



Kubilay Atik¹

¹*Nevsehir Haci Bektas Veli University,
Nevsehir, Turkey
(E - mail: kubilayatik@gmail.com)*

From horses to drones: the transformation of the turkish military

Turkey has one of the strongest militaries not only in its immediate neighborhood but also in Europe and within NATO. In this paper the development of the Turkish military and the military complex is examined from a historical perspective beginning from the early republic to the current situation with the political and international developments which affected this development. The transformation of the Turkish army from an obsolete but large land army to a modern one with some leading technologies in fields such as drones and infantry weapons is divided into four periods based on important political turning points which caused deep changes within the Turkish military in return. Most of the views on political matters are however, reflecting the Turkish point of view among the public and politicians, and therefore might differ from the general point of view in other parts of the world. But it was necessary to mention them to better understand the intrinsic reasons for the changes that took place.

Key word: Turkish army, Turkish military industry, NATO, Turkish Navy, development, peace

Introduction

While Turkey boasts a military tradition dating back to the Xiongnu (匈奴) leader Modun (冒頓) to the 3rd century BCE, the current modern military of Turkey was mainly shaped after the Truman Doctrine and the entry of Turkey into NATO. This article therefore deals with the Turkish military beginning with the Cold War and then deals with the post-Cold War changes within the Turkish military in terms of organization, military doctrine and military capabilities. While the modernization of the Turkish military dates back to the 18th century, the early attempts were mostly unsuccessful due to political and military resistance from within the Sublime Port and the military. During the 19th century, Ottoman Sultans managed to establish modern armies independent of the obsolete janissary corps who opposed most of the military innovation. In these early attempts, the Ottomans took the French as their prime examples while Polish officers who took refuge in the Ottoman Empire also were influential. Later on with the rise of Prussia, the Prussians were taken as examples and the Turkish army in a modern sense along with its military doctrines was established by von Moltke, who was also tasked with establishing the modern Japanese army after the Meiji restoration. In a way, the Prussians, as late comers, were also helping the Asian powers to establish modern armies against their mutual British, French and Russian adversaries. Ottoman Empire went on to ally itself with Germany in World War I, and the bulk of the Turkish military was equipped with German weaponry and equipment [1].



After the end of the World War I and the Turkish War of Independence which ended with a Greek defeat and the retreat of European powers from Anatolia, the Turkish army went into a stagnation. The foreign policy of Turkey was as stated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk “Yurtta Sulh, Cihan’da Sulh” (peace at home, peace in the world/abroad). While Turkey was wary of Italian expansionist policies under the fascist government and German expansionism under the Nazis, economically Turkey was rebuilding itself after the devastation of the First World War and the subsequent invasions, especially in the west by the Greek army which resulted in huge human and infrastructure loss at the economic heart of Anatolia, the Aegean region. As a result, Turkey steered clear of the World War II, and escaped most of the calamity falling on other European countries. However, the Turkish military as a result was mostly neglected, with occasional military equipment provided by the British. In many ways, the Turkish military remains to be a subject of and an actor in Turkish politics both foreign and internal.

Methodological basis

For this paper, mainly the open source materials were gathered both online and in print. The Turkish military’s development in accordance with the Republic of Turkey’s foreign policy perspectives and perceptions of external threat and cooperation were discussed according to the approach of the English School Theory of International Relations mainly by discussing the entry of Turkey into different international society that formed following the World War II. Comparing Turkish foreign policy and entry into pacts such as CENTO and NATO with the modernization of its military equipment and doctrine in line with British and American ones has been discussed to demonstrate the correlation between the military and the Foreign Affairs that affected each other mutually. Inner politics surrounding the Turkish military modernization and the military organization have been discussed as much as they directly affected the army (organization, equipment etc.). The paper rather focused on the external affairs of the Republic of Turkey and the military.

Main body

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his comrades from the Ottoman Army, the military has been both a subject and an actor in the Turkish politics. As early as the Turco-Greek War following the Greek invasion of the Turkey in 1920, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his comrades such as İsmet İnönü became towering figures in the republic both militarily and politically. Like most other countries, Turkish constitution ranks the president of Turkey as head of the Turkish military forces with the title head commander (*başkomutan*) as constituted in the article 40 of 1924 constitution [2]. With the exception of a 160 days of presidency of İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, cut short by a coup d’état headed by Kenan Evren in 1980, the first seven of the eight presidents of Turkey were all former army members. Of course having former



military at top positions of the politics was not particularly a Turkish phenomenon in Europe and the west. From Churchill to De Gaul. In fact, with exceptions such as Richelieu, it was the norm to have military leaders to rule supreme in the political scene. Especially with the Napoleonic Wars and the rise of Prussia resulting in the German unification, military men were entrusted with the survival of most states in Europe. It is worth remembering that centuries old states such as Poland, Scotland, Bavaria, Venice and others ceased to exist as a result of the political and military modernization in Europe. The Ottoman Empire as part of the European States System was no exception. *Pashas* (commanders), rather than *viziers* (ministers) and *sadr azams* (prime minister) became prominent political actors, and it was therefore no surprise that the modern republic was established by military men.

However, what set Turkey apart was that, when after World War II, when military men such as Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden were replaced by civilians, Turkish presidents continued to be military men until the 1990s. Also there were three coup d'états until the 90s. And even after the 90s there was one famous incident in the 90s resulting in a change of government upon an announcement by the military and one unsuccessful coup attempt in 2016 by the Gülenists in the army who ironically were initially supported by the ruling party. But long before the coup attempt, the government in Turkey began to pass reforms to demilitarize the Turkish politics, which however ended up in the politicization of the army. This process was in many ways like the Japanese Imperial army. Turkey began to modernize its military capabilities in cooperation with the private sector in Turkey who in return had organic bonds with the government. Just like Japan and in some ways the Korean Cheobols cooperation with the government in the 80s, Turkish military benefitted from this cooperation in terms of military equipment. As will be discussed, Turkey's relations with NATO has not been a smooth ride and in some instances Turkey found itself bereft of much needed military equipment due to political reasons from its allies in NATO which in turn resulted in a politically motivated attempt at building a military production complex the most notable example of which are the military drones as will be discussed. Since the main topic of this paper is the Turkish military, politics will be mentioned briefly to introduce the general point of view from a Turkish perspective though. Because the way Turkish politicians and the military perceived the international developments deeply affected the way they developed the Turkish military complex as a whole, therefore it is important to mention the Turkish point of view which is in most cases different from the rest of the west. In fact, in many ways, a desire for autonomy, like France since De Gaul after World War II, defines the Turkish military and politics since the end of the Cold War.

Being at the losing end of the table after World War I, the new republic followed a rather precautionary foreign policy, and other than annexation of Antioch with a popular referendum there, Turkey steered clear of the wars around it until the end of the World War II. Therefore, İsmet İnönü, the second president of Turkey after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whose military career was as successful as his predecessor, and even took his family name from his two successful battles



against the invading Greek forces in İnönü in western Turkey, resisted the German overtures for joining the war on Germany's side. In many ways the leaders of the time had emotional dilemmas in their decision-making. Churchill was in favor of supporting Turkey with military equipment in case of a German attack which would open the way for German troops to the Middle East and South Caucasus. The Turkish army at the time was mostly equipped with obsolete German weaponry from World War I, and despite its numerical strength, was in no shape to resist the Nazi war machine. The Germans on the other hand were already having logistical problems in the Russian front, and a new front in the south would be costly. Churchill actually had personal grievances against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and İsmet İnönü whose successes in Gallipoli and other battlefields as well as Lausanne Peace Conference dealt serious blows to his political career. In the same way, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, İsmet İnönü and other military cadres in Turkey perceived Britain and especially Churchill as a patron of Greek interests, and blamed Britain and France for supporting Greek expansionism. However, being conscious of Turkey's geopolitical value as well as the army's state, so they acted realistically. The period between the two world wars thus saw different weapons being employed in the Turkish army. In fact, during this time, Turkey was able to purchase weapons that were their top grade in the western armies. A brief look at the tanks and armored vehicles during this period reveals the close relationship between the Turkish foreign policy and the military.

During the war of independence, the Turkish army did not possess any tanks other than the seven Renault tanks that were captured from the Greek army. However, the Soviets saw the Turkish efforts as an anti-colonial struggle, and they also wanted to see Turkey on their side for geopolitical reasons. Thus the first tanks the Turkish army used were MKE Kırıkkale tanks which were essentially copies of the Soviet T-37 amphibious light tanks. One such tank was given to Turkey by the USSR in 1935, and it was produced by the state-owned MKE (Makine Kimya Endüstrisi: Machine and Chemicals Industry). However, this tank was discontinued. Later on Turkey purchased French, British, Soviet, German and American tanks. Perhaps with the exception of Japanese and Italian tanks, the Turkish army was using the tanks of nearly all the parties in World War II. During the 30s, the Soviets also provided Turkey with T-26 light tanks. Turkey purchased sixty of these tanks from the Soviets along with sixty BA-6 armored vehicles. These were at the time, among the best Soviet armored vehicles. But Turkey's tank arsenal was not limited to the Soviet tanks as mentioned earlier. In 1928, Turkey bought one hundred Renault T-17s. Turkey already had seven T-17s captured from the Greek army. These tanks mostly served for training purposes however, unlike the Soviet tanks they were not the best French armors at the time available. But as the World War II began and Turkey's geopolitical importance increased the French delivered sixty Char Leger Renault R-35 tanks in 1940 to Turkey. These were at the time the tanks that were used by the French army, and in fact just a few months after France sold sixty of these tanks to Turkey, she also used them against the German invasion forces. Britain and Germany also sold Turkey tanks. In 1940, Britain sold Turkey sixteen Vickers-Armstrong Mark-A tanks. Later on between



1942-1944, Turkey obtained two hundred and twenty Vickers-Amstrongs Valentine infantry tanks from Britain. At the same time, Turkey also purchased American tanks from the British at huge numbers. Two hundred and ten M-3 Stuart light tanks were delivered by the British to Turkey. The Anglo-Turkish military cooperation would later on be influential in the establishment of CENTO military alliance against the Soviets as well as the Truman Doctrine which was actually urged by Winston Churchill. Finally in 1945, just a couple of months before Turkey entered the war on the allied side against Germany, the United States sold Turkey thirty four medium M-4 Sherman tanks which were also used by the allied forces in Normandy against the Nazi forces. While the allied forces were supplying Turkey with the best tanks in their reserves, one interesting note is Germany also sold Turkey twenty two medium Panzer III medium tanks and the next year sold another thirty five Panzer III G and H model tanks. While in ordinary times, these purchases could be seen normal, both the allied forces and the Germans were selling Turkey tanks when all the fighting parties were having hard time finding tanks for themselves during the heat of the battle, and they were providing the top of the line equipment demonstrating the importance they attached to the Turkish military. While the allies were hoping to take Turkey on their side with her large pool of soldiers, the Germans were trying to see Turkey on their side to divert some of the Russian effort in the western front to the Caucasus, and to have a pincer movement against the British in North Africa and the Middle East.

After World War II, Britain lost its position along with France as a super power. While the French, under the leadership of de Gaul tried to pursue an autonomous foreign and military policy. The Suez Canal crisis and the subsequent military and political disaster for Britain and France heightened the geopolitical importance of Turkey in the East Mediterranean. Upon the suggestion of the British ambassador in Washington DC, the United States announced the military aid to Turkey and Greece against a communist take-over. Later on, Dean Acheson would write “the president and his principle advisers seemed convinced that it was vital to the security of the US for Greece and Turkey to be strengthened to preserve their national independence, that only the US could do this, that funds and the authority of Congress were necessary, and that State would prepare for concurrence by War and Navy specific recommendations for the President. General Marshall, approving, Henderson and his staff worked with me preparing the recommendations” [3]. The General Marshall mentioned here was General George Catlett Marshall, after whose name the famous Marshall plan would be named just a few months after the United States announced the Truman Doctrine and the necessity to provide help to Turkey to protect itself against a possible Soviet take-over. As Satterthwaite states, Turkey at the time was in a dire situation due to the Soviet pressure for ceding some territories in the North-east of Turkey and the control of the straits [4]. While Truman clearly saw the survival of Turkey and Greece as essential for Europe and the Middle Eastern policies of the US [5], Turkey also saw American help reassuring after the British retreat from the Middle East [6]. As a result, Turkey began to receive American and British weaponry and military equipment. The Truman plan also led to the establishment of CENTO



which gave a special place for Turkey. Consequently, Turkey as an ally joined the Korean War on the American side and later on joined NATO in 1952.

The Truman Doctrine and the subsequent entry of Turkey into NATO as a founding member fundamentally changed the Turkish military. Nearly all of the equipment, purchased from other powers was replaced with American and British weaponry. This in return caused in changes to the military doctrines of the Turkish army. Unlike the US, Russia, Britain or other major weapon producers of the time, Turkish military doctrine, since then was until recently, shaped by the equipment that is available rather than the other way around. Originally Turkish army was modelled after Prussia and Germany, and Turkish military doctrine was also based on Von Moltke's ideas [7]. But entry into NATO dictated that all the member states coordinate, and additionally the new military equipment, especially in the field of the air forces changed the post-war military forever. However, for the Turkish military, this was not a smooth interaction. Turkey experienced two coup d'états in 1960 and 1980. The 1960 coup came shortly after the prime minister Adnan Menderes planned to visit Moscow for economic cooperation and Alparslan Türkeş, one of the leaders of the coup openly stated NATO and CENTO adherence in his speech [8]. However, when Turkey intervened in Cyprus in following a series of inter-ethnic violence between the Turkish and Greek communities, Turkey was sanctioned crippling its efforts. The military intervention was done after a coup in Cyprus which ousted the democratically elected government and sought union with Greece which was then led by a military junta and left NATO. While the Turkish intervention in Cyprus resulted in the ousting of the military junta in Greece due to its military failures, the Turkish political circles felt betrayed by NATO and the west following a series of sanctions against Turkey for its military intervention in compliance with her role as a guarantor along with Greece and Britain. In response, Turkey hindered the re-entry of Greece to NATO until the 1980 coup, the first policy decision of which was to sign the reentry of Greece to NATO by Kenan Evren. This has led to mistrust ever since between the civilian politics and the military in Turkey ever since. Kenan Evren was the last president of Turkey to have been a former high-ranking military officer and is remembered under a negative light by almost all the political parties.

However, the democratically elected governments and presidents in Turkey were not able to curb the power of the military in Turkish politics until the 2010s. there was one military memorandum in 1994 which resulted in the fall of the government. But after 2000s, the current ruling party put some efforts to curb the power of the Turkish military in the politics. The organization, legal structure as well as the command structure of the Turkish military underwent many changes ever since. Also, as it turned out after the failed coup attempt by the Gulenists in 2016, it seems religious groups also infiltrated the ranks in the name of democratizing the army. All these led to a depoliticization of the army in Turkey. But at the same time the military underwent many technical changes following the end of the cold war and the dissolution of the Soviet Union which has continuing geopolitical effects to this day. As the Soviet Union collapsed and for a brief period Russia ceased to be a great power in the 1990s, Turkey began to seek more



autonomy. Also the invasions in Iraq and NATO allies unwillingness to provide Turkey with Patriot air defense systems combined with the previous bitter memories after Cyprus resulted in a new phase of military modernization efforts in Turkey. At the same time Turkey faced Kurdish separatism and PKK as one of the biggest dangers it faced since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Another point of friction was with Greece in the Aegean. Turkey and Greece remain to be anomalies as seeing each other as potential enemies despite both being NATO members. Ironically Turkey reacted to her perceived western support for PKK and Greek expansionism in the Aegean in two different ways. One was to strengthen and modernize the army with either local or non-Western equipment in case of another series of western sanctions which actually happened at different intervals, and the other was to cling to NATO even more fervently despite the popular anti-NATO feelings (along with France Turkey has one of the highest anti-NATO views among her public). Instead of the patriots, Turkey initially sought other European alternatives without success for her air defence. The NATO failure to defend Turkish airspace from missiles as a result of conflicts in Iraq and especially Syria which resulted in high numbers of civilian casualties in the border cities as a result of ISIS and YPG (Syria branch of PKK) attacks lead Turkey to seek other sources. Turkey tried to buy these systems first from China, but Turkey's condition that China also transfer technology to Turkey resulted in failure. In fact, until the purchase of S-400s, Turkey insisted on technology transfer to all the parties with the exception of the USA on patriots. This stemmed from fear of possible sanctions, after all if Germany or Sweden could put sanctions on military exports to Turkey, China would be less reliable. While today S400s dominate the press and public opinion in Turkey's military cooperation with non-NATO countries, South Korea plays perhaps a more important role. After Turkey failed to take some apache helicopters and navy ships from the US despite paying for them, Turkey began to advance her own capabilities. For this, in the production of these equipment, Turkey signed contracts with South Korea, especially in the field of helicopter production. At the same time, ASELSAN (Askeri Elektronik Sanayi: Military Electronics Industry) and MKE also began to develop equipment and weapons with their own capabilities. Although they too are shadowed by the success of the Bayraktar drones, the equipment produced by these two companies outweigh the sale of drones today. While these two companies are owned by the state, beginning from the 2000s, private companies also began to play a more important role in the production of military equipment, either as a whole like the drones, or production of parts for the tanks, helicopters etc. these companies in return get special protectionism from the governments. The relationship between these companies and the government however, is not like the relationship between the US and Lockheed, but rather like the South Korean Cheobols and the government. In most cases a specific company is tasked with producing goods for a certain area and not competing with other companies that are tasked with other areas of production. Vestel, an electronics company in Turkey, also produced some drone prototypes but later on stopped this project leaving Bayraktar as the sole company in the military drone field, while Vestel went on to invest in other



fields such as the TOGG electric cars supported by the government. This policy seems so far to have succeeded. Turkey has used its NATO membership and veto rights as a leverage against mostly European support for PKK in the diplomatic field while producing its own equipment lead to a change its military doctrines and tactics. While the use of drones and how they changed the battlefield is well-known, another lesser known in the Turkish military was in the fields of artillery and navy. Turkey slowly modernized its navy with Turkish ships and equipment, mostly comprised of smaller vessels rather than larger American warships. While this strategy is partially based on the incidents involving American Congress blocking the delivery of the ships Turkey purchased, it was also based on Turkey's situation in the Aegean and the Black sea. For Turkey, strategically it is more feasible to have smaller ships in larger numbers to patrol the Aegean waters. Greece, like China's claims in the South China Sea, claims the whole sea area as her own, and Turkey pursues an active military presence to cover as much area as possible to deny domination in the sea. In this regard more and cheaper ships make more sense for the Turkish navy which are produced in Turkish dockyards. Another reason for this strategy is in the Black Sea. Currently in the Black Sea Turkish navy has at around the same tonnage with the Russian navy, and as the war in Ukraine has demonstrated, the Black Sea is far from peaceful. This strategy is in fact a huge deviation from the previous one pursued until the early 2010-s when Turkey tried to purchase larger warships and even on occasion tried to have air carriers in its fleet which are expensive to purchase and to maintain. As of the writing of this paper, Turkey has commenced its first drone carrier to the sea and is working on navy drones, both of which are indicative of the direction the navy is taking. Rather than taking a luggerheads approach with Greece in trying to buy the most expensive and largest ships from the USA which resulted in the bankruptcy of one and the economic hardships of the other, this new approach tries to bolster the local industry and obtain more ships more suitable for Turkey's marine borders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of the Turkish army can be divided into four periods. The first period is from the establishment of the republic to the Truman Doctrine when Turkey and its military pursued an "active neutrality" [9]. the second period begins with the Truman Doctrine and ends with the intervention in Cyprus in 1974 which resulted in sanctions against Turkey by her NATO allies. During this period Turkey replaced her arsenal of weapons and equipment from various countries ranging from the Soviet Union to Germany and Britain with American equipment. The Turkish military doctrine also changed during this period in accordance with the doctrines of NATO rather than Turkish military doctrines based on Prussian and German doctrines. The third period begins with the Cyprus intervention and ends with the early 2000s. during this period, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the terrorist threats caused changes in the Turkish army. Also with the end of the Cold War, Greece began to appear as an adversary in the



Aegean prompting both sides to modernize their navies. During this period Turkey also tried to strengthen its military industry with state owned companies, but the bulk of the military equipment and doctrine remained to be American. During the fourth period, the army's hold on political power was curbed and the army was reorganized in terms of its administrative structure while at the same time private companies entered the scene with cheaper and sometimes better equipment which not only began to replace the western equipment, but also caused a change in the military doctrines and tactics of the Turkish army. All these periods were closely connected to the political development both within and outside Turkey, and today the Turkish army, though not a political actor, is an instrument in Turkish foreign policy with exports of military equipment and technical aid to other countries.

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Атик К.

Беспилотник: трансформация Турецкой армии

Турция обладает одной из самых сильных вооруженных сил не только в своем непосредственном соседстве, но и в Европе и в рамках НАТО. В этой статье развитие турецких вооруженных сил и военного комплекса рассматривается с исторической точки зрения, начиная с ранней республики и заканчивая текущей ситуацией с политическими и международными событиями, которые повлияли на это развитие. Трансформация турецкой армии из устаревшей, но многочисленной сухопутной армии в современную, обладающую некоторыми передовыми технологиями в таких областях, как беспилотные летательные аппараты и пехотное вооружение, делится на четыре периода, основанные на важных политических поворотных моментах, которые, в свою очередь, вызвали глубокие изменения в турецких вооруженных силах. Однако большинство мнений по политическим вопросам отражают турецкую точку зрения общественности и политиков и, следовательно, могут отличаться от общей точки зрения в других частях мира. Но



упомянуть о них было необходимо, чтобы лучше понять внутренние причины произошедших изменений.

Ключевые слова: Турецкая армия, турецкая военная промышленность, НАТО, военно-морской флот Турции, развитие, мир.

Атик К.

Ұшқыссыз ұшақ: Түрік армиясының трансформациясы

Түркия өзінің жақын маңында ғана емес, сонымен қатар Еуропада және НАТО-да ең күшті қарулы күштерге ие. Бұл мақалада түрік қарулы күштері мен әскери кешеннің дамуы тарихи тұрғыдан, ерте республикадан бастап, осы дамуға әсер еткен саяси және халықаралық Оқиғалармен қазіргі жағдайға дейін қарастырылады. Түрік армиясының ескірген, бірақ үлкен құрлық армиясынан қазіргі заманғы армияға айналуы, ұшқыссыз ұшу аппараттары мен жаяу әскер қаруы сияқты салаларда кейбір озық технологияларға ие, маңызды саяси бетбұрыс кезеңдеріне негізделген төрт кезеңге бөлінеді, бұл өз кезегінде түрік қарулы күштерінде терең өзгерістер тудырды. Алайда, саяси мәселелер бойынша пікірлердің көпшілігі жұртшылық пен саясаткерлердің түрік көзқарасын көрсетеді, сондықтан әлемнің басқа бөліктеріндегі жалпы көзқарастардан өзгеше болуы мүмкін. Бірақ өзгерістердің ішкі себептерін жақсы түсіну үшін оларды атап өту қажет болды.

Кілт сөздер: Түрік армиясы, Түрік әскери өнеркәсібі, НАТО, Түркия әскери-теңіз күштері, даму, бейбітшілік.

Құбылай Атик	PhD, Nevsehir Hacı Bektas Veli университетінің тарих кафедрасының қауымдастырылған профессоры
Кубылай Атик	PhD, Ассоциированный профессор кафедры истории университета имени Nevsehir Hacı Bektas Veli
Kubilay Atik	PhD, Nevsehir Hacı Bektas Veli University, Department of History Assistant Professor Nevsehir, Turkey