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TRANSATLANTIC **TWEAKS**

THE revision of NATO's Strategic Concept was an opportunity for Turkey also to reassert its position on the evolution of the Alliance. Ankara considers NATO as the cornerstone of its national security. But for the first ever state to have had an unsuccessful bid to join the European Union, NATO membership also has an identity dimension. It symbolizes Turkey's integration in the transatlantic community. So Turkey's long term outlook on NATO continues to be influenced by a desire to maintain and consolidate its primacy as the security pillar of the transatlantic bond.

In return, just like many other states of the Alliance, Turkey has strived to shape the Strategic Concept so that it better reflects

its own security concerns. Firstly, for policy makers in Ankara, terrorism is nowadays the most significant threat. Turkey has had a long history of fighting the predominantly Kurdish PKK, a terrorist entity acknowledged as such also by the US, UK and the EU. Over the years Turkey has been able to greatly reduce the operational abilities of the PKK. The emergence of the drone technology has been particularly helpful both strategically and tactically in this struggle. The enhancement of border security has undermined the ability of the PKK to infiltrate Turkish territory and to smuggle weapons leading over time to an inability to stage attacks. The reliance on these autonomous vehicles has also greatly constrained the freedom of movement of the leadership cadre of the organization, even in the cross-

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border areas. And yet in the wake of Syria's internal strife, the emergence of the Islamic State has upended Turkey's threat perception. The Syria based PYD/YPG, an organic offshoot of the PKK was used as a proxy force by Turkey's NATO allies to fight the Islamic State. The assistance to the YPG involved the supply of several weapons systems and platforms that ended up being significant assets for the PKK itself.

As a result, for Turkish policy makers a major aim has been to elevate the fight against terrorism in the ranking of common security threats faced by NATO nations. The challenge for Ankara has been to convince its Allies that the understanding of the concept of the fight against terrorism should not be limited to radical religious movements

that arguably are seen as the main threat from the perspective of many other NATO Allies. By underlining the need to treat all the manifestations of terrorism in the same way, Ankara has strived to leverage NATO as a platform to nurture political solidarity for its fight against the PKK.

Turkey's diplomatic efforts were thus focused to obtain in the newly negotiated Strategic Concept a more comprehensive and ambitious definition of the tasks that the Alliance would undertake to combat terrorism. It is worth recalling that the only time Article 5 was triggered was in relation to a terror attack on 9/11. And yet the institutional role of the Alliance in combating terrorism still remains limited. As a result, Ankara believes that the political solidarity around the goal of combating terrorism in all its manifestations has essentially been elusive.

Turkey's position on the accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance is in essence significantly shaped by this grievance. It is linked to the assessment that Sweden's stance does not reflect the expediency to have a more effective strategy to combat the influence of terror linked entities like the PKK. Ankara has regularly complained to the authorities in Stockholm about what it sees as a too permissive environment for the terror groups in relation to their fund raising and recruitment activities. Another source of complaint, both with Sweden and Finland, has been about the recalcitrance of these governments to green light the extradition of people charged with terror linked activities in Turkey. Obviously, a commitment from the Nordic governments on matters related to extradition is not realistic given the principle of the separation of powers with extradition issues falling within the purview of independent judiciary agencies. But at the very least, Stockholm and Helsinki could agree to a



deepened and regular dialogue with their counterparts in Ankara to address the problems that stem from this standoff. Ankara has also asked for these countries to cease the arms embargoes against Turkey.

But with this very public position on Sweden and Finland's accession, Ankara also aims to emphasize its expectations from the Alliance itself. The internal mechanisms of the Alliance have in reality proven to be insufficient for Turkey to foster a political consensus around its major security challenge. The lack of a real political solidarity within NATO on the threat of terrorism has therefore caused Turkey to harden its position on NATO enlargement. The conclusion of the ongoing negotiations between Turkey and the Nordic countries can therefore be accelerated with the Alliance espousing, possibly in the Strategic Concept itself, a more ambitious political role for itself to address the negative impact of divergent national level policies

that undermines the common effort to combat terrorism. The second major objective for Turkish policy makers in relation to the revision of the Strategic Concept has been to ensure the prospects of NATO-EU cooperation should not come to the detriment of Turkey's national interest. Ankara has been at best ambivalent about the ambitions of the EU to develop its own security and defense identity. On the one hand, Turkey cannot discount the lasting changes in the global and regional landscape that argue for a stronger role for the EU in ensuring the stability and security of Europe and its close neighbourhood. Washington's pivot to Asia or even the possibility of a future US leadership to significantly downscale the commitment of the US to Europe's security are certainly strong arguments in defense of a bigger European role. Even beyond this set of circumstances, there are other rationales for a stronger NATO-EU collaboration. The EU has a

more diverse set of capabilities in post-conflict stabilization. It is also better placed to address governance challenges. And yet despite this reality, Turkey has been conflicted about the emergence of the EU as a security anchor. The reason is Turkey's troubled relationship with the EU. In the post WWII era, in addition to being a NATO member, Turkey was also an associate member of the Western European Union, the then security and defense arm of the EU. As an associate member, Turkey was able to take part in the deliberations of the WEU almost as a EU member, albeit without voting rights. After the St Malo agreement in 1998 and the burgeoning of a Common Foreign and Security Policy, the EU has essentially ostracized Turkey from this critical platform. Diplomatic negotiations that intended to create a mutually acceptable framework of cooperation between Turkey and the EU on areas related to CFSP have failed on account of the unwillingness of the EU to create a more flexible

arrangement for a non-EU NATO ally like Turkey in terms of its institutional affiliation with CFSP. This sense of exclusion has therefore fed Turkey's suspicion of the EU as a security actor and rationalized Turkey's embrace of NATO as the main security organization to address the security challenges in Europe.

Brexit was viewed at some point as a critical milestone that could herald a more inclusive thinking about the future of CFSP. The argument was that the EU would need to be more creative to be able to ensure the association of the UK with CFSP and the institutional modalities of this association would also serve as a blueprint to advance Turkey's ties with CFSP as another non EU NATO nation. And yet political difficulties caused by Brexit in UK-EU relations have so far prevented the emergence of a more ambitious framework of inclusion of third countries in CFSP.

A third major consideration for Turkish policy makers has been the framing of the external actors like Russia and China. At present and with the war in Ukraine, no government would want to appear to be championing a "normal" relationship with Russia. But the Strategic Concept is a vision document. It sets the NATO doctrine for the next decade. And therefore it needs to reflect an assessment that is not too focused on the short and even medium term dynamics affecting the transatlantic security landscape.

Turkey's perspective on Russia has undergone a deep transformation in the past decade. Traditionally Turkish

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policy makers have viewed Russia with deep suspicion. This sentiment is largely shaped by Turkey's imperial legacy. The Ottoman empire has lost many wars waged against Czarist Russia and had to continually cede land for peace with the Crimean war being the sole major exception. And then after a brief period of rapprochement between the newly Bolshevik Russia and the modern nation state of Turkey, the post WWII era brought new challenges with Stalinist Russia's territorial ambitions on Turkey. It is against this backdrop that in recent years Turkey and Russia, Erdogan and Putin, have been able to create a diplomatic partnership to manage regional crisis. This concept of a Turkish-Russian regional diplomatic condominium firstly emerged in Syria, where Ankara was eventually forced to collaborate with Russia and Iran to limit the negative repercussions of the internal chaos of its neighbour. This understanding was then extended to other theaters like Libya and Nagorno Karabakh where Turkey and Russia have played a major role, with varying degrees of success, to stabilize regional conflicts.

Today Turkish diplomacy is

relying on this "acquis" to play a constructive role in the Ukraine war. Ankara has successfully charted a difficult path that can be defined as being pro-Ukraine without being anti-Russian. So it continues to supply to Ukraine armed drones and has closed the Turkish Straits to the passage of Russian warships. And yet it is the only NATO country not to have implemented sanctions against Russia. The air corridor to Russia remains open. This carefully balanced policy has allowed Turkey to play a facilitating role in the diplomatic negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. Also Turkey remains actively involved in efforts to end the Russian embargo on Ukrainian ports so that grain can be transported to world markets.

Turkish policy makers have therefore started to view Russia not so much as a security threat but more as a diplomatic partner, albeit with competing objectives. This assessment is also a consequence of Turkey's increasing misalignment with its traditional partners in the West which has been accelerated firstly by the ongoing erosion of fundamental rights at home but also by the divergences on the security challenges as illustrated

by the ongoing US support to the Syria based YPG, an organic offshoot of the PKK. For Turkey, relations with Russia have started to espouse a strategic purpose. As a result, Turkey will not want to see the emergence of a new and lasting era of high tension between Russia and NATO which would foreclose the opportunities for Turkey to collaborate with Russia on regional issues. This observation is compatible with the quest of Turkish policy makers to expand the limits of the country's strategic autonomy which involves more robust relations with the non-Western powers including China as well as an outreach to Africa.

This vision should nonetheless and at least at this stage be seen as Turkey's hedging strategy. Ankara is hedging against two negative developments that would have strategic implications. The first one is the creation of a stronger European Security and Defense vision and architecture that would forever exclude Turkey. The second one is the weakening and possibly incapacitation of NATO with a future US president that would champion an isolationist agenda.

It is often said that geography is destiny. In Turkey's case, geography shapes its foreign and security policy. That is also the reason why Turkey may appear to be an outlier in NATO. But the future of this relationship is not pre-ordained. A return to democratic reforms in Turkey would surely strengthen Turkey's place in the transatlantic relationship. And so would the evolution of NATO in a direction that better addresses Turkey's security concerns.



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