



Understanding Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy

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Turkey's different recent moves in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is argued, aim to disrupt the game plans of other countries. Backed by military instruments, Turkey has confronted regional adversaries, including some of its NATO allies. It has undertaken naval exercises or deployed its navy to support its seismic surveys and has thwarted other players' drilling efforts, hence blocking the monetization of the area's natural resources, not to mention its military involvement in the Libya conflict. There is a tendency to view such actions as erratic moves aimed at disrupting the game plans of others which can hardly be explained by strategic considerations. Disruption is definitely part of Turkey's regional conduct, but it would be misleading to downplay it as aimless. Such moves can be best conceptualized as part of coercive diplomacy, which is based on the threat of punishment or threat of denial to achieve desired objectives.

The Strategic Context

Turkey's moves do not take place in vacuum: their increasing frequency can be placed in the context of an assertive strategic orientation, centered on the militarization of foreign policy instruments. The seemingly erratic resort to the use or threat of force rests on a certain strategic logic. First, Turkey's acts relate directly to its calculation of relative power. As I have argued in an earlier piece in this series, the ability to block outcomes that might be against one's interests has to be factored into an analysis of foreign-policy performance. Indeed, the readiness to use military means has been an integral element of the power calculus in Turkish decision making.

Numerous analyses have been far too eager to declare the failure of Turkey's regional engagements. Many ignored the country's ability to make game-changing interventions to upend the course of events, either by blocking others' moves or altering their calculations. A notable recent case was during the independence referendum in Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) in 2017 when Turkey undertook counter-intuitive moves to disrupt the President Masoud Barzani's calculations. In the Eastern Mediterranean, this dynamic has been present as well, as was illustrated starkly in the case of Libya and the ongoing disputes over the exploration of offshore hydrocarbon resources.

Turkey's disruptive actions are also part of Turkey's coercive diplomacy, which has become another defining feature of its conduct of late. States engaging in coercive diplomacy seek to either deter their adversaries from

undertaking certain actions or compel them to behave in certain ways. In either case, coercive diplomacy relies on a credible threat that eventually rests on material capabilities and the will to employ them. The threat can take either of two forms: punishment or denial.

Any coercive diplomatic move is based on an underlying belief on the part of the initiator that it commands escalation dominance. If the adversary feels it has better options by retaliating rather than complying with the threat, the coercer will face a dilemma: either to back down, which will produce reputational costs, or to escalate, which risks a military showdown. Since neither is the true objective of coercive diplomacy, the initiator needs to calculate carefully before engaging in this strategy.

In several instances in which Turkey employed coercive strategies, it has enjoyed clear superiority over its regional rivals. However, it has also confronted superior counterparts periodically: France over Libya or the United States or Russia over Syria. The willingness to engage in coercive diplomacy depends more on a balance of resolution than balance of material power, and to a large extent it is related to the risk-taking calculus of leaders. Moreover, even in the case of military balance, the options that can actually be used in a given crisis are more determinant than overall capabilities. Geographic proximity and the significance of the issue will determine how much usable military assets countries will bring to bear in a crisis, as opposed to their total national power. Therefore, while assessing who enjoys escalation dominance, the coercer needs to have an idea about its own and the adversary's commitment to the issue at stake, the value they place on the stakes, their reputational concerns, and the resolution to back their stance with military instruments.

Drivers of Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy

Keeping these broader theoretical insights in mind, at least three interrelated narratives about the utility of force currently make Turkish leaders confident that they possess escalation dominance and thus willing to undertake high-risk coercive steps.

Boots on the ground: In Turkey's reading of the strategic environment in the Middle East and North Africa, the deepening cycle of instability and power vacuums are the two prevailing forces that create structural challenges. In this uncertain setting, military power is treated as an essential ingredient of Turkish statecraft, which seeks to assert strategic autonomy and regional leadership. A glorification of the "boots on the ground" narrative, in the sense of establishing a direct linkage between military force and diplomatic influence, has been a hallmark of recent foreign policy, fed by Turkey's experience in Syria.

Dirt on the boots, already: Turkey's decision making has been more trigger-happy since 2016 when it launched the first military operation in Syria against ISIS. There has been a learning curve. Having passed the threshold of resorting to military instruments and getting its boots dirty already, which overall was successful and led to political dividends, authorizing subsequent operations and mobilizing public support behind them have been easier. These operations are treated as precedents, and hence clear signals, that Turkey remains determined to back its threats by force if adversaries fail to accede to its demands.

Adversaries in dress shoes: Turkey's recent conduct has rested on the assumption that other countries will find it hard to escalate against it, because of either their aversion to take off their dress shoes and put boots on the ground, or their inability to mount a credible challenge. Compared to their recent track record of with-

standing the costs of military operations in blood and treasure, Turkish leaders downplay their opponents' resolution to sustain the pain of foreign military missions.

Assessing Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy

Together, these factors suggest that, in addition to the country's advantages in terms of the distribution of material capabilities vis-à-vis some of its regional rivals, Turkey's leadership sees coercive diplomacy backed by military instruments as feasible. However, the logic of coercive diplomacy is complex, and since it is one step short of application of brute force, it has to be managed judiciously. A sound foreign policy that relies on coercive diplomacy must be attentive to of the following considerations.

Proportionality: A proper assessment and identification of where the country's real national interests lie and channeling necessary resources to their defense is a vital element of any strategy.

Legitimacy: Like any diplomatic instrument, coercive policies need to enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of domestic and international constituencies.

Diminishing returns: Since the utility of the use or threat of force declines over time, one can employ coercive diplomacy only so many times. It requires not only a sound assessment of others' determination, but also a delicate balancing act to avoid encouraging the formation of counterbalancing coalitions.

Perception/misperception: Even in case of perfect calculation on the part of coercer at the outset, the risks associated with perception/misperception dynamics can alter reaction of other actors, increasing the risk of a military showdown.

Exit strategy: Like any strategy, coercive diplomacy must have clear perspective about the endgame being pursued, which needs to be signaled clearly to the adversary without leaving room for ambiguity.

Coercive diplomacy that fails to carefully attend to the above elements may turn out to be very risky for Turkey. Miscalculations can easily trigger an uncontrolled escalation spiral and security dilemma, which may turn its disruptive policies into destructive encounters.

Some of Turkey's disruptive moves so far have overall paid off by denying adversaries the ability to accomplish their objectives or getting them to act in line with Turkey's interests. In Syria, Iraq, and Libya, Turkey has managed game-changing coercive diplomacy drawing on the threat of punishment and denial. It committed relatively modest hard-power assets relative to the outcome, which was even admitted by the staunch critics of Turkish policy. Although Turkey's moves were seen by others as high-stake gambits, the outcome in many cases has proven otherwise. So far, Turkey's assessment of its own and others' resolution to escalate proved correct, as showcased in its brinkmanship against France over Libya, in which case it also correctly calculated potential European and U.S. reactions, which led to France being marginalized.

Turkey has also managed to avoid some of the pitfalls involved in coercive diplomacy identified above.

First, by framing the new coercive turn as a strategic necessity, the government seems to have made a strong argument domestically to justify the proportionality of means to ends. While Turkey's engagement in Syria and Iraq is contextualized with reference to thwarting existential threats to the country's survival and territorial integrity, its policy in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean has been tied to the defense of sovereign rights.

Second, as a result, the government has managed to garner legitimacy in the eyes of domestic constituencies. The Turkish stance in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean continues to be backed not only by the supporters of the government but also those of the opposition parties.

Third, it has proven to be a calculating risk-taker and managed to contain escalatory dynamics in many cases. When confronted with powerful actors that command escalation dominance, Turkey has backed down or settled for face-saving deals, as was the case with the Moscow memorandum in March over the situation in Idlib in Syria. It has de-escalated, giving room to diplomatic negotiations, and offering the adversary a chance to reconsider options. Turkey's decision to halt seismic explorations in Eastern Mediterranean waters to ease tensions with Greece, under mediation by Germany, illustrated this tactic, which bolstered its legitimacy.

On the other hand, Turkey's coercive diplomacy has run into complications.

First, frequent resort to the use or threat of force underscores a major problem of Turkey's foreign policy overall: the failure to draw on a wider array of diplomatic instruments, most notably coalition-building.

Second, the frequent invocation of national survival to justify an endless ring of militarized entanglements abroad may lead to overstretch, as well as raise questions about threat inflation and re-securitization of foreign policy. In any case, the overdose risks undermining domestic and international support for the government, and eventually the credibility of coercive diplomacy. Diminishing returns are already kicking-in: the more it uses them, Turkey is realizing that there are no automatic rewards from coercive strategies, in the sense of translating victories on the ground into permanent diplomatic gains.

Third, the perception/misperception dynamics have kicked in, undermining the legitimacy and support behind the policy. Irrespective of Turkey framing its new posture as defensive, many of its interlocutors perceive this as offensive gunboat diplomacy. Some of the domestic rhetoric in justification of the new policy, which frequently includes thorny historical metaphors, are hardly helpful to reassuring adversaries that are implicated by the very same narratives.

Fourth, to the extent that signaling of mixed motives raises ambiguity about Turkey's objectives, they create security dilemmas for its interlocutors at which point whether Turkey is acting on defensive or offensive considerations becomes irrelevant. Consequently, Turkish engagements have already triggered counterbalancing coalitions among its rivals, who also prepare to engage in coercive diplomacy, which makes the situation ripe for further escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Last but not least, it is far from certain a realistic exit strategy underpins Turkey's current foreign policy initiatives. So far, it has avoided getting embroiled in military quagmires by de-escalating as necessary. However, it

is currently undertaking several cross-border operations and continues to issue threats of force. Considering the instability and power vacuum in the Middle East and North Africa, the fluid regional environment makes coercive diplomacy a particularly risky choice. Considering the intensifying strategic interactions between a myriad actors in the Eastern Mediterranean and the growing signals that other countries see the gains from using or threatening force as outweighing the risks, Turkey might find itself having to defend outcomes it did not foresee initially. If mishandled, its current engagements can trigger an uncontrolled spiral of escalation and drag Ankara into a difficult choice between backing down or getting entrapped in dangerous military encounters over issues of questionable importance.

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