

Short Essay: Berk Cebeci

Middle Power Agency: Turkey in the 1970s Cold War



Central Intelligence Agency, Turkey, Published Maps series, Record Group 263: Records of the Central Intelligence Agency, NAID 266784429 (Local ID: 802946AI), National Archives Catalog, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/266784429>

The Cold War is often remembered as a bipolar struggle in which Washington and Moscow set the terms, and others had to follow. That framing has long dominated both the popular imagination and a significant strand of diplomatic history. Yet the historical record tells a more complicated story, one in which some states positioned at the intersection of competing interests exercised remarkable influence over the very alliances that nominally subordinated them. Turkey's navigation of

the 1974-1980 period offers one of the most instructive examples of this dynamic: a middle power that, far from being an object of American strategy, exerted to shape the terms of its own rehabilitation within the Western security order.

The Cyprus crisis of 1974 and the congressional arms embargo that followed represent, at first glance, a textbook case of hegemonic discipline. Turkey had deployed American-supplied weapons in the Cyprus intervention, a violation of U.S. law, and

Congress responded accordingly. The Ford administration protested. The State Department warned of strategic catastrophe. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called the embargo a "calamity."¹ None of it mattered. The ban entered into force in February 1975. Here, one might expect the story of a dependent ally quietly absorbing punishment until Washington decided to restore normalcy. That is not what happened.

What followed instead was a deliberate, calibrated Turkish campaign to leverage its structural indispensability against the very power that had sanctioned it. The Demirel government did not plead for reconsideration. It closed American base facilities across the country; twenty-one installations in total, housing five thousand military and civilian personnel and transferring their supervision to the Turkish Armed Forces.² It opened diplomatic channels with the Soviet Union, hosting Premier Aleksei Kosygin and accepting approximately \$650 million in Soviet economic assistance over the course of the embargo period. It cultivated ties with Balkan nations, Middle Eastern states, and

African countries, signaling publicly that Turkey's foreign policy orientation was not permanently fixed. And throughout this period, it extracted concessions: the partial lifting of the embargo in October 1975, the Defense and Cooperation Agreement of March 1976, and ultimately the full termination of the embargo in 1978.

These were not the actions of a dependent ally. They were the moves of a state that understood precisely what it offered to the Western alliance: the southern flank of NATO, control of the Turkish Straits, borders with the Soviet Union, and a landmass bridging southeastern Europe and southwestern Asia, and was willing to deploy that geographic leverage deliberately. The base closures in particular demonstrated a sophisticated reading of alliance politics: Turkey shut down American operations while carefully preserving NATO functions, maintaining flexibility and signaling resolve without providing Washington a pretext for permanent estrangement. As one American intelligence assessment conceded, Turkey was "unlikely to cut the ties knowing that being part of NATO and the West has been mutually beneficial"³ but Ankara had made

¹ "Memorandum of Conversation," February 28, 1975, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXXVIII, Part 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1973–1976*, eds. Kristin L. Ahlberg and Alexander Wieland (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012), 277.

² Barış Doster, "Soğuk Savaş Döneminde Türkiye - ABD İlişkileri," in *Türkiye'nin Soğuk Savaş Düzeni: Ordu,*

Sermaye, ABD, İslamizasyon, eds. Behlül Özkan and Tolga Gürakar (İstanbul: Tekin Yayinevi, 2020), 324–325.

³ "Interagency Intelligence Memorandum," February 21, 1975, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXX, Greece; Cyprus; Turkey, 1973–1976*, eds. Laurie Van Hook and Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007), 704, 708, 710.

certain that Washington understood the costs of continued alienation.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan later that same year provided the decisive catalysts. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski captured the logic with characteristic directness: the revolution had destroyed the "northern frontier" spanning Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, and had opened the region to unprecedented vulnerability.⁴ The loss of American military and intelligence infrastructure in Iran; reconnaissance capabilities, base access, the entire architecture of the Dual Pillar strategy transformed Turkey from a sanctioned ally into an indispensable one. Carter administration officials who had spent years navigating congressional resistance to military aid for Turkey now urgently requested \$100 million in economic assistance to stabilize a country they could not afford to lose.⁵

Turkey was not simply rehabilitated by this shift in American calculations. It had helped engineer the conditions under which rehabilitation became a strategic imperative. The Ecevit government's national defense

doctrine had made explicit what Turkish officials had been implying since 1975: that dependence on a single Western source for arms procurement was untenable, and that Turkey retained the capacity to restructure its security relationships if the alliance failed to honor its commitments. The doctrine was partly rhetorical and partly operational; Ecevit's July 1978 visit to Moscow raised Western anxieties, even though the agreement signed there did little more than reaffirm Helsinki principles. But the signal it sent was unmistakable. As American intelligence analysts noted, the Ecevit government was "examining with greater seriousness" the possibility of reducing Turkey's ties to the West, and Washington could not afford to call what it suspected was a partial bluff.⁶

The Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement of March 1980 formalized the healing in affairs. Turkey received security guarantees and a renewed commitment of military and economic assistance; the United States reactivated access to a network of bases that its own strategic planners had concluded were essential to any serious response to the Soviet threat in Southwest

⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), 354-356.

⁵ "Letter to the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate Transmitting Proposed Legislation," April 10, 1979, in *Public Papers of The Presidents of The United*

States: Jimmy Carter, 1979. Book I (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 648.

⁶ "Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency," May 25, 1978, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XXI, Cyprus; Turkey; Greece*, eds. David Zierler and Adam M. Howard (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2014), 91.

Asia. The terms were more favorable to Ankara than those of any previous arrangement. Structural inequality remained; the alliance hierarchy had not been dissolved but Turkey had successfully renegotiated its position within it.

The military coup of September 1980 provided the period's defining coda. Washington, which had sanctioned Turkey diplomatically and economically in 1975 over a military operation conducted abroad, responded to the overthrow of Turkey's elected government with studied silence and quiet acquiescence. The democratic and human rights concerns that had animated the embargo were absorbed, with barely a murmur, into the imperatives of Cold War realpolitik. The United States had already re-embraced Turkey as an indispensable partner; the coup occurred within a strategic context in which that partnership had become too valuable to jeopardize over the means by which a NATO ally chose to govern itself.

This is, in one sense, a cautionary story about the limits of liberal internationalism within the structures of Cold War alliance politics. But it is equally a story about agency and the capacity of middle powers to shape the terms of their own subordination, to exploit the gap between their formal

position within a hierarchical alliance and the structural leverage their geography and capabilities actually conferred. Turkey was not the only Cold War state to practice this type of calculated ambiguity; Finland, Yugoslavia, and Egypt each tried to navigate versions of the same dynamic in their own regional contexts. But the Turkish case is relatively well-documented, unusually stark and instructive for what it reveals about the actual functioning of Cold War alliance politics beneath the surface of superpower competition.

The history of the Cold War cannot be adequately understood without recovering the agency of the states that occupied its periphery; not as objects of great power strategy, but as actors whose own calculations, vulnerabilities, and assertiveness helped constitute the outcomes that had been long attributed to superpowers alone.

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