not an EU member state. It was clear then as it is clear now that Turkey will not hesitate to impede NATO unity when it believes its interests are at stake. Thus, the famous motto “One for All and All for One” becomes questionable in Turkey’s case.

Finally, the May 2017 decision by Ankara not to grant permission to members of the German Parliament’s Defence Committee to visit staff currently serving at a NATO mission Incirlik Air Base raises serious doubts about the Alliance’s unity and cohesion. We need to remember that back in June 2016 Turkey banned German lawmakers from visiting the base until the Turkish government relented in October 2016. Following Ankara’s May 2017 decision, Chancellor Angela Merkel said that: “Berlin could move its soldiers to another country from Turkey, such as Jordan.” Germany’s potential move would be the first time in NATO’s history that a member state withdraws a military contingent from one ally country and moves it to a non-ally country, noting that the move would have a negative repercussion on the Alliance’s solidarity.

Expelling Turkey from NATO?

To conclude, does this all mean that if the worst comes to the worst NATO may consider expelling Turkey out of the Alliance? What is known is that the North Atlantic Treaty makes no mention of leaving or being expelled from the Alliance, nor of any penalties for misbehaviour. We need to re-

Photo: WarLeaks



Turkish land forces deployed in the fight against ISIS at the Turkish-Syrian border

member that when the treaty was signed back in April 1949, it has envisaged as such an important article. April 1949 was a different era and Turkey was not yet a member of the Alliance. However, Article 12 of the Treaty says explicitly that "After the Treaty has been in force for ten years, or at any time thereafter, the Parties shall, if any of them so requests, consult together for the purpose of reviewing the Treaty." Apparently, no party thus far made a request and, as a result, NATO failed to adjust itself to the current difficult reality vis-à-vis its member Turkey.

Furthermore, what is known is that the treaty can only be terminated by the member state itself. In other words, regardless of Turkey's geographically strategic position for NATO (as Stoltenberg says "Turkey is a key country for the security of Europe") and Turkey's disregard of democratic credentials today, the Alliance cannot expel its member state. And even if NATO members decide to expel Turkey, such a decision would have to be approved by consensus within the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and, as a result, it would be vetoed by Turkey. Furthermore,

Turkey is not going to leave the Alliance on its own since within the Alliance it defends its interests, can block non-NATO member Turkey, such a NATO programmes, and, finally, influence NATO's internal decisions.

This is indeed a vicious circle where both Turkey and NATO are trapped in an uneasy relationship without, for the time being, a clear way around the impasse. As more time passes, further problems are likely to be piled onto the Turkey and NATO policy agenda that is no longer equally shared by both parties. ■

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