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Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in Turkey

How Has the Security Landscape Changed under AKP Rule?

Sinem Adar and Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony in June after being sworn in for the third time as the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promised the nation that his policies in the coming five years would “crown the second century of the republic with the Century of Türkiye”. Turkey has undergone a massive transformation in the last two decades since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rose to power in 2002. Undoubtedly, the reconfiguration of civil-military relations has been one of the most critical markers of such change. The Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) has, under AKP rule, become an executor of foreign policy in an empowered security ecosystem consisting of the Ministry of Interior (MoI), the National Intelligence Organization (MİT), and the defence industry. These shifts in the security environment as such have been shaped by the dynamics of regime change in Turkey and post-Cold War security imperatives.

Pro-government circles continue to celebrate civilian control over the military as evidence for democratisation. For others, who initially welcomed the changing balance of power in favour of civilian rule, the heavy securitisation of policy and politics since 2015/6 demonstrates Erdoğan’s compliance with the republic’s pro-status-quo and tutelary underpinnings. Meanwhile, some in the opposition see the changing balance of power between civilians and the TAF as another manifestation of the deteriorating institutional capacity under autocracy. For instance, the military’s absence in response to the tragic earthquake in February has been taken as evidence of a crippled army.

Oscillating between triumph and criticism, these perspectives are misleading. The first view presumes that civilian control over the military is conducive to democratisation. Yet, Turkey’s gradual yet steady transition into authoritarian rule over the last two decades shows otherwise. The second perspective treats the temporal overlap between the increasing militarism and nationalism since 2015/6 and Erdoğan’s alliance with ultranationalist actors as an isolated causality. The agency of the AKP leadership is often overlooked, encompassing not only its vision of state-society relations but also its perspective on Turkey’s global position. The third interpretation of the changing civil-military relations takes



the TAF's nonexistence in domestic politics and policy as a sign of its weakening capacity. Turkey's expanding military footprint in its immediate and far neighbourhood obscures this narrative, begging for a more nuanced view on its seemingly higher operational capabilities.

The changing power balance among security institutions

It is widely acknowledged that since coming to power in 2002, the AKP leadership has engaged in a concerted effort to diminish the military's prevailing influence in Turkish politics. Lurking underneath this endeavour is the ruling elites' determination to capture and consolidate power. In this respect, the failed coup attempt in 2016 and its aftermath was a watershed moment. Above all, the failed coup attempt and the hundreds of citizens who shed their blood as a result enabled the president to position himself as the embodiment of the people's will and the charismatic defender of society's authentic and national values (*"yerli ve milli"*).

Besides the ideational legitimacy, the failed coup attempt also allowed the ruling elites to restructure the entire security landscape, starting with, but certainly not limited to, the military. The failed coup attempt paved the way for unprecedented military purges on the suspicion of having links to Gülen. A series of reforms implemented shortly after radically restructured the TAF. The land, naval, and air forces were brought under the control of the Ministry of National Defense, stripping the TAF of its command role. Military high schools were also abolished, and officer cadres started to be recruited instead from civilian high schools including Islamic high schools (*İmam Hatip*). Military academies were replaced by the National Defense University, which is overseen by the Ministry of National Education. Similarly, military hospitals were put under the Ministry of Health's administration.

Putting the TAF under civilian control was accompanied by further strengthening

of other security organisations. The Gendarmerie and Coast Guards, which was effectively a branch of the armed forces, was brought under the MoI's full control via an emergency decree, giving the Ministry an upper hand in domestic security. The aftermath of the failed coup attempt also witnessed the allocation of more heavy weaponry to the Turkish National Police (TNP) under the jurisdiction of the MoI. As a continuation of an already existing trend since the AKP's rise to power, this meant not only the empowerment of the police, but also that the TNP would take on roles previously performed by the military. In fact, since 2016, the TNP has been the main actor in the war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) inside Turkey.

The post-2016 period also saw further changes with the MİT being firmly placed at the centre of the security apparatus and given new capabilities and authorities to balance the TAF and the TNP. Already in 2014, an amendment to the Law on State and Intelligence Services led the MİT to assume operational tasks abroad, significantly expanding its access to documents and resources of other agencies and strengthening the criminal immunity enjoyed by its members. Later, at the end of 2016, changes drafted in the context of the country's envisioned transition into a presidential system placed the organisation under the sole control of the president, expanded its influence among the different elements of the security apparatus, and provided it with foreign intelligence capabilities. At the opening ceremony in 2020 of the organisation's new building, dubbed 'the Fortress' (*Kale* in Turkish), Erdoğan noted that the MİT "played an active role in Syria", "significantly contributed to the successful execution of our [Turkey] military operations", and "successfully executed duties in Libya".

A changing security environment in the post-Cold War era

Even though the MİT's role in foreign policy has significantly increased during AKP rule

at a visibly rapid pace, particularly following the failed coup attempt, the aspirations to equip the organisation with operational and foreign intelligence capabilities go back to the 1990s. In his master's thesis published in 1999 on the role of intelligence in foreign policy in the U.S., the UK, and Turkey, the MIT's former head and current Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan argued that given Turkey's active foreign policy, it "cannot expect a continuation of the intelligence sharing of the past [Cold War era]", and needs to tailor "foreign/strategic intelligence" to its "foreign, military, and economic policies".

The end of the Cold War did indeed usher in new challenges for Turkey, underlined by the search for a new identity. Among them, one of the most crucial was integrating its armed forces into a changing global security environment. As a NATO army, the TAF's capabilities and responsibilities were shaped over decades to counter threats such as a possible Soviet invasion and a communist revolutionary attempt from within. The post-Cold War assumption that the likelihood of traditional warfare had decreased led to debates about the necessity to downsize the TAF without weakening its operational capabilities.

In fact, already in the second half of the 1980s, when tension between the Cold War's two central protagonists began to decrease, policymakers saw it necessary to align the TAF with newly emerging needs via military modernisation and professionalisation programmes. The first step towards the latter was taken in 1986 with the recruitment of specialised sergeants. Likewise, the TAF announced in 1985 a modernisation programme based on two pillars: the upgrading of military equipment and increasing the share of national production in the defence industry.

Later in the 1990s, the modernisation efforts coincided with the army's expanding influence in domestic politics (despite the Prime Minister and then President Turgut Ozal's attempts in the late 1980s and early 1990s to bring it under civilian control) and its more direct and decisive role in foreign

policy, particularly in the Middle East, due to the changing threat perceptions after the First Gulf War. Doğan Güreş, the Chief of the General Staff between 1990 and 1994, echoed this mindset: "The stronger a country's armed forces are, the stronger its foreign policy will be". Turkish officers were ready to combat Greece, Syria, and the PKK all at the same time, expressed by the 'two and a half wars' concept.

In addition to the anxieties underlined by these changing security threats in a fragile neighbourhood, the whole debate was fraught with insecurity triggered by Turkey's diminishing role in the European security structure. As a non-EU member, Ankara was worried that the EU would become the primary actor responsible for its own security, potentially sidelining NATO. To demonstrate Turkey's utility to its Western allies, decisionmakers were more than ever before willing to deploy troops beyond its borders by participating in UN and NATO peacekeeping operations. Between 1992 and 1994, Turkey deployed troops in Somalia as part of a UN operation. In 1993, upon NATO invitation, 18 Turkish F-16s were sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later Turkey also partook in the UN peacekeeping operation in the region.

Weak inside, strong outside: The army as a mere executor of foreign policy

The AKP not only adopted, but also instrumentalised this triad of militarisation, professionalisation, and modernisation, in line with its own domestic and foreign policy aspirations. The AKP's initial commitment to EU reforms, initiated during the accession negotiations that began in 2005, helped the ruling party to garner support from both the masses and the elites within Turkey. By the end of the 2000s, the balance of power in civil-military relations was already distorted in favour of the AKP. While the TAF's dominance in domestic politics continued to decline amid the centralisation and personalisation of power

during the 2010s, the army had become more active outside Turkey, arguably turning into “an expeditionary entity”.

Today, Turkey has several overseas military bases, including in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Qatar. Since 2016, Ankara has also added military power to its foreign policy instruments. According to the BICC, Turkey was in 2021 among the top ten most militarised countries in Europe. The militarisation of foreign policy is manifest in Ankara’s operations in northern Syria and Iraq, its military support to the then Government of National Accord (GNA) in the Second Libyan Civil War in 2019 and to Azerbaijan in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, and in its brinkmanship in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2019/20.

Efforts at professionalisation also continue. Today, compulsory military service still exists, but as of 2021, 55.2 per cent of the TAF’s combat force comprised professional soldiers. Moreover, the procurement and upgrading of high-technology equipment has been one of the most heated topics during AKP rule. Motivated by the desire to strengthen the indigenous defence industry, significant investments were made in various areas, including land, naval, and air forces. Notwithstanding, Turkey’s search for a new identity continues as manifest in oscillations, first between the U.S. and the EU, later between its Western allies and their challengers.

The AKP’s initial adoption of the F35 Joint Strike Fighter Program (JSF), in which Turkey participated in 1999, was first interrupted in the face of the disagreements between Ankara and Washington during the Iraq War. The EU accession negotiations provided Turkey with alternatives such as the Eurofighters, the purchase of which it hoped would pave the way for admission to the then newly established European Defence Agency (EDA). Eventually, Turkey joined the production phase of the JSF in 2007. Yet, Turkey’s relations with its Western allies have steadily soured ever since.

By the late 2000s, the talk of accession negotiations had almost wholly lost momentum and since 2016, the negotiations are effectively at a standstill. Meanwhile,

disagreements in Syria particularly with the U.S., Ankara’s increasingly confrontational foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and elsewhere, and Turkey’s increasing rapprochement with Russia have all deteriorated U.S.-Turkey relations. Failing to repair relations with its Western allies, the modernisation effort lost its anchor, with Ankara first signalling its intention to buy Chinese air defence systems in 2013 and later in 2017, buying the Russian air-missile defence system S400s amid the political tensions with its Western allies in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt. In turn, the U.S. removed Ankara from the JSF and sanctioned the Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB).

The defence industry: A boost to the changing security landscape

What started as a strategic oscillation between the U.S. and the EU in the 2000s in aircraft modernisation has, over time, culminated in tactical blunders, intensified by, and simultaneously facilitating, Turkey’s authoritarian turn. The initial strategic aim to enhance self-reliance in indigenous defence production as the backbone of the army modernisation programmes was further solidified albeit under the shadow of deteriorating relations with Ankara’s Western allies and more and more out of necessity due to Turkey’s increasing isolation.

Particularly during the 2010s, the Turkish defence industry went through three crucial changes: i) the inclusion of higher technology elements into production such as short- and medium-range air defence systems, frigates, TCG Anadolu, and unmanned armed vehicles; ii) the expansion of the market encompassing old and new companies, ranging from small- and medium-sized enterprises to giants such as Koç, Baykar, BMC, and FNSS; and, relatedly, iii) the privatisation of the sector. Particularly since 2016, overlapping with the militarisation of foreign policy, the defence industry has experienced significant growth with the total turnover of the companies in the field reaching US\$8.9 billion in 2020

and contract value hitting US\$60 billion in 2022 (compared to US\$5 billion in 2002). The number of defence projects between 2002 and 2022 similarly increased from 62 to 812.

A new national identity in the making

The upsurge of the defence industry has permeated into society as well. The Ministry of Industry and Technology, in cooperation with the MoI, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Turkish Technology Team – a foundation which was founded by Erdoğan’s son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar whose family owns the defence company Baykar – has since 2018 organised the TEKNOFEST Aerospace and Technology Festival. The latter’s reported aim is to “increase popular interest in technology and raise awareness about Turkey’s transformation into a society that produces and develops technology”.

Despite various technology-related topics, including green energy and health, many of the participants at TEKNOFEST are defence companies. The festival is perceived by the AKP leadership as a crucial instrument to garner mass support for securitisation and the ruling elites’ discourse on a “fully independent Turkey”. Accordingly, homegrown products demonstrate the country’s self-sufficiency. TEKNOFEST is indeed a distinct example of the AKP’s imagination for the nation: rooted in society’s authentic values and local knowledge, independent (particularly from the West), and self-confident to carry the nation forward.

This unique combination of the claim to authenticity, militarism, and techno-nationalism distinguishes the AKP’s militaristic discourse from previous periods. “Every Turk was born a soldier” was the famous motto of past militarist discourse and accompanying indoctrination mechanisms. Today, an engineer or an entrepreneur involved in the production of military technology is not only capable but is also expected to contribute toward making Turkey independent. For Selçuk Bayraktar, for instance, his drone-producing company Baykar redeems

the “self-confidence” that was lost when “the center of gravity [in science and innovation] shifted, a century and a half ago, toward the West”.

Soap operas produced by the state broadcaster TRT also help deliver this message. *Gönül Dağı* (Gönül Mountain), for instance, portrays the efforts of three cousins in a remote town in Anatolia to produce technology. *Teşkilat* (Organisation), on the other hand, tells the story of the MİT trying to uncover a deadly operation organised by foreign intelligence services against Turkish engineers designing drones.

Domestic and security implications

All of this suggests that the AKP leadership’s dismantling of military tutelage does not automatically translate into the AKP’s hostility or objection to militarisation in terms of its ideology and policy practices. A comprehensive look at the restructuring of the security landscape, including but not limited to the TAF, demonstrates a structural transformation that goes beyond the dichotomy of a strong versus weak military.

This transformation is marked by three elements. Firstly, not only the TAF, but also the MoI and MİT are today equipped with comparable resources and heavy equipment. Secondly, the TAF’s role in domestic security has been overtaken by the MoI and, as such, the areas of responsibility of the two organisations are separated. Meanwhile, the MİT represents the nexus between domestic and national security, resembling a *deus ex machina*. Last but not least, security organisations in this new structure continuously balance and complement one another.

Naturally, compartmentalising security enhances the president’s control over security institutions and produces an effective coup-proofing strategy. The AKP leadership seems, at least for the moment, to have a military capable of executing its foreign policy, on the one hand, while preventing it from intervening in politics, on the other. This enables the AKP to securitise domestic politics without necessarily having to worry

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about empowering the military. As such, it also cultivates a new national identity combining militarism, techno-nationalism, and the ruling elites' claim to authenticity. Masses are mobilised accordingly, while defence companies continue to profit.

Still, this new structure is not yet stable. The first obstacle comes from the deterioration of institutions after the massive restructuring of Turkey's political system. The composition of Erdoğan's new cabinet implies a willingness to overcome this challenge and consolidate the system. Secondly, Turkey's brain drain and economic difficulties hamper efforts to expand and deepen an indigenous defence industry, especially in an environment of strained relations with its Western allies. A third and related hurdle to the stabilisation of the new security landscape is Ankara's inability to resolve the issue of Turkey's positioning within the current international system. A lasting solution to this ongoing debate since the 1990s does not appear on the horizon as far as the AKP leadership is concerned.

Notwithstanding the question of stability, any future attempt at democratisation in Turkey should carefully address the new realities in the security landscape and their societal implications. The transformation of civil-military relations as one of the pillars of the changing security landscape also raises important questions about Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU.

Firstly, the apparent transformation of the Turkish military into an expeditionary army is compatible with a pattern visible within NATO armies since the 2000s. This trend seeks to enhance the capabilities of these armies to operate abroad, addressing NATO's post-Cold War responsibilities of crisis management and cooperative security within its stability projection agenda.

Secondly, the TAF is NATO's second largest standing army after the U.S. Armed Forces and Ankara remains willing to display its usefulness to its NATO allies when opportunities arise. In June 2023, for in-

stance, a Turkish commando battalion was stationed in Kosovo to bolster NATO-led peacekeepers upon a request by NATO. In addition, as the withdrawal of the U.S. and other NATO forces from Afghanistan became clear, Turkey reportedly offered at a NATO meeting to guard and run Kabul's airport after the withdrawal was complete.

Thirdly, Ankara does not hesitate to act as a spoiler within NATO, driven by a general mistrust of its allies for not approaching Turkey's interests on an equal footing. A case in point here is its objection to Sweden's (initially also Finland's) NATO membership bids based on the alleged support that they provide to actors that Turkey considers a threat to its national security.

Although Turkey's willingness to actively partake in NATO missions at first glance appears contradictory to its disruptive behaviour within the organisation, there is a logic to this seeming inconsistency. On the one hand, Turkey sees its NATO membership as vital to its aspirations to conduct an independent foreign policy. This perspective certainly drives Ankara's so-called balancing act between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea.

At the same time, Ankara continues to operate with an existential anxiety about being left out of the European defence and security structures and missions. Even though the origins of this insecurity go back to the early post-Cold War period, it has moved onto a self-perpetuating path, particularly salient in the last decade of AKP rule amid efforts to redefine Turkey's role in a changing international order, albeit rather incoherently.

Given that Turkey's EU accession prospects are in the short- to mid-term off the horizon, mutual trust between the EU and Turkey has been significantly eroded, and Ankara's potential to disrupt the coherence of NATO continues, prospects for formulating a joint and enduring approach to tackle geopolitical challenges facing the EU and Turkey in their common neighbourhoods appear dim.

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