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Turkey's Nuclear Motivation:
Between NATO and Regional Aspirations

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Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently complained about the unfair situation whereby some countries are free to possess nuclear tipped missiles, while others are not – a situation he cannot accept. What might be motivating Erdogan not only to raise the nuclear issue at this time, but for the first time to threaten to develop his own capability? If Erdogan decides to go down the nuclear path, this decision will have implications for Turkey's relations with NATO/EU, the nuclear nonproliferation regime, and the Middle East. Erdogan's remarks have so far not triggered international criticism or any warning to Turkey, and the international community has some tools to deal with potential nuclear advances by Ankara: the question is whether it will have the political will to use them, especially after the years-long failure to rein in North Korea and the limited success in the case of Iran, after years of sanctions and attempts to negotiate. A nuclear Turkey is clearly not in Israel's interest, regardless of the fact that Turkey is not an integral part of the Middle East region. For countries like Egypt – which following Iran's nuclear intentions has considered the nuclear option – Turkey's intentions will serve as an additional incentive. And so the region, which is anything but stable, will further deteriorate into instability and unpredictability.

In recent months Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has complained about the unfair situation whereby some countries are free to possess nuclear tipped missiles, while others are not – a situation he cannot accept. In a statement in early September 2019 he did not miss the opportunity to single out Israel, not for the first time, which he views as threatening the region with its nuclear weapons. What might be motivating Erdogan not only to raise the nuclear issue at this time, but for the first time to threaten to develop his own capability? Despite the direct reference to Israel, this is unlikely to be a motivating factor for the current statement, as Israel has been an assumed nuclear state for over 50 years. Moreover, while Erdogan has complained about Israel's nuclear arsenal in the past, he has done so in the context of advocating for nuclear disarmament, not for Turkey to develop its own capability.

What then has changed? Perhaps the most important factor is the message coming from the Trump administration that it intends to reduce its commitments in the Middle East,

and the implications of this withdrawal. With this change, Erdogan sees an opportunity to position Turkey in a leadership role. To establish that role and to enhance his prestige, acquiring nuclear weapons could be important. An additional factor that could be behind the unprecedented statement regards the implications of the possible removal of 50 US nuclear bombs that remain on Turkish territory under the auspices of NATO and the command of the US. There are likewise Iran's nuclear advances, which signal its growing challenge to regional hegemony, a role that Turkey also covets. In addition, Erdogan may be bolstering the image of Turkey standing up to biased Western norms and standards, a message most likely tailored to his domestic audience. Still, there are political and economic risks involved in announcing nuclear intentions, and Erdogan can be expected to pay a price if he actually advances toward nuclear weapons. Will the international community have the political will to deal effectively with Turkey's nuclear ambitions after years of attempting to curb nuclear proliferation in general and the nuclear advances of North Korea and Iran in particular?

While NATO currently still provides a nuclear umbrella for Turkey that at least for now is credible, Erdogan seems to have his doubts as to its viability. Or, perhaps due to tensions with the US, he no longer wants to be beholden to this potentially unreliable umbrella. Since Erdogan made his statement on possible nuclear plans, this calculation has likely gained added impetus. Following Turkey's incursion into Syria, the debate in the US has sharpened the argument that the B61 nuclear bombs in Turkey must be removed, even though they were to be removed in any case for maintenance. The advocates of this position claim that Turkey is no longer a reliable NATO ally, and that the instability in the region makes it highly dangerous to keep US nuclear bombs there.

Following a US withdrawal from the Middle East, there also seems to be a new urgency regarding the reshuffling of power in the region that began at least four years ago, with Iran and Russia trying to fill the vacuum. These powers are attempting to implement their own dreams of regional prominence – to be dominant players that must be included in regional dynamics. In this scenario, Turkey may sense that nuclear weapons will give it an important advantage. However, this clashes directly with Turkey's membership in NATO, and brings into sharp relief the contradiction between Turkey's international profile, which demands responsible and cooperative behavior of a NATO ally, and its ambitions in the regional theater, which drive it to adopt aggressive policies.

How serious is the threat from Ankara? Are there indications that Turkey is making concrete preparations? Some arms control analysts believe that while Turkey is advancing a civilian nuclear program with the help of Russia, there is no serious nuclear weapons infrastructure at this point, nor are preparations apparent. While there is evidence that Turkey toyed with the idea of nuclear development back in the 1960s, those

were pre-NPT years, and there is no evidence of follow-up until Erdogan's recent statements. And while a recent analysis published in the *New York Times* claims that there is reason for concern, this article was published following Turkey's incursion into northern Syria, and it is possible that it may have been influenced by recent events, somewhat exaggerating the potential nuclear threat.

If Erdogan decides to go down the nuclear path, this decision will have implications for Turkey's relations with NATO/EU, the nuclear nonproliferation regime, and the Middle East. Indeed, Turkey will not only have to withdraw from NATO, but also from the NPT. Alternatively, it could remain in the treaty and cheat on its commitment to remain non-nuclear, while stockpiling enriched uranium and engaging in reprocessing, ostensibly for civilian purposes – effectively becoming a threshold state. This path, however, will be more difficult if Erdogan does not inform the IAEA about Turkey's enrichment and reprocessing activities. After his alerts as to possible military nuclear intentions, one would hope that the IAEA will be particularly vigilant, making it more difficult to conduct a clandestine project. With the credibility of the NPT regime already under pressure, Turkey's actions would deal it another blow at a time when North Korea and Iran are posing a serious challenge. But to preserve the credibility of the regime the international community will also have to take action.

What can be expected regarding international reactions? What means does the international community have at its disposal for countering this development? There are some tools; the question is whether international powers will have the political will to use them, especially after the years-long failure to rein in North Korea and the limited success in the case of Iran, after years of sanctions and attempts to negotiate.

It is noteworthy that Erdogan's remarks have so far not triggered international criticism or any warning to Turkey. One explanation could be that Erdogan and his outrageous rhetoric is well known, and there is no desire to play into his hand by reacting to every statement, no matter how extreme. Moreover, as serious as a declaration of intent might be, the thinking might be that there is no reason to assume that Turkey has embarked on the path to acquire a nuclear military capability, and therefore there is no need to sound the alarm at the current time or to set red lines. If there are clear indications of military nuclear advances, it will be essential for the international community to draw the red line and define the sticks that it will use if Turkey crosses this line. For the message to be effective it will have to entail adopting a common position.

Regarding the Middle East, an open question is if Turkey does go nuclear, this development will accelerate an arms race among the Arab states as well. This depends to a certain degree on whether Turkey were to go nuclear before or after Iran – either as a

threshold state or after actual development of a military capability. Because of Turkey's regional concerns, it is not likely to advance past a threshold status before Iran. In any case, currently it is Iran that is pushing other regional states in the nuclear direction.

A nuclear Turkey is clearly not in Israel's interest, irrespective of the fact that Turkey is a neighboring state and not an integral part of the Middle East region (for example, it is not considered a member of the region for the purpose of discussing a WMDFZ for the Middle East). For countries like Egypt – which following Iran's nuclear intentions has considered the nuclear option – Turkey's intentions will serve as an additional incentive. And so the region, which is anything but stable, will further deteriorate into instability and unpredictability.