

# TURKEY: THE NATO ALLIANCE'S WILD CARD

*Turbulent relations between Turkey and its Western allies, as well as the country's drift into the arms of Russia, are putting strains on the NATO alliance and raising questions about Turkey's role within it. A Turkish exit from NATO, previously considered out of the realm of possibility, is now an option that is gaining currency. In this article, the author explores the scenario of a Turkish exit from NATO, weighing the strategic benefits and drawbacks that would affect both. The author posits that while Erdoğan brought profound changes to both the domestic and international sphere, Turkey and its NATO allies are bound to recognize that the strategic benefits linking them ultimately outweigh current frictions.*

Francesco M. Bongiovanni\*



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\* Dr. Francesco M. Bongiovanni is a former investment banker and the author of *Europe and the End of the Age of Innocence* and of *The Decline and Fall of Europe*.

**T**here is no question that since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took the helm of Turkey in 2003, there have been major changes in the country as well as with its relationship to its allies and the world. In recent years, the country's trajectory has been a source of concern for its Western allies, while perceived as an opportunity by the likes of Russia. The June 2018 presidential and legislative election enshrined the sweeping executive powers that were granted to Erdoğan by the April 2017 constitutional referendum, cementing his "hyper presidential" rule until at least 2023 and possibly beyond. The fact that Erdoğan's AKP party had to rely on the far right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to win an aggregate 343 seats out of 600 in Parliament means a solid opposition exists. However, it also means that Turkey is likely to become even more nationalist, even more wary of outside powers and of Kurdish aspirations, and even more unpredictable and confrontational. With the growing perception in the West that Turkey no longer adheres to NATO's values and core principles and does not shy away from confrontational policies raises the question over the relationship between Turkey and its Western allies.



Bernard Lewis attributed the WWI defeat of the Ottomans to the Empire having, likely out of a feeling of superiority derived from centuries of successes, grown increasingly introverted and blind to the technical-military advances of Western powers.<sup>1</sup> Turks woke up to discover that dogmatism and isolation had resulted in having been left behind (not unlike what happened to China), which is something Kemal Atatürk sought to change. The Kemalist revolution brought about the radical Westernization and de-Islamization of Turkish society. Turkey reinvented itself, shedding its Ottoman past and embracing modernization. Modern Turkey saw itself as increasingly European and its fate intimately linked to that of the "West."

### *Turkey in the NATO Alliance*

It comes as no surprise that Turkey joined NATO in 1952 after hundreds of Turkish soldiers had lost their lives fighting alongside American forces in the Korean War. NATO represented, after all, the quintessential Western military Alliance, which

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lewis, "What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East" (Harper Perennial, January 2003).

had been created just two years earlier with the purpose, as General Lord Ismay put it, “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”<sup>2</sup> Joining NATO was in line with Turkey’s new paradigm and to both sides this marriage seemed to be anchored in solid strategic ground. To Turkey, NATO membership meant a closer relationship with the West and an insurance policy against its historical nemesis, Russia. To the US-led West, and particularly in the context of the Cold War, being able to count Turkey as a full partner in the Alliance translated, among others, into control of Russia’s access to the Mediterranean and the guarding of Europe’s south-eastern flank by Turkey’s powerful army—NATO’s second largest after the US army. More recently it also meant, especially to Washington, the ability to conveniently use bases on Turkish soil to project power in and around the Middle East. Granted, the Cyprus question as well as other issues have been more than mere irritants. Questions have often been raised in Western circles about the reliability of Turkey as an ally, such as in 2009 when Turkey held a joint military exercise with Russia’s ally Syria. Yet, overall the situation suited both sides well. At the same time, Turkey’s rapprochement with Europe seemed to progress to the point where EU membership discussions started in 2005.

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Enter Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). Erdoğan won his first election in 2003 and has gone from victory to victory since then, winning a total of 14 elections. For all of his increasingly autocratic style, Erdoğan came to power, stayed in power and consolidated his power through the ballot. Granted, today’s Turkey is increasingly perceived as a one-man show and its society is increasingly and dangerously polarized. Yet, the *reis*’s (leader) electoral track record means a substantial part of Turkish society backs him, for better or for worse, and consistently so. If they were meant to hurt Erdoğan at home, recent American trade sanctions against Turkey have at least to some extent reinforced his popularity, rallying many Turks around him as he shrewdly portrayed America as the ungrateful ally behind the country’s current economic woes. Were a new election to take place today, Erdoğan would likely win outright, without the help of the nationalists. It would, thus, be delusional to think that the Erdoğan phenomenon is a mere temporary glitch. Turkey has undeniably and profoundly changed, albeit

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Wheatcroft, “Who Needs NATO?” *New York Times*, 15 June 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/opinion/16iht-edwheatcroft16.html>

a substantial portion of Turkish society remains unhappy with the new direction Erdoğan's rule has taken. In any case, Erdoğan's personal imprint on Turkey is undeniable and when it comes to security matters his agenda is quite different from the pro-West agenda of yore. Under his rule, Turkey has become more independent, nationalist, Islamist, and less willing to do the West's bidding. In its relationship with the rest of the world, the country has become far more assertive and adventurous, its policies at time erratic. Whether these new directions and initiatives displayed by Turkey in its neighborhood are in the country's best long-term interest remains to be seen (some western observers have labeled them "self-destructive").

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#### *Tensions between Turkey and its Western NATO Allies*

On the domestic front, Erdoğan has launched a thorough de-Kemalization and re-Islamization of Turkish society. On the international security scene (the dimension that matters the most to Washington), Turkey has been pursuing policies that increasingly put it at odds with Western and American interests, and vice versa. The first signal was Turkey's rejection of the use of İncirlik base during the war against Saddam Hussein, possibly due to fears surrounding the demise of Saddam resulting in Iraqi Kurdistan gaining power. More recently Turkey was shocked by America's decision to use the militias of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as a proxy (a very effective one as it turned out) to fight ISIS on the ground. The Kurds accepted the job with relish and the naiveté that it would gain them American support for their national aspirations. America's rapprochement with the Kurds could only come at the expense of its relationship with Turkey which perceives the YPG as a mere extension of the PKK, an internationally listed terrorist organization. Although Turkey has been the target of terrorism for the better part of three decades, the West has often underestimated Ankara's paranoia over the issue of Kurdish militancy. Sure enough, once ISIS had been pushed back, Western powers prioritized preventing a breakdown in relations with Turkey over catering to Kurdish national aspirations. As a result, the Kurds found themselves the target of Turkish military operations in Northern Syria. Grievances run both ways: Some Western circles accuse Turkey of having bought

oil from ISIS and to Turkey's chagrin, the West allied itself with Kurdish militants considered to be Turkey's biggest threat. From the Turkish standpoint, any Western rapprochement with the Kurds is a betrayal, and any attempt to force Ankara to implement trade sanctions against its important trading partners, Iran and Russia, is unacceptable.

Alarm bells recently sounded in Washington following the announcement that Turkey would be buying Russia's S-400 air defense system. This move is incompatible with Turkey's acquisition of American state-of-the-art F-35 stealth fighters since the operation of S-400s would likely result in Russia learning how to defend itself against this aircraft. This move has also been seen as a potential point of no return by NATO, one that would make it technically difficult to keep Turkey as a full partner in the Alliance. Unsurprisingly, the U.S. Congress voted to stop the sale of F-35s to Ankara. "Given Turkish President Erdoğan's willingness to take American hostages, and his inability to fully guarantee the safety of American and NATO assets in Turkey, Senators Shaheen and Tillis felt it inappropriate and dangerous to send Turkey F-35 planes at this time," said Senator Shaheen.<sup>3</sup> From Turkey's standpoint, this narrative ignores two facts. Firstly, Turkey has been trying to buy America's Patriot system for quite some time, though it also looked into, among others, the French-Italian Eurosam product. The Patriot system, however, carries a high price tag and is primarily designed for defense against ballistic missiles; more importantly for Ankara, Raytheon is unwilling to transfer technology to Turkey, a crucial difference with its Russian competitor. Secondly, there exists a precedent for NATO members to accept the acquisition of Russian air defense products by an ally in the region: In the late 1990s, the Republic of Cyprus (which is not a member of NATO but which is supported by a member, Greece) acquired Russia's S-300 system and NATO did not have an issue with this purchase (the missiles were moved to Crete after Turkey threatened to destroy them). Will Turkey adopt the recently-revived, face-saving solution to buy the Patriot system—with enough American flexibility on price and technology transfer (or perhaps the European system)—and scrap the S-400 deal to satisfy its allies? If this happens it will be a clear indication that despite serious frictions and posturing, both sides still value their strategic relationship above mere tactical considerations.

On the political front, several European capitals perceive the current political leadership in Turkey to be increasingly autocratic, Islamo-nationalist, and at odds with fundamental EU values. Europeans are deeply uncomfortable with Turkey's record of jailing journalists and dissidents. In a Europe traumatized by the issue of

<sup>3</sup> Jamie McIntyre and Travis J. Tritten, "Senate measure would restrict Turkey's involvement in the F-35," *Washington Observer*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/senate-measure-would-restrict-turkeys-involvement-in-the-f-35>

increasingly assertive Euro-Muslim minorities, Europeans worry about the extensive re-Islamization of Turkish society that has been central to Erdoğan's agenda since he started his political career. In the recent past, Ankara's perceived meddling in the socio-political life of some European countries by soliciting votes from the Turkish European diaspora for Turkish domestic elections is perceived as increasingly troublesome and led to some red-hot exchanges between Turkey and Germany as well as other countries.

Sticking points, such as the unresolved case of the detained American pastor Andrew Brunson, decried by the Western media as being a pawn, if not a hostage, to the Turkish government, contribute to the deterioration of Turkey's image among its allies. The growing unpredictable, politicized, and assertive nature of Turkey's actions when it comes to foreign policy and security matters is pushing many of its allies to increasingly view Ankara as a more of a liability than an asset. Erdoğan's public warning that it could hit US forces in Manbij, its spectacular rapprochement with Moscow, and growing economic ties with Tehran do not exactly ingratiate it to Washington. American concerns are compounded by the knowledge that the TurkStream Pipeline is to supply gas from Russia to Turkey and that Moscow will build Turkey's first nuclear plant. US Ambassador to NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchison, spoke of a Russian bid to "flip" Turkey in order to weaken NATO, a strategy that makes perfect sense from the Kremlin's standpoint and that gives Erdoğan the possibility to play both sides.

### ***What Would a Turkish Exit from NATO Look Like?***

In this context, new questions have arisen about the suitability of Turkey as a partner in NATO and as a potential partner in the EU. For example, why would France and Germany—which have been calling the shots in Europe for decades in a cozy *pas de deux*—want to accept a large third player like Turkey, which would likely be allocated comparable votes to Germany in the European Parliament? At the same time, why would Erdoğan whose *raison d'être* is Turkish nationalism and the consolidation of his personal rule, want to enter a union whose essence is the dilution of national identity and the devolution of national powers to the profit of Brussels-based institutions? In truth, if there is one area in which the current Turkish and European leadership see eye to eye, it is that Turkish accession to the EU has been a non-starter, yet it suits both sides to maintain the illusion.

Conversely, the reality of Turkey's relationship with NATO in recent times can be summarized as follows: The only thing worse than Turkey being inside NATO is Turkey being outside NATO. Interestingly enough, this is a conviction shared by both sides.

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From a procedural standpoint, should Turkey decide to formally exit NATO, there would be no administrative quagmire in the form of Brexit. Ankara would simply need to follow Article 13 of the Washington Treaty stating that “...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.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, if Ankara were to exit the Alliance, it would suddenly find itself facing unpalatable strategic consequences. Too weak to hold its own in the great powers game, Turkey would likely have to align itself with a welcoming Russia, which would have finally managed to reach its strategic objective of splitting NATO and weakening the West. However, this same Russia, Turkey’s old nemesis, would unlikely allow Erdoğan to be his own boss, and would seek to assert some control over its newfound ally. Granted, Turkey does a lot of business with Russia, but it also does a lot of business with Europe and is better off keeping both as business partners rather than antagonizing them. Having left NATO and aligned itself with Russia, Ankara would find itself clearly in America’s crosshairs and Washington would have several options at its disposal should it wish to create mischief and destabilize Turkey. This would be felt not just on the economic front, but also by playing the Kurdish card to the hilt.

Incidentally, if Turkey were to expel the Americans from their military bases in the country, it would not substantially dent Washington’s power projection capabilities in the region. The bases could be moved to Greece and NATO’s relationship with Israel would likely become stronger. For example, America’s expansion of the Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan could be interpreted as a sign that Washington feels it may lose the use of Incirlik.

After having exited NATO, where else could Turkey turn to find useful allies? Once it had left NATO, Turkey could choose to expand its alliance with Iran and perhaps China. However, there are caveats to this: China is far away and, aside from the lingering historical mistrust Turkey harbors towards Iran, Iran has its own ambitions

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<sup>4</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4 April 1949, [https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm)

and interests in the region that often clash with Turkey's. The opposing views held by Tehran and Ankara over the fate of the Assad regime is case in point. Much has been said in recent times about Turkey's growing influence in the Balkans. Turkey's protective relationship with Muslim Bosnia is nothing new, epitomized by the words of Bakir Izetbegović, chairman of Bosnia's tripartite presidency who said Erdoğan was "sent by God." However, as long as joining the EU remains a possibility, Turkey's influence in the Balkans will be limited. Not only is the EU a bigger investor than Turkey in the Balkans, but also the countries of the Balkans—despite close historical ties that some have with Turkey—share the dream of joining the EU. Therefore, it is unlikely that any Balkan country that joins the Union will look back to Turkey.

Notwithstanding the desire to join the EU, recent declarations by the EU's Claude Juncker to the effect that there will be no EU enlargement towards the Balkans play in favor of increased Turkish influence in the area. Yet, what could Turkey hope to concretely achieve in the poor and restless Balkans besides extending some zones of influence, giving Europe some headaches, and creating more instability on its doorstep? Turkey is, after all, surrounded in great part by chaotic or inimical countries—Syria and Iraq being the most blatant example of the first—which has resulted in the weakening of the country's border security. Secondary examples of antagonistic neighbors include Armenia and Greece. Moreover, Turkey has been confronted with terrorism for several decades; leaving NATO would doubtlessly introduce additional instability in Turkey's security equation.

The notion that Turkey's so-called "neo-Ottoman" policies in this cauldron of a neighborhood could result in the revival, albeit geographically limited one, of the Ottoman Empire is a fantasy. But the notion that Erdoğan's Turkey will strive to extend its influence in the region and take advantage of opportunities and shifting Alliances whenever and wherever it can—if only to show the West that it has options and cannot be bossed around—is a reality. Moreover, Turkey needs to trade with Iran and with Russia. Similarly, the notion that Turkey could stir up European Muslims especially from the Turkish diaspora to assert its influence is a possibility just as is the notion that Turkey will not shy away from establishing closer ties with Moscow to exert leverage over the West. Erdoğan dictates Turkish foreign policy and he will not be content with a Turkey that quietly sits in a corner. He is likely to seize any opportunity to assert his influence and vision when it comes to international and security matters. This may sometimes go beyond posturing and result in Turkey finding itself at odds with its Western partners. Granted, some countries, such as Greece and France left NATO in the past (and later came back), so leaving NATO is not without precedent. Yet, for all the recent posturing provocations, Erdoğan knows that Turkey is better off inside NATO than outside of it. It is one



thing for Erdoğan to play NATO against Russia and vice-versa while being a member, but it would be an entirely different thing to face Moscow without this membership, and, as a shrewd politician Erdoğan knows this.

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The notion that Turkey should be “kicked out” of NATO is increasingly gaining currency in some Western circles. This idea was first floated by former US President Barack Obama’s Secretary of State John Kerry in July 2016 following the extensive purges after the failed coup attempt in Turkey. From a procedural standpoint, there is no mechanism to expel a country from NATO, but that does not mean a way could not be found. True, under Erdoğan, the tensions in Turkey’s relationship with the West have grown substantially and recently reached critical levels. Yet a strategic move such as accepting or expelling an Alliance member should be based on strategic, rather than tactical or emotional considerations. What would the West concretely gain, from a strategic standpoint, by ejecting Turkey from the Alliance? Nothing really.

On the other hand, there would be visible drawbacks to such a move. In the short term, Turkey could retaliate against Europe by reneging on the agreement to stop inland migration flows. This is not a small issue (although one that does not particularly concern the US) considering that Turkey hosts 3.7 million refugees (from Syria and other regions) and that politics in Europe are increasingly shaped by the migration issue. It is also easy to underestimate Turkey’s contribution to Western security. Turkey enjoys a great geostrategic location as a buffer zone between Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, one that borders the world’s most chaotic region. From a strategic standpoint, Turkey leaving NATO would weaken both parties. The Alliance would not only lose bases on Turkish soil but also Turkey’s invaluable contribution to NATO’s spearhead, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.

If things go from bad to worse Turkey could perhaps decide to leave NATO or the allies could perhaps decide to do away with Turkey. Yet, despite the growing and increasingly visible strains in their relationship, logic has it that NATO and Turkey are better off trying to make it work. Despite bumps along the road, a continuation of Turkish membership in NATO is the most likely outcome. From a Western perspective, the difficulty is putting pressure on Turkey to curb its excesses without going

too far and facing the consequences of the worst-case scenario, i.e. Turkey moving out of NATO and joining the Moscow-Tehran axis.

Questioning the relationship between NATO and Turkey makes sense, needless to say, as long as there is a NATO to speak of. Recently, US President Donald Trump declared that the Alliance was obsolete. If this is not mere tactical posturing to get the allies to cough up their fair share of expenses, Washington might decide that its “ungrateful” European allies are not worth defending which would result in a far-fetched but not entirely improbable scenario where the US exits NATO. This would signify the end of the institution, the formal end of the post-WWII order, as well as any vestige of cohesion in the Western world. In this scenario, Europe would end up on its own as a soft power giant and hard power dwarf, rich yet as unable to unite politically or militarily—the perfect prey in a new jungle. Turkey would, just like Europe, need to find accommodation with Russia. Nevertheless, despite the apparent increase in grievances and in the fragmentation of the alliance, the odds are that the Americans, Europeans, and Turks understand that NATO works for all of them and that their world would be far less secure without it.