

Turkey: Learning From the Ottomans' Mistakes

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Turkey's president is determined to break the disconnect between perceived and real military capabilities.

Reality Check

By Xander Snyder

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to move Turkey's military procurement process under his direct authority – mandated in an emergency decree passed on Dec. 24 – indicates two things. First, that he knows that for Turkey to rise, it needs a stronger military. Second, that he's mindful of past mistakes made by the Ottoman Empire. For Turkey to project power, it needs the ability to intervene unilaterally, independent of foreign military purchases. It also needs its strategic planners to be on the same page with those who procure the weapons that support its military strategy. In other words, Erdogan is aware of the risk of the disconnect between perception and reality.

Geopolitical Futures has written extensively on the [rise of Turkey as a major regional power](#). To buffer its core from the chaos in the Middle East, Turkey needs to expand its territory. To expand its territory, it needs a powerful, independent military. Turkey's Emergency Decree No. 696 is a step toward constructing this military.

The decree grants Erdogan a number of new powers. The agency responsible for executing military procurement decisions – the Undersecretariat for Defense Industries, or SSM – now reports directly to the president rather than to the Defense Ministry. The decree also gives the president the authority to convene and chair meetings of the Defense Industry Executive Committee, which makes the policy decisions that are carried out by the SSM. It also places the Turkish Armed Forces Foundation – a government agency that retains majority ownership in several of Turkey's largest defense companies – under the president's direct control. Finally, the decree permits Erdogan to appoint personnel to the SSM at his discretion.

In effect, Erdogan will now have direct access to information further down the command chain – information that previously would have passed through an additional layer of gatekeepers to

reach him – all without dismantling any existing organizations. This was important to Erdogan because of his experience in the failed coup against him in July 2016. Since then, he has been hesitant to let military matters escape his grasp. He has pushed to increase his own powers via emergency decrees and a referendum last April that strengthened the executive power of the president. (Previously, the presidency was more of a ceremonial role.)



Turkish soldiers march during the 94th Republic Day parade on Oct. 29, 2017, in Ankara, Turkey. ADEM ALTAN/AFP/Getty Images

Erdogan was also motivated by foreign considerations. Turkey's rise will compel it to [seek greater strategic depth](#) and expand its territory into the Middle East – or, at the very least, control more territory via proxies. Expansion entails conflict, and all wars ultimately hinge on the ability of a state to supply its military. Failure to establish controlled supply routes is tantamount to walking into a losing fight.

But Erdogan's recent emergency decree is not simply about informational awareness; it is also a matter of decreasing dependency on foreign military purchases and cementing Turkey's unilateral ability to act militarily.

The organizations Erdogan has placed under his control have, since their inception in the 1980s, been tasked primarily with developing an independent domestic arms industry. Events in Turkey's relatively recent history spurred their creation. In the Cyprus crisis of 1964, when Greece and Turkey nearly went to war over control of the island of Cyprus, the U.S. and NATO intervened. They mediated an agreement to prevent the two NATO allies from going to war, an

event that would have weakened the alliance in the midst of the Cold War and only two years after the Cuban missile crisis. At the time, Turkey was a weaker power than it is today and was far more dependent on foreign military aid.

But there is more than recent history behind Erdogan's desire for greater direct access to military information. Indeed, it could be argued that the onset of the Ottoman Empire's decline was the direct result of its leaders' disconnect between perceived and real military capabilities.

Historical Memory of a Declining Empire

Turkey's historical memory is informed by the failure to fully understand the extent of its own capabilities. After the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries, a series of wars with the Persian Safavid Empire lasting more than 100 years largely took the Ottomans' focus off of Europe. While the Ottomans traded borders continually with the Safavids and employed largely the same military tactics and operational supply lines that had served them well up to that point, a catastrophic event in Europe changed the nature of warfare: the [Thirty Years' War](#).

From 1618-1648, European militaries revolutionized their training, tactics and weapons technology. This largely escaped the notice of the Ottomans, who at that point considered the Safavids the more immediate threat. In 1683, when Kara Mustafa Pasha broke the armistice of 1664 with the Habsburg monarchy and marched on Vienna, he was woefully unprepared to face the European militaries. A small Viennese garrison was able to hold out for several days until reinforcements arrived - culminating in the largest cavalry charge in history - and even though the European army was about two-thirds the size of the Ottoman forces, the Ottomans were routed. The Great Turkish War that followed saw the near-complete annihilation of three Ottoman field armies, marking the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman Empire.

As the empire waned, the Ottomans made several unsuccessful attempts to implement rapid reform to meet the unrealized threat from European armies. In the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire suffered one defeat after another at the hands of the Russians. In the 19th century, the Ottomans implemented their most sweeping set of reforms after another crushing loss, this time to Napoleon. This reform effort also proved unsuccessful. The Russians defeated the Ottoman Empire yet again in 1878, and then the Ottomans watched their empire crumble as the Balkan revolutions unfolded in the lead-up to World War I, which was the empire's death knell.

Ottoman leaders overestimated the might of their military relative to those of European powers. Erdogan is determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The key will be to ensure that his perception - and the perception of subsequent presidents - of Turkish military strength closely parallels reality. An emergency decree may not be a long-term answer, but it is an important step toward greater centralized control of the military.