

Turkey and NATO in Retrospect: Hard to Classify as a “Win-Win” Relationship

PART II

Turkey’s Solo Response to PKK Terrorism: “O NATO Allies, Where Art Thou?”

In Part I, which was published in the previous issue of *The Strategist*, how Turkey’s membership in the NATO has created major obstructions in its fight against terrorism since the late 1970s was discussed by and large.

Now, in Part II, how Turkish governments have found their own solutions, in one way or another, without tangible support coming from their allies will be discussed in detail.

Mustafa KİBAROĞLU

Prof., BİLGESAM President, Dean of MEF University





Impact of the War in the Gulf: “No-Fly-Zone” Becomes “Safe Haven” for PKK

In the aftermath of the short-lived war in Kuwait between the Coalition Forces and Iraq in March 1991, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds had fled their country and sought refuge in Turkey and Iran.

As a result of the declaration of “no-fly-zones” by the United States in the northern and the southern parts of Iraq, the creation of safe havens for the Iraqi Kurdish population turned out to become a serious security problem for Turkey.

Because, the northern sectors of the Iraqi territory that fell into the scope of the no-fly zone enforcement became a sanctuary for the PKK terrorists.

Hence, the PKK started to use the northern Iraqi territory as a safe haven whereby it intensified its attacks on Turkish security forces and the population.

Saddam’s forces had left lots of light and heavy weaponry and their munitions behind them when they were forced to retreat from the region after the victory of the Coalition Forces led by the United States in 1991.

The PKK terrorists not only seized these weapons and munitions but also benefited from the lack of authority in northern Iraq to gain many more recruits. They also increased their revenues by controlling the arms and drug trafficking between Central Asia and Europe during the first half of the 1990s.

Turkey felt the need both to reorganize and to restructure its security forces and also needed special arms and technological products, such as remote sensors, night vision cameras, and the like to properly fight the terrorist organization.

The Winds of Change in Eastern Europe Take Precedence over Turkey’s Role

However, the early 1990s were also the years of great transformations in Europe where concepts like human rights, cultural rights, and ethnic diversity have started to gain supremacy in the political discourse across the continent.

The Paris Act of 1990, which was a fundamental document making powerful references to these concepts, was also started to be adopted by all nations in Eastern as well as Western Europe.

Similarly, in the United States, Democrat Party came to power with the November 1992 elections. The Clinton administration, like its European counterparts, also paid a lot of attention to the democratic norms and values in its relations with other nations, including Turkey.

Some of Turkey’s requests for military sales were either denied or delayed by the US Congress on the grounds of the criticisms of especially the Democrat Senators.

Turkey had encountered serious difficulties in getting support of the European nations, and of the United States, to a lesser degree, in its fight against the PKK.

Most Europeans tended to see the PKK terrorism more as a result of “a lack of democratic norms and values in Turkey.”

Therefore, political interest groups and nongovernmental organizations as well as some political parties have started to put pressure on the European governments to impose a ban on the arms sales to Turkey.

They were concerned with the possibility of use of these arms, if sold to Turkey, against the “Kurdish freedom fighters”.

Some of these allegations have gone as far away as to assert that, for instance, if Norway sold the Penguin anti-ship missiles to Turkey, the Turkish Army could use them against the Kurds.

Beside the irrationality of any such allegations, one has to bear in mind that the Penguin missiles were anti-ship missiles and they could only be found in the inventory of the navies. Penguin missiles would have no use, if at all, in any counterterrorist operations.

Military Cooperation with Israel: Critical Partnership Against Terrorism

In such an international atmosphere where most of Turkey’s allies in NATO have denied critical arms supplies, Israel emerged as a country that could provide all such arms and technical devices that Turkey would need in its fight against the PKK.

Israel also provided Turkey with critical and sound actionable intelligence about the movements and the logistical capabilities of the PKK terrorists. As such, the value of military cooperation with Israel at the operational level has been tremendous and helped Turkey gain the upper hand in the fight against the PKK.

One should bear in mind that the force posture of the Turkish military during the Cold War years was heavily determined with the threat perception of the authorities who had assigned considerably more emphasis to the northeastern part of the country bordering the Soviet Union as well as the northwestern part bordering the Warsaw Pact member Bulgaria.



Developments Enabling Turkey to Change its Force Posture Toward M. East

A series of developments have either compelled or enabled Turkey to make drastic changes in its force posture and the deployment of its military capabilities inside the country.

First of these developments was Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, which forced the Turkish military and the security elite to be seriously concerned with the possible consequences of the ensuing events thereof.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Turkey was quick to take political, military, and economic countermeasures both unilaterally and along with the international community in conformity with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions.

The United States also asked Turkey to increase the level of its troop concentration along the Iraqi border in order to increase pressure on the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein who was then seemingly not very much affected from the reactions to his invasion of Kuwait coming from various parts of the world.

Both as a preliminary measure against the threats posed by the attitude of the Iraqi leader toward Turkey and to satisfy the expectations of the United States, Turkey decided to increase the level of troop deployment in its southeast.

The recent collapse of the Warsaw Pact had eased the degree of the threat perceived from Bulgaria. Thus, approximately 100,000 mechanized troops were transferred from the Bulgarian border to the southeastern part of Turkey, and they were deployed mainly along the Iraqi border.

Both as a preliminary measure against the threats posed by the attitude of the Iraqi leader toward Turkey and to satisfy the expectations of the United States, Turkey decided to increase the level of troop deployment in its southeast.

Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Entry into Force of the CFE Treaty

The second development that enabled Turkey to go toward making drastic changes in its force posture was the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the emergence of independent states across Turkey's northeastern border. These historic developments enabled the Turkish security elite to reassess the threats perceived from the region.

The elimination of the possibility of a large-scale surprise attack of the Red Army made it unnecessary to allocate the bulk of the Turkish military capabilities toward Soviet Union any more.

Hence, the possibility of shifting the military units away from the northeastern frontier was much welcomed both by the political and by the security circles in Turkey.

The third development was the implementation of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which was negotiated between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries starting with the Helsinki Process in 1975 and all through the 1980s, and entered into force in 1990.

The CFE Treaty envisaged drastic cuts in the five categories of conventional force levels of the militaries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. These five categories were main battle tanks, armored personnel vehicles, artilleries, attack helicopters, and combat aircraft.

As a consequence of these developments, the military planners in Ankara shifted their attention from Turkey's northern neighbors Bulgaria and the Soviet Union to southern and eastern neighbors Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and re-deployed the military units accordingly.

In less than a decade, Turkey's troop deployments in the region increased almost fivefold from a figure like 60,000 infantry and gendarmerie troops in the early 1990s and reached a figure like 300,000 in 1998, when a crisis erupted with Syria.

In the context of the CFE Treaty, most part of Turkey's southeast was left outside of the treaty limitations. This would mean that Turkey would not have to lower dramatically the number of its military assets in the five categories of weapons systems.

Beside the numerical increase, the quality of the troops, including the Special Forces, also improved. New equipment, such as light and heavy artillery, armored vehicles, and attack helicopters were sent to the region, enabling the military to wage cross-border operations.

These deployments have been possible thanks to an exceptional arrangement in the CFE Treaty that increased Ankara's freedom of action in the region.

In the context of the CFE Treaty, most part of Turkey's southeast was left outside of the treaty limitations. This would mean that Turkey would not have to lower dramatically the number of its military assets in the five categories of weapons systems.

Moreover, Turkey would be able to receive some of the excess weaponry from its NATO allies that would have to be dismantled due to the treaty obligations of these countries. Germany, for instance, sent some of its heavy armory to Turkey instead of dismantling them.

The increase both in quantity and in quality of Turkish military capabilities in its southeast, neighboring Syria, Iraq, and Iran, enabled Turkey to develop a new stance toward these countries, each of which has been a source of serious concerns with its military capabilities and political intentions.

In the second half of 1990s, the Turkish military has become capable of launching a comprehensive ground operation, on a short notice, with the involvement of tens of thousands of troops fully equipped and mechanized.

Added to this, the air power capability could provide the troops on the ground with close air support through F-16 combat aircraft, and Sikorsky and Super Cobra attack helicopters. Early warning aircraft (AWACS—Airborne Warning and Control System) as well as refueling aircraft that entered the inventory of the Turkish Air Force increased both the range and the operational capability of the combat aircraft involved in operations.



Syria and Turkey maps

Hence, the overall operational capability of the ground forces in combination with the air units is considered to give Turkey the capability to conduct large-scale military operation in the territory of the enemy, if need be, in a considerably short time.

Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy Toward Syria

Turkey's capability to retaliate thus constituted a credible deterrent against its southern neighbors. The impact of the increased troop deployment along southeastern borders of Turkey was clearly felt by the Syrian leadership during the short-lived crisis between the two countries in October 1998.

Confident with the ability to put enough military power behind its political claims, Turkey gave a precise ultimatum to Syria in October 1998. The official position of Turkey was publicly announced by the then President Süleyman Demirel during his speech on the opening day of the Turkish Grand National Assembly on October 1, 1998.

Prior to that, General Atilla Ateş, then Commander of the Land Forces, had made statements to that effect in front of the journalists right on the Turkish-Syrian border stressing the fact that Syria's incessant support to the PKK could no more be tolerated.

The message from the military and political wings of Turkey was clear: Syria should stop supporting the PKK and should expel Öcalan out of Syria.

Close coordination between the top politicians and the Turkish General Staff as well as the proper use of the public diplomacy made it clear that this time Turkey was both ready and capable of coercing Syria to act along the lines of its, indeed decades-old, request.

Turkey's capability to retaliate thus constituted a credible deterrent against its southern neighbors. The impact of the increased troop deployment along southeastern borders of Turkey was clearly felt by the Syrian leadership during the short-lived crisis between the two countries in October 1998.



Syria took a rational decision as expected, and expelled Öcalan out of Syria. Öcalan's journey, which had stopovers in Moscow, Rome, and the Greek Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, ended in a prison in Turkey. Öcalan was given a fair trial and sentenced to life for treason and committing various crimes, including terrorism.

Both Syria and the Arab League acknowledged the severity of the situation. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited Ankara and Damascus and tried to prevent a war between Turkey and Syria.

Hafez Al Assad was a very clever and pragmatic leader. He was aware of the possible consequences of Syria's continuing support to the PKK. Not only was Turkey powerful militarily, but also Syria had lost the support of the Soviet Union. The Russian Federation was not willing to take strong measures against Turkey.

Considering all these, Syria took a rational decision as expected, and expelled Öcalan out of Syria. Öcalan's journey, which had stopovers in Moscow, Rome, and the Greek Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, ended in a prison in Turkey. Öcalan was given a fair trial and sentenced to life for treason and committing various crimes, including terrorism.

Syria signed the "Adana Protocol" later in 1998 with Turkey committing itself not to give any more support to any groups that would damage the national interests of Turkey. End of story!!

Conclusion

The purpose of telling this "story" was not simply to express resentments toward the NATO allies for not having properly supported Turkey in the past in its fight against the PKK, both inside and outside its territory, as well as against the countries whose manifold support to the PKK has long served as its center of gravity.

The essential purpose was to emphasize that, despite being labeled as a "staunch ally" by the other members of NATO, Turkey had to carry out a tremendous job in fighting against the PKK and to sustain it for nearly three decades without enough tangible support coming from the allied and friendly countries, not to mention some of their obstru-

ctions that diminished the operational capability of the Turkish security forces.

More than 40 thousand people have lost their lives during the fight between the Turkish security forces and the PKK terrorists, including nearly 7 thousand security personnel and almost an equal number of civilian Turkish citizens. More than 25 thousand PKK terrorists were killed in this fight, many of whom were citizens of Turkey.

Among the civilians who lost their lives, in the order of hundreds, were teachers, doctors, engineers, technicians and other public servants whose sole purpose was to help improve the quality of life as well as to provide the basic services to the people living in the backward districts of the country. Many of them volunteered to go that region knowing the fatal implications of their choices.

Their peers, due to the manifold difficulties that the country was passing through, would not easily replace those who were fallen. The military officers of the Turkish Armed Forces have thus become the substitutes for them in teaching at schools, providing healthcare, and other day-to-day services.

This behavior is nowadays called "winning the hearts and minds" of the local population, something that the Turkish security units had long been performing during their fight against terrorism for decades without necessarily attaching any particular label to it.

Hence, security experts covering NATO-related issues should better be studying Turkey's above-mentioned experiences closely in order to draw some precious lessons that would surely have relevance to the global fight against transnational terrorist organizations, instead of calling Turkey's membership into question and recklessly suggesting its discharge from the Alliance. ■