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Analyses

Turkey's role in Afghanistan: a major risk

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Turkey is looking for an opportunity to maintain its military presence through negotiations with the Taliban.
[Anadolu Agency/Getty Images]

This paper discusses Turkey's objectives behind its mission in Afghanistan as well as international and field risks. It assesses that with the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, a new competition over power will begin in Asia. With Russia and China expected to fill the power vacuum created by said withdrawal, relations with Turkey are discussed on two bases: trade and economy, and regional competition with Russia. In addition, attention is drawn to the macro risks that Turkey may be exposed to through Russia and China if it assumes a role in Asia via Afghanistan. The paper also discusses the risk scenarios that Turkey may face on the ground in Afghanistan. The information and data in the study were taken from expert articles, government statistics and international organisations.

Turkey's narrative in Afghanistan is not new, but fundamental developments in Afghanistan have generated intense disputes about Turkey's role in the country.

First and foremost, Turkey has been playing an important non-combatant role in Afghanistan since 2003 especially in Kabul airport. (1) Even though this non-combatant military presence provides relations that strengthen Turkey's hand for the parties to the conflicts in Afghanistan, the current result of the intra-Afghan talks in Doha and the agreement between the United States and the Taliban have also affected Turkey's position.

Turkey's new adventure in Afghanistan, which was set out to repair its relations with the United States and strengthen its position in NATO, (2) took a different turn due to the Taliban's rapid takeover of the country. However, the Taliban's seizure of power did not cause Turkey to push back. Currently, Turkey is looking for an opportunity to maintain its military presence through negotiations with the Taliban. (3) Turkey saw the Kabul airport mission as a pragmatic opportunity while the United States sought to transfer its responsibility to a cooperative middle power while withdrawing from Afghanistan and prepare to face great power competition with Russia and China. (4) The United States' 2019-2025 Central Asia strategy, (5) as well as its policies towards the Indo-Pacific, (6) support the idea that the withdrawal from Afghanistan is a preparation for a new great power competition.

While much of the focus has been on the United States and how it is preparing for a great power competition, the long-running zero-sum game between Beijing and Moscow will end at some point with the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan. These two great powers, who tolerate each other against the United States, will no longer be able to maintain this balance in Central Asia. Turkey also thinks that by taking part in this great power competition in Asia through Afghanistan, it can maintain its regional balance policy and achieve political and economic gains.

Great power competition and Turkey

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan will realign geopolitical positions due to the United States' position against China and Russia. As a result, the great powers' competition will shift from costly areas in the Middle East to more diplomatic and trade-centred Asia. But, this change will not devalue the strategic plans related to regions and countries; on the contrary, it will make them more important as a denominator of the great power struggle. However, rather than a unipolar world order, these developments will also define an era of renewed great power competition between Asia, led by China and Russia, and the West, led by the United States. (7)

While the world is on the verge of a new era of great power competition, commercially and politically, Turkey will feel the rivalry in all aspects due to its targeted role in Afghanistan. Despite its broad economic, political and military relations with the West, if Ankara somehow takes over the task in Kabul, it will find it very difficult to balance the relations between Asia and the West. (8) Although the negative opinions against the West and the Cold War institutions it established, including the United Nations

have intensified in Turkish politics and media, (9) the Turkish government is trying to keep relations with the United States and the West at a certain level, considering that the economic relations between the two great powers of Asia are shaped against it.

In terms of seeing the economic relations free from the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, taking 2019 as a basis, we see that Turkey exports predominantly to Western markets. In the same year, most of Turkey’s imports came from Russia and China. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, in 2019, Turkey made 40 billion dollars of 202 billion dollars of imports with Russia and China.

	Russia	China	Total
Export	3.852.993.806	2.586.637.371	6.439.631.177
Import	22.453.026.441	18.496.580.460	40.949.606.901
	-18.600.032.635	-15.909.943.089	34.509.975.724

***The table is made with the data obtained by the author from the Turkish Statistical Institute.**

According to the data published by the Turkish state television, China was the 18th highest importer of Turkish goods in 2019, and it was Turkey’s third highest exporter. Turkey, which has exported a total of 13 billion and 179 million dollars to China in the last 5 years, has imported 112 billion and 902 million dollars from this country. The trade volume between the two countries has reached 126 billion and 80 million dollars in 5 years. (10) According to the June 2021 import list of the Turkish Ministry of Commerce and the Statistical Institute, China and Russia are the first two countries in Turkey's list of importers. (11) In other words, Turkey's economic relations with Russia and China do not work for Ankara's benefit.

For Ankara, the economy has turned into a weak spot in terms of foreign policy due to the economic crisis it has been experiencing since 2019 and the depreciation of the Turkish lira combined with the global pandemic. As data reveals, Turkey’s relations with the great powers of Asia are not progressing in Ankara’s favour. Economic relations with the West are in a similar situation. As a result, the Turkish economy does not have the means to counter or at least balance the regional effects of the new Asia-centric power competition that Ankara wants to be involved in with a role it will assume in Afghanistan.

The intensification of communication with formations such as the five-year-old C5+1, (12) which the United States established in the years before its withdrawal from Afghanistan, is an indication that Central Asia (13) will turn into a serious commercial struggle area for great powers. If Turkey has to make a choice in the Asia competition under economic pressure from Beijing and Moscow, it may find itself facing US sanctions, which will seriously affect the economic and defence industries, and which would not be as soft as before. (14)

Until now, Turkey has balanced the global great powers through their regional disputes and thus managed to stay away from their destructive economic and political actions. However, it may risk the balance it has achieved between Western and Asian powers by taking a role in Afghanistan because it is not just the government in Kabul that has changed, the players and the rules of the game are also slowly changing both on the international stage and in the field. We will also evaluate the field-based risks of Turkey's role in Afghanistan, which will be shaped through its management of Kabul's Hamid Karzai airport. However, it is imperative to address another issue that will affect Turkey globally.

Reflections of Turkey's regional policies

Despite its fragile economy, Turkey is in competitive cooperation with Russia regionally in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan. (15) Russia became very influential in Afghanistan by holding an intra-Afghan talks summit (16) under its auspices in Moscow, right after the US-Taliban talks. "None of these meetings made any progress on a political settlement, but they ensured that Russia retained a key role in the process. Russia publicly supported a peace deal between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020, but many officials were skeptical that it would succeed. Russia remained ready to restart its own regional approach should the U.S. negotiations falter." (17) Russia followed a similar path in Syria. It undertook a coercive, firepower-based mediator role (18) and used the conflicts in Syria, which it had frozen (19) from time to time, to use later as trump cards in problems with Turkey. In other words, there are areas where Russia and China are expected to fill the power vacuum in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, as they have demonstrated their military superiority over Turkey alongside from economic means. There is a wide regional rivalry based on relatively cold areas such as the Black Sea and the Caucasus, as well as active conflicts at various levels in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh through proxies between Turkey and Russia. (20) Although Turkey seems

to have gained a relative advantage in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, we know that Ankara chose political compromises to solve the problems as quickly as possible to avoid direct intervention by Russia.

Among these areas, Syria stands as the Achilles' heel for Turkey. Ankara has become even more dependent on Russia for the Syrian issue since Russia undertook the guarantor role at the end of Turkey's operations in the area controlled by the People's Defence Units (YPG) in northern Syria in 2019. Competitive cooperation with Russia, one of the great powers of Asia, against the United States and the YPG in Syria gave Russia a chance to develop its relations with anti-Turkey organisations on the ground in the near abroad of Ankara.

A military mission that Turkey will undertake in Afghanistan and political influence initiatives based on this mission may cause Moscow to take action against Turkey in the above-mentioned areas in the event of a conflict. This is because the area that Turkey targets in coordination with the United States through Afghanistan, is the Central Asian Turkic states, (21), which Russia considers its 'near abroad' in the post-Soviet period and its own area of responsibility. (22)

In Afghanistan, or in the competition that Turkey will be involved in through Afghanistan, Turkish involvement may cause problems with Russia. Russia can use its proxies in Syria or Libya or anti-Turkey organisations against Turkey in Ankara's near abroad in Asian conflicts centred on Afghanistan. Moscow can also use sub-organisations in Afghanistan against Turkey in any conflict of interest, as it has done against the United States in the past. (23)

Risks in the field

Although Russia denies paying the Taliban to kill US soldiers, (24) the diversity of organisations in Afghanistan provides a suitable environment for such intelligence operations. The Taliban has been patronising al-Qaeda for two decades since Osama bin Laden took shelter with them. (25) Although US President Biden said in a speech advocating withdrawal that al-Qaeda is "gone" from Afghanistan, (26) Pentagon and UN reports (27) indicate otherwise.

According to the UN report, the Taliban provides a protection umbrella to many armed organisations, especially the Uzbeks, Tajiks and Pakistanis in addition to al-Qaeda.

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its sub-groups, Lashkar-e-Islam, the Turkistan Islamic Party, Jamaat Ansarullah, Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari continue to exist in Afghanistan. (28) The Taliban have guaranteed security to almost all their neighbours, including China (29) and Russia. (30) But there are many unanswered questions about the fate of these organisations that have fought alongside the Taliban for twenty years. Even in the best scenario, in which we assume that the Taliban keep all the promises they made to the international community, the organisations will undoubtedly experience tension with their former allies and leaders who support these allies in the new period. (31)

This potential internal turmoil will put Turkey's role in Afghanistan in a very risky situation. Even if there is no intelligence operation by any state, organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which Turkey has problems with in its Syrian branches, will pose serious threats to the Turkish military presence in Afghanistan, where NATO does not exist and the Taliban cannot form law enforcement yet.

Conclusion: Cost calculation

The Kabul mission, which was planned to be carried out with Ankara's support from the United States and the NATO, included relative gains in terms of political achievement: repairing relations with the United States, a step towards the old and strong position in NATO, the diplomatic advantages of being an access point between the West and Afghanistan, the chance to establish a relationship with the management as a direct and dominant force for the protection of investments in the region, etc. However, due to the rapid advance of the Taliban and the collapse of the Kabul government, the plan with the United States fell through. Turkey then started to look for ways to stay in Kabul by setting a new discourse. The Afghanistan mission discourses re-railed, as some analyses suggest, Turkey's attempt to increase its influence in Central Asia. However, this view does not answer the question of how a limited and non-combatant task force in Kabul will create a multiplier effect in terms of regional impact, even if the Turkish military presence is accepted by the Taliban.

The trade volume between Turkey and Afghanistan is less than 200 million dollars. Compared to China's massive mining, energy, infrastructure and regional investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative for Afghanistan, (32) Turkey's 'role' scaled by military presence is costly.

For Turkey to seize an opportunity politically, economically and diplomatically in Afghanistan and avoid the above-mentioned risks, it needs to free its role in Afghanistan from its military presence and airport parenthesis. Otherwise, it will not be able to turn Afghanistan into a steppingstone for Central Asia in the new period of great power competition. The only gain Turkey can achieve through Afghanistan may be to re-balance with the Western powers, which it is currently having problems with in many issues.

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