

## **TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH NATO AND THE EU AFTER THE COUP**

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In this article I shall examine the possible repercussions in Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU in the aftermath of the failed coup of 15 July 2016 against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) government. Each one of these organizations have been of paramount importance in Turkey's foreign policy designing for decades. However, Mr. Erdoğan's poor democratic standards and ambiguous commitment to Western institutions, in conjunction with the current political instability in the country, call for a new model of relations between Turkey and its Western allies.

### **An unlikely exit and an equally unlikely entry**

It is more than obvious that the recent coup attempt has opened the Pandora's box in relation with the Turkish government's commitment to democracy and human rights. The government crackdown, including arrests of thousands of people suspected for taking part to the plot, suspension of even more from their duties in the army and other posts in civil service and education and the forced closure of dozens of media outlets, as well as the discussion for the restoration of death penalty, have alarmed Turkey's Western allies. Turkey's participation to NATO and its ongoing accession negotiations with the European Union (EU) are becoming trickier every day, as Mr. Erdoğan perceives the coup as a "blank cheque" for cleaning "all state institutions of the virus" of Fethullah Gulen supporters.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding Turkey's NATO membership, a discussion was triggered after a statement made by the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, a few days after the coup attempt. Being profoundly disturbed by the Turkish government's indiscriminate crackdown, Mr. Kerry went as far to question Turkey's NATO membership in case violations of rule of law and human rights persisted. According to Mr. Kerry, "NATO [...] has a requirement with respect to democracy," and added that NATO would "measure" Turkey's actions in days to come. "Obviously, a lot of people have been arrested and arrested very quickly", he said.<sup>2</sup> Following that comment there were calls for a fundamental change of the US stance towards

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Guyoncourt, "Turkey coup: Death penalty fears as President Erdogan begins 'cleansing' operation of dissidents," *Independent*, 17 July 2016.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-purges-army-protesters-arrested-france-warning-blank-cheque-a7141361.html>.

Accessed on 25 July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Massimo Calabresi, "How John Kerry Handled Turkey's Coup," *Time*, 19 July 2016. <http://time.com/4412495/turkey-coup-john-kerry/>. Accessed on 27 July 2016.

Turkey's NATO membership.<sup>3</sup> In reality though, Mr. Kerry's call was rather a diplomatic slap than a warning with serious legal and institutional gravity. The North Atlantic Treaty indeed outlines an obligation of all signatories to respect democracy, rule of law and human rights. Specifically, in the preamble it is stated that

“the Parties to this Treaty [...] are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. (...)”<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, in relation with NATO's enlargement, for any applicant to be accepted as a new member state, there are specific pre-conditions to be fulfilled, including a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy, fair treatment of minority populations and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutions.<sup>5</sup> Although it is implied that these principles must be respected by the already existing NATO members as well, there are no reviewing mechanisms, neither any clause of expulsion on any grounds (except for a provision of a signatory's self-exclusion from the North Atlantic Treaty, according to Article 13). Therefore, there is no safe institutional way to force Turkey or any other country out of NATO.

However, regarding Turkey's relations with the EU, things are totally different. Turkey is not a member-state, but a candidate country with an accession application under evaluation. It has to fulfill the so called Copenhagen criteria for membership, including the obligation to have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the accession negotiations between the candidate country and the European Committee, the former is asked to fully accept the so called *acquis* by making all the necessary legislative adjustments. The *acquis* is broken into 35 chapters (including chapter 24 on justice, freedom and security). So far, after eleven years of an exhausting monitoring process, Turkey has provisionally closed only one chapter (chapter 25 on science and research). It is well known to any observer that Turkey's accession negotiations are in a continuous stalemate for years. Although the recent refugee crisis

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<sup>3</sup> Doug Bandow, “Toss Turkey out of NATO: U.S. Doesn't Need Civilian Dictatorship of Military Junta,” *Forbes*, 27 July 2016.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2016/07/27/toss-turkey-out-of-nato-u-s-doesnt-need-civilian-dictatorship-or-military-junta/#ef80e1c848d5>.

Accessed on 28 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4 April 1949.

<sup>5</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Study on NATO Enlargement,” 3 September 1995.

<sup>6</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria_en.htm).

Accessed on 28 July 2016.

and the agreement between Turkey and the EU for the return of Syrian refugees who fled to Greek islands (and from there to continental Europe) via Turkey has revitalized the process to some degree,<sup>7</sup> every interested party knows that Turkey's quest for full membership is particularly thorny. Even if all the EU institutions agreed on an Accession Treaty with Turkey (including the European Parliament which is increasingly opposing this perspective), the ratification of the Treaty would have to go through all the member states individually, including many countries that are constitutionally obliged to hold referendums. The current situation in Turkey, in conjunction with the increasing Euroscepticism and islamophobia in Europe, implies that the expectation that all the member states would agree with the accession of a predominantly Muslim country (with a population close to 80 million) is totally groundless. The statements made by the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Parliament in the wake of Mr. Erdoğan's crackdown (with special care about the possibility of the restoration of death penalty<sup>8</sup>) are the latest indications that the one-and-a-half decades lasting organized hypocrisy of Turkey's perspective for full membership is critically waning.

### **A new model of relations**

Under the rule of Mr. Erdoğan and AKP, Turkey's relations with NATO, the EU and the United States had entered an era of prolonged uncertainty long before the recent coup attempt. Turkey's post-World War II geostrategic alignment with the West has been widely disputed in the last decade, but without being disregarded. For example, strains with NATO allies pre-existed the coup.<sup>9</sup> However, deteriorating relations with Russia in the last couple of years acted (and this is expected to continue) as a balancing factor to Turkey's dubious commitment to the alliance. Similarly, the US-led campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria also highlights the need for a *modus vivendi* with neighboring Turkey (despite widespread allegations regarding Turkey's covert aid to ISIS<sup>10</sup>). Moreover, Mr. Erdoğan's rates of domestic support and legitimacy leave no room for Western hopes that a possible democratic succession could happen any time soon. In any case though, the more Mr. Erdoğan is strengthened at the expense of the country's institutions, the more Turkey becomes unpredictable and unpredictability is a characteristic that does not match

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<sup>7</sup> Press office - General Secretariat of the Council, EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016.

<sup>8</sup> "Death penalty will end Turkey's EU bid, says Juncker," *Anadolu Agency*, 25 July 2016. <http://aa.com.tr/en/europe/death-penalty-will-end-turkeys-eu-bid-says-juncker/615091>. Accessed on 28 July 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Burak Bekdil, "Turkey: what ally?" *The Gatestone Institute*, 22 September 2014. <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4715/turkey-ally>. Accessed on 28 July 2016.

<sup>10</sup> David Graeber, "Turkey could cut off Islamic State's supply lines. So why doesn't it?" *The Guardian*, 18 November 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/18/turkey-cut-islamic-state-supply-lines-erdogan-isis>. Accessed on 28 July 2016.

with the profile of a "pivotal ally". Therefore, the Western nations (especially the United States) and organizations should establish a new model of relations with their increasingly roguish ally, which would be based on more sticks and carrots and less reliance.