



NATO AND TURKEY: ACTIONS SHOULD SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

EVALUATION NOTE

“Turkish Commandos joined American and Italian paratroopers during an airborne assault that was a part of the training exercise #SaberJunction19 at Hohenfels training area in Germany.”

This was a twitter message, with a photo, shared by the US Army’s official twitter account on October 15, a couple of days after the launch of Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in Northeastern Syria. Saber Junction 2019 was one of the multinational tactical exercises of NATO, and it is quite ordinary for the Turkish Military to participate in it. However, in recent days, Turkey’s NATO membership has been questioned in the international media, as well as a vast array of social media accounts. If one were to go by these comments alone, it would appear as though Turkey’s exit from NATO was imminent. Is this true? Are Turkey and ATO, thereby the United States, about to go through a divorce?

The short answer is a straight “no”. I have found that the longer, more detailed answer depends often on how willing my interlocutor is to listen. So let me get into some of the details of my answer.

When speaking about breaking off any relationship, there are at least two sides to the issue. We have to deal with a Turkish and NATO perspectives, while keeping in mind that NATO is,

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to the some extent, theoretically and historically a monolithic body. On the Turkish side, it makes no sense to lose a seat in the world's most prestigious international security organization. Turkey's veto power alone, just like all other members of the alliance, is a significant asset. On the NATO side, even in the worst-case scenario, there is not any eviction mechanism in the founding documents of the organization. There is, however, a possibility of suspension or expulsion from membership, but it requires unanimity. This is possible, but not probable under the current circumstances.

As for the realities on the ground, beyond the recent popular narratives, one should examine ongoing activities. Historically, the record of Turkey-NATO relations is nothing but reliability on both sides. There were surely some problems throughout this history, yet both sides managed to overcome them. These include the Cuban Missile Crisis, the procurement of S-300 missiles to Greek Cyprus, the Aegean Sea disputes with Greece, the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, the Kosovo Operation, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Iraq War. Even during the last decade, a laborious diplomatic process succeeded in establishing the NATO Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMD), and installing its sensory BMD Radar Tracking Component at Kürecik, Malatya in Turkey. Turkey has clearly fulfilled its responsibility to defend European allies by deploying the sensor on its soil.

From the realpolitik point of view, we should assess today the future of relations based on these facts. As alluded at the beginning, I would argue that the ongoing activity between Turkey and NATO is disconnected from the discourse in the international media, which is largely shaped by reactions to Turkey's policy in Syria. On the one hand, Turkey has been consistently against the activities of the PKK and decided to prevent Northern Syria from becoming a safe haven for them. Many in Turkey wanted to prevent a recurrence of what happened in the Northern Iraq after the Gulf War. Contractually, NATO's any member might engage in a military operation for its national interest and that would not necessarily result in any discussion on its membership to NATO. For example, because of France's military operations in Mali during the second decade of this century did not result in a discussion of its membership to NATO. Though, France itself gives some signs to harm alliances such as describing NATO is in brain death.² On the other hand, Turkey has been fulfilling its commitments to NATO. By assessing Turkey's future as an ally on the grounds of its performance as a NATO member, rather than its Syria policy, one may have a better capacity to explain the future of its status as an ally.

² "NATO alliance experiencing brain death, says Macron," Retrieved November 8th, 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50335257>

The contributions of Turkey to NATO could be categorized as financial and operational. In September 2014, the North Atlantic Council gathered in Wales and, and as was later highly publicized, decided to “*agree to reverse the trend of declining defence budgets.*” In this perspective, the allies would increase their defense expenditures to 2 percent of GDP in a decade. Therefore, Turkey, as pledged, has been increasing its defense expenditure percentage 10 percent every year, and reached the figure of 1.89 percent of GDP in 2019.³ Although Turkey had exchange rate fluctuations and economic problems in 2018, its pace for reaching the 2 percent goal complies with what was agreed at the Wales Summit.

As for the operational contribution of Turkey to NATO, I would argue it has been going on without interruption, regardless of political discussions. Institutionally, NATO’s Land Command Headquarters is located in İzmir and its High Readiness Force Corps HQ is located in Istanbul. In addition to these, the NATO Center of Excellence Defense Against Terrorism and the Partnership for Peace Training Centre are located in Ankara. Moreover, on October 18th, nine days after the beginning of the Operation Peace Spring, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed for establishing the Maritime Security Centre of Excellence in Turkey.

Besides that, Turkey has been supporting NATO’s Afghanistan mission ever since it began. Turkish troops are currently in Afghanistan and Turkey is one of the NATO Framework Nations along with Germany, the United States and Italy in this country. Additionally, Turkey is one of the leading nations for NATO Mission in Iraq, and Turkish troops have been serving in the NATO Kosovo Force. Turkey has allocated its Konya Air Base for NATO AWACS to fight against DAESH and also supports their air refueling as a member of the Global Coalition against DAESH.

There are also some active operations or exercises, which Turkey has either joined or hosted during the Fall 2019 period: Operation Sea Guardian, Rapid Trident 2019, Steadfast Flow 2019, Naval Electro Magnetic Operations 2019, Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2, Standing NATO Maritime Group 2.

Moreover Turkey is going to lead NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) in 2021. VJTF, or in other words, the Spearhead Force of NATO, is responsible for reacting to any possible crisis in a week. The German-Dutch Forces, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, Poland and Turkey are the contributors of the force.

³ The figure for 2019 is an official estimate. Retrieved November 3rd, 2019 from https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_06/20190625_PR2019-069-EN.pdf

Above all, the political and diplomatic engagements of Turkey have been ongoing without any hesitation from either side. During the same period of the calendar, in fall 2019, there were many high level political and diplomatic engagements on the scene. On 11th October NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg visited Turkey and met with, sporadically, the President Erdoğan and the Minister of Foreign Affairs; on 12th October the NATO Parliament Assembly gathered in London; on 24th October, Turkish Minister of Defence attended the NATO Defence Ministers Meeting; during the course NATO Commissions for Ukraine and Georgia visited these countries including Turkish delegations. That's to say, in addition to Turkey's financial and operational contributions to NATO, the political and diplomatic dimension of the mutual relation has been as expected.

Someone who just follows the discourses on traditional media outlets or the social media during the last months would easily claim that Turkey's NATO membership is about to end. Admittedly, even the decision makers would lead the public to think in the same way. However, there is a real world beyond the narratives and reality shows us the contrary. Bluntly speaking, the field operations, some of which are listed above, and the mechanism of the alliance, tell us that the cooperation between Turkey and NATO is continuing without interruption. Actions should speak louder than words. Otherwise, in future, the title of another article would be "Self-Fulfilling Prophecy!"

Please check the link for a detailed quantitative and qualitative data of Turkish Contribution to Peacekeeping Operations www.tubakov.org