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THE TURKISH NAVY IN AN ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

RYAN GINGERAS
COMMENTARY

APRIL 30, 2019



On a dry dock just within eyeshot of the city of Istanbul, large rigs tower over the partially completed hull of the *Anadolu*, Turkey's first light aircraft carrier. The ship is modeled on the Spanish carrier *Juan Carlos I* and is set to be delivered to the Turkish navy at the end of 2020. Once in service, the *Anadolu* will augment a naval force that is expanding and modernizing by leaps and bounds. Media sources suggest that a total of 24 new ships, including four frigates, will be put to sea by the time Turkey celebrates its centennial in 2023. Complementing these new

construction projects is an ambitious plan to retrofit existing ships and submarines with new propulsion, navigation, detection and weapons systems. Most of these upgrades, commentators emphasize, derive from Turkish contractors.

The Turkish navy's transformation resonates strongly with the political and social leanings of Turkey's sitting president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The construction of the *Anadolu*, the final cost of which remains unclear, is in line with his government's longstanding agenda of sponsoring large-scale capital projects aimed at demonstrating the country's sophistication and global standing. An expanded, modernized fleet adds further muscle to Erdoğan's increasingly aggressive posturing in foreign affairs, giving Turkey the ability to further its foreign policy interests across the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Emphasis upon the employment of Turkish-owned companies in the production of new platforms and technologies reflects the acutely nationalistic tenor of his administration. His advancement of the Turkish defense industry also echoes the synergistic relationship between native manufacturers (particularly those involved in Turkey's export market) and the government's new-found assertiveness on the global stage. The navy's growth is lastly, and most importantly, emblematic of Turkish aspirations to become more untethered in pursuing the country's national interests. Once the *Anadolu* slips into the water, Erdoğan will undoubtedly declare Turkey ready to assert itself on the high seas without anyone impinging upon its independence or freedom of action.

Amid increased discussion of world affairs as defined by great power competition, Turkey is often overlooked. Ankara's ties to NATO, and its diminutive role within global affairs for much of the 20th century, has led many foreign commentators to see Turkey as a secondary power, a power whose interests generally align closely to its Western allies. A cursory look at the editorial pages of the country's most prominent newspaper, however, tells a very different story. From the perspective of the country's most prominent media personalities, Turkey is at most a few steps

away from joining the ranks of the world's most powerful states. Attaining such a status, for many leading commentators, is not wishful thinking but rather a birthright that past governments had forsaken. Erdoğan stands out as the most vocal champion of this conviction, making it a hallmark of his administration. While one may be forgiven for overlooking these assertions as nothing more than electioneering, it is clear many within Turkey's political establishment believe that the country is close to standing shoulder to shoulder with other greater powers. The Turkish navy's reformation represents an acute example of this emerging worldview, a worldview that increasingly paints the United States as a rival, and at times an adversary, in the path to Turkey's ascendancy on the global stage.

History, Nationalism, and Perceptions of the Turkish Navy

Children who attend public school in Turkey learn that they are the descendants of one of history's greatest naval powers. Turkish schoolchildren are raised and educated to think of their country as a main character in the making of the modern world. Central to this perception is the emergence of the Ottoman Empire as a hub of commercial wealth and imperial might. The empire, according to elementary and high school curriculum guidelines, dominated the Mediterranean Sea for more than two centuries. While Europeans may have forayed across the Atlantic, Ottoman naval forces demonstrated the empire's military and economic might through long campaigns along the east African coast and across in the Indian ocean (at one point sending a military expedition as far east as Aceh in Indonesia). Such lessons naturally include discussions of Piri Reis, an Ottoman admiral and navigator who compiled one of the most detailed maps of the Atlantic world in the early 1500s.

The emotive appeal of this view of the past forms an important element of how many Turkish policymakers see the present and future of the country (and, by extension, its navy). For Erdoğan and other senior leaders, Turks have long been denied their rightful inheritance as the heirs of the Ottoman sultans. The empire's retreat from global prominence was less the fault of its rulers as it was the

consequence of Western exploitation. European hegemony over the Ottoman Empire, according to this reading of history, was only partially the result of its superiority in military, commercial, or maritime affairs. Rather, it was through Europe's manipulation of the empire's economy and domestic politics that Western diplomats, traders, and missionaries gained an upper hand over the Ottoman state. Instead of reviving the country's preeminence as a world power, Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, engendered a foreign policy that was more parochial and deferential in its outlook. His successors, according to many contemporary critics, chose to sublimate Turkey's sovereignty and international interests in exchange for European and American protection and support. Erdoğan has repeatedly insisted that Turkey has been undermined by the United States and other NATO allies. Among the most consistent tropes of his speeches since the 2016 coup attempt has been his belief that Turkey is experiencing a "second war of independence." In alluding to the country's post-World War I struggle against foreign occupation, Erdoğan has regularly implied that Turks will again liberate themselves from Western influence and help reverse the West's subjugation of the Middle East and the Islamic world at large.

The writings of Erdoğan's former foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, have had the greatest influence upon Erdoğan's worldview and his consequential approach towards the navy. In his magnum opus, *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu proposed that the country's history and geographic location constituted the basis for a far more robust Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's imperial past, he maintained, makes it a predestine naval power. Yet despite their territorial hold over the straits bridging the Black Sea and the Aegean, and their history of ruling lands stretching across the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, Turkey's rulers have generally failed to leverage these strengths over the last two centuries. In abdicating the country's "hidden potential" as a naval power, both the Ottomans and the republican governments wasted opportunities to play a more determinative role in global politics as well as their own defense. Turkey's imperial heritage and contemporary interests, he argued, should compel Ankara to take a more active

role within the “sea basins” within its near abroad. Davutoğlu’s original vision, penned in 2001, foresaw a future where economics and shared strategic interests would guide Turkey’s interactions with competing powers. Though he cites the U.S. naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan with much affection, Davutoğlu’s musings offered no concrete guidance as to how the Turkish navy should specifically help Turkey realize its innate potential.

Regional Rivalries, Trade, and Domestic Politics

Three present-day trends have helped refine Davutoğlu’s initial projections upon Turkey’s foreign policy and maritime ambitions. Arguably the most important factor at work today is the precipitous rise in regional tensions within Turkey’s near abroad. Syria’s civil war encapsulates many of Turkey’s most profound fears regarding the country’s security. The rise of a successful, emphatically nationalistic Kurdish movement in Syria, coupled with the involvement of various powers and proxies in the conflict, has compelled Ankara to take greater initiative in asserting its place in regional affairs. Several of the actors involved in the Syrian conflict, such as the United States, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, possess overall strategic goals and interests that conflict with Ankara’s current security priorities. This clash of rivaling interests can also be seen in other areas Ankara views as its maritime periphery, such as Cyprus, Libya, Qatar, and the Crimea. Outside of Syria, the most ambitious forum for Turkey’s proactive security policies lies on the Horn of Africa. For the last decade, private Turkish interests have helped bolster growing military and commercial ties with the governments of Djibouti, Sudan, and Somalia (an effort that has intentionally caused some discomfort in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). Protecting Turkey’s trade and energy interests has also exercised an increasingly strong influence over its current strategic planning. With more than 87 percent of the country’s trade conducted via maritime ports of entry, and a number of transnational pipelines passing through Turkish territorial waters, the country’s naval capabilities have come to figure more prominently in contemporary Turkish thinking. A desire to stake a claim to natural gas deposits

off the coast of Cyprus has especially stirred the attention of policymakers in Ankara. The commencement of Turkish drilling operations, as well as rumored plans for the building of a new Turkish naval base in northern Cyprus, are among the most recent signs that planners intend to project greater influence over the eastern Mediterranean.

BECOME A MEMBER

Still other economic factors have helped shape the nature of Turkish naval policy. Turkey's plans to build and deploy the carrier *Anadolu* is but one indication of Ankara's overall push to develop and expand its national defense industry. Although lawmakers have long nurtured a desire to make Turkey less dependent upon foreign weaponry and technology, Erdoğan's government has dramatically increased defense spending and has worked diligently to promote state cooperation with native defense contractors. According to a survey conducted by one of the country's leading defense industry associations, spending on research and development has tripled since 2007, topping more than \$1.2 billion during the last fiscal year. This surge in capital investment has produced a number of projects principally meant to augment the Turkish navy. In addition to a new line of frigates and corvettes, known as the MILGEM program, local contractors have come to supply the fleet with a new array of torpedoes, missiles, and sensory equipment. Complementing this commitment to modernizing the Turkish navy has been Ankara's promotion of its defense industry abroad. Although dwarfed by comparable products meant for land operations, international sales of naval hardware have taken far greater importance in recent years (most notably with Pakistan's plans to purchase four MILGEM frigates in the coming years).

Domestic politics also plays an outsized role in the forging of Turkey's new naval policy. Since coming into power in 2002, Erdoğan has promoted large-scale capital investment projects as the touchstone of his administration. Investment in mass public works, particularly in the transport sector, has contributed extensively to his popular appeal and electoral successes. As expositions of the country's improved prosperity, large-scale construction projects have also provided the Turkish president high-profile venues to herald the country's growing strength and material capacity. The lauding of the country's improved defensive capabilities has also provided Erdoğan a basis from which to promote his belief that Turkey is country besieged by conspiratorial foreign and domestic forces. If Turkey did not invest in its military, he told a crowd in 2017, the government would be unable to conduct foreign operations or combat terrorism due to "the covert embargoes applied to our country today." Yet in his quest to see Turkey utilize only "national and native" sources of supply and design, Erdoğan has also used public investment as a means to consolidate power and punish dissent. The most notable case of his politicization of the defense sector was the government's decision to cancel a \$2 billion contract with the Koç construction conglomerate, which was originally tasked with building the first wave of MILGEM vessels. News that a Koç-owned hotel had harbored protestors during the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations fed widespread speculation that Erdoğan preferred that defense contracts be awarded to more politically reliable firms. The owner of Sedef Shipbuilding Yard, which is currently completing construction on the *Anadolu*, has long been rumored to be close to Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party government.

Great Power Competition and the Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations

As a matter of official policy, the Turkish Naval Forces does not envision radical changes to its mission. Turkey's overall foreign policy goals, according to its 2015 strategic outlook statement, remain grounded in three basic principles: "stability, cooperation and continentally-oriented projection." Nothing within the navy's actions or public statements suggest that it plans to deviate from its current

commitments to NATO. More specifically, there are no indications the Turkish navy sees the United States as anything other than an ally and partner. Yet recent actions and statements do suggest a change in posture may be forthcoming. In March, the Turkish Armed Forces staged their largest maritime exercise in modern history. While Turkey's state-run news agency cast the maneuvers as contributing "to the shared goals of NATO," Russian ships later joined the exercises. One former Turkish admiral emphasized that the "Blue Homeland" exercises constituted a message to the United States and other Western powers. The West, he argued, was intent upon blocking Turkey's access to the energy-rich Mediterranean and "did not want Turkey to join the maritime club of the developed world." Even greater vitriol can be found in the editorial pages of pro-government newspapers or from watching popular television commentators. Turkey's modernizing navy, as one commentator put it, stands ready "for war against the fait accompli attempts of Greece and the Greek administration of Cyprus to expand their occupation efforts in the Aegean and the Mediterranean." Far harsher words and intensions are cast towards the United States, which is generally depicted in the Turkish press as a state hell-bent on undermining Turkey's sovereignty and interests. With the two countries at loggerheads over Washington's alliance with Syria's Kurds, some pundits have openly speculated as to possible military clashes between Turkish and U.S. forces. Should Turkey face off against American troops in northeastern Syria, one former Turkish general recently argued, "they'll say no and maybe resist a little but they won't enter into armed combat with the Turkish army over such a small region." Even in the absence of direct conflict, leading members of Turkey's foreign policy community tend to see the future as one where the United States and its Western allies are relegated to the sidelines. The world's future, as one noted expert recently put it, will surely look "more global, more African, more Latin American, more Asian and more Turkish."

As the hull of the *Anadolu* continues to rise above the sea's horizon, it certainly appears that Erdoğan and other senior leaders bank on the ability of the Turkish navy to take a more forceful role on the open ocean. Whether those aspirations are

indeed attainable depend upon several factors. When the modernization of the navy began, Turkey boasted a growing economy and stronger currency. After the lira's recent downturn, the country's financial stability increasingly looks at risk. Despite statements to the contrary, Ankara's ability to continue its revamping of its navy also rests on maintaining strong relations with its NATO partners. The *Anadolu*, for example, was commissioned as a platform used to deploy its expected fleet of F-35 fighters. As of this spring, it is unclear whether Turkey will ever receive the 100 planes it was originally promised. Whether the Turkish navy can truly operate independently of its allies is yet another unanswered question. With much of its fleet composed of new, limitedly tested platforms and technology, it remains to be seen how well Turkish vessels can sustain long deployments or combat operations completely on its own. For this reason, experts still rate the Turkish navy as "an essentially littoral force."

Yet even if one accounts for these potential limitations, it is likely that Turkish aspirations for greater global influence will endure. In spite of the contentiousness of his rule, Erdoğan has had an indelible effect upon how large numbers of Turks see their country's future. The revisionism of his worldview, an outlook that casts Turkey as a spited global-power-in-waiting, resonates strongly among citizens at various ends of the country's political spectrum. Though foreign analysts and policymakers may not include Turkey among other contemporary "great powers," Turkish political leaders and opinion makers possess no qualms in ranking their country's long-term potential alongside the likes of Russia, China, and the United States. What that means for the United States is not entirely clear. While Ankara and Washington remain bound together through NATO and other bilateral ties, the desire to match or overtake the United States as a regional and global actor serves as a powerful source of inspiration in Turkey. In the long run, these impulses will likely lead to greater conflict between the two historic allies.

BECOME A MEMBER

Ryan Gingeras is a professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School and an expert on Turkish, Balkan, and Middle East history. He is the author of five books, including the forthcoming Eternal Dawn: Turkey in the Age of Atatürk. He has published on a wide variety of topics related to history and politics in such journals as Foreign Affairs, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Middle East Journal, Iranian Studies, Diplomatic History, Past & Present, and Journal of Contemporary European History.

Image: [Turkish Naval Forces photo](#)

COMMENTARY

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