



Turkey's Nonnuclear Decisions on Nuclear Issues

By Nilsu Goren

Executive Summary

Beyond its history of military coups and incomplete civilian oversight of its armed forces, Turkey has struggled with defining an independent international security policy. Its perception of U.S./NATO security guarantees has historically shaped its decision to either prioritize collective defense or seek solutions in indigenous or regional security arrangements. As part its domestic political transformation during the past decade, Turkey has decreased its reliance on NATO, leading to questions among observers about Turkey's future strategic orientation away from the West.

This brief argues that Turkey's strategic objectives have indeed evolved in the recent past and that this is apparent in the mismatch between the country's general security policy objectives and the outcomes of its policies on nuclear issues. At present, nuclear weapons do not serve a compelling function in Turkish policymakers' thinking, beyond the country's commitment to the status quo in NATO nuclear policy. Since nuclear deterrence is secondary to conventional deterrence, Turkey's policies on nuclear issues are predominantly shaped by non-nuclear considerations. These decisions, in the absence of careful consideration of nuclear weapons, increase nuclear risks. This brief explores how Turkey could formulate more effective and lower risk nuclear policies than it currently does by employing cooperative security measures and how such a reorientation could strengthen to its overall security policy in the process.

The Policy Problem

Turkey is a non-nuclear member of a nuclear alliance in a region where nuclear proliferation is of particular concern. It is also the only North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member that borders the Middle East. As such, Turkish policy makers have chosen not to rely solely on NATO guarantees in addressing its regional security challenges. However, Turkey has not been able to formulate a security policy that reconciles this quest for independence with its NATO

membership, its bilateral relationship with the United States, and its Mideast regional engagement.

This general incoherence is readily apparent when assessing a range of nuclear-related decisions facing Turkish policymakers today. Turkey's security policies have little explicit emphasis on nuclear weapons, which officials argue provides flexibility. This brief instead argues that the lack of well-defined, national nuclear policies creates signaling problems and contributes to concerns about Turkey's broader actions and intentions.

Background: Turkey's Attitudes Toward U.S./NATO Extended Deterrence

A series of formative events both during and after the Cold War functioned as solidarity tests and "trust-breaking" incidents for Turkey, leading it to conclude that it has different security needs than the rest of the NATO alliance.

During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. unilateral decision to withdraw the Jupiter missiles deployed in Turkey without consulting Turkish officials led to frustration and doubts about the U.S. commitment to Turkish security. In a more drastic turn of events, in June 1964, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson warned Turkey not to intervene in Cyprus and threatened that the United States would not protect Turkey if the Soviets became entangled. When Turkey deployed forces in Cyprus as part of a 1974 unilateral offensive, the United States imposed an arms embargo that lasted until September 1978. Both the embargo and Turkey's military vulnerability during the Cyprus intervention continue to shape the mindset of Turkish policymakers, who argue for a strong, domestic defense industry.

While Turkey actively contributed to NATO's post-Cold War out-of-area contingency operations, including the 1991 Gulf War, its vulnerability to Saddam Hussein's missile inventory and NATO's slow response to Ankara's request for air and missile defense reinforcements decreased Turkey's confidence in NATO security guarantees. After the Turkish parliament refused to allow U.S. troops to cross into northern Iraq through Turkey as part of the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom, NATO hesitated to deploy Patriot missile batteries and Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) surveillance planes to Turkey, raising further questions.

President Obama tried to reinforce Turkey's ties to NATO during his April 2010 visit to the country. He referred to the country's "model strategic partnership" and called for additional instruments to contribute to regional stability and strengthen the NATO alliance through multilateralism.¹ However, Turkey's and US/NATO's threat perceptions have only diverged as Turkey's economic and political ambitions in the Middle East have grown. Turkish security policymaking no longer favors isolation from the Middle East but rather promotes engagement outside NATO to enhance Turkish strategic interests. Yet, Turkey's limited power and the uncertainties and complexities of Mideast political and security dilemmas, including the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS, have raised the price of Turkish regional engagement.

¹ Namik Tan, "Turkish-US strategic partnership," *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 1, 2011.

Turkey's Strategic Objectives on Nuclear Issues and Problems in Policy Formulation

Turkey faces several pressing nuclear-related decisions relating to U.S. tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Turkey, national air and ballistic missile defense, and Iran's nuclear program. Based on Turkey's stance on nuclear issues, one could assume that its strategic objectives include:

1. Maintaining a minimum nuclear deterrent by keeping U.S. tactical nuclear weapons at the Incirlik Airbase;
2. Eliminating Turkey's vulnerability to aerial threats arising from the Middle East by strengthening its air and missile defenses; and
3. Preventing a nuclear-armed Iran from altering the balance of power in the region.

However, a closer look suggests that Turkish decision making on nuclear issues instead reflects the central, *non*-nuclear principles of Turkish security policymaking. These include:

1. Maintaining the stability and continuity of the U.S.-Turkey strategic partnership and of NATO's security guarantees;
2. Developing sophisticated indigenous defense technologies to increase Turkey's political autonomy in security policy; and
3. Increasing Turkey's regional influence by partnering with regional actors to counter security concerns unique to Turkish interests outside of NATO.

The misalignment between Turkey's security policies on nuclear issues and its broader strategic objectives derives from a widening gap among the U.S., NATO, and Turkish strategic interests in the region. It also owes significantly to Turkey's quest under the leadership of the AKP party to strengthen its domestic defense industry.

Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Turkey. Turkish thinking on the future of U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, including the 50 B-61 gravity bombs at Incirlik Air Base, is crucial to understanding Turkey's nuclear policies. The failed coup attempt in July 2016 and the detainment of the Incirlik base commander reignited the concerns about the vulnerability of these weapons. While the probability of unauthorized use of these nuclear weapons remains very low, the risk is not zero. However, Turkish policy makers continue to lack confidence in U.S./NATO security guarantees and to fear abandonment. Turkish officials believe that maintaining tactical nuclear weapons at Incirlik will strengthen the U.S. political commitment to Turkish security—a non-nuclear objective. Yet neither the Turkish Armed Forces nor the AKP government has signaled an intent to adopt a nuclear mission despite Turkey's acquisition of F-35 joint strike fighters which is in concert with the B61-12 Life Extension Program. Indeed, Turkish officials have signaled that if there was consensus within NATO on removing all U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, not just Turkey, they would not block the decision.

As the nuclear weapons at Incirlik remain strictly under U.S. command and control they do not serve the Turkish desire to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent. In principle, Turkey would welcome a WMD-free zone in the Middle East and a world free of nuclear weapons in the long term, yet its general ambivalence on nuclear policies in the medium term leads some observers to debate whether Turkey would consider developing its own nuclear weapons in the future,

especially if NATO's nuclear policy changed and U.S. extended deterrence was degraded. Another factor frequently named as potential motivation for Turkey to develop its own nuclear weapons would be a nuclear-armed Iran leading to a "nuclear domino" or "proliferation cascade" in the region. Despite these possibilities, Turkey has neither expressed the desire nor acquired the capabilities to develop nuclear weapons.

Ballistic Missile Defense. Repeated delays in the dispatch of Patriot antiballistic systems for Turkish use have led some Turkish officials to doubt whether they can entirely depend on NATO and to argue for Turkey to develop its own national air and missile defense capabilities. While Turkey hosts an X-band early warning radar in Kurecik as part of the NATO ballistic missile defense architecture, the existing architecture doesn't provide defense of eastern Turkey, providing another reason for Turkish development of such systems.

Because Turkey emphasizes maintaining the independence of Turkish defense industries and modernizing its military it has relied on technology transfer as its primary defense procurement strategy. However, AKP officials have been considering the possibility of indigenously developing long-range missile and air defense systems—technically challenging and expensive technologies—without taking into consideration the strategic implications of such a decision. When Turkey cancelled its initial missile defense deal with China in 2015, Turkey's top defense procurement official stated that Turkey's air and missile defense system assessment is based on enhancing the domestic defense sector and technology development, and not on Turkey's security objectives or the political implications of such decisions.² Both Undersecretary Demir and President Erdogan have repeatedly stated that Turkey would need both offensive and defensive missiles for an effective deterrent.

Officials do not talk about Turkey's quest for defense modernization as a way to better contribute to NATO, but rather as an act of independence in response to their lack of confidence in NATO guarantees. Turkey's vulnerability to ISIS rocket attacks on border towns demonstrates its precarious position. Yet officials offer few details about the immediacy of the long-range ballistic missile threats that they expect to face, whether the proposed new systems would be effective in addressing these threats, or whether the new systems could create a security dilemma and promote horizontal missile proliferation. Given the reluctance of foreign producers to address Turkey's technology transfer demands beyond a stop-gap acquisition, it is not clear that Turkish industry would be up for the job of developing these capabilities domestically, as developing the advanced technological capabilities required for long-range air and ballistic missile defense would be a large technological leap.

Iran's Nuclear Program. A major objective of Turkish security policymaking is ensuring regional engagement to address security concerns unique to Turkey. An example of this objective has been Turkey's pursuit of a stable relationship with Iran, particularly by maintaining close economic ties. Throughout negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran regarding Iran's nuclear program, Turkish leaders consistently underlined Iran's right to enrichment technologies and to developing peaceful nuclear energy and opposed any military action and financial sanctions. This, despite not being directly involved in the talks. Turkey was particularly

² Dr. Ismail Demir, Undersecretary for Defense Industries, "Stratejik Hava Savunma Sistemleri ve Turkiye'nin Yol Haritasi," SETA Ankara, October 25, 2015.

concerned about the possibility of a U.S./Israeli preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Turkish officials also criticized Iran for its initial lack of transparency in compliance with its IAEA obligations yet argued that a diplomatic solution on the nuclear issue, as it put forward in the Turkey-Brazil deal with Tehran in 2010, was the only viable option.

Despite the desire for further regional engagement, Turkey does not have a clear roadmap following the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action about how to formulate a security policy toward Iran, particularly given the stark differences in their sets of allies in the Syrian conflict. While the government and the public generally do not perceive the Iranian nuclear program as a threat, some in Turkey's traditional security establishment—military officials and the diplomatic elite—are concerned with Iran's nuclear capabilities and future intentions.

Recommendations

To address its crisis of confidence with NATO, redefine its strategic partnership with the United States, and adopt a more clear, cautious approach toward the Middle East, Turkey will need to transform its external security policy making. Steps it could take in this direction toward nuclear issues, could include:

- (1) Implementing policies on nuclear issues that don't rely on conventional deterrence as justification. Turkish thinking on nuclear weapons should be formulated on carefully considered principles that are not subsidiary to other policy concerns.
- (2) The reevaluation and emphasis of Turkey's security concerns and security needs, including which threats are most urgent and what strategies would be most useful in addressing them within the alliance.
- (3) Emphasizing cooperation rather than coercion to counter perceived threats by, for instance, minimizing risks from miscalculation that could lead to escalation and deteriorate Turkey's security. If Turkey were given concrete security guarantees, i.e. enhanced U.S.-Turkey defense cooperation and reassurances for multilateral defense against Russia, it would likely support the removal of nuclear weapons from Incirlik, since they have no military value in addressing Turkey's security threats. These conventional military guarantees would instead address Turkey's most immediate security concerns regarding the ongoing war in Syria and Iraq, especially the vulnerability along the border. Such concrete guarantees would also buttress the U.S.-Turkey partnership and alleviate Turkey's concern that its security interests are not being taken into consideration.
- (4) Separating conventional air defenses from ballistic missile defenses, and relying on NATO defense assets as needed without investing in longer range indigenous capabilities with high technological barriers, high costs, and strategic implications. Turkey can better achieve its objective of decreasing its vulnerability to short-range aerial threats with short-range air defenses and real-time surveillance rather than by pursuing ballistic missile defense. The most immediate

aerial threats to Turkish territory from Syria and Iraq, are rockets and shells, not ballistic missiles.

(5) Recognizing the impact of their decision making on nuclear issues (e.g. tactical nuclear weapons, ballistic missile defense, and choice of strategic partners) on Iran's perception of Turkey's security and defense posture. For Turkey, the JCPOA opens up opportunities for additional security, economic, and energy cooperation with Iran. It also gives Turkey the opportunity to engage with Iran beyond economic interdependence to develop the diplomatic resolution of conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

All of these steps would help Turkey reassure its key allies, adopt a more realistic assessment of power, a more rational and less philosophical regional policy, and avoid alienation in an unstable region.

Implications

Turkey and NATO are in a mutual crisis of confidence. Turkey is concerned about a divergence of its and NATO's strategic interests, particularly in Syria; Western officials are increasingly concerned about Turkey being an "unreliable" ally.³ Despite the increasing lack of confidence, Turkey continues to have an inevitable bridging role between NATO and the Middle East and can provide unique contributions to security policy debates. Turkey wants to be seen as a valuable ally and a good partner worthy of working on joint defense projects.

If Turkey's declaratory policy toward tactical nuclear weapons shifted away from maintaining the status quo to elimination, it could contribute to the broader debate on NATO's "nuclear sharing" strategy and the next round of nuclear reductions between the United States and Russia concerning the non-strategic nuclear arsenals. The absence of nuclear weapons in Turkish strategic thinking constitutes an opportunity to revise the policy and clarify Turkey's intentions. Beyond the international implications of Turkey's domestic political and military restructuring, a repositioning of external security policy and a sustainable defense industry strategy are direly needed for the improvement of NATO/U.S.-Turkey relations and to end the turmoil in Syria and Iraq.

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³ See, for instance, "Turkey: An Increasingly Undependable Ally," Bipartisan Policy Center, April 23, 2015, at: <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/turkey-an-increasingly-undependable-ally/>

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