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TURKEY'S SECURITY PERCEPTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In Turkey, national security is generally perceived as a condition in which national and territorial integrity and the constitutional establishment are secured and economic and social progress is sustained. The objectives depicted in this definition also correspond, respectively, to national interests. While national interests drive security policies, history and geography shape security perceptions. Leaving policies to politicians and bureaucrats, this paper will first recap on Turkey's historical heritage, then discuss its strategic prominence; and finally, present a short overview of Turkey's defence and security concerns in the current strategic environment.

HISTORICAL HERITAGE

If Turkey is famous for something, that is its tough neighbourhood. Indeed, Turkey is almost completely surrounded by present and potential instabilities and irredentism. This is mainly due to the somewhat painful and unhealthy dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The modern Turkish Republic could not escape this inheritance. Many of the old Ottoman provinces have turned into neighbouring states. Some have unclosed accounts; others harbour a certain amount of scepticism towards Turkey. Yearning for independence and national sovereignty, Turkey entered, what one might call, a phase of rehabilitation, aiming to establish good relations with its neighbours and taking initiatives to improve regional stability. From the very beginning, Turkey adopted a strategy that was defensive and active, a strategy which found its meaning in the famous slogan "Peace at home and peace in the world." That strategy is still current today and conforms nicely to that of NATO's strategy of prevention of war.

In time, Turkey, through the Lausanne Treaty and Montreux Convention established its borders, resolved its major issues with the world powers and achieved full sovereignty. It struck a balance with Greece and identified itself as a secular, modern state. Building up an indigenous defence industry was essential for total independence and for securing peace. Its southern neighbours were mandates of England and France and, together with Iran to the east and Russia to the north, they caused no serious security concern to Turkey. Indeed, this period was a time when Turkey felt most secure and it ended with the emergence of the later expansionist powers in Europe.

During World War II, Turkey found itself poised between the Axis Powers and the Allies. It kept a somewhat precarious neutrality throughout the war. This neutrality, however, was costly to Turkey as at the end of the war, the West blamed Turkey for being an unreliable partner and Russia made territorial claims and demanded joint control of the Straits. Turkey had to prove itself in Korea before being invited to join the North Atlantic Alliance in 1952.

NATO membership and the Cold War opened a new phase in Turkey's security. During the Cold War times, the Turkish military had a very clear-cut role to play. Turkey's commitment to NATO's collective defence effort was to hold NATO's southern flank against the Soviet threat. In doing so, Turkey was also to deny the Soviets access to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, thus, contributing to the implementation of the containment strategy. Since the Soviet Union's soft underbelly was rather exposed to Turkey, this also forced them to deploy a considerable portion of

their military assets in the south; assets which otherwise could have been concentrated against the central region. Turkey also provided an ideal platform to detect Soviet ICBM launches and gather electronic intelligence. Although external reinforcements were considered necessary to achieve a credible defence against the Soviet Union, their availability and the cohesion and solidarity of the Alliance were to constitute a successful deterrence.

The Turkish military's role at that time was not confined to Europe. Despite the fact that Turkey was following a policy of non-involvement towards the Middle East, it could not escape its share in regional calculations. As a NATO nation bordering a strategic region of high competition between the two superpowers, Turkey, through its potential military value, contributed to regional stability. In the meantime, though, Turkey's southern neighbours, having gained their independence, affiliated themselves with the Soviet Union. This polarisation inevitably distanced Turkey from Syria and Iraq, and complicated Turkey's defence requirements.

Turkey's military strategic importance of the time cannot be completely portrayed, however, without asking what would have been the consequences had Turkey not been a member of the North Atlantic Alliance, but instead a member of the Warsaw Pact.

During the Cold War, Turkey continued to maintain a large military capability, but it also became largely reliant on US material support and was led to give up its efforts to develop an indigenous defence industry. Turkey's shortfalls in defence and security became painfully apparent when the Cyprus issue erupted and the US Congress decided to impose a military embargo on Turkey. While this event made Turkey realise the need for its own national defence planning, it did not change Turkey's basic security orientation, but certainly broadened its security perceptions.

The Cold War came to a sudden end in 1990. While a new security environment evolved, Turkish security entered a new phase. But before dealing with the present, it would be timely to make a quick assessment of Turkey's strategic military importance.

TURKEY'S MILITARY STRATEGIC PROMINENCE

Geographic disposition and military power constitute the essential elements of a country's military strategic value. One might add to these elements the strategic doctrinal orientation of the armed forces.

Turkey's geographic location can be considered an enviable strategic military asset. It offers Turkey the option for acting either as a bridge or as a barrier over critical routes of transportation, both maritime and land (the Straits and both the east-west and north-south). It provides an easy and short access to strategic natural resources. These used to be silk and spices in the past; more recently Middle East oil, and now Caspian and Central Asian gas and oil. It can also be an ideal power base for force projection in a universal way. As such Turkey could potentially influence the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Caucasus, the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Such geography might be considered a privilege were it not to create a reciprocal sensitivity which in turn necessitates vigilance and obliges Turkey to keep a strong defence. This is to say that, from a different aspect, Turkey is seen squeezed on the margins of several regions. Commensurably, in some way, Turkey is surrounded by differences. There are 13 countries around Turkey, with 11 different ethnic nationalities, each with a different historical experience and aspiration, speaking ten different languages and practising six different religions. At the same time, chronic trouble spots, instabilities, weak democracies and totalitarian regimes encircle Turkey.

Turkey's military power is essentially commensurate with other elements of its national power. It can mobilise large forces and maintain a high degree of readiness for a considerable length of time. Its industrial base is now capable of producing a good proportion of its military hardware requirements. Turkey still lacks the technological base to make it a competitive military power. Nevertheless, through acquired capabilities, if it chooses, Turkey may qualify as a regional power to be reckoned with. In fact, Turkey's military capabilities are presently superior to those of most of

its neighbours.

Here one may therefore conclude that Turkey's geographic prominence and its potential military power render important to the balance of power, not only in regional terms but also between competing power centres, as was the case during the Cold War and in a more striking way during World War II. For leading powers, it is quite logical that Turkey, first, should be neither too strong nor too weak to cause any problems for them. Secondly, it would be better if Turkey was on their side or at least was respectful to their concerns. On the other hand, Turkey's military strategic prominence vests in her the responsibility to be prudent, cautious and balanced in taking its strategic stands.

Indeed, Turkey has been committed to a strategy of war prevention right from the time of its foundation as a republic. As has already been stated above, the motto 'Peace at home and peace abroad' reflects the conviction that wars are not a way of solving problems and that unless a nation's very existence is at stake, engaging in war is a crime. But, there is also a Turkish proverb that says, "If you want peace, you should be prepared for war." Altogether, this is to say that, conceptually, Turkey's military potential is not to be used for adventure but to defend and protect Turkey's vital interests.

CURRENT STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The current strategic environment is characterised by a single superpower and an international mood of constructive co-operation to prevent wars. Ideological differences have been overcome by free market forces, which in turn demand stability. There is no longer a Second or a Third World. The world has become more interdependent. Globalisation together with the threats to existence posed by degradation of the environment also promotes and necessitates international co-operation.

The mood of constructive cooperation is not confined to Europe. The Gulf War was a solid display of international will to stop and punish aggression. A majority of south Mediterranean countries have joined with the European Union to jointly make the Mediterranean more secure. Despite the difficulties encountered, there seems to be no other viable option but to continue the Middle East peace process for both the Arabs and the Israelis. One can even argue that this co-operative mood is prevailing throughout the world.

But at the same time ethnic, religious and cultural differences have become more apparent and so are the material or tangible disparities among and within the states. Access to natural resources and economic competition have gained prominence while weapons of mass destruction, proliferation of weapons technology, terrorism, mass migration and organised crime have become the new security issues that are of most common concern. Although the spectrum of commonly defined and agreed values and principles has significantly widened, the world has turned out to be a rather unruly. Uncertainties prevail and the future is difficult to predict.

In this global context, Turkey's security interests remain inextricably linked to Europe. Aside from NATO, Turkey is a member of Council of Europe, the OSCE, and associate member of the EU and the WEU; thus it shares the same values as the Euro-Atlantic community. A significant number of Turks live in Europe and the Turkish economy is essentially tied to Europe as over 50 per cent of Turkey's exports go to Europe. One can easily assert, therefore, that peace and security in Europe is of paramount importance to Turkey. The so-called 'new risks' give us reason for common concern. In fact, encircled by regions of instability Turkey, is more exposed to the dangers of the new security environment than any other European country.

As Turkey opened to the world in the mid-80s, however, it also became aware of its potential role in the region and, as the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union dissolved, Turks discovered that Turkey looked bigger from outside than it did to them from inside. Freed from the constraints of the cold war era, Turkey seemed to have a better chance of playing bigger and different roles.

In this context, Turkey wanted to grab the opportunity of building good, co-operative relations with

Russia and, once and for all, to change the course of historical enmity into a friendly one. New prospects have risen offering the opportunity for reconstructing relations, not only with Russia, but also with all the newly independent states on co-operative terms and for expanding interests to new horizons. In the meantime, Russia has already become Turkey's second biggest trade partner; relations with the central Asian states are established and the Black Sea Economic Co-operation grouping is hesitantly and slowly gaining speed.

TURKEY'S SECURITY CONCERNS

Let us now question how secure or insecure Turkey is and how dependent it is on its allies to meet its security challenges.

Turkey's vital security interests have traditionally been perceived as 'Peace at home, peace in the world' and they have been categorically defined within the context of:

- protection of territorial and national integrity, and
- defence of legitimate rights, sovereignty and freedoms.

Therefore, the state of security is a coefficient of the nature of relations with neighbours, adjacent instabilities and disturbances that have a spill-over potential, and domestic order. Since security interests have become increasingly economic oriented, the extent of the area of concern has become commensurate with the extent of economic interests, and political and historical affiliations.

Let us begin with the internal situation. The PKK terrorist organisation, initially a Marxist-Leninist and later to be an ethnic Kurdish faction, together with growing Islamist radicalism, pose a serious challenge to Turkey's territorial and national integrity and to its secular democracy. They are obviously issues internal to Turkey. However, both factions have outside connections and support. This situation does not only trouble Turkey but naturally raises serious concern among Turkey's allies. Yet, Turkey and its allies are far from sharing a common understanding over these issues and about the methods to deal with them. Thus, while a mutual security concern would normally bring the allies closer, in this case, it separates them. In other words, they constitute an impediment to harmony.

Suffice it to say that, although the PKK is no longer what it was used, it still occupies a considerable portion of Turkey's agenda and consumes a lot of resources. Turkey needs the understanding and the support of its allies in its struggle against the PKK while the PKK itself is trying to gain political recognition and is raising funds in Europe. Turkey considers the PKK simply a terrorist organisation fighting for a power of its own and a convenient subcontractor for those who want to destabilise and weaken Turkey. The organisation is also recognised as a terrorist organisation in most NATO countries and its activities banned in the places where it is most active. But, at the same time, it is somewhat sympathetically perceived in a human rights context as a Kurdish uprising. Thus, while Turkey expects its allies to give the support that it deserves from them in its fight against the PKK terror, it receives an unwarranted embargo on associated weapons sales. And, while Turkey adamantly defends its unitary state structure it becomes frustrated when its allies would like see the Kurds be treated not as regular citizens but as minorities.

Looking around, one sees that Turkey's relations with its neighbours are not at all trouble free. It has unresolved vital issues with Greece, Cyprus and Syria. It has ideological differences with Iran. It is at opposites with Armenia on the question of Nagorno-Karabakh and on historical accounts. Despite the attractive and promising prospects of partnership, Turkey and Russia, still need to overcome the legacies of the past, and now face the danger (once again) of entering the tunnel of rivalry. With its future unclear, Iraq and Syria provide a sanctuary for separatist Kurdish terrorism.

Though there may presently be some hostility to Turkey in the neighbourhood, there is no power in the vicinity to threaten it with general aggression. But there apparently exists a risk of military

confrontation in Cyprus. One observes growing signs of the intention to use force in the Greek Cypriot's aggressive military build up and the sabre rattling between Turkish and Greek ships and aircraft in the Aegean when issues come to the fore. Turkey is worried to see that Europe can hardly remain unbiased over these issues, and that Turkish EU relations become captive to Greek initiatives. European solidarity with Greece generates an impulse to keep Turkey outside the EU and fans anti-European feelings in Turkey. Enlargement of the EU without Turkey would further increase the number of confrontational issues between Turkey and the EU. Particularly, in the case of Cyprus and Bulgaria.

In the Balkans and the Caucasus, Turkey is surrounded by post-Cold War ethnic grievances, each of which has a potential to flare regional confrontations. Different historical and cultural affiliations create diverging perceptions and attitudes. There again Turkey must be able to resist and cope with the complications of being a sub-regional country. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey is happy to see that NATO could finally respond to the kind of new security requirements of Europe. On the other hand, over the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict in the Caucasus, Turkey is somewhat disappointed and puzzled by the hard facts of the institutional shortcomings of the new European security architecture for providing 'equal security' to all. Then, as one realises, common concerns do not always correspond to identical interests involving equal stakes. One cannot resist asking to what extent its European partners might be sharing Turkey's security concerns. Where would the threshold of Europe's vital interests lie? These questions could not have a satisfactory answer so long as Turkey is kept at the threshold of full membership to the European Union.

Taking into consideration the shortcomings of the new European security architecture, therefore, Turkey figures a need to become more self-sufficient in meeting its own military requirements. This is perhaps the most rational explanation for Turkey's recent rapprochement with Israel and for its strive to develop its own defence industry.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that Turkey's military strategic significance stems not from its military power but from its critical geographic location. In the present day's strategic environment this geographic location has a certain prominence; a prominence which does not essentially correspond to a strategic advantage but also reflects a certain amount of sensitivity. From both aspects Turkey becomes a focal point in strategic thinking for designing the new world order. In the present unruly world, however, Turkey seems to be bound to remain crucial to the regional balance of power, at least until such a time as Europe, ie. the European Union, makes up its mind as to where to place it.