Opinion Paper

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NATO and Turkey: Where is the Partnership Headed*

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The parting of ways had to take place at some time or the other. The differences had started emerging almost since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the disastrous Yeltsin years, even Russia bereft of the Soviet possessions in Central Asia appeared to be falling apart. This state of affairs continued till almost the turn of the century when Boris Yeltsin nominated Vladimir Putin as his successor. It has to be noted, however, that to this day Mr. Putin having pulled Russia up by the bootstraps has never spoken ill of his erstwhile benefactor.

Up to then Turkey being the strongest army in Europe was the bulwark of NATO defenses in Europe. It still remains the strongest army in Europe. However, it is keeping its options open much to the dismay of the Europeans who are still dependent upon it many ways. The reasons for the drift are manifold. These are considered in the ensuing paragraphs.

The first and most important is the nature of the threat that NATO faces. During the Cold War the principal threat to NATO-Europe and the United States remained the

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Soviet Union. There was no other, not even in the distant horizon. NATO’s power remained unchallenged around the globe.

Turkey was the anchor of the defense against the Soviet Union. The Americans placed Jupiter missiles in Turkey right at the border of the Soviet Union. The Soviets took note. They countered it by locating missiles in Cuba, their strong ally. The Cuban missile crisis is still remembered as the time when the two great powers of the day almost came to a nuclear exchange.

After a nail-bitingly tense period for the world the crisis was finally averted through back channel diplomacy by Robert Kennedy, President John Kennedy's brother. The trade-off was the removal of the Jupiter missiles from Turkey in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. The sigh of relief was palpable around the world.

In 1974 Turkey caused consternation among its NATO allies by invading the Northern tip of Cyprus on 20 July 1974. The operation code-named by Turkey as Operation Attila, was a military invasion of the island. It was launched following the Cypriot coup d'état on 15 July 1974 for the purpose of ENOSIS or Union with Greece. Turkey first sent in paratroopers to safeguard the Turkish minority in the north.

This was followed by armored columns. There was consternation in Europe especially in Britain which has a base on the island. The island has been divided since that year. A buffer zone 120 miles long divides the island. In Cyprus the Green line separates the two communities. The longest-serving United Nations Peace Keeping Force UNFICYP has kept peace, although reasonably free movement across the divide takes place routinely, relative peace having prevailed over the status co.

Cyprus joined the European Union in the subsequent year, much to the consternation of the Turkish part. Thereafter Cyprus has frequently stymied Turkish proposals relating to accession to the European Union. Turkey's key location as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East as well as its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea has always made it strategically very important to NATO.

The Turkish Straits connect various seas along the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, the Near East, and Western Eurasia. Specifically, the Straits allows maritime connections from the Black Sea all the way to the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, the Atlantic Ocean via Gibraltar, and the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal, making them crucial international waterways, in particular for the passage of goods coming in from Russia.

At the present time the biggest differences between Turkey and NATO as well as the European Union (EU) relate to the Middle East (ME). Largely, these include Syria and
its President Bashar al-Assad, the flow of immigrants to Europe via Turkey, its opposition to the Syrian Kurds, the blow-hot-blow-cold relations with Israel and differences with the US President Trump that have bedeviled relations. They have led to a sharp decline in the value of the Turkish lira.

None of these seem amenable to easy resolution on terms favorable to Turkey. The end of the conflict in Syria with the complete victory of President Assad would put an end to or taper off the problem of immigration. When Turkey agreed to limit or stop the flow of immigrants to Europe it did so with several demands of its own from Europe. Under the agreement, Turkey got cash - 6 billion Euros - and other incentives, including jump-started talks on its bid for E.U. membership and a conditional promise of visa-free travel for its citizens to Europe.

Visa-free travel has yet to materialize; as things stand nor is Turkey's accession to the EU likely to materialize any time soon, if ever; more so after BEXIT. Added to Europe's growing Muslim population the accession of Turkey could potentially assimilate over 70 million of Turkish Muslims. That would submerge Europe's Christians. In addition, several European nations would exercise veto rites, most notably Greece, Cyprus, Austria, among others. In this regard it is worth noting what the Turkish President had to say about the massacre in Christchurch that had been condemned by the whole world. Mr. Erdogan's statement on it would have been ominous for Europe.

Showing footage of the rampage in Christchurch at a rally in advance of March 31 local elections, Mr. Erdogan declared that "there is a benefit in watching this on the screen. Remnants of the Crusaders cannot prevent Turkey's rise". Mr. Erdogan went on to say that "we have been here for 1,000 years and God willing we will be until doomsday. You will not be able to make Istanbul Constantinople. Your ancestors came and saw that we were here. Some of them returned on foot and some returned in coffins.

If you come with the same intent, we will be waiting for you too". Unquote The immediate difficulties with the US affecting the Turkish economy have been partially resolved with the release of the US pastor who had been incarcerated in Turkey. In return Mr. Erdogan had demanded the extradition of Fethullah Gulen whom he accused of engineering the military coup against him. Mr. Trump did not oblige, nor is he likely to do so. The more intractable aspect relates to Turkey's decision to go ahead on the agreement with Russia for the purchase of two batteries of S-400s from Russia.

These could hurt relations with both the US and NATO. President Erdogan has not apparently realized that President Trump of the US is different from his predecessors. He does not care whether Turkey remains in NATO or not. Whereas
keeping Turkey on board remains a challenge for Russia. It has watched with interest as Turkey’s differences grow with Europe and the US. Many of them appear irreconcilable.

Energy and economic links with Russia - the Black Sea Turkstream2 gas pipeline, a nuclear power plant with Russian credit, 6 million Russian tourists in Turkey and extensive Turkish business interests in Russia - are important binding factors, but Russia is conscious of Turkey’s global ambitions and its potential strategic value to the US in northern Syria, West Asian politics and in the Black Sea. Turkey’s close relations with Russia have not prevented its agreement to supply armed UAVs to Ukraine, which will significantly enhance the Ukrainian Armed Forces’ capacity to hit the Russian-supported rebel forces (and private Russian mercenaries) in eastern Ukraine.

Turkey always remained under the impression that the Western NATO partners were very keen to keep Turkey in NATO going to many lengths to do so. To date that impression was true because among others Turkey had provided forces in Afghanistan and was part of ISAF. However, times have changed and so have perceptions in Europe and NATO. Mr. Trump would not care one bit whether Turkey were a part of NATO or not. The US cannot, afford to abandon its Western allies, however.

The Europeans know it. They know that the Pentagon would remain against it as would the US Senate and the House of Representatives. All it would mean would be to ride out Mr. Trump’s tenure which they hope would be limited to a single term. Even were that not to happen the allies or NATO are not likely to break up any time soon. Other far more threats are emerging on the horizon.

To conclude Turkey might continue to remain a NATO ally. It would be more de jure rather than de facto as both sides know that Turkey keeping its own national interest uppermost will not be a party to a confrontation with Moscow, leave aside war, that having been the raison d’être for becoming part of NATO, in the first instance. Also, it can rule out accession to the EU as a full member.