

**Closed Session**

# The New Fault Lines in Turkey's Security Strategy

*Dr. Kaan Kutlu Ataç*





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## Introduction

### The Main Pillar of Turkish National Security: Notes about Theoretical and Historical Background

**W**hen the actors are blended in the strong memory of history, international crises are probably the best teachers of destiny of geography. This is especially true for Turkey, as unprecedented volatile circumstances have been unfolding in the Levant since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The more Turkey becomes aware of its past, the better adjustments and calibrations it can make to secure a favourable position and defend its national interests. In doing so, Turkey has added a new dimension of national security strategy to its foreign policy.

The contemporary geopolitical map of the Middle East indicates that it is a shatter belt region. It is an area which has been destroyed by internal conflicts, and whose destiny has also been affected by the intervention of the external great powers. These interventionist powers have increased their sphere of influence over their clients in the region through military, political and economic assistance. The compression zones are located in the narrower subsections within or in-between geopolitical regions. These zones, which are under intense pressure, are shattered through a combination of civil war and the in-

terventionist actions of neighbouring countries. As a traditional geopolitical concept, the shatter belt refers to a geographical area where local tensions turn into serious conflicts between great powers which are outside the region. The great powers intervene into local conflicts because they believe that they have significant interests in these areas (Cohen: 2015).

On the other hand, local conflicts prepare the ground for the great powers to make alliances with neighbouring countries, especially in the area where the conflicts dominate (Kelly, 1986: 161-180). Cohen points out that as a shatter belt, the Middle East has begun to shatter even more. While one edge of the compressed area extends to Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and the eastern region of Saudi Arabia, the other end extends along the line of Syria and South Lebanon.

Shatter belts have a structure of two layers. In the first layer, political turmoil, social and economic pressures and divisions dominate. The second layer is at the international level; the turmoil which prepares the ground for the intervention of regional powers is paired with the emergence of international actors who benefit greatly from ongoing pressure and division. The US and regional countries who acted alongside the US backed oppositional groups against the

<sup>1</sup> This point is strongly indicated in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official web site: 'Established in 1923, following a costly war of independence against the occupying powers, the security of the Republic of Turkey has been dictated by two main elements: geography and longstanding ties with the neighbouring countries.' [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/i\\_-turkey\\_s-security-perspective\\_-historical-and-conceptual-background\\_-turkey\\_s-contributions.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/i_-turkey_s-security-perspective_-historical-and-conceptual-background_-turkey_s-contributions.en.mfa).

Syria regime. Soon, Russia intervened into this compressed zone of the Middle East, siding with the regime. Russia has begun to increase the amount of military supplies that it has been providing to the regime since January 2012, and it has announced that it is against the forcible change of the Syrian regime. Russia decided to prevent the kind of regime change that had happened earlier in Libya with the support of the US. One year after the US active military intervention in Libya, on September 30, 2015, Russia carried out its first military operation in Syria. Since then, Turkey has been dealing with two great powers: the US, which supports the Syrian Democratic Forces, mainly composed of the Kurdish terrorist PYD/YPG organization, and Russia, which supports the Syrian regime. Turkey has been trying to bring stability to the region. However, it has realised that the two powers are not responding to Turkey's insistence that instability in Syria is an existential threat to Turkey's national security.

Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, Turkey has always been a security-minded state, with international security concerns often at the top of its agenda. This tradition has emphasised the protection of territorial integrity, political independence and non-intervention in regional conflicts. This foundation, which is closely tied to issues related to sovereignty, continues to shape the Turkish strategic and national security debate until today.<sup>2</sup> The Turkish approach to national security issues has been traditional, nationalistic and pro-NATO/Atlantic-centric.

The Turkish Republic has a strong tradition of strategic and national security, shaped largely by

the Ottoman Empire era. The founders of the Republic had already experienced the harsh reality that they had not been free to choose their side in the First World War. Because the nation was not able to manoeuvre well in the troubled waters of global politics, Turkey paid a high price: a shrunken empire and the danger of losing political independence. The 'fear of loss of territory' (Bilgin, 2005) is without a doubt the sword of Damocles in terms of Turkish national security understanding. As President Erdoğan explicitly declared in his Victory Day speech on August 29, 2019, 'Turkey pursues [the] same determination to protect its national survival as it did 97 years ago' (www.aa.com.tr). Hence, Turkish national security understanding is conservative and geopolitical in nature, solely revolving around territorial unity and political independence. The shadow of the Sèvres Complex<sup>3</sup> has continued to haunt the Turkish political elite since 1920 (Karaosmanoğlu, 2000: 199-216). The primary concern of Turkish political elites and top decision-makers is to keep the state as a stable territory surrounded by a volatile milieu.

Recent regional and global threats in Iraq, Syria and the Mediterranean base have forced Turkey to re-structure its national security architecture. The 2009 discovery of huge natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean was a game changer, altering regional geopolitics. As President Erdoğan stated in January 2020, 'Turkey will continue defending its rights and interests... The country's future and security begin far beyond its borders'. The decision to send troops to Libya was seen in the New York Times as Turkey 'flexing its muscles' and an attempt 'to be a

<sup>2</sup> For example, press release of the Turkish National Security Council meeting held in 30 July 2019 states that 'The Council was briefed on the fight waged at home and abroad against all terrorist organizations, especially the PKK/PYD-YPG, FETO and DAESH, which threaten Turkey's national unity...'

<sup>3</sup> Sèvres complex: The Sèvres complex is an expression used in Turkish political life to describe the paranoia of the Turkish civil/military bureaucracy and almost all political spectrum that foreign powers are inclined to destroy and dismantle Turkey as the severe Treaty of 1920 indicates (Robins, 2003: 161-206).

power broker in a volatile region'. For Erdoğan, the decision was a means to 'upside-down the Sevres [Treaty] ([www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr)). Though Turkey's concerns for survival are still valid in the context of the Sèvres Syndrome, the contextual framework of Turkish national security has reached a new dimension beyond its borders. In using Saul B. Cohen's terminology for this study, Turkey is located in a strategic position on this very historical 'shatter belt' line. With three trans-boundary military operations underway in Syria, combined with military assistance to the UN-recognised Libyan Government of National Accord, Turkey has become a powerhouse in a shatter belt and compression zone area. Cohen describes problematic regions of geopolitics according to an analytical level. In this context, the security policies of Turkey, associated with both the internal and neighbouring geography, are located at the conflict points of the geostrategic spheres of influence of the great global powers. Turkey has carried out cross-border military operations for the purpose of establishing security in war-torn Syria. At least for the time being, Turkey has established itself as a dynamic force on the global scale by virtue of its military interventions in the Levant and East-Med region. Military interventions have added a new dimension in the country's new national security architecture, more powerful than it has been for the last ninety years.

Turkey's proactive approach of dealing with troubles directly at their sources aims to create room for its national interests, enabling it to manoeuvre more independently within disputed zones and diplomatic corridors. Yet Turkey's new, relatively independent policy raises questions about its Western-oriented foreign poli-

cy having already departed from its traditional base. As foreign capitals have begun to question Turkey's proactive course in foreign policy, they seem consciously to have neglected a crucial point. Turkey's political leadership has been using strong political language, stressing that the country has been under attack since the 15th July coup d'état attempt. The attack originated from separatist and extremist terrorist groups from inside the homeland, and also from Iraq and Syria.<sup>4</sup> While Turkey could not get enough support from its traditional strategic partners to suppress these close and immediate threats, Turkish decision-makers determined that it was Turkey's natural right to cope with these hazards. Literally, there was an existential threat to Turkey's national security, far beyond the scope of any criticism of Turkey's have moved away from its traditional foreign policy stance.

The Turkish political leaders' risk assessments for Turkish national security still include its historical adversaries and geopolitical competitors. Turkey's future security posture will probably reflect these vital concerns, whether in a transatlantic, European or unilateral context. Turkey remains in fact a part of the Western mainstream in terms of the changing debate about functional security issues. From territorial security to energy and human security, the very definition of security is evolving to encompass unconventional challenges which diverge from traditional, regional lines. Whatever the conclusion, Turkey will try its best to remain independent in its national security issues and realise its national interests, even though it is very difficult to proceed through the current challenges. It is vital for Turkey to overcome its national security concerns.

<sup>4</sup> President Erdoğan said in a video message to the nation, marking 29 October 2019, the 96th Republic Day that 'We are waging another war similar to the War of Independence, which we started a century ago and climaxed with the establishment of our republic... the nation was faced with another historical fight' to protect its present and future.' ([www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr))

## Turkey' Response to Separatist Movements

The presentations and discussions of the panelists have revolved in general around the theoretical framework of Turkey's national security issues as described above. The first speaker, a veteran politician, shared his policy-making experiences which were directly related to Turkey's struggle with separatist/ethnic terrorism in Turkey since the 1980s. Turkey's problem with ethnic separatist terrorism can be traced to non-state actors operating in the region. However, one of the most important aspects of non-state proxies is that they are an important investment for superpowers, and these actors are useful tools for the advancement of their policies. This assessment is compatible with the concerns of the Turkish national security apparatus. For example, the following were the issues discussed in the first monthly meeting of the 2020 Turkish National Security Council: 'national unity and survival; [the] PKK/PYD; [the] FETÖ terrorist organisation; military operations in Syria; Turkey's assistance in [the] ongoing Libyan internal conflict; Turkey's interests and rights in the East Med' ([www.hurriyet.com.tr](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr)).

The speakers mentioned that the competing agendas of the superpowers engaged in reshaping the Middle

East in the post-American era were reflections of another Turkish national security issue, the Sèvres Complex. One speaker also added that Turkey's recent military operations, Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring, are indications that Northern Syria is the main object of Turkish security concerns.

To state that Northern Syria is a matter of survival for Turkey clearly fits into the theoretical shatter belt conceptualisation. In an historical context, the influence of outside powers during and after World War I created compression zones whose spill over effects have created the current turmoil in the region. The artificial borders drawn by the European powers are among the sources of international disputes which exist today. According to the speaker, the picture of the Middle East is grim due to many fragmentations, oppressions and military problems. All panellists agreed on the point that militarism has failed for a long time to solve the problems of the Middle East, and it is continuing to fan uncertainty in the region.

The alliance between the terrorist PKK/PYD organisation and the US is a good example of this uncertainty. Although the PKK/PYD has a Marxist ideology, the US has aligned itself with this group even though it is an arch enemy. It should be remembered that the US officially declared the PKK an illegal and terrorist organisation, and it still remains on the list of terrorist organisations. In Northern Syria, the US is allied with the YPG/PYD, which is the Syrian branch of the PKK. This situation creates uncertainty in the Middle East. Turkey was obliged to intervene militarily in Northern Syria with the Peace Spring Operation. Turkey called upon the international community to confront this terrorist organisation, but there was no meaningful, positive response. The controversial partnership between the YPG/PYD and the US is considered a life-and-death issue. The PKK has been active in Turkey for the past forty years. Strategic cooperation between the US and the PKK/PYD terrorist organisation is a prime example of the increasingly probable intensification of tension which might lead to considerable friction between the great power and its ally of many years.

*Turkey's recent military operations, Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring, are indications that Northern Syria is the main object of Turkish security concerns*



## Conflicts in World Politics and Regional Implications

The second panellist, a leading expert in international relations in Turkey, began with an observation of the international situation from an academic perspective: What we are facing in the Middle East is a clash of global powers. We cannot find any local solutions to global problems which stem from global disputes. Regional dynamics, which include the compression zone conceptualisation, are important in tackling these problems. According to the speaker, the world international system has been changing every hundred years. Hegemonic power is challenged by other rising powers. In an historical transition, the US is being challenged by another international hegemonic power, China. International power is shifting toward China. Therefore, the historical political turmoil in the region is the effect of hegemonic power politics.

The speaker opened an eye-opening subject that the US is struggling to have a coherent policy toward Turkey. We do not know who decides the US foreign policy with regard to Turkey. We do not know how the impeachment process will end in the US. The domes-

tic political instability of the US is a new phenomenon which we must face. Indecisiveness in the American foreign-policy decision-making process creates a power vacuum. Hesitation in Washington forces other countries to search for a reliable great power to tackle tensions in the region. The inability to reduce uncertainties or to predict what will happen in the near future only increases the power struggle. We cannot predict what will happen in the US.

On the other hand, Russia sees the opportunity to fill the power vacuum in the Middle East. As an alternative, Moscow pours all of its available resources into the toolbox to change the balance of power in its favour. Because of its direct military involvement in the Syrian Civil War since 2015, Moscow has proved to the world that Russia today is not the same as it was twenty years ago. The Russians are now in the Middle East. As for the EU, they are no longer a foreign policy giant in this regard.

## Turkey's Security Fault Lines

The speaker made an important point in describing the fault lines in Turkish national security. Putting Turkey in the centre, we can easily draw four lines:

- Diagonal Fault Line: South/Southeast to North/Northwest. This diagonal line stretches from the Sub-Sahara to Afghanistan. All of the important human trafficking routes lie along this line, and Turkey stands in the middle of the gates of passage.
- Energy Fault Line: Northeast to South, extending from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The energy transfer from north to south is problematic, and the energy equilibrium has changed since Russia entered the line of the South.
- East-to-West Fault Line: This fault line consists of the regions of the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa. Terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime are important in this line.

- **Multidimensional Fault Line:** The state/citizen relationship has dramatically changed from Baghdad to the Ukraine. Political unrest is directly affecting our region. This multidimensional line accounts for sudden shock to the region's capitals and a source of instability in the Middle East

These four fault lines reveal how the shatter belt conceptualisation is important in comprehending the current waves of multiregional tension which surround the Anatolian peninsula. How we can overcome these problems, and how we can find a solution for the PKK/PYD issue, are crucial questions that must be answered. The speaker at this point proposed and underlined the policy resolutions that follow:

- As President Erdoğan repeated many times, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) must be restructured and the UN system should be renewed. The UNSC is the result of World War II, and the question should be asked why India, Turkey, Brazil and other large countries are not represented in the UNSC.

*These military operations are in fact conspicuous examples of President Erdoğan's contribution to a new dimension of the traditional Turkish national security strategy, '[the] problem should be solved at its source'*

According to UN Charter Article 47, 'The Military Staff Committee', composed of the chiefs of staff of the five permanent members of the UNSC, was given responsibility for the strategic coordination of forces placed at the Council's disposal. However, the Military Staff Committee has had limited significance in practice. It is necessary to promote Article 47 to find solutions to international problems.

- NATO and the EU should respect the interests of other states in our region, and we should find a solution for the Syrian problem at a global level.

The second speaker's presentation gave to some extent an inclusive approach to the Turkish national security fault lines, both at the theoretical and practical levels. This was a coherent approach to solving the problems which Turkey faces.

The third speaker, a retired army officer from the Turkish Armed Forces, presented the technical details of the three transborder military operations which Turkey has been conducting since 2016. These military operations are in fact conspicuous examples of President Erdoğan's contribution to a new dimension of the traditional Turkish national security strategy, '[the] problem should be solved at its source'. The speaker then emphasised that the PKK was first associated with the Soviet Union, until 1991, and then with the US. The US decided to use one terrorist organisation against another in Syria, i.e. the PKK versus DAESH, while Turkey struggled to defeat all terrorist organisations in Syria, without any distinction. According to the speaker, Turkey's new security doctrine is a good example to other states because it uses elements of national power. Turkey's new approach is dynamic and fluid in nature. These dynamic and fluid characteristics derive their power from strong political leadership. A distinctive way that Turkey uses its national power against terrorism is in its human-centric approach. The speaker indicated that Turkish security strategy relies upon 'first diplomacy, then military options'.

## Conclusion: Open Discussion on Turkey's Security Partners and Challenges

The question and answer session gained momentum when the issue was brought up about the lack of confidence between some NATO members and Turkey. Turkey's other potential options, aside from NATO, were also discussed. These discussions highlighted the traditional Sèvres Complex, and that the Western powers have historically aimed to disintegrate Turkey. For decades, Turkey has rightfully complained that some NATO members have backed ethnic separatist terrorism in Turkey. This is another example of why Turkish elites are so sensitive about the so-called 'hidden agenda' of Turkey's Western allies. To some, 'The Western countries have preferred to collaborate with some anti-Turkish regional actors that threaten Turkey's national security' (Ataman, 2019: 5). The Turkish political leadership has often questioned the core principle of NATO, that the organisation should protect any member from armed attack, and whether the member states do support Turkey in its life-and-death struggle against terrorist organisations. To some, the answer is very clear: The West is supporting terrorist organisations instead.

The panel reminded the audience that the US has accepted the truth that the PYD/YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK terror group.<sup>5</sup> The US support of the PKK's Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG, has become an important point of friction between Turkey and the US, as the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by the US, the EU and by NATO. This inconsistency and

the lack of a coherent policy toward Turkish national interests have created new challenges in the form of distrust among NATO member states. As a result, Turkey struggles not only with its own enemies, but with NATO members as well. This does not mean that Turkey has no other alternative than NATO. However, Turkey does have a place in NATO and does not need to look at other security mechanisms.

The question and answer session concluded with President Erdoğan's proposition that Turkey's new global scenario indicates two pillars: The first is Turkey's humanitarian foreign policy, and the second is the territorial and political integrity of its neighbours. The panel's common understanding of Turkish national security policy can be summarised as follows: Turkey simply wants a stable region, not only for Turkey, but also for the entire Middle East, achieved through peaceful solutions to the current issues.

<sup>5</sup> The American Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey, who is the former US Ambassador to Turkey, said the US' local partner since 2014 has been the PYD, which is the Syrian offshoot of PKK. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/ypg-is-syrian-offshoot-of-pkk-terror-group-us-en-voy/1312862> The same acknowledgment was clearly mentioned by then the US Defense Secretary Ash Carter that U.S. Backed Syrian Kurdish Group Shares Ties with Terror Group PKK. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4591976/user-clip-def-sec-carter-us-backed-syrian-kurdish-group-shares-ties-terror-group-pkk>

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