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Turkey's Non-Nuclear Weapon Status -A Theoretical Assessment

Abstract

Turkey's security policy upholds nuclear (and WMD) nonproliferation and commitment to the regimes. In the post-Cold War and post-9/11 world, military threats to Turkey's security emanate mainly from the Middle East, where security is still defined in a Realist world. Turkey has several issues with its neighbors and maintains strategic balance with superiority or rough equality in its military power, its alliances, and to a lesser extent, economic ties. This paper analyzes Turkey's policy as a non-nuclear weapon state amid uneasy neighbors, which has had WMD and/or nuclear programs, by several International Relations theories that explain proliferation dynamics: Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and other theories explaining state behavior by opening the 'black box'. The analysis reveals the pillars that make up the policy including motivations and restraints. The post-9/11 US security and foreign policy and Iran's nuclear program are independent variables that introduce intervening variables (like the effects on the regime and norms) to see the impacts on these motivations and restraints. The paper distinguishes between motivations, keeping a 'nuclear option' open and the actual decision to go nuclear. The main argument is that the independent variables have challenged the maintenance of the policy as a security asset, and Turkey may consider a 'nuclear option' when this asset converges into a security deficiency. The paper concludes with recommendations to keep Turkey on the current track.

i. Turkey's security policy and Non-Nuclear-Weapon-State Status

Since the establishment of the Republic, Turkey has sought alliances to maintain its security. At the onset of the Cold War, Turkey joined the Western camp, and became a member of the Atlantic Alliance in 1952. NATO membership formed the cornerstone of Turkish security policy by solidifying its ties to the West and by providing nuclear umbrella. In 1979, Turkey signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapon state, and became member to other agreements regarding the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems.

This study analyzes Turkey's policy as a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) amid WMD-capable neighbors in the Middle East. In the post-Cold War and post-September 11 (9/11)

periods, military threats to Turkey's national security mainly emanate from the Middle East, where security is still defined in Realist terms. Throughout the Cold War, Turkey pursued a policy of nonintervention and indifference regarding the Middle East.¹ The end of the Cold War, and particularly the Gulf War of 1991 demonstrated that Turkey had to revise this policy: While NATO did not disintegrate, its collective defense commitment was questioned during this period. Turkey started to engage in bilateral and trilateral strategic cooperation with the United States and Israel in the 1990s.² Less than strategic partners, Turkish-American relations boomed in military, political and economic aspects as Turkey's strategic importance for the United States increased in this period regarding the region geographically, politically and culturally.

Turkey's security policy is shaped on the basis of the strategy of deterrence in the first place. Defense comes second.³ Cold War and post-Cold War period security policy rested on the nuclear deterrent of NATO and Turkey's military power, which is the second biggest army in NATO. Turkey is located in the intersection of conflict regions, namely, the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East, and that of strategic routes for trade, commerce, energy, etc... After the end of the Cold War military threats mainly emanated from the Middle East, especially after the Gulf War. Relations with Syria, Iran and Iraq have been uneasy due to a number of issues ranging from water dispute, border issues, terrorism, mutual threat perceptions of regimes, Turkey's alliances with the West, the United States and Israel, etc... All three possessed ballistic missiles whose could reach strategic targets and main cities. The mass destruction weapons capabilities were also a cause of concern: Syria possessed chemical weapons, Iraq had chemical and biological weapons (CBW), and was working on a nuclear program before the war. Iran was suspected of having CBW capability and of working on a nuclear program. The absence of conflict was mainly because of Turkey's military deterrent that was bolstered in the Eastern and Southeastern Turkey after the Cold War⁴, and NATO defense commitment. Economic relations played a minor role.

¹ Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, "The Evolution of the National Security Culture and the Military in Turkey," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (Fall 2000), pp. 200, 208.

² For details, see _ebnem Udum, "Missile Proliferation and Missile Defense: Turkey and Missile Defenses," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, (Autumn 2003), pp. 71-102.

³ Turkish Ministry of Defense, "Turkey's National Defense Policy and Military Strategy," *White Paper*, Part IV, Section I, 2000.

⁴ See Ali Karaosmanoglu and Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Defense Reform in Turkey," in Istvan Gyarmati and Theodor Winkler (eds.), *Post-Cold War Defense Reform: Lessons Learned in Europe and the United States*, Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002, pp.135-164.

Why Turkey did not aspire to have nuclear capability was not just because of its deterrent capabilities, and later its strategic relations with the United States and Israel in military matters. There were other elements that sustained this policy as a security asset. Next section will give a theoretical explanation of how Turkey's non-nuclear weapon status was formed and the factors that sustained it.

ii. Main pillars of Turkey's nuclear nonproliferation policy: A theoretical assessment

Theories that explain nuclear proliferation and nonproliferation are numerous. They provide explanations in international, state, domestic and ideational levels.⁵ Turkey's non-nuclear weapon state status can be understood in the framework of these theories, and this study will take Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism and look at the domestic level to that end. I distinguish between motivations, i.e. factors that trigger states to seek nuclear weapons; keeping a 'nuclear option' open, i.e. acquiring civilian nuclear technology and keeping it in a way that would allow diversion to military use; and the actual decision to go nuclear, i.e. a government decision to have an operational nuclear program. The following explanation is more relevant to the motivational aspect of proliferation. The next two aspects will be discussed within the Turkish case later in the analysis.

Nuclear proliferation was tackled mainly from the Realist and Neo-Realist viewpoints during the Cold War as nuclear weapons are the ultimate means of military capability and there was a bipolar international structure⁶. Realist theories have a pessimistic view of international

⁵ For an analysis of theories explaining nuclear proliferation, see Tanya Ogilvie-White, "Is There a Theory of Nuclear Proliferation? An Analysis of the Contemporary Debate," *The Nonproliferation Review*, (Fall 1996), pp. 43-60; Scott Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996/1997), pp. 54-86.

⁶ Daniel Deudney, "Dividing Realism: Structural Realism versus Security Materialism on Nuclear Security and Proliferation," B. Frankel and Z. Davis eds., *The Proliferation Puzzle: Why Nuclear Weapons Spread and What Results*, London: Frank Cass, 1993, pp. 20-21; Benjamin Frankel, "The Brooding Shadow: Systemic Incentives and Nuclear Weapons Proliferation," B. Frankel and Z. Davis eds., *The Proliferation Puzzle: Why Nuclear Weapons Spread and What Results*, London: Frank Cass, 1993, pp. 37-78; John M. Deutsch, "The New Nuclear Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.71, No. 41, (Fall 1992), pp. 120-134; George Schultz, "Preventing the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. 84, No. 2098 (December 1984), pp.17-21; Michael M. May "Nuclear Weapons Supply and Demand," *American Scientist*, Vol. 82, No. 6, (November-December 1994), pp. 526-537; Bradley A. Thayer "The Causes of Nuclear Proliferation and the Nonproliferation Regime," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, (Spring 1995), pp. 463-519; Richard Betts "Paranooids, Pygmies, Pariahs, and Nonproliferation Revisited," in Z. S. Davis and B. Frankel eds., *The Proliferation Puzzle: Why Nuclear Weapons Spread and What Results*, London: Frank Cass, 1993, pp. 100-124; David Gompert, Kenneth Watman and Dean Wilkening, "Nuclear First-Use Revisited," *Survival*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (Autumn 1995), pp.27-44.

politics, in which main actors are states seeking power to ensure security for their survival. The ultimate national interest is power, which is understood in military sense. States are in constant struggle to increase military capabilities for security and defense, which creates “security dilemma” and which fuels arms race. As a result, states either balance or bandwagon: They form balances of power to avoid war, and lesser powers bandwagon to ensure their survival. Realist theories argue that nuclear proliferation will spread as a chain reaction, because the acquisition of nuclear weapons by one state will initiate a security dilemma. Therefore, as a result of national security concerns, the acquisition by a regional adversary of nuclear arms or the possibility of such acquisition that may trigger proliferation drives, and states would either go nuclear to balance power, or join alliances with a nuclear power.

In this framework, against the Soviet expansionist and nuclear threat, NATO’s nuclear umbrella and relations with the United States had provided Turkey with sufficient reason not to seek nuclear weapons capability. The end of the Cold War did not prepare that of NATO or its nuclear posture. Doubts about NATO’s commitment during the Gulf War, and the ballistic missile and WMD programs of its neighbors challenged Turkey’s position, however, there were other variables that either constrained Turkey to revise its policy, or that maintained it as a security asset.

Among those factors, Turkey is a signatory to the NPT and all other nonproliferation of WMD regimes; so first and foremost, Turkey is legally and politically committed to keep its NNWS status. Turkey’s international commitments go beyond legal constraints, and build an image of a dedicated member of the regime, and confirm the country’s status as an “accepted” state among the community of nations. Nuclear nonproliferation regime was bolstered after the Cold War, by the extension of NPT, denouncement of nuclear weapons by a number of states and their NPT memberships, success of the UN inspections in Iraq, and cooperation between the United States and Russia to prevent proliferation, etc... Being a NNWS, thus, became the accepted norm of international community, as opposed to the past decades, where possession of nuclear weapons was a sign of prestige and status. Constructivist approach explains the

construction of identity and evolution of norms as a result of social interaction.⁷ In this sense, Turkey's status was contemplated as an asset rather than a deficiency.

Liberal theories are powerful in explaining why states choose not to go nuclear with their emphasis on cooperation, institutions and regimes. States start to cooperate for a common goal. Out of cooperation, they develop common rules and procedures for decisionmaking and resolving problems without recourse to arms. They establish institutions and institutionalize these procedures; therefore they would want to continue cooperation. Neo-Realist concern about cheating is met by the Neo-liberal answer that state behavior in institutions is a reiterated game, and not one-for-all, hence states would refrain from cheating to avoid punishment. Therefore, gains from cooperation override those from conflict and institutions are sustained.⁸ Altogether, these institutions, codes of conduct, rules and norms form regimes.⁹ Liberal theories explain Turkey's membership to the NPT and other nonproliferation regimes: the NPT aims at the total and eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons, and forms the cornerstone of the regime. NNWSs benefit from negative security assurances and international cooperation to deal with proliferation risks. In terms of security, Turkey's ties to the West, particularly its EU perspective constitutes a political constraint, because Turkey is within a liberal zone with the West and a nuclear Turkey would be suicidal to Turkey's EU membership bid.

Motivations and constraints to proliferation should also be understood by opening the black box. Decisionmaking theories and organizational theories are helpful in this respect. Bureaucracies and organizations within the state can be effective in motivating or constraining policymakers, because eventually the proliferation decision is taken by governments.¹⁰ In Turkey, security policy is basically shaped by the military, and is subject to approval by the National Security Council which has both civilian and military members. Governments are sensitive to the public opinion, especially regarding national security issues. Turkey attempted

⁷ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1992, pp. 391-425; Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

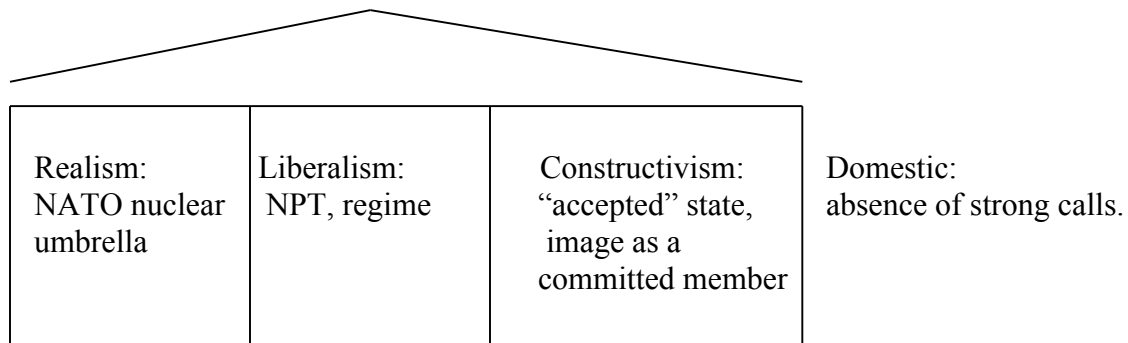
⁸ David Baldwin, ed., *Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

⁹ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, No. 30, pp. 167-214; R. Jervis, "Security Regimes," in Stephen Krasner, ed., *International Regimes*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, pp. 173-194;

¹⁰ Scott Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security*, Vol.18, No. 4, Spring 1994, pp. 66-107; Stephen M. Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

several times to transfer civilian nuclear technology but was unsuccessful mainly due to international concerns and economic constraints.¹¹ There has not been a passionate call from the military, politicians or the public for Turkey to acquire nuclear weapons. However, the picture is transforming since 9/11. The next section will look at the effects of independent variables on Turkey's NNWS status. Overall, Turkey's policy can be depicted as follows:

Illustration I. The pillars that make up Turkey's NNWS status



iii. Turkey's position in post- 9/11 world: What changed?

9/11 is a turning point for the international nuclear nonproliferation regime as a result of the dramatic shift in US foreign and security policy and its impacts on international politics, the definition of war and peace. The new security strategy of the United States has a new definition of threat and response: The new threat is terrorism operating transnationally, seeking WMD and getting support from states of concern or failed states, and illicit trade of arms and drugs. They wage an apocalyptic war against the United States and the West. Therefore, the United States and its allies have to prevent these attacks by means that are not limited to military, and can bypass Cold War institutions for swift and effective action. Nuclear weapons are not weapons of last resort in this war against terrorism. Beginning from the Iraq War of 2003, this new strategy deteriorated relations with allies and adversely affected nonproliferation efforts and regimes, for which multilateralism and legitimacy is essential. The Bush administration drew clear lines between "good and bad", and called Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil." The Iraq

¹¹ Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Turkey's Quest for Peaceful Nuclear Power," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Spring/Summer 1997, pp.33-44.

War severely affected relations with the allies and jeopardized the functioning of international institutions. Iran's nuclear program has been worrisome, and the American position did not help address the issue. North Korea carried out a successful nuclear test on the grounds of national security reasons. While on the other hand, the United States initiated nuclear cooperation with India.

These developments had implications on the main pillars that sustained Turkey's position:

First- regarding realist explanations which focus on Turkey's NATO deterrent and military power along with the post-Cold War strategic cooperation with the United States and Israel-, The 2003 Operation in Iraq demonstrated that NATO collective defense guarantee would not come automatically, because Turkey's request to bolster its defenses in case of an Iraqi aggression was turned down.¹² In addition, the change in the US post-9/11 foreign and security policy affected relations with Turkey severely as a result of a series of misperceptions: Turkey refused to let the US troops use Turkish land for the Iraq Operation on March 1, 2003. On July 4, 2003, Turkish special forces in Iraq's north were detained by US counterparts, reportedly by false intelligence of Kurdish groups. This event (called the Hood Event since the Turkish soldiers were detained and transported with hoods on their heads) caused outrage in the Turkish public because of the significance of the army in the Turkish security culture and that of the special forces, which are a special group of soldiers in the Turkish General Staff. Above all, Turkey has been fighting with separatist terrorism since early 1980s, that finds shelter and support in the same region. The war in Iraq led to a power vacuum and terrorist attacks resumed. Turkey's expectations from the United States to address terrorist infiltration from Iraq's north and to put an end to these attacks were still not met, and this increased resentment and anti-Americanism among the Turkish public. The reports that Israel is also conducting activities in Iraq's north and cooperating with the Kurdish groups were not well received in Turkey. Last but not least, the public opinion turned very low after the Israeli attacks on Lebanese civilians. All these developments resulted in questioning the reliability of the Atlantic Alliance, the United States and Israel. Anti-Americanism and anti-EU position is rising among the Turkish public following the tension in Turkish-American and Turkish-EU relations.

¹² Although it was because of the conflict of interest among members about the Iraq Operation itself, it was seen that rifts in NATO would jeopardize Turkey's security.

Second, in 2003, it was revealed that Iran had important failures about meeting the requirements of the safeguards agreement with the IAEA, and that the United States could not prevent North Korea to produce nuclear weapons and to quit from NPT membership. Turkey feels very strongly about the nuclear nonproliferation regime and the NPT, but these developments undermine the effective functioning of the regime and of the Treaty. Therefore, NNWS started to question the effectiveness and meaning of the Treaty, and that of the UN to deal with such cases. Iran and Turkey have had tough relations, and the absence of conflict owes to the rough strategic balance. If Iran acquires nuclear capability and the international community cannot prevent it, Turkey and other states in the Middle East would be motivated to go nuclear.

Third, Iran's nuclear program and North Korea's withdrawal relates to the significance of nuclear weapons for the status of a state, and the international norms that evolved through the regime. Although they are included in the "Axis of Evil" as the states of concern, if the international community sinks into acquiescence after the acquisition of nuclear weapons and withdrawal from the Treaty, that would affect the norms of the regime: Possession of nuclear weapons would be considered as an act that could go with impunity, and non-possession as a security deficiency.

As a result, Turkish nonproliferation experts point to the possibility that Turkey may want to have the basic infrastructure to produce nuclear weapons to keep its nuclear option open, and perhaps to go nuclear when needed and not be constrained by an ineffective Treaty.¹³ However, it should be underlined proliferation is a political decision, and that Turkish policymakers would need to go through a cost-benefit analysis.

iv. Prospects and Recommendations

Turkey recently engaged in another attempt to transfer civilian nuclear technology for energy purposes. There are views supporting and opposing to such transfer from energy and security aspects. What is relevant to this study is that there are those in the military, politics and the public that view this transfer as a technological capability that would give Turkey a nuclear

¹³ Mustafa Kibaroglu, *Iran's Nuclear Program May Trigger Young Turks to Think Nuclear*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 20, 2004.

option in case its current policy converges to a security deficiency as a result of international and regional developments. The assessment of such a view is the subject of another study, but it should be underlined that post-9/11 developments, i.e. deteriorating relations with the United States and Israel, doubts about NATO, growing anti-Americanism and anti-EU sentiments, Iran's nuclear program and North Korea's recent test, resulted in demands that Turkey should also acquire nuclear weapons since the NPT is not working and Turkey's alliances are not reliable as opposed to the rising proliferation of WMD in the region.

Having said that, I argue that Turkey's acquisition of nuclear weapons would not be a viable decision: If Turkey decides to go nuclear, international pressure will be intense: Turkey is already a candidate to the EU, and has a membership perspective. It ties Turkey firmly to the West and the Western liberal zone. Turkey's nuclear aspirations would jeopardize this process and would have high political costs. Likewise, relations with the United States are too important to be jeopardized: The United States is an indispensable ally despite all the tensions. Economic sanctions would be applied to the already sensitive Turkish economy, that would impair micro and macro balances. What is more, the place of nuclear weapons in the military strategy is doubtful, i.e. against which country would Turkey use it or threaten to use it? If it is Iran, there are other more powerful actors. Turkey has other leverages that it could use against Iran in diplomatic relations. Last but not least, it would make Turkey a target.¹⁴

Turkey's difference from the other states in the Middle East, which are concerned about Iran's nuclear program, is the EU perspective. Turkey is materially and ideationally between the East and the West. Its EU prospects keep the country in cooperative mechanisms to address security issues. If this perspective is lost, it will be highly likely that it will be drawn into the Realist zone of international security in the East, and highly motivated to seek nuclear weapons capability. Thus, both Turkey and the EU should put their best efforts to keep Turkey in the EU track.

The cases of Iran and North Korea and the way they are dealt with are not promising for a strong regime. The US policy after 9/11 is unhelpful as well: The new strategy does not rule out the use of nuclear weapons, hence legitimizes them as an instrument of statecraft. On the other hand, the United States attempts to revise the NPT in a way that would prevent proliferation, but

¹⁴ Mustafa Kibarolu, "Kitle _mha Silahlarının Yayılması Sorunu ve Türkiye (The Issue of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Turkey)", *Do_u-Batt*, August-October 2003, pp.134-142.

the proposed amendments are strongly rejected on the grounds that it would not strengthen the Treaty, and rather lead to rifts. Multilateralism is pivotal in keeping a strong regime. As the United States gave up working by consensus following 9/11, relations with allies soured, leading to a tendency to shift from the neo-liberal bases of international politics to a more realist one, in which states would be inclined to provide self-help and turn inwards, as it is the case with Iran and North Korea. Nuclear weapons have been those of deterrence, and to keep it stable, the United States and the Soviet Union had spent great effort. New nuclear powers would be inexperienced in crisis management, which would increase risks of misuse or accident.