



NATO, Turkey, and the “East-Asianization” of Europe?

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Abstract

In the upcoming May 16-17 meeting between President Trump and Turkey’s President Erdogan, and the May 25 NATO summit, Washington and Brussels would need to address several issues regarding the status of NATO—namely reform on defense expenditures, clarification on the alliance’s mission on new security threats, and the standing of Turkey’s membership. Currently NATO is in disarray, with an increasingly Islamist and totalitarian Turkey undermining U.S anti-ISIS efforts by bombing Kurds and threatening to attack U.S. troops, failure of most member states to meet their 2% GDP defense expenditures, and alliance structure ill-equipped to address new unconventional threats of terrorism. Absent NATO reform in the Trump era, European security appears likely to transform from a "collective security" concept, to a more cost-efficient East Asian “hub-and-spoke” model of bilateral security guarantees centered on the U.S.

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Analysis

Under the Trump administration, U.S. security policy towards Europe appears to be taking on a new trajectory. One of them is the evolution of a “collective defense” concept in NATO to one of a “hub and spoke” model similar to East Asia.

“East Asianization” of Europe

As Hans Kundnani¹ from the German Marshall Fund’s Transatlantic Academy pointed out, in the context of Trump’s demand that NATO members fulfill their pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defense and the deployment of NATO troops to the Baltic states and Poland, “What may be emerging is a system of implicit bilateral security guarantees between NATO countries, centered on the United States.”

In January, U.S. Armored Brigade consisting of 4,000 troops arrived in Poland—a NATO member that spends more than 2% of its GDP on defense. In Latvia and Lithuania that spends roughly 1.5% of GDP on defense, non-US troops from NATO will be deployed.

Kundnani observed that the extent to which a NATO member can rely on the U.S. security guarantee may now depend on its defense spending and whether American troops are stationed on its soil, and the “transformation of collective security into a system of bilateral security guarantees may mean the de facto end of NATO as a collective security organization.”

This thus resembles the “hub and spoke bilateralism” in East Asia—centered on security guarantee with individual countries such as South Korea and Japan—as Washington appears slowly moving towards bilateral deals from multilateral structures.

NATO not equipped to address unconventional security threats

While NATO’s original purpose was to provide a shield for postwar Europe to recover and not fall prey to an expanding Soviet empire, over the past decades, the organization seemed to have lost its way.

As a legacy Cold War institution, NATO retains a built-in bias against Russia and is focused on conventional warfare. However, in an era when the mission defines the coalition and not the other way around, NATO’s coalition of collective security against a conventional threat is ill-equipped to address new security challenges² such as terrorism, refugee crisis, conflict prevention and resolution.

Moreover, U.S. is no longer the wealthy nation it once was that could provide defense welfare to support Europe’s post-war reconstruction. It is also unfair for many wealthy European states to continue placing a heavy burden on struggling American taxpayers to underwrite 75% of NATO’s budget, while U.S. economy is flailing with its own \$21 trillion debt burden.

As Doug Bandow in a 12 September 2016 *Foreign Affairs*³ article argued, “Alliances should be a means to an end rather than an end in themselves, and in this case, that end should be to increase US security.” Unfortu-

¹ Hans Kundnani, “The ‘East Asianization’ of Europe?” *Transatlantic Academy Blog*, April 18, 2017,

<http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/node/1028>

² Christina Lin, “Move over NATO; OSCE is a better platform to engage China”, *Asia Times*, November 7, 2016,

<http://www.atimes.com/move-nato-osce-better-platform-engage-china/?platform=hootsuite>

³ Doug Bandow, “Ripped Off: What Donald Trump Gets Right About Alliances”, *Foreign Affairs*, September 12, 2016,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2016-09-12/ripped>



nately, it seems over the past years U.S. alliances are actually decreasing U.S. security—especially NATO member Turkey.

Turkey and the erosion of NATO as a value-based alliance

Despite repeated mantras from the U.S. and other NATO members that Turkey is a reliable ally, since 2003, Turkey under Erdogan and AKP has been transforming into an Islamist and totalitarian country that stands in opposition to NATO's professed values of democracy, human rights and rule of law.

Moreover, it has betrayed the U.S. and supported America's enemies. As confirmed by a German intelligence report⁴ and another by Columbia University⁵, in the past years Ankara has been acting as an umbilical cord to feed al Qaeda and ISIS⁶ with foreign fighters, weapons, and market for its oil. Indeed that is what provoked Erdogan's regime to ban Wikipedia⁷ recently, for its refusal to remove contents linking Turkey's role in promoting jihad in Syria.

As such, despite recent NATO assurance⁸ to President Trump that the military alliance will begin to reorient its mission on counter-terrorism, there remains skepticism. It is problematic to declare the alliance is engaged in counter-terrorism when one of its own members has been complicit in fomenting terrorism in Syria.

With Turkey sabotaging U.S. anti-ISIS efforts in Syria and Iraq, and repeatedly bombing Kurds⁹ who serve as the spearhead force for the coalition, this has prompted outrage¹⁰ by pundits¹¹ and U.S. lawmakers.

The Pentagon¹² also slammed recent Turkish airstrikes that risked the lives of American troops working with the Syrian Kurds (YPG) battling ISIS. Now, there is a halt to the momentum on the Raqqa offensive as U.S. troops are deployed to Syria-Turkey border to stop Turkish attacks, with Russian¹³ troops doing the same in Efrin.¹⁴

⁴ Charles Peat, "Angela Merkel's government says it has proof Turkey is supporting Islamic State and Hamas", *Sunday Express*, August 17, 2016, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/700826/Angela-Merkel-Turkey-Erdogan-Islamic-State-ISIS-Daesh-Hamas-Germany>; Cynthia Kroet, "German govt: Turkey supports terror groups in the Middle East", *Politico*, August 18, 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/german-govt-turkey-supports-terror-groups-in-middle-east/>

⁵ David Phillips, "Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey Links", *Huffington Post*, September 8, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turkey_b_6128950.html

⁶ Thomas Seibert, "Is NATO Ally Turkey Tacitly Fueling the ISIS War Machine?" *The Daily Beast*, September 8, 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/08/is-nato-ally-turkey-tacitly-fueling-the-isis-war-machine?via=FB_Page&source=HuffPoFacebook

⁷ "Wikipedia banned in Turkey for refusing to remove content about links to Syrian civil war: Court", *Hurriyet Daily*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/wikipedia-banned-in-turkey-for-refusing-to-remove-contents-about-links-with-syrian-civil-war-court-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=112608&NewsCatID=339>

⁸ "NATO weighs new counterterrorism post following Trump's demands", *Fox News*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/05/02/nato-weighs-new-counterterrorism-post-following-trumps-demands.html>

⁹ Seth Harp, "Trump's Cruel Silence on Turkey", *Rolling Stone*, April 28, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/trumps-cruel-silence-on-turkey-w479271>; Ilham Ahmed, "We're America's best friend in Syria. Turkey bombed us anyway", *Washington Post*, April 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/04/28/were-americas-best-friend-in-syria-turkey-bombed-us-anyway/?utm_term=.0f1423db314e; "Turkish Jets Bomb U.S.-backed Kurdish Forces in Iraq & Syria", *American Military News*, April 25, 2017, <https://americanmilitarynews.com/2017/04/turkish-jets-bomb-u-s-backed-kurdish-forces-iraq-syria/>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/MaxAbrahms/status/857253435875500032>

¹¹ Michael Rubin, "Can NATO survive Turkey?", *American Enterprise Institute AEIdeas*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.aei.org/publication/can-nato-survive-turkey/>

¹² Richard Sisk, "Pentagon slams NATO Ally Turkey on Airstrikes Against Kurds", *Military Times*, April 26, 2017, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/04/26/us-slams-nato-ally-turkey-airstrikes-against-kurds.html>

¹³ https://twitter.com/Dr_Partizan/status/859084750421729282

¹⁴ https://twitter.com/Dr_Partizan/status/859084386565795840

Meanwhile, Erdogan is steadily populating northern Syria with Turkey-trained Islamist militants-cum- security forces. Chanting and hailing Allah,¹⁵ Erdogan and Turkey, a batch of 450 troops deployed to Jarablus¹⁶ in January 2017, the first of some 5,000 security forces Ankara is training to occupy northern Syria as part of Operation Euphrates Shield launched in August 2016.



Caption: Turkey-trained police for Jarablus, Syria

Coordinated with pro-Turkish Syrian rebel jihadi groups including the Turkmen Sultan Murad Brigades, the August operation in Jarablus appears to be part of Ankara’s larger plan to annex northern Syria. As previously reported in a *Times of Israel* article¹⁷, on 5 August 2015, Turkish newspaper Takvim¹⁸ featured a map¹⁹ of Turkey’s proposed buffer zone that includes Aleppo, Idlib and the north of Latakia to be under Turkey’s control as an eventual 82nd province.



Caption: Turkey’s 82nd province, Takvim-5-August-2015

Now the question facing President Trump in the upcoming May 15-16 meeting with Turkey’s president and the May 25 NATO summit is, will U.S. and NATO support Erdogan in his neo-Ottoman empire building?

¹⁵ MEMRI TV, “Members of Jarablus Police Hail Turkey, Erdogan in First Graduation Ceremony”, February 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-YU1kS-PYI>

¹⁶ Arwa Ibrahim, “Turkey trains and deploys hundreds of police to Syria”, *Middle East Eye*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-YU1kS-PYI>

¹⁷ Christina Lin, “NATO, Turkey, annexation of north Syria like north Cyprus?” *Times of Israel*, November 24, 2015, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/nato-turkey-annexation-of-north-syria-like-north-cyprus/>; Alastair Crooke, “Russia Forecloses Erdogan’s Gambit to Re-Ottomanise”, *Northern Syria & Iraq*, Valdai Club, October 20, 2015, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-forecloses-erdogan-s-gambit-to-re-ottomanise-northern-syria-iraq/>

¹⁸ <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2015/08/05/yeni-sehir>

¹⁹ <http://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2015/08/05/yeni-sehir>



Hub and spoke for Europe?

NATO is clearly in a state of disarray: Washington has to confront a NATO member to stop attacking U.S. allies, while Turkey threatened²⁰ to attack American soldiers in Syria. This in turn has provoked some observers to muse whether Washington and Ankara would invoke Article 5 against each other, and is all the more reason why it may be unrealistic to expect that American taxpayers—the main source of funding for the alliance—would continue to underwrite an organization that seems to be undermining and not furthering American security.

As long as NATO member Turkey persists in degrading anti-ISIS efforts and hold American and international security hostage to its own agenda, the alliance will continue to lose its credibility and moral legitimacy on the world stage. Absent NATO reform on defense expenditures and clarification on the alliance's mission in the Trump era, European security thus appears likely to transform into an East Asian hub-and-spoke model.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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²⁰ Sagar Enjeti, "Turkey Now Overtly Threatening US Troops in Syria", *Daily Caller*, May 4, 2017, <http://dailycaller.com/2017/05/04/turkey-now-overtly-threatening-us-troops-in-syria/>; Paul Iddon, "What Would Happen if Turkey Attacked U.S. Troops in Syria", *War is Boring*, May 5, 2017, <http://warisboring.com/what-would-happen-if-turkey-attacked-u-s-troops-in-syria/>; Paul Mcleary, "Turkey threatens U.S. Forces in Syria, as Putin presses for safe zones", *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/03/turkey-threatens-u-s-forces-in-syria-as-putin-presses-for-safe-zones/>;