



# TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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## **Afghanistan offers an opportunity to repair**

### **Turkey-NATO relations**

Dr. Kohei Imai

In 2019, Turkey, a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), purchased the S-400 missile system from Russia shocking other NATO allies with the unprecedented move that may pave the way for serious security breach in favor of Russia. Unsurprisingly, Turkey's decision created mistrust in the alliance. In response to Turkey's deployment of S-400 systems in October 2020, the United States imposed sanctions on Turkey in December, through a bill called, "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" (CAATSA).

Given this background Turkey felt it was necessary to restore trust in NATO through making contributions to NATO's missions. From Turkey's perspective, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan provided a golden opportunity. In fact, long before the recent American statement of withdrawal, Turkey had committed to help the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan starting in August 2003. In light of its constructive role under the ISAF mission, Ankara seeks to demonstrate its contribution to NATO by combining its Islamic identity and its unique role in NATO, which may enable it to open a dialogue channel with the Taliban.

## **Turkey's contribution to reconstruction in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan was the second state that recognized the Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led Ankara government in 1921.<sup>1</sup> Turkey and Afghanistan have kept good relations since then. According to Foreign Ministry of Turkey, Turkish foreign policy has had four pillars to Afghanistan: (1) maintaining the unity and integrity of Afghanistan, (2) providing security and stability, (3) strengthening its political structure, and (4) the restoration of peace and prosperity by eliminating terrorism and extremism.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Turkey seeks to stabilize Afghanistan through improving infrastructure and the security situation.

In order to realize this policy, Turkey operates its soft power mechanisms like the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TİKA). According to development assistant report of TİKA published in 2019, Afghanistan is the fifth largest recipient (32.94 million dollars) of development aid, and the largest recipient within Least Developed Countries (LDCs).<sup>3</sup> TİKA has planned approximately 1300 projects, mostly areas of education and health.<sup>4</sup> In addition to TİKA's activities, Turkey has coordinated the multilateral cooperation. The Istanbul Forum is a good example. The Turkish think tank TEPAV, which is under the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), had coordinated the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Pakistan, and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Afghanistan. The Istanbul Forum, which was held eight times during 2007 to 2014, promoted trust and cooperation between Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan through the establishment of industrial estates, empowerment of women, and providing aid to young entrepreneurs.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from supporting NATO through cultural and economic projects, Turkey is also contributing to Afghanistan's security. Since the beginning of 2001, Turkey has actively participated to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and its successor, Resolute Support Mission, which launched in January 2015. Turkey's contributions to ISAF and Resolute Support Mission are divided into three areas. The first area of contribution involves sending troops to Afghanistan, especially around Kabul. Turkey deployed 600 soldiers to Kabul as member of Resolute Support Mission in February 2021.<sup>6</sup> Turkey's second contribution to ISAF is participation in Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). According to NATO's website, aim of PRTs is "to provide security for aid works and help humanitarian assistance or reconstruction tasks in areas with ongoing conflict or high levels of insecurity."<sup>7</sup> In this framework, Turkey

sent troops to Jowjan province and Wardak province in league with PRTs.<sup>8</sup> The last area of Turkey's contribution to ISAF consists of training Afghan military members and police forces. In 2010, a training base was established for non-commissioned officers and soldiers.<sup>9</sup> In addition to that, Turkish troops has participated in the NATO Afghan Training Mission (NTM-A) launched in October 2009. Turkey established police training centers both in Afghanistan (Wardak) and Turkey (Sivas).<sup>10</sup> By March 2021, in total, 5061 Afghan military personnel and 9913 police officers received training in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Turkey decided to spend 60 million dollars to maintain the Afghanistan security force.<sup>12</sup>

Besides its involvement with NATO projects, in order to enhance peace in Afghanistan, Turkey also seeks to coordinate with the UN. In this regard, Turkey, Qatar, and the UN planned to hold a high level conference for peace of Afghanistan in April 2021.<sup>13</sup> However, conditions of conference were not yet ripe. Hence, this conference was postponed until more favorable timing.<sup>14</sup>

### **The United States withdrawal from Afghanistan**

On April 13, 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that U.S. troops in Afghanistan will completely be withdrawn by September 11, 2021.<sup>15</sup> This is a part of agreement between the United States and Taliban that was reached at the end of February 2020. Accordingly, the United States, Coalition forces, and NATO allies will withdraw their troops from Afghanistan within 14 months.<sup>16</sup> In the shadow of this agreement, unsurprisingly, other NATO member countries are concerned about the security situation in Afghanistan and the collapse of the Kabul government after U.S. withdrawal. In the aftermath of the withdrawal, it is very likely that the instability in Afghanistan will increase.<sup>17</sup> In addition, other NATO allies and coalition members including Germany, the second largest force in Afghanistan (1300 personnel), and United Kingdom, third largest force in Afghanistan (750 personnel), have also decided to withdraw from Afghanistan in compliance with the U.S. and Taliban agreement.<sup>18</sup>

Another problem caused by the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan is the influx of the Afghan refugees to Turkey via Iran. From the beginning of July 2021, Afghan refugees have started to approach to Turkish-Iranian border.<sup>19</sup> After U.S. and NATO withdrawal, this number may increase significantly. Even before the announcement to withdraw, Afghan refugees constituted the second largest refugee

community in Turkey. According to UNHCR, currently 116,403 asylum seekers and 980 refugees from Afghanistan are staying in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that Turkey already absorbed more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees amid growing xenophobia at home.

Despite acknowledging this gloomy picture, after meeting with U.S. President Biden at the latest NATO summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commented that Turkish troops will stay and defend Kabul's Hamid Karzai international airport instead of U.S. troops.<sup>21</sup> Turkish decision makers justify Turkey's presence in Afghanistan by relying on the historical bilateral ties and believe it is feasible thanks to Turkey's Muslim identity.<sup>22</sup>

However, the Taliban opposed to Turkey's request to maintain control of the airport in Kabul and warned that they would regard Turkey as an 'occupier state'.<sup>23</sup> Despite Taliban's warning in order to realize its goal Turkey also seeks to recruit Pakistan and Hungary to accomplish its mission.<sup>24</sup> Certainly Pakistan is considered with the situation, and may be a suitable and a natural partner for Turkey thanks to its good bilateral relations with the Taliban. However, involving Hungary raises questions. Ankara has two good reasons for selecting Hungary as one of its partners. Hungary already managed the security of the Kabul airport between 2010-2013 period. Hungarians are therefore seen as experienced partners for this mission.<sup>25</sup> The second reason is, like Erdoğan, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán - who is frequently criticized in the West for his authoritarian stance, and for his anti-refugee policies - wants to show NATO that Hungary is a contributor and reliable partner.

### **Can Turkey restore the confidence of other NATO members?**

The abovementioned Afghanistan mission could potentially help Turkey to mend its fences with NATO. However, the security of Turkish military personnel in Afghanistan is not guaranteed. The Taliban has harshly warned Turkey to withdraw its forces. According to Taliban's spokesman, Turkey, a NATO member, should withdraw in compliance with Taliban-U.S. agreement.<sup>26</sup> In addition to that, NATO's adversaries Russia and Iran, as well as Saudi Arabia are not happy about Turkish presence in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this, given the current strategic circumstances, Turkey's presence at the Kabul

airport after withdrawal of U.S. and other NATO members is a chance to regain the confidence of the other NATO members. However, if Turkey ignores the Taliban's warning, the Turkish military will face a security risk. Moreover, Turkish Armed Forces may fail to safeguard the airport. In case of a Taliban takeover, apart from casualties and a potential hostage crisis, Turkey will also have to cope with international criticism for being seen somehow responsible for losing the airport to the Taliban. Turkey must get the approval of the Taliban to continue its mission at the Kabul airport to lower this risk. In order to realize this goal, in my opinion, the key countries that could help Turkey succeed are Pakistan and Qatar. Islamabad and Doha have good relations with both Turkey and Taliban. While mending its fences with the West in foreign policy it should also be emphasized that if the situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate or spiral out of control, Erdogan's plan could be overshadowed by a growing refugee crisis at home, as well as the rise of an extremist government in Afghanistan.”

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Turkey-Afghanistan Bilateral Political Relations.”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> TİKA, “Türkiye Kalkınma Yardımları Raporları 2019,” Ankara, 2020, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> TİKA, “TİKA'dan Afganistan'da 15 Yılda 1300'den Fazla Proje ve Faaliyet,” December 21, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> TEPAV, “Istanbul Forum Held Its Eight Meeting,” February 14, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> NATO, “Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Troop Contributing Nations.”

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- <sup>7</sup> *NATO Review*, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – how they arrived and where they are going,” Autumn, 2007.
- <sup>8</sup> *NATO*, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).”
- <sup>9</sup> *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, “Turkey’s International Security Initiatives and Contributions to NATO and EU Operations.”
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Oguzhan Ertugrul, “Celebrating 100 Years of Turkish-Afghan Diplomatic Relations”, *Anadolu Agency*, March 1, 2021.
- <sup>12</sup> “Turkey-Afghanistan Bilateral Political Relations,” see footnote 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Qatar has played the most important role in negotiations between the United States and Taliban. *Reuters*, “Explainer: Afghan-Taliban peace talks - who, what, where and why,” September 16, 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> *UNAMA*, “Joint Statement by Co-Conveners on Postponement of Istanbul Conference”, April 21, 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> *Washington Post*, “Biden will withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021,” April 13, 2021.
- <sup>16</sup> “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of State Website.
- <sup>17</sup> *Anadolu Agency*, “UN says civilian casualties in Afghanistan up 47% in 1st half of 2021,” July 26, 2021.
- <sup>18</sup> Andrew Macaskill and William James, “Britain has withdrawn nearly all its troops from Afghanistan”, *Reuters*, July 9, 2021; *Reuters*, “German military completes withdrawal from Afghanistan,” June 30, 2021.
- <sup>19</sup> Metin Gurcan, “Afghan refugee influx stokes tensions in Turkey,” *Al-Monitor*, July 23, 2021.
- <sup>20</sup> *UNHCR report*, “Onward Movements of Afghan Refugees January-February 2021,” March 17, 2021.
- <sup>21</sup> *AP News*, “Turkey seeks US support to maintain troops in Afghanistan,” June 15, 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> Oguzhan Ertugrul, see footnote 11.
- <sup>23</sup> *Al-Monitor*, “Taliban renew demand that Turkey leave Afghanistan,” July 12, 2021.
- <sup>24</sup> Dilara Aslan, “Turkey, Pakistan to discuss details of Afghanistan cooperation,” *Daily Sabah*, June 18, 2021.
- <sup>25</sup> Ragip Soylu and Levent Kemal, “Afghanistan: Why Turkey wants to partner with Hungary to protect Kabul airport,” *Middle East Eye*, June 18, 2021.
- <sup>26</sup> Jonathan Landay, “Turkey should pull troops from Afghanistan under 2020 accord - Taliban spokesman,” *Reuters*, June 11, 2021. On the other hand, Taliban side recognizes that Turkey is a “great Islam country” and has a deep historical legacy in Afghanistan.
- <sup>27</sup> Rahimullah Farzam, “Turkey’s possible Afghanistan mission: Opportunities and challenges,” *Anadolu Agency*, 5 July 2021.