

A Study on the Structural Contradictions in the US-Turkey Alliance Relations

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After the Cold War and especially since the Justice and Development Party administration led by Erdogan, the US-Turkey alliance relations have declined. The two countries have sharp structural contradictions on a series of issues. Due to the profound geopolitical landscape changes, the interdependence on security and defense between the United States and Turkey has been severely weakened, leading to significant divergence in threat definition and pursuit of interests. Turkey has continuously enhanced its diplomatic autonomy, seeking to change its weak position in the original alliance relations, and striving to become a regional leader. These structural contradictions inevitably trigger the hedging of policies and interests between the United States and Turkey.

Keywords: US-Turkey alliance, structural contradictions, geopolitics, foreign strategies

Realism theory emphasizes that international structure is national policy's most important explanatory factor. Both Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth N. Waltz held that one of the important purposes of the alliance was to provide a counterbalance for the countries with excessive power. Stephen Walt (1988) thought that the countries establish an alliance to counterbalance threats, and they establish an alliance with the party posing the least threat to counterbalance the party posing the maximum threat. Both power and threat constitute an organic part of the international structure. Some scholars such as Randall Schweller pointed out from another perspective that following was another important motive of the alliance, and the member states with relatively weak strength made their profits by following the alliance of big countries. This is apparently a result of strength distribution among countries based on the international structure. After the Cold War and especially since the 21st century, the global landscape has undergone profound changes, and a series of structural contradictions caused by geopolitics, national strength, and other factors have been increasingly prominent in US-Turkey relations. The differences in threat perception and strategic goals between the two countries have weakened the strategic foundation for the US-Turkey alliance relations.

The Profound Changes of Geopolitical Factors Undermining the Strategic Foundation of the US-Turkey Alliance

Geopolitics is an important geographical factor that influences the relations between countries and national decision-making. The US-Turkey alliance relations are a typical geopolitical product, and the common security threat is the foundation of its existence. The unique geostrategic location endows Turkey with an extremely remarkable strategic role in containing the Soviet Union's expansion in the Middle East. The

geostrategic value of Turkey is the core of the US-Turkey alliance relations, which determines that an inherent characteristic of the US-Turkey alliance relations is almost completely based on security and defense. The unity of this alliance foundation is greatly influenced by the development of the international situation and the changes in geopolitical factors. The cooperation between the two countries in other aspects is basically subordinate to or gives way to security defense. For example, the economic cooperation between the two countries serves the security cooperation to a great extent, and the sense of identity at the level of values is not high. The alliance relations between the United States and European countries in the NATO system have a more diverse and composite foundation. In addition to security cooperation, there are strong economic ties, value recognition, historical trust, and other factors that have helped build the resilience of the relations. After the Cold War and especially since the 21st century, the hidden hazards of the single foundation of strategic cooperation between the United States and Turkey have been constantly exposed. If the need for common defense is weakened, the disagreements between the two countries will increase, and the alliance relations will become loose.

From the perspective of Turkey, after the Cold War, the geopolitical landscape dominated by bipolar confrontation in the Middle East no longer exists. Especially after “the Arab Spring”, the world begins to undergo profound changes unseen in a century. The surrounding regions of Turkey are facing profound changes, turmoil, disorder, and imbalance of power structure. Refugee influx, border conflicts, and the growth of Kurdish forces have all imposed unprecedented threats to Turkey, and the alliance among Turkey, the United States, and other Western countries is unable to solve these new threats. When the international system changes due to the change in the geopolitical landscape, middle powers will be dissatisfied with the current situation, and then take positive actions to realize their interest expectation. In the Middle East, there is a trend of rise in the East and fall in the West and order rebuilding. The leading role of the United States declines, and the process of regional multi-polarization is accelerated. Traditional regional powers such as Egypt, Libya, and Iraq undergo regime changes and lose their original strength, while some emerging countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey rise constantly. Compared with the change in the international landscape, Turkey is more sensitive to the change in the regional system situation, regarding the transformation and adjustment of the regional landscape as a good opportunity to gain regional leadership. Its geopolitical motives in diplomatic strategy are more obvious. Turkey sways constantly in the westernization of secularism, the world of Islamization, and the orientalizing of Pan-Turkism. The disputes and contradictions between Turkey and the United States largely reflect the dilemma of Turkey’s choice of strategic direction.

From the perspective of the United States, with the changes in the global geopolitical landscape, the status of Europe and the Middle East in the global strategy of the United States has declined to some extent, and its focus has been shifted to the Asia-Pacific region. Turkey used to shoulder the flank defense of Southeast Europe, but now the security threat from Russia is far less than that from the Soviet Union. Therefore, Turkey’s significance for European security is weakened. Although Turkey is facing multi-dimensional geopolitical challenges from the Middle East, Balkan, and the Black Sea in the new situation, the United States has not paid attention to this. In the Georgian crisis in August 2008, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) did not make a consistent response, which made Turkey deeply upset (Flanagan et al., 2020, p. 169). It can be seen that in the new geopolitical environment, the United States has not given Turkey the right to speak in the Atlantic Alliance but repeatedly ignores Turkey’s security concerns and threat evaluation (Du, 2022, p. 132).

Although there is still a security need between the United States and Turkey, it is far incomparable to that during the Cold War. The sense of alienation between the United States and Turkey has become increasingly obvious, and the bilateral relations are susceptible to interference from various factors. The most fundamental problem is that the interdependence between the two countries in security and defense is severely weakened, the threat perception diverges significantly, and the defense objectives are no longer clear and focused. Although the Russia-Ukraine war has once again escalated the confrontation between Russia and NATO, the threat perception of Turkey is inconsistent with the United States but continuously strengthens its contact and cooperation with Russia. The interests and conflicts between countries overlap, in this sense, it is difficult to define the relationship between friend or foe. The boundary of alliance becomes equivocal, and the importance of alliance relations is correspondingly weakened. The weakening of the importance of collective security mechanisms directly leads to a decline in the influence of American leadership.

The Change of Power Structure Significantly Weakening the Strategic Dependence of Turkey on the United States

The strength of a country's self-help capability has an important influence on its alliance policies. When a member state strengthens its self-help capability, its dependence on the security of the alliance will be weakened correspondingly. According to the strengths and defense obligations of the allies, the alliance is divided into a symmetric alliance and an asymmetric alliance. In an asymmetric alliance, the leading countries play a dominant role in alliance policies and actions, determining the development direction, nature, and cooperation mode of the alliance, and exerting some control over the following countries. It is difficult for the following countries to have a fundamental impact on the alliance policies but rely on the security protection provided by the leading country. For the sake of improving the strength of the alliance, the leading countries will support the weak allies, make them dependent, and play a greater role in security. When the strength of small countries rises and becomes more autonomous in the alliance, big countries will tend to take restraining actions to maintain their dominant position (Wang, 2006, pp. 112-113). Mancur Olson pointed out that there are common and competitive interests in the alliance. In an asymmetric alliance, small countries are highly dependent on big countries, so the common interests will increase and the alliance relations will become closer. When a small country improves its strength and seeks autonomy, it will easily cause diplomatic alienation from the leading countries, gaining competitive interests at the expense of the other side (1995, p. 5).

The US-Turkey alliance relations are a typical asymmetric alliance. During the Cold War, the strength disparity between the United States and Turkey was an important reason for their relatively stable strategic relations. Outside the alliance, Turkey could not guarantee its security interests on its own; within the alliance, Turkey was incapable of challenging the dominant discourse power of the United States. After the Cold War, global economic integration has brought global economic prosperity, but it has also impacted global and regional governance. Globalization not only promotes diversification but also causes decentralization. The trend of diversification of national interests is obvious, and the relations between countries are rebuilt. Within the alliance, the strength comparison among member states has a change as well. The change of asymmetric power relations between the leading countries and the following countries challenges the traditional thinking mode of alliance governance. In other words, when the strengths of the following countries in the alliance are improved rapidly, their position and social power in the international system will be enhanced correspondingly. This will decrease

the dependence of the following countries on the alliance, which makes it impossible for the leading countries to impose coercion on the following countries.

On the one hand, the global and regional influence of the United States has declined. After the Cold War, the dominant position of the United States, as the only superpower, began to face challenges that did not stem from a military power like the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it was precisely because of the disintegration of the Soviet Union that the disappearance of original threats weakened the cohesion of the Western camp. The weakening importance of the collective security mechanism has thus led to a decline in the importance and even legitimacy of American leadership. Moreover, the intensification of international competition and the diversification of power and wealth distribution indicate that the United States has a power decline to some extent and can hardly maintain its influence. Globally, the rise of China, Russia, and the European Union has weakened the global leadership and influences of the United States. In the Middle East, the United States' control over the regional security situation and its influences on regions and countries are unsustainable. The United States is facing strategic confusion during the transition period in the Middle East, and its basic policy orientation has gradually returned from large-scale military and political intervention in the early post-Cold War period to agent strategy and offshore balance. This change will inevitably affect the regional situation and the US-Turkey relations (Niu, 2020, p. 12).

On the other hand, Turkey's strength is growing, and its status is rising. Another consequence of globalization is to make regional powers showcase their strength in a multipolar or even nonpolar international environment. During the administration of Erdogan for 20 years, Turkey achieved rapid economic growth, becoming one of the Top 20 economies in the world. In addition, the military power of Turkey takes the lead in the Middle East, and its military power is second only to that of the United States in NATO. All these have helped Erdogan win a political reputation, laying a solid foundation for his strong diplomacy, and enabling Turkey to make greater strategic ambition. In this context, Turkey invested lots of resources in Africa, Eurasia, and other regions and actively expanded its influence in diplomacy, culture, and peacekeeping during the administration of the Justice and Development Party for 20 years. In the diplomatic practice, Turkey has gradually linked its own security with the regional situation. Its diplomacy in the Middle East does not only reflect the tough policy attitude but also tends to use hard power. Turkey has adopted proactive and even risky policies for many times. Turkey pursues a pre-emptive military security policy. When necessary, it even ignores the strategies of the United States and NATO, taking unilateral actions such as military operations in Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, the growth of strength will help Turkey form a more arbitrary and tougher style in the NATO alliance system. For example, during the "Trident Javelin" drill held by NATO in Stavanger, Norway in November 2017, Erdogan angrily withdrew the Turkish troops because of the criticism received from the NATO states, stating that he would reconsider the membership of Turkey in NATO.

In short, Turkey is an emerging economy and middle power rising rapidly in the transfer of wealth and power structure in the era of globalization. It is also an active participant in the process of global and regional governance adjustment and the rebuilding of new international order. With the change of national strength, the United States is increasingly unwilling to support Turkey, showing a tendency to restrain Turkey. The American diplomatic establishment camp restricted Erdogan's "Look East" policy after taking into account of democracy and human rights, regional power balance, and containment of Russia's regional influence. With the continuous improvement of Turkey's strength especially after gaining its international status and influence in some regional

affairs, Turkey's willingness to follow the United States is constantly declining. These realistic conditions and trends will inevitably affect Turkey's strategic decision-making, enabling Turkey to readjust its relationship with the United States as a leading country in the alliance.

The Adjustment of Strategic Goals Resulting in the Expansion of Difference of Interest

The innovation in Turkish diplomatic philosophy is not baseless but built upon an understanding on the international and regional orders and the self-cognition. Erdogan has repeatedly proposed that "the world is bigger than five", emphasizing that "Turkey is far more than itself", and revitalizing "Pan-Turkism" and "Neo-Ottomanism" at the diplomatic level through historical and cultural heritage, memory revival, and reconstruction. Turkey partially achieved the goal of injecting its influence into a broader geopolitical space.

With the rise of national strength and especially after the Middle East Revolutions in 2011, it is widely believed in the Justice and Development Party that Turkey has obtained a great political opportunity and will have a chance to become a regional leader. Turkey has adjusted its foreign policy, with the European dream gradually losing its appeal and the increasing enthusiasm for involvement in regional affairs. Davutoglu pointed out that "The Ottoman Empire should become the political legacy of today's Turkey rather than a burden" (2007, p. 187). If the situation in the Middle East changes and Turkey's efforts to integrate into Europe fail, its Ottomanism will tend to be strong. Facing the chaos in the Middle East, Erdogan begins to act as a leader of the Muslim world and intervene in regional affairs.

After 2016, the global hegemony of the United States showed a trend of strategic contraction, and multi-polarization trend in the Middle East was obvious. The Syrian civil war, the Yemen crisis, the rise of the "Islamic State", and other issues made the regional situation more turbulent. Erdogan thinks that the international power center is shifting from the West to the East, the multi-polarization pattern is gradually forming, and the West tends to decline. Especially in recent years, Obama implemented a strategic contraction policy in the Middle East, and the emerging powers such as China and Russia are playing an increasingly important role in global and regional affairs. Turkey's special historical, cultural, and geographical advantages are conducive to the implementation of "strategic depth" diplomacy and the restoration of Ottoman glory in the past. In this regard, Russia and Turkey share natural similarities. Russia lost its original international status after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which reminds the Turks of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire due to European imperialism. At present, Turkey has a unique strategic location and national strength, hoping urgently to assume the historical status of the successor of the Ottoman Empire and play a key role in solving the Middle East issues.

The diversification of national interests and the complexity of relations between countries resulting from the adjustment of national diplomatic strategy led to the increase of internal contradictions in the US-Turkey alliance. It is rather difficult to solve the disputes and struggles in the economic field or the conflicts caused by regional and border issues in the traditional NATO collective security mechanism. The contradictions and disagreements in the US-Turkey alliance relations do not lie in whether to maintain the alliance relations but in the hedging of diplomatic strategic goals. Basically, it is not a short-term dispute over micro-interests but inevitable in-depth structural contradictions. The new diplomatic strategy of the Justice and Development Party focuses on taking an aggressive diplomatic offensive in non-Western countries such as the Middle East, North Africa, Balkan, and other regions with strategic interests, using soft power such as politics, economy, diplomacy, and culture to achieve the strategic goals. The basic premise of the strategic geopolitical interpretation of the Justice and

Development Party is that the expansion of Western forces in Balkan, Central Asia, and the Middle East is not in line with Turkey's national interests, so this situation must be reversed (Stein, 2015, p. 2). In his theory, Davutoglu also emphasized that the Western countries headed by the United States have deep prejudice against the hegemony of the world and the Middle East. The policy of unconditionally getting close to the West must be criticized, and the long-term diplomatic intervention of the United States in Turkey must be resisted (Murinson, 2006, p. 947). The pluralistic diplomatic strategy shift collides with the strategic adjustment of the United States. The strategic disagreements between the two countries aggravated dramatically after the Syrian crisis, heated up after the failed military coup, and resulted in irreconcilable fundamental conflicts of national interests and the loss of political mutual trust.

During the administration of Obama, the United States hoped to improve US-Turkey relations and establish a "model partnership". He emphasized that the bilateral relations were exemplary but not strategic. That is, they served as a model for cooperation and common prosperity between Christian countries and Muslim countries. The Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu commented that this concept was universally applicable but did not clarify the specific connotation of this "model". What Turkey wants is strategic relations on an equal basis. The idea of Obama is idealistic and impractical, ignoring the interest base of the strategic relations between the United States and Turkey to some extent. Although Obama emphasized the importance of Turkey and expressed his willingness to improve US-Turkey relations, this exemplary partnership was seriously deficient in policy and discourse, so this goal was not achieved during his term of office but accumulated lots of contradictions on regional issues. After Trump took office in the White House, he also announced that he would promote the "chemical reaction" with Erdogan, and Erdogan also expressed his expectation and repeatedly hoped to develop strategic relations between the United States and Turkey based on mutual understanding of mutual interests. Contrary to the expectation, the contradictions and disagreements between the United States and Turkey increased, and the alliance relations faltered. This just reflects that a major crux of the US-Turkey alliance relations lies in deep-seated structural contradictions which cannot be improved in a short time only by leaders' gestures of goodwill or minor policy adjustments. The changes in the international landscape in the post-Cold War era have brought significant adjustments in the foreign strategies of the United States and Turkey. In particular, Turkey has gradually made historical adjustments to the orientation and direction of national development. The ambition of the Erdogan government is stronger than that of any previous government. It can be seen that Turkey pursues strategic autonomy, and it has begun to use various means, especially military power, to pursue the interests that are in line with its strategic goals.

However, this is not what the United States wants to see. If Turkey becomes powerful, it may be an opponent that is more challenging than Iran. The United States prefers an "obedient" Turkey to a strong one, and it can only accept a secular and pro-Western Turkey that serves the national interests of the United States in the Middle East. For example, in the Gulf War, Turkey joined the war against Iraq in order to prove its friendship with the United States, and the US-Turkey alliance relations were highly praised by the United States at the cost of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq. However, in the Iraq War in 2003, Turkey "disobeyed" the expectation of the United States by refusing its request to open the second battlefront against Iraq in southern Turkey, which subverted such an inherent idea that Turkey should cooperate with the strategy of the United States and marked the beginning of the deterioration of the US-Turkey alliance relations. In the Syrian War, the conflict between the United States and Turkey became more prominent. Turkey regarded Kurdish forces as an enemy, while the United

States regarded it as an important ground force to jointly fight against the “Islamic State”. The United States did not support Turkey to attack the “Islamic State” in Syria but supported the Kurdish forces in Syria and helped it develop and grow. For Turkey, the Kurdish forces is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, so the United States’ support for the Syrian Kurds has apparently laid the groundwork for potentially splitting Turkey. Based on the strategic goal, the two countries have a fundamental opposition to the cognition of “friend or foe”. These determine the inevitable conflict between the United States and Turkey in the strategic line. This conflict not only reflects the micro-level consideration of military security goal but also the contradiction between Turkey’s increasing strength and expanding its external influence and the weakening of its influence by the United States. When Trump took office in January 2017, he tried to build the “Arabic version of NATO” including Egypt, Jordan, and “GCC” members. Its purpose was to contain Iran and limit the expansion of forces in Turkey. The goal of US Middle East Policy is to strengthen the relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other allies to contain the expansion of Russian and Iranian forces, promote Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, and achieve regional stability. In this context, Turkey’s strategic position and influence have obviously declined. *The US National Security Strategy Report* released by the American government in 2017 even deemphasized the US-Turkey alliance relations.

Conclusion

As a typical geopolitical product, the US-Turkey alliance relations have obvious structural contradictions in the post-Cold War era. The reduction of the need for common security and defense has severely weakened the foundation of the strategic relations between the two countries. The threat perception between them diverges significantly, which affects the bilateral relations. The enhancement of national power has enabled Turkey to seek to change its weak position in the traditional asymmetric alliance relations. Especially after the Middle East Revolutions in 2011, it is widely believed in the Justice and Development Party that Turkey is expected to become a regional leader. Then, Turkey made major adjustments to its foreign policies. The European dream gradually loses its appeal, the enthusiasm for involvement in regional affairs continues to increase, and the trend of diversification of national interests is obvious. With the improvement of Turkey’s power status in the international system, there are many differences in policy positions between the United States and Turkey. Facing the rise of Turkey, the United States has gradually shifted from support to containment. The twists and turns in US-Turkey relations also indicate that the United States lacks a clear and reasonable strategic design for Turkey after the Cold War. Mark Parris, the former US ambassador to Turkey, pointed out that there is a huge difference between American regional strategies and Turkey’s strategic adjustment (Zanotti & Thomas, 2016). If there is any conflict of interest, the United States will tend to exert pressure on Turkey, and then the US-Turkey relations will take a drastic turn with frequent setbacks.

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