



NATO's most problematic member: an authoritarian Turkey

By Ted Galen Carpenter

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Worries about Turkey's conduct are growing rapidly among fellow NATO members. There are multiple concerns, some of which have surfaced periodically before, while others are either new or at least much more salient. All of them are now combining to make critics wonder whether Turkey is a reliable or even a tolerable ally. Seth Cropsey, a Senior Fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute in the United States, denounces what he termed "Turkey's contempt for NATO principles." International media mogul Conrad Black urges NATO members to "get tough with Turkey."

One issue, Turkey's continuing occupation of northern Cyprus, is a long-standing irritant, but it has acquired new relevance given NATO's stance against Russia's actions in Ukraine. Ankara's forces invaded Cyprus and amputated some 37% of that country's territory in 1974. Turkey subsequently established a client state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which even today enjoys virtually no international recognition. Since Cyprus joined the European Union in 2004, it has become increasingly awkward for countries that are part of both that organization and NATO to ignore the ongoing occupation of a fellow EU member's territory.

Recent developments have made Turkey's stance on the Cyprus issue even more of an embarrassment, especially to the United States as NATO's leader. It is rather difficult for Washington to condemn Vladimir Putin's regime for annexing Crimea or setting up puppet states in the occupied Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia when a NATO member is guilty of similar behavior.

Disgruntled Americans and other Westerners also view Ankara's overall foreign policy with mounting suspicion. US supporters of Israel especially regard Turkey's increasingly frosty treatment of that country as a manifestation of hostility toward both Western interests and Western values. Ankara's conduct regarding ISIS has aroused additional concerns that Turkish leaders are conducting a cynical flirtation with radical Islamist forces in the Middle East. Not only did President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government drag its feet on supporting air strikes

against ISIS by the United States and other NATO allies, but there were indications that Turkish leaders actively impeded measures to weaken the terrorist organization. For an agonizingly long period of time, the Erdoğan regime did little to assist besieged Kurdish defenders trying to thwart the attempt by ISIS forces to conquer the city of Kobane on the Turkish-Syrian border.

And as if Ankara's behavior on the foreign policy front was not a sufficient worry, there are ominous signs of mounting authoritarianism in Turkey's domestic affairs. Civil organizations and independent press outlets repeatedly find themselves under siege. Steven A. Cook, Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, documents the extent of Erdoğan's consolidation of power, contending that "he has become the sun around which all Turkish politics revolve."

Cook notes in an article on Politico.com that most of the Turkish press now exhibits support bordering on adoration for the President and his policies, and the dominance of that view is largely the result of "forced sales of newspapers and television stations to Erdoğan cronies." Perhaps even more unsettling than the transformation of an independent Turkish press into cogs in a partisan political machine is the media's participation in the President's growing cult of personality. Media outlets routinely refer to Erdoğan as "Buyuk Usta or Great Master." Cook notes that the atmosphere and imagery is sometimes "positively North Korean-esque."

Former supporters of Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party are now treated as enemies of the state, not merely political opponents. At the end of October, Turkey's National Security Council branded the Gülen Movement, once the government's most significant political ally, as a threat to national security. Erdoğan personally presided over the meeting at which that charge was adopted. At the beginning of February, the Turkish government revoked the passport of Gülen's leader, Fethullah Gülen, who resides in the United States. That decision effectively stranded him in exile without even a modicum of due process. Such actions smack of petty political retaliation against a critic of the regime, with an intent to intimidate other potential critics. In December, the US State Department formally protested the arrest of more than two dozen leading media figures - all of whom appeared to be vocal opponents of the Erdoğan administration.

The government's increasingly oppressive hand is evident in other respects. When investigators conducted a wide-ranging probe of official corruption, leading to the resignation of four government ministers, Erdoğan's regime retaliated by purging hundreds of police officials and prosecutors. It also pushed through laws giving the President tighter control over the judiciary. According to Reuters, a few weeks later, Erdoğan ominously asserted that the judiciary and other state institutions must be "cleansed of traitors."

Granted, Turkey is not the only NATO country exhibiting worrisome autocratic behavior. US officials have expressed alarm at the apparent authoritarianism and corruption enveloping Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary. Orbán's crackdown on human rights groups is

disturbingly similar to Vladimir Putin's campaign against domestic opponents. One of Orbán's targets is the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, which, ironically, had supported him a decade earlier when he was under intense pressure from political adversaries.

Over the past few years, harassment of media outlets, civil organizations, and other critics of Orbán's rule has steadily grown. In rhetoric reminiscent of Putin, Orbán has been reported as asserting that such groups are "paid political activists attempting to assert foreign interests in Hungary." The Prime Minister now touts the alleged virtues of autocracy, citing China, Russia, Singapore and Turkey, as models of successful countries that Hungary should consider emulating. Orbán has even reportedly proposed mandatory drug testing for journalists.

Budapest's authoritarian drift, combined with the government's growing foreign policy flirtation with Russia has alarmed not only officials in other NATO countries but pro-Western elements in Hungary itself. Such concerns were evident at the beginning of February when thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets of the capital to protest Orbán's policies and urge visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel not to accord his regime any deference.

As bad as domestic political trends are in Hungary, however, they pale in comparison to the manifestations of autocracy in Turkey. The rising tide of domestic authoritarianism there is not a small concern, nor purely a domestic issue. True, NATO has previously tolerated illiberal regimes and even outright dictatorships as members. Founding member Portugal was a quasi-fascist country under Antonio Salazar. Throughout the Cold War, the military was the decisive power broker in Turkey's political system, and on occasion the country even lapsed into outright military rule. Greece suffered under a brutal military dictatorship in the late 1960s and early 1970s without forfeiting its NATO membership.

But it would be far more difficult in the 21st century for the Alliance to look the other way as a member succumbs to dictatorial impulses. During the Cold War, it was widely understood that NATO was primarily an anti-Soviet defense association. The professed commitment to liberal democracy, while important, was secondary. But in the post-Cold War era, NATO leaders repeatedly stress the organization's commitment to democracy and human rights. It would be more than a little embarrassing to have a Putin-style autocracy emerge in NATO's ranks. Yet that is now an embryonic worry with respect to Hungary and a looming danger with respect to Turkey.

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