



The Remilitarization of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Military Resumes a Leading Role in National Issues

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Recent developments from the dynamic fronts of Turkish foreign policy indicate that the military plays a significant role in all national issues (the Kurdish problem, relations with neighboring countries, the Eastern Mediterranean, relations with the Great Powers, energy, and more). After the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) was radically reorganized and any attempt to criticize the Erdogan government's political line on domestic issues was quashed, representatives of the Turkish military began marked intervention in the area of diplomacy.

Keywords: Turkey, Ankara, Erdogan, Cavuşoğlu, Turkish Armed Forces, TSK, Turkish foreign policy

The Immortal Shadow of Turkey's Generals

Since the mid-2010s, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) has once again assumed a leading role on all dynamic issues in Turkish foreign policy. In tandem, since mid-2015, the role of the Turkish Foreign Ministry and especially that of Foreign Minister Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu was further overshadowed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who often chose to manage essential issues of Turkish foreign policy personally.

During the late 2000s, various coup attempts and plots to overthrow Turkey's democratically elected government (Ergenekon, Balyoz, and the military espionage case), resulted in the imprisonment of high-ranked military personnel. In conjunction with the amendment of the constitution in 2010, these developments narrowed the armed forces' role in the Turkish political scene, leading to the partial demilitarization of the country's social and political life. In tandem, the army was sidelined on essential issues, among them developments on the Kurdish issue and in the Eastern Mediterranean (first half of the 2010s).

After 2015, the shadow cast by the political divorce between the Turkish government and the Fethullah Gülen movement and the release of the imprisoned generals changed political alliances. In the process, the collaboration between the government, the military, and the nationalist political circles on vital issues such as the Kurdish issue and the Syrian crisis put the demilitarization process on hold.

In the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup attempt, massive purges took place within the Turkish army. Consequently, the newly emerged leadership of the TSK chose to overlook its political and ideological differences with the government and focus on strengthening its role in a series of national issues. In the new period, essential Turkish foreign policy decisions were taken at meetings and contacts with the President at National Security Council meetings. The Minister of National Defense has intervened frequently on diplomacy issues. In addition,

strategies created by active and retired military personnel, e.g., the Blue Motherland theory, are adopted by Turkish diplomacy as the country's official doctrine.

The Three Dimensions of Turkey's Remilitarization

The term "militarism" first appeared in political science during the early 19th century. Shortly after the French Revolution, in analyzing the role of the armed forces in the modern nation-state, scholars adopted "a critical approach to the military," mainly toward "the military's excessive impact on society," meaning the so-called militarization process. After the end of the Second World War, scholars began discussing the "demilitarization" process, specifically, the armed forces' withdrawal from important decision making mechanisms.

In Turkey's case, political scientists and historians found that [the Turkish military had long had a leading role](#) in the country's socio-political life, especially during [essential junctures in Turkish history](#). The renewed and reshaped role of the TSK since 2015 will be analyzed through the parameters of economy, politics, and society; researchers debating the process of militarization in industrialized countries such as Turkey and [Japan](#) argue that these are the three main dimensions of this phenomenon.

Beginning with the economic dimension, focus is on Turkey's growing [military spending](#) and its extensive defense industry, which has flourished under the AKP. Compared to the past, Turkey's defense spending remains on the same high levels, accounting for a significant share of the country's annual budget. In fact, recent studies indicate that Turkey's defense spending has followed a small but significant upward trend in recent years.

In the political realm (internal politics and foreign policy), the [TSK's re-emergence](#) is multi-dimensional. First, Turkey maintains a military presence in three neighboring countries (Iraq, Syria, Cyprus), either due to active war or as part of its military deployment overseas. Second,

Turkey uses its military power to solve various international problems (Qatar, Libya, Eastern Mediterranean).

Finally, on the societal level, the TSK is present when natural or other disasters arise through its re-established structure and role. In addition, the TSK's role as a state policy instrument is legitimized and highlighted in the media through its almost daily interventions.

Thus, the revamped TSK has recovered its leading position in Turkish society by putting a hold on the ideological conflict and aligning its strategies with the conservative government on several national issues.

The Remilitarization of Turkish Foreign Policy

Essential developments over the last five years played a crucial role in returning the TSK to the forefront of Turkish foreign policy. In the mid-2010s, as the talks between Ankara and the Kurdish separatist movement broke down, Ankara re-enlisted militaristic tactics to tackle the Kurdish problem. Moreover, shortly after the 2016 failed coup attempt, the government proceeded with significant purges in the TSK. This process was run by Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar, who later took over as the country's Minister of National Defense. In the same period, Ankara employed military formulas to deal with the aftershocks of the Arab Spring (in Syria and Libya) and strengthened its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. After the TSK was radically reorganized and any attempt to criticize the Erdogan government's political line on domestic issues was quashed, representatives of the Turkish military began displaying resounding intervention in the diplomatic realm.

The latest developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus shed light on the TSK re-emergence in the political realm. For instance, the TSK played a leading role in the Second [Karabakh war](#), and Azerbaijan has been able to control large areas of Karabakh thanks to TSK support. During the same period, the

Minister of National Defense's harsh rhetoric for the Eastern Mediterranean is a manifestation of Ankara's new Eastern Mediterranean strategy. The national doctrine of the [Blue Homeland](#), developed by Turkish Navy officials, contributed to the climax of the tension. In addition, the shift toward military formulas in the Kurdish issue since the 2010s enhanced the TSK's involvement in the country's policymaking.

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Finally, in parallel with the reappearance of key TSK personnel in the political and diplomatic arena, the Turkish army was present to help deal with recent natural disasters such as the major earthquakes in Turkey during 2020.

Conclusion: The TSK, Again at the Helm of Turkey's National Issues

Has the TSK returned to its leading position as Erdogan's government representatives, as some analysts have claimed? The survey above shows that the TSK plays a central role in many Turkish citizens' daily lives in the realms of the economy, politics, and society.

Has the TSK role in decision making mechanisms changed compared to past periods when the army dominated the country's political scene? Here the army's fundamental role dictated by the Kemalist principles at the base of the Turkish state must be considered, as well as its importance in addressing national issues. Recent developments indicate that the army no longer objects to the conservative government's questioning of the Turkish state's founding principles, such as the principles of the secular state. Unlike the past, generals do not confront the Turkish President for the sake of certain Kemalist principles. On the contrary, having overcome their animosity toward the conservative government, they are focused on

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rebuilding the army. Furthermore, they aim at managing the ongoing antagonistic problems the Turkish state has faced since its establishment (the Kurdish issue, problems with neighbors).

Against this background, is the TSK of 2021 Erdogan's army? This is a sensitive question. All the latest developments show that the Turkish President has entered into a multi-dimensional alliance of common interests with the nationalist actors and army generals. As such, Erdogan is building an authoritarian conservative political system internally, while the country's foreign policymakers and diplomats return to the well-known nationalist recipes of the past. The aggressive nationalistic rhetoric employed recently is not exclusively Erdogan's work, but is also based on the military junta's political regime in 1980. The return to nationalist, militaristic rhetoric could not be more apparent than in the developments on the Kurdish question and Greek-Turkish relations. From this point of view, there is little room for believing that the conservative alliance and its supporters in the army and the nationalistic circles will choose a moderate foreign policy aiming at appeasement for the long term. As Erdogan's strategic partnership continues, tensions in Turkey's relations with its rivals could be reduced only in unforeseen geostrategic changes or in developments that serve the mutual interests of the parties composing ruling alliances.

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