

A “defense umbrella” for Cold War rainy days: Turkish-American relations (1947-1990)

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Abstract

This brief article seeks to shed light on the interdependence that emerged in Turkish-American relations during the Cold War era in the face of Soviet threat. The alliance was based on keeping the balance of power in a tight bipolar world order. On the US side, the inclusion of Turkey in the US defense umbrella was recognized as a primary US interest in pursuing the policy of containment regarding Soviet expansionism, because of the geopolitical position of Turkey. On the Turkish side, the US was regarded as a security guarantor in the face of Soviet territorial demands. Thus, the rapprochement between the US and Turkey in deterring Soviet aggression was shaped heavily by a strong ‘mutuality of interest’. The paper provides an overview of the evolution of US-Turkish relations as they were shaped by the realities of the Cold War era. Thereby it also illuminates underlying reasons for Turkey’s attachment to the West during the Cold War. This paper argues that the high level of Soviet threat resulted in the US and Turkey sharing common ground in their foreign and security policies. In order to explain the alliance behaviour observed, the paper adopts balance of power theory based on structural realism’s assumptions of international relations.

Keywords: Cold War, balance of power, Turkish-American relations, alliance behaviour

The end of the Second World War gave birth to a confrontation between the two superpowers which lasted for over 40 years. The US and the USSR vied for assuring influence in vital regions of the world.² States divided into two camps, with European countries eventually organizing into the framework of NATO on one side and the Warsaw

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² Hobsbawm, E. J. (1994). *The age of extremes: a history of the world, 1914-1991*. Pantheon, p. 228.

Pact on the other. Turkey has been a critical actor in the contest. Once US adopted its policy of containment, the geopolitical position of Turkey made the country very important, given its 'geographical proximity' to the Soviet Union and its historical and cultural ties with the Middle East.³ Accordingly, the policy of containment dictated support to Turkey as a barrier against the Soviet threat in the Middle East and in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴ On the other hand, the US alliance was of critical importance for Turkey as well. Turkey needed to protect its national security and territorial integrity in the face of Soviet aggression and expansionism.⁵ This resulted in a high level of Turkish commitment to the Western alliance system.

It is important to highlight that the relations between the two countries and the character of their alliance went through different phases during the course of the Cold War. This came related to the changing levels of threat against the actors concerned, which implied either converging or diverging interests for the two parties, and, subsequently, varying levels of commitment to the alliance.

Since this study argues that balance of power theory can explain the changing imperatives and shifting motives of the two allies, it firstly deals with the theory itself. After a brief consideration of the US motivation to include Turkey in the Truman doctrine and offer the country NATO membership with the aim of forming a defense umbrella for Europe, the article also provides an assessment of the Turkish balancing decision in its alignment with the West.

Waltz's (1979) theory of the balance of power is based on the premise that world politics play out in an anarchic international environment.⁶ The alliance behaviour of states is shaped primarily by states' reactions to 'threats', dictating a need to either bandwagon or balance. The latter may be a preferable option, even if it is not always possible, because systemic stability hinges on the outcome of states' acts of balancing⁷ by forming alliances with one another against potential aggressors.⁸ States choose to form alliances to secure themselves from threats based on their respective national security

³ Atmaca, A. Ö. (2014). The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years. *All Azimuth*, 3(1), 19.,p.23.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Bilgin, P. (2009). Securing Turkey through western-oriented foreign policy. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, 103-123, p. 111.

⁶ Sheehan, M. (2004). *The Balance of Power: History & Theory*. Routledge, p. 5.

⁷ Aydemir, I. (2010). *Alliance in Flux: Turkey's Alliance Behavior, from the Cold War to the Present, 1947-2010* (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University), p. 25

⁸ Aydemir, 2010, p. 12.

considerations. They add others' powers to their own to defend against common adversaries, to thus manage reciprocal threats.⁹

The article takes, as its working definition of the balance of power, the concept formulated by Palmer and Perkins;

“...the balance of power assumes that through shifting alliances and countervailing pressures, no one power or combination of powers will be allowed to grow so strong as to threaten the security of the rest”¹⁰

US considerations. Because of its geographical proximity to the Soviet Union, Turkey was recognized as a primary ally in pursuing its policy of containment against Soviet expansionism and the spread of communism. In fact, Turkey was geopolitically designated as NATO's southern flank, its base, and barrier against the Soviet threat in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

While NATO's expansion in the Mediterranean would result in further responsibilities and commitments, a Soviet-Turkish rapprochement was feared.¹¹ In that sense, the primary US motive was to turn Turkey into a 'buffer zone' between the Soviet Union and the Middle East, as an integral part of the containment policy of the US.¹² As Keyman (2009: 9) argues, Turkish foreign policy throughout the Cold War was based accordingly on a 'buffer state identity'.¹³ As Leffler summed up the military considerations related to this:

“...Turkey could slow down a Soviet advance to Suez and North Africa, attack Soviet oil resources, provide fighter cover for bombers heading toward Moscow, bottle up Soviet submarines in the Black Sea, destroy Soviet shipping, and launch a possible ground offensive into the Soviet heartland”.¹⁴

⁹ Wallace, G. P. (2008). Alliances, institutional design, and the determinants of military strategy. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 25(3), 224-243., p. 227.

¹⁰ Sheehan, *ob.cit.*, p. 3.

¹¹ Atmaca., *ob.cit.*,p.24.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.32.

¹³ Keyman, E. F. (2009). Globalization, modernity and democracy: In search of a viable domestic polity for a sustainable Turkish foreign policy. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, 7-27, p. 9

¹⁴ Leffler, M. P. (1985). Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952. *The Journal of American History*, 71(4), 807-825, p. 815.

Turkish considerations. Turkey needed to protect its national security and territorial integrity in the face of Soviet territorial claims related to Kars and Ardahan provinces, bases in the Dardanelles related to control over the key maritime straits leading to the Black Sea, having faced Soviet territorial demands in exchange for the renewal of the Turkish-Soviet Treaty of Neutrality and Nonaggression of 1925. Turkey was thus concerned about its territorial integrity.¹⁵ Its seeking of NATO membership was thus a balancing move against the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

The Soviet territorial demands in 1945-1946, which would cause the revision of the Montreux Convention were contrary to Anglo-American interests in the Mediterranean.¹⁶ The Soviet Union could not be allowed to dominate Turkey in this way, as this would have opened up space to further Soviet influence-building on three continents.¹⁷ The Soviet territorial demands against Turkey thus constituted the first geopolitical crisis of the Cold War era (Atmaca, 2014: 20)¹⁸.

With its inclusion in the Truman Doctrine, Turkey received military aid to enhance its military capabilities and its bases. Aydın (2009: 128) defines the alliance as a 'rule of the game' that was based on the exchange between Turkey and the US¹⁹. Accordingly, in exchange for the Turkish provision of bases to monitor the Soviet Union, the US would supply economic aid and offer a defense umbrella under NATO membership to Turkey, extending 'collective defense' in case of military attack as enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Hence, in a 'mutuality of interests', Turkey would turn into NATO's southern flank, and NATO would mean Turkey's security guarantor.²⁰

The Turkish commitment to the Western alliance system was also actively manifested. Turkey deployed troops to fight in the Korean War²¹ – a contingent of up to

¹⁵ Altunışık, M. B. (2009). Worldviews and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, 169-192, p. 175.

¹⁶ Leffler, M. P., *ob.cit.*, p. 808.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 811.

¹⁸ Atmaca., *ob.cit.*, p.20.

¹⁹ Aydın, M. (2009). Reconstructing Turkish-American relations: Divergences versus convergences. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, 125-146, p. 128.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Yılmaz, E. (2002). *The role of foreign policy discourse in the construction of Turkey's Western identity during the Cold War* (Doctoral dissertation, Bilkent University), p. 87.

4,500 military personnel.²² During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Turkey appeared as supplementing the Western alliance, having earlier on accepted the installation of 15 Jupiter ballistic missiles, risking 'third world war' at its doorstep when the Soviet Union raised exactly this in rationalizing its attempted deployment of missiles to Cuba. The alliance had its ups and downs related to the Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus and other developments, but in general US-Turkish mutual assurance worked quite well throughout the Cold War – an alliance born out of the two sides' respective considerations of national security.

²² Atmaca., *ob.cit.*,p.24.