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The Policy of Turkey towards EU-NATO Cooperation

by Adam Szymański and Marcin Terlikowski

In recent months NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced a 'dual track' initiative to break the EU-NATO deadlock caused by the Turkish and Cypriot blockade of attempts to exploit the potential of the "Berlin plus" formula governing the partnership of both organizations. However, the proposal is not likely to be effective, mainly because of Turkish reluctance to accept it. The strengthened role of Turkey in CSDP, particularly as it cannot be certain, is not equally important for that state as is defending the Turkish interest connected with the Cyprus issue.

Turkey and the CSDP. The root cause of Turkish discord with CSDP (previously ESDP) is in its strong status in the now historical Western European Union (WEU). An "associated member" at the time, Turkey participated in regular political-level meetings of the WEU and was able to shape the debate within it. Moreover, it had full voting rights in the decision-making as regards the utilization of NATO assets by WEU, and was an active member of the Western European Armaments Group—a predecessor of the European Defence Agency (EDA).

The formation of the ESDP in 1999 meant that Turkey found itself at risk of not being a part of an important pillar of the European security architecture. Thus, it consequently blocked the establishment of EU-NATO ties until it received a guarantee (eventually in the so-called Nice Implementation Document from 2002) of the fullest possible involvement of non-EU European NATO Allies in ESDP activities. Since then, Turkey has vigorously participated in ESDP missions (the majority of which took part in the Turkish neighborhood), for example, as a third contributor to operation "Althea" in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It also declared assistance in implementing the 2010 Headline Goal and its participation in the EU Battle Groups' system. However, it was not granted the right to participate in planning and decision-making within the ESDP.

The accession of Cyprus to the EU and its subsequent veto policy equaled a further obstacle for Turkish engagement in ESDP. Despite consulting with Turkey on the European Security Strategy from 2003, the EU made no such consultation in 2008 in the case of the Report on the Implementation of the ESS. Important ESDP missions in the Turkish neighborhood (Iraq and Georgia) as well did not involve consultations with Turkey. Moreover, the EU has so far not agreed to sign with Turkey an agreement for exchange of classified information (which would allow, for example, Turkish participation in ESDP planning) and an administrative arrangement to enable Turkish participation in the EDA.

The EU-NATO Deadlock and Recent Initiative to Break It. So far, EU-NATO relations have been far from the "strategic partnership" that it was assumed it would be. The "Berlin plus" formula proved to allow only a limited partnership of EU and NATO—merely military collaboration in the case of EU-led operations using NATO assets, and limited consultations in capability development (within a joint Capability Group). Meanwhile, growing operational engagements and rising demands on the capability of both organizations made the existing cooperation framework clearly insufficient. Had "Berlin plus" been broadened, the EU and NATO could, first and foremost, coordinate and more effectively conduct parallel operations (e.g., Afghanistan, Kosovo and on the waters near Somalia). However, these operations cannot develop sufficient formal ties because of a lack of a politically-negotiated framework. Next, they could harmonize their capability development processes, which is now possible only on a small scale and solely through informal contacts.¹

¹ More, see: M. Terlikowski, "EU-NATO Partnership and its Prospects," *PISM Bulletin* no. 105 (181), 19 July 2010.

The key obstacle to exploiting the potential of “Berlin plus” has been the unresolved Turkish-Cypriot issue. Ever since the ascent of Cyprus to the EU, Turkey has blocked the participation of Cyprus in the agreed EU-NATO framework, both on a political level (North Atlantic Council - Political and Security Committee meetings) and a technical level (e.g., the Capability Group). On the other hand, Cyprus vetoed all attempts to more deeply engage Turkey in the ESDP. Consequently, EU-NATO relations have been in constant deadlock since 2004, with both Turkey and Cyprus blocking attempts to go beyond the existing framework.

In May 2010, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, during a meeting with the EU High Representative for CFSP, Catherine Ashton, announced a ‘dual track’ initiative to break the EU-NATO deadlock by allowing the increased cooperation of both organizations at the technical level. The content of the proposal related to the signing of two EU-Turkey agreements: first, on exchange of classified information, and second, an administrative agreement allowing Turkish participation in the EDA—both requiring Cypriot acceptance. In exchange, Cyprus would be allowed to participate in both organizations’ activities on a technical level (which requires the consent of Turkey). The initiative was officially presented by Rasmussen in Ankara in October 2010. However, it was flatly rejected by the Turkish side.

Reasons behind Turkey’s “No” to Rasmussen’s Proposal. It may seem that Rasmussen’s initiative gave Turkey its expected concessions. However, from the perspective of Turkey, strengthening its role in CSDP cannot be equal in importance to the Cyprus issue. Turkey will not sacrifice the latter for participation in the EDA, or for even having more to say in CSDP, particularly as the concessions on Turkey’s behalf are not certain, the importance of which can be deduced from the repeating of their necessity by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Being aware that not only Cyprus (whose key goal is to be recognized by Turkey) but also some other EU states are likely not to agree on concessions for a non-EU country in the CSDP domain, Turkey is driven by its bad experience in relations with the EU and its fading enthusiasm for the involvement in CSDP (reflected by the Turkish withdrawal of its formal force declaration to the HG 2010). This is the reason for the lack nowadays of any serious political debate in Turkey on this issue. Even if concessions are possible in the end, Turkey perceives them suspiciously as they may turn out to be another attempt to work out an alternative to EU membership.

For Turkey, the formal engagement of Cyprus in EU-NATO cooperation would be equal to recognizing it. From an internal policy point of view, that would be seen as a substantial threat to national security and political suicide for the governing Justice and Development Party, particularly on the eve of parliamentary elections due to take place in June 2011. In turn, the informal engagement of Cyprus, as with its participation in NAC-PSC meetings in June 2005 (when Turkey allowed it because it was on the eve of opening accession negotiations with the EU), cannot garner Turkish acceptance while EU membership is drifting away. Moreover, Turkey generally is reluctant to agree to informal solutions, since they could be seen as a *de facto* recognition of Cyprus through the act of sitting at the same table with its representatives.

Therefore, the Turkish stance, shared by all main political forces in that state, remains firm. What has changed is only the flat reaction of Turkish authorities, which apart from the frustration caused by the EU position and upcoming elections that make a conciliatory position difficult can be explained by the Cypriot blockade of the opening of subsequent negotiating chapters within EU membership talks with Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey is also driven by its growing ambition to be a regional power whose interests are respected and one that can set conditions for the development of cooperation. Turkey can now afford to reject Rasmussen’s proposal also because of the U.S., for whom gaining consent on the location of missile defense elements within Turkey is much more important than further involving Turkey in EU-NATO cooperation efforts.

Prospects of Breaking the Deadlock. Solving the EU-NATO-Turkey equation is not possible in the short term (during the Lisbon NATO Summit) since it would require the lifting of long-standing Cypriot and Turkish blockades. It seems, moreover, that in the long run Cypriot engagement on a technical level would not help EU-NATO relations and would bring few – if any – benefits to Cyprus. Yet, NATO and the EU can intensify their cooperation at an informal level, mostly by engaging the EDA and Allied Transformation Command in joint capability development initiatives or by broadening—whenever possible and plausible—existing operational collaboration agreements, made by personnel of both organizations’ concurrent operations. In the long run, the only way to boost the EU and NATO partnership is to find an ultimate solution to the Cyprus issue, one that is acceptable for both communities on the island and achieved through talks between their leaders on the unification of Cyprus (the pace of which remains slow). Also, reaching a new consensus in the EU on the key strategic aspects of the CSDP would help to set its position *vis-à-vis* NATO in greater detail.