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Some Thoughts on Turkey's Security Problems

by

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1. Turkey's security problems are essentially a function of four factors. These are: (a) the geographical location and topographic features of Turkish territory; (b) external "threats" as they are perceived, evaluated, and prioritized by the Turkish government (with an order of priorities that may differ from that of the United States or Europe); (c) domestic questions, some exclusively military in nature, having to do with the efficiency and effectiveness of the armed forces, and others political, deriving from the nation's economic and social situation; (d) potential repercussions of extra-regional events on Turkish security.

2. Geographically, Turkey occupies a key position, that of suture or transit bridge between Europe and Asia. It is at the crossroads of East-West and North-South arteries in the Middle East and Gulf region. It forms a barrier against easy Soviet access to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, a feature enhanced by Turkish control of the Straits, the Soviet Union's only naval outlet from the Black Sea.

As a member of NATO, Turkey has about 1000 kilometers of land border with Warsaw Pact nations (the Soviet Union and Bulgaria), in addition to its 1600 kilometers of Black Sea coast, and it is the most important link in the Atlantic Alliance's southern flank.

From a geo-strategic point of view, Turkey's geographic situation is a source of both advantages and weaknesses in terms of security. Its proximity to the militarily important regions of the Crimea and the Caucasus makes it an invaluable listening post for surveillance and intelligence data collection on Soviet armed forces' activity (including missile test launches in the missile ranges of southern Russia). And this gives Turkey the capability to provide

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early warning in case of preparations for an attack and at the onset of the attack itself. Furthermore, in case of conflict Turkish air defenses could play an especially important role as a screening barrier against Soviet bombers (Badger and Backfire) headed for the Mediterranean. The significance of this potential role is evident when one considers that those aircraft, armed with air-to-surface missiles, constitute the most serious potential threat for maritime traffic and NATO naval forces operating in the Mediterranean.

Defense and force deployment problems are complicated by the length of Turkey's borders, also because the internal road and rail communications network is utterly inadequate. Still, very few Black Sea beaches are suitable for large-scale amphibious operations, and the lines of advance inland are interrupted by the Pontic mountains. The eastern border with the Soviet Union is characterized by very rough terrain, with only a single readily negotiable pass, towards Erzurum. In the south, the border with Syria in the Iskenderun region is even more difficult. The sole connection between Tiflis and the middle Tigris threads through a tortuous pass in Iran's Zagros Range.

The weakest and most dangerous zone is Thrace, on the Bulgarian border, with easy invasion routes through the Vardar Valley, the Struma Gap and the open plain that leads directly to the Aegean and the Straits. This area, particularly well suited for armor and mechanized operations, lacks sufficient depth to permit a manoeuvrable defense.

The Aegean Sea, stretching from the Straits to Crete, is dotted with over 3000 islands, which would facilitate an effort to blockade it. No ship, whether alone or in convoy, could pass without having to fight.

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3. As regards the "external" threat, Turkey has always been fearful first of all, of Russian expansion towards the Mediterranean, a constant feature of Moscow's foreign policy from Tsarist days down to the Brezhnev era. The decision to join NATO was dictated primarily by the need to defend against that Soviet threat. In recent years, partly in response to the détente process, Turkey has re-examined its relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. There was a political rapprochement, increased trade and closer economic ties, with contributions toward Turkish industrial development, long-term loans, and so on. This rapprochement became more pronounced in the mid-1970's after the sharp deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations, and Turkey's relations with the U.S. following the Cyprus crisis.

The events of 1979-80 - the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Gulf war between Iraq and Iran - have spurred renewed attention on the part of Turkey's leaders to Soviet foreign policy objectives and to the dangers of the Middle East situation. Hence, Turkey has given a low profile to the problems of its relations with Greece, even though the Aegean Sea issues still remain open (sovereignty over the continental shelf, oil exploration, exploitation of the seabed, etc.). But though Turkey has removed its veto, permitting Greek reintegration into NATO's military structure, that does not imply that Turkey has crossed Greece off the list of potential "threats".

Of course, militarily, the most direct and imposing threat comes from the Soviet Union. There are 27 divisions (of which 22 mechanized) deployed in the three Military Districts of Odessa, North Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus. The majority of these divisions are not combat-ready, since they need to be reinforced with men and equipment before being employed. There are, however, two Category I

divisions and these are, significantly, airborne divisions, which would play a very important role in the seizure of the Straits area. In the air, the threat comes from more than 650 combat aircraft, including Naval Air Aviation bombers, while the Black Sea Fleet numbers 85 major combat ships and 25 submarines.

The Bulgarian armed forces have been strenghtened, starting in 1974, by transfers of Soviet weapons previously reserved for Warsaw Pact countries on the central-north front. They can count on eight motor rifle divisions and five tank brigades. Bulgarian air strength consists of some 210 combat aircraft, including about 20 modern MIG-23s.

Turkey is well aware that it is in no position to counter this threat on its own. Most of Turkey's divisions are infantry, while the majority of the Warsaw Pact forces is armor or mechanized. It is practically impossible that Italian forces could be engaged in Turkey (aside from Italy's Ace Mobile Force contingent) or that Greek troops would support Turkish defensive operations in Thrace.

West of the Bosphorus, precisely where the terrain permits very effective use of armored divisions, the Turkish forces deployed do not seem capable of repulsing or stopping a consistent thrust unless they receive adequate reinforcements.

Outside reinforcements, in practice, could be provided only by the United States. But the problem is how long would it take them to intervene. For air forces, this interval would be in the order of one week, but for ground forces (apart from the Marine battalions of the TF 69 already stationed in the Mediterranean) some 30 days would be required. Furthermore, support transport would have to navigate the Eastern Mediterranean, where the Soviets enjoy greater flexibility in the use of their forces - air strength in particular - since the region is relatively near Soviet bases in Southern Russia and the Crimea.

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The third potential threat comes from the Middle East and the Gulf. Aside from their differing positions in the international arena, Turkey and its Arab neighbours to the South are not divided by any particular issues or conflicts of interest. But instability in that region could have negative repercussions on Turkish security, especially if broadening Soviet influence should give rise to an attempt at encirclement from the south. Turkey cannot fail to be alarmed by the closer ties between Syria and the Soviet Union instituted by the recent signing of a treaty of friendship and cooperation between the two countries, and by the continuing Syrian military build-up, in excess of that country's real defense requirements.

4. Domestic questions of a defense nature arise mainly from the evident incapacity of Turkey's armed forces to meet the possible external threats, whether openly or covertly Soviet. The problems are many and complex. Though very strong in numbers, the army is equipped with weapons and equipment that are technologically and operationally obsolete (the armored troops, for instance, still ride old M-47 and M-48 tanks). In addition, the infantry is only very slightly mechanized and tactical mobility is very poor. As to the air force, attach aircraft are limited in number, and there is only one squadron of all-weather interceptors. There are gaps in the radar defense network, and the system as a whole is not highly reliable. The navy needs to strengthen its anti-ship missile capabilities.

The 1975 U.S. arms embargo has seriously affected the operational and logistics efficiency of the Turkish forces. In addition, the army suffers from an excessive proportion of draftees, due to the country's high birthrate. This raises problems of manpower

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absorption and burdens the defense budget with heavy personnel subsistence costs. Yet defense spending cannot be raised much above the present level without endangering the already precarious economic situation.

The Turkish government recently issued a detailed estimate of its defense needs for 1981-86 to enable the country to meet its NATO commitments and provide for its own defense. Urgent, top-priority needs would amount to $4.442 billion. The air force needs to spend $1.146 billion for F-4 and F-104 aircraft, spare parts and ammunition, equipment and material for air defense. The army's requirements would cost $2.192 billion, to be spent on tanks, anti-tank missiles, communications equipment, and helicopters. The navy will need $1.105 billion for submarines, FPBs, ASW aircraft, helicopters and anti-ship missiles. Over the same period, the defense budget will provide no more than $450 million towards meeting these expenses. In addition, the United States has pledged credits for $1.5 billion and West Germany for $240 million. This still leaves a gap of over $2.2 billion, an enormous sum clearly far beyond the means of Turkey and possibly out of reach of the aid resources available from the other NATO partners. The contracts signed with Norway, Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands for the purchase, on favourable terms, of those nations' F-104s (as they are replaced by the F-16), like a $250 million loan from Saudi Arabia for 1980, are measures of limited significance.

Other major "domestic" security problems involve:

- the country's fragile economic and social condition, on the verge of total disintegration before the military's seizure of power; at present, the situation is far from back to normal;

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- the latent potential for a widespread acceptance of integralist Islam on the part of the Shi'ite minority (several million strong), which would add a new and higly destabilizing political content to their differences with the Sunni majority;

- the possible exacerbation of the Kurd question; particularly under the influence of events in Iraq and Iran;

- the possible development of a demand for self-determination by the Arab-speaking minorities who live in the South, on the borders of the Arab Middle East;

- a potential growth of pressure for an essentially neutralist and non-aligned posture, on the part of those who repudiate Turkish "Westernization"; such pressures would seek to reject the prospect of Turkey as a lay republic, better integrated with Europe socially and economically through its ties with the EEC.

5. Finally, as to potential repercussions of events outside the region on Turkish security, it is enough to mention the possibility of a conclusion of an East-West agreement in the MBFR talks in Vienna which would not prohibit the re-deployment of Soviet forces from the central European front to the southern flank.

6. Turkish security policy feels the effects of the country's being simultaneously Balkan, European, and Middle Eastern, as well as of its geographical contiguity with the Soviet Union. The deepest concern, though perhaps not the most immediate, concerns the Soviet Union's foreign policy objectives and activities in the world and in the regional areas. Crucial is the determination of the Soviet Union's basic policy objectives in the Mediterranean and in relation to the current situation in Afghanistan, the Gulf and the Middle East.

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Security in the Balkans (relations with Greece and the possibility of new developments in Yugoslavia) remains important, however, with a number of delicate and complex problems to be settled.

But also the Middle East situation is followed with special attention by Turkish planners, as a variety of plausible scenarios could present problems for Turkish security (strengthening of factors of crisis and instability in the Gulf, widening of the Iraq-Iran conflict, disintegration of Iran marked enough to stimulate foreign intervention, Syrian potential to use its growing arsenal for purposes other than national defense).

Thus the trend for the foreseeable future for Turkey will be towards an omni-directional security and foreign policy, though of course the NATO defense commitment remains the central feature. To this we must add the "internal" projection of security policy, deriving from the armed forces' gradual assumption of broader and broader responsibility for the maintenance of order and now, with the September seizure of power, for the government of the nation.

The available military policy options for meeting security requirements seem to be narrowly limited by domestic problems - social, financial, industrial, and structural.

If Western and NATO nations fail yet again to at least meet Turkey halfway in seeing to its security needs, based on a realistic appraisal of its importance for the Atlantic alliance, Ankara might likely be faced with the necessity of shifting the guidelines of its foreign and defense policy.