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**Afghanistan and Turkey:
Past, Present and Future Prospects**

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On 1 July, the United States and its coalition forces handed over Bagram Airfield to Afghanistan's Security Forces. This iconic airfield, visited by US President Dwight Eisenhower in 1959, seized by Soviets in 1979 and occupied by US and Coalition forces since 2001, has been, for better and worse, the bridge between Afghanistan and the outside world. The handover is the most visible sign of the ending of this century's war in Afghanistan, and the subsequent [looting of the airport](#) later that day may be a fitting symbol of an untidy end to the mission.

Securing the Kabul Airport: Turkey Steps Forward

As the US and NATO troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan picks up speed, there is increased discussion about the implications of an expanded follow-on role for Turkey. The only predominantly Muslim country with troops in the coalition, there has been a longstanding understanding of the benefits of a longer Turkish deployment. The handover of Kabul airport operations to Turkish military control may provide that opportunity.

Turkey has the experience and military capability to provide security at Kabul's airport, noted by one Bloomberg columnist as a "[risky Afghan mission that no one else wants](#)". The Turkish military has been running the Hamid Karzai airport for six years and has gained significant experience in this regard. Ankara also possesses a unique diplomatic toolkit to serve as a viable mediator when necessary among the clashing Afghan constituencies. It enjoys positive relations with Pakistan, and it touts itself as a leader of the region's Turkic nations, two of which abut Afghanistan. Two years ago, there was talk among sources close to the Doha peace talks that the Taliban might consider a continued Turkish presence in Afghanistan outside of the NATO mission. So it came as no surprise when [Turkey made an offer to guard and operate the airport at the May 2021 NATO Foreign and Defense ministerial meetings](#) after international troops depart.

Far from being an act of altruism, the offer will likely benefit Turkey's position within NATO as well as Ankara's designs for Central Asia. The offer, however, is not unconditional, and while there have been offers of cooperative assistance from some countries, notably the US, there remain unresolved "[political, logistical and financial](#)" conditions to this day.

The Terms of the Deal

The [NATO Summit Communique of 14 June 2021](#) strengthened the possibility of a handover to Turkey when it noted funding would be made available for that purpose. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also hinted during a press conference after his meeting with US President Joe Biden on 14 June that [Pakistan and Hungary could also have a role](#) in securing the strategic airport. A role for Pakistan in Afghanistan's security affairs would surely be met with opposition across the Afghan political spectrum, but it may be necessary for Ankara to involve Islamabad to ensure Taliban compliance.

Turkey has more than 500 troops stationed in Afghanistan as part of a NATO mission to train Afghan security forces and additional troops would likely be needed for the airport mission. Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar has said that Ankara's offer was contingent on backup from allies. This request for assistance is not without precedent. NATO assumed command of the International Security and Assistance Force from the US-led coalition in 2003 and as it expanded throughout Afghanistan, Lead Nations were unable to provide necessary requirements out of

their own capabilities, in particular with shortfalls in logistics, rotary-wing aircraft and vehicles. As retired Admiral Don Loren, who led the Coalition support efforts in the Pentagon, recently noted, “There were legitimate requests for assistance to help out many of the nations in the ISAF coalition to efficiently transition the ISAF handover”. Turkey’s request for assistance, eighteen years later, is little different.

With the United States scaling back its presence in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the Biden administration will nevertheless ensure that its interests are maintained. Turkey has been a longtime ally of the US in holding back what it considers Russian expansionist intentions, but recent challenges to the bilateral relationship between the US and Turkey have made this more complicated. Ankara enjoys warmer relations with Moscow as well as pursuing its own geopolitical and economic interests in the Middle East and Central Asia that are not necessarily in sync with those of Washington. As such, Washington would naturally be concerned about Turkey’s reliability as an enforcer of US interests at this juncture, given their strong disagreements on a number of key issues, but both sides seem keen to make it work. After the recent bi-lateral meeting with Biden, Erdoğan noted “...there [are no problems in Turkey-U.S. ties](#) that don’t have a solution”, and a Turkish role in securing the airport could help improve ties between Ankara and Washington.

The View from Kabul

Kabul has enthusiastically endorsed the expanded Turkish mission with [Foreign Minister Haneef Atmar telling TRT World](#) that “we welcome it and we will support it”. Securing Kabul’s Hamid Karzai International airport could help persuade some countries to maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and prevent further nations from shutting their embassies as did Australia in May, citing security concerns.

Yet, Turkey’s involvement in Afghanistan is far less contentious as Turkish troops are predominately Muslim and less “foreign” to Afghans. As such, the Turkish troops present in Afghanistan today as part of the NATO mission have enjoyed a special status. Not to mention, many Afghan military and police officers have been trained by Turkey.

While there are parties in Afghanistan that may view a more pronounced Turkish role with suspicion, the idea is certainly not as contentious as a continued role by other countries, with blame laid on some of them for [significant civilian casualties](#) and others whose troops, [notably Australia](#), have been embroiled in war crimes scandals.

Perceptions of Turkey in Afghanistan are mildly favorable. Much of this is due to historical relations between Ankara and Kabul which date back to the early twentieth century when Afghan King Habibullah Khan [invited Ottoman advisors to Kabul](#). Later in the 1920s, King Amanullah and his entourage of progressive advisors saw a model to emulate in Ataturk’s Turkish republic. In that period, scores of Afghans were sent for higher education to Turkey. To this day, a Turkish education remains prestigious for many Afghan families, a legacy of the days of King Amanullah.

Up until the 1960s, Turkey “supported Afghanistan’s modernization efforts and played a crucial role in [the] establishment of modern state structures and public institutions”, as indicated on Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Close relations continued between the two countries until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Throughout the last several decades, successive Afghan leaders have found inspiration in movements originating in other Islamic

countries, whether Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Although Turkey's influence may not be as palpable as it may once have been, it has remained consistent over the years.

It is worth considering the ethnic dimension as well. Turkey touts itself as the protector of Afghanistan's Uzbek minority, in line with the special attention Ankara accords to Turkic people everywhere in the world. Albeit, Turkey was fiercely criticized for supporting scandalized former Afghan Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek politician who fled to Turkey after [facing sexual abuse and torture accusations](#) by an ethnic Hazara politician.

On a soft power level, since coming to power in 2002 the AK Party, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has made no secret of its ambitions to reclaim Turkey's leadership role in the Muslim world. Turkey's efforts on the humanitarian and education level across the region have contributed to its rising influence on a social and cultural level. The global success of its soap operas is nothing short of a "cultural offensive". Sympathetic accounts of conquering warriors or harem intrigues have captivated millions of people, once subjects of the Ottoman empire. Afghans, seeking escapism from their predicament and pride in their Muslim heritage, are no exception.

Turkey and the Taliban

Turkey's position towards the Taliban is hazy at best. By virtue of Ankara's alliance with Qatar and Pakistan, Turkey has neither expressed a hostile position toward the insurgent group, nor has it been particularly supportive of the government. In the midst of the current crisis in Afghanistan, the Afghan president has not made an official visit to Ankara since 2015, while opposition figures come in and out frequently, usually for "personal visits".

But a [Taliban spokesman issued a statement](#) on 10 June that Turkey should withdraw its troops from Afghanistan under the 2020 deal for the pullout of US forces, effectively rejecting Ankara's proposal to guard and run Kabul's airport after NATO forces depart. Perhaps concerned that any attacks on a NATO member would invoke a return of US forces or other harsh response, the Taliban view appears obdurate.

Turkey has opted instead to put itself forward as a neutral venue for Afghan peace talks, notably through "The Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process" launched in 2011, which brings together 15 countries with a vested interest in regional stability and prosperity centered on Afghanistan. While its more recent offer to host intra-Afghan talks in Istanbul has not yet been accepted by the Taliban, Ankara's position has been consistent in seeking to play the role of "honest broker". Even though the Afghan government had already given the green light for Turkey's continued role in securing and operating Kabul airport, Ankara needs to establish working relations with all parties to the conflict, including the Taliban.

"Though the Taliban's initial response to Turkey's offer was not very promising, it has not put the Turkish mission in the category of its enemies; its attitudes to the Turkish forces in Afghanistan has been different from other military missions in the country, even though it considers the mission to be among the 'foreign forces'," [argued Ali Resul Usul](#), former chair of the Center for Strategic Research at Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a recent op-ed.

"Turkey will likely want to act with Pakistan on the Taliban issue — Erdoğan has already partially expressed [possible cooperation](#) with Pakistan."

The NATO Factor

Relations between NATO and Turkey over the past few years have been testy. Disagreements over the purchase of the S-400 system from Russia, US support for the YPG in Syria, the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, the recent conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, rising tensions between Greece and Turkey over gas exploration activities near Kastellorizon, the French-Turkish dispute over the attempted inspection of a Turkish vessel allegedly breaching a UN arms embargo – these and other incidents have created distrust and acrimony between Turkey and its NATO partners.

There is little doubt, however, that an expanded role in Afghanistan replacing NATO members keen to withdraw will also ameliorate some of the strained ties between Ankara and NATO. It is certainly a step in the right direction and likely a positive note in the recent NATO meeting.

The Central Asia Focus

A little discussed dimension of Turkish objectives in a continued presence in Afghanistan is Turkey's designs for the greater Turkic world, Eurasia and beyond in Central Asia.

“Afghanistan is of immense geopolitical importance and China's Belt and Road Initiative has made the competition even more critical. As a key regional actor in Eurasia, Turkey wants to become more influential there. This region makes up an integral part of the geopolitics of the Turkic world, to which Turkey attaches great importance,” [argued Ali Resul Usul](#).

An increased presence and bigger future diplomatic role for Turkey in Afghanistan would have a collaborative effect with Ankara's broader Central Asian policies, notably Ankara's plans to forge an economic union amongst Turkic Council member states by 2040.

Turkey has gained much experience in conflict zone management and diplomacy from its ventures in Syria and Libya. While Afghanistan will present Turkey with many challenges, it will also create new opportunities. After the end of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh six months ago, Turkey has pushed to carve out influence in Central Asia and position itself as an alternative to Russia among Turkic states. The Turkic Council, an intergovernmental agency formed in 2009, has been an important diplomatic umbrella for increasing solidarity and cooperation amongst Central Asian States and Turkey. By 2040, [Ankara's aim is to create an economic union](#) amongst Turkic Council member states and sources say Afghanistan has formally applied to the Turkic Council for observer status. Turkey's growing influence in the region also intersects with one of the major arteries of China's Belt and Road Initiative. An increased presence and bigger future diplomatic role for Turkey in Afghanistan will definitely have a synergistic effect on Ankara's broader Central Asian policies.

The only option?

In recent decades, Afghanistan has not figured as a foreign policy priority for Turkey. It has much bigger priorities with Syria, the US, the EU and the East Mediterranean. Still, the current climate has meant Turkey has been on the lookout for bargaining power and Afghanistan is a card to play. In some quarters in Washington, DC, there is concern that by withdrawing from Afghanistan, it is leaving Asia open to Russia, Iran and China. A greater role played by a natural

player in the landscape could be of use to the Americans to safeguard its interests, and the Americans have welcomed it.

The Turkish offer to secure and operate Hamid Karzai International Airport should not be seen in isolation, but as a larger effort to extend Ankara's influence throughout the region. Broader Central Asia aspirations certainly come in to play here, and a positive reception within NATO must surely have been part of the considerations. This will be a tough mission for Turkish forces and their partners and, regardless of its larger purposes, is one of the few examples of positive news emerging of late from Afghanistan.

In the absence of credible security measures, there is a need for a strong military presence at the airport, if for no other reason than to ensure diplomatic contingents remain within Kabul. It is unlikely that countries would maintain embassies with only an Afghan or commercial security ring around the airport, at least until the post-withdrawal situation on the ground is clarified. Turkey will be able to bridge that uncertain period and in doing so can mitigate much of the risk. And, despite the counterarguments, it may be the only option.

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