

The ‘New Turkey’ and American-Turkish Relations¹

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ABSTRACT

The United States has to deal with a very different Turkey today than the Turkey during the Cold War. The disappearance of the Soviet threat has reduced Turkey's dependence on the United States for its security and deprived the U.S.-Turkish security partnership of a clear unifying purpose. At the same time, Turkey's geographic role and interests have expanded. Turkey now has interests and stakes in various regions it did not have two decades ago. It is thus less willing to automatically follow the U.S.'s lead on many issues, especially when U.S. policy conflicts with Turkey's own interests. This does not mean that Turkey is turning its back on the West or the United States. Turkey still wants—and needs—strong ties with the United States. But the terms of engagement have changed. Ankara is a rising regional power and is no longer content to play the role of junior partner.

In recent years, U.S.-Turkish relations have been plagued by significant difficulties and strains. The U.S. invasion of Iraq contributed to a sharp deterioration of U.S.-Turkish relations and a visible rise in anti-American sentiment in Turkey.² More recently, differences over Turkey's ties to Iran and the problems in Turkish-Israeli relations have created tensions in relations with the Obama Administration and raised concerns in Washington and other Western capitals that Turkey is drifting away from the West in favor of strengthening ties with the Muslim world.

Strains in U.S.-Turkish relations are nothing new. The U.S. withdrawal of Jupiter missiles in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis precipitated a serious crisis regarding the credibility of the U.S.'s commitment to defend Turkey against outside attack. U.S.-Turkish relations also suffered a sharp downturn as a result of the 1963–1964 Cyprus crisis. The crisis prompted Ankara to broaden its security ties

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and reduce its dependence on Washington. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 precipitated an even more severe crisis. In response to the invasion, the U.S. Congress imposed an arms embargo on Turkey, which resulted in a sharp deterioration of U.S.-Turkish relations.

While these crises put severe strains on the U.S.-Turkish partnership and prompted Turkey to begin to reduce its dependence on the United States for its security, their impact was mitigated by the constraints imposed by the Cold War. In the face of an overriding Soviet threat, both sides felt the need to maintain strong security ties and not allow these disagreements to fundamentally weaken the security partnership.

Turkey's Changing Security Environment

The current strains are quite different. They are primarily the result of *structural changes in Turkey's security environment*, particularly since the end of the Cold War. The disappearance of the Soviet threat removed the main rationale behind the U.S.-Turkish security partnership and reduced Ankara's dependence on Washington. At the same time, it opened up new opportunities and vistas in areas that had previously been neglected or were off-limits to Turkish policy, particularly in the Middle East and the Caucasus/Central Asia. Ankara sought to exploit this new diplomatic flexibility and room for maneuver by establishing new relationships in these areas.

In addition, with the end of the Cold War, the locus of threats and challenges to Turkish security shifted. During the Cold War, the main threat to Turkish security came from the north—from the Soviet Union. Today, Turkey faces a much more diverse set of security threats and challenges: rising Kurdish nationalism and separatism; sectarian violence in Iraq, which could spill over and draw in outside powers; the possible emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran on Turkey's doorstep; and a weak, fragmented Lebanon dominated by radical groups with close ties to Iran and Syria. Most of these threats and challenges are on or close to Turkey's southern border. As a result, Turkish strategic attention is today focused much more on the Middle East than it had been in the past because this is where the key threats and challenges to Turkish security are located. In addition, Turkey's economic interests have shifted towards the east and south.

This does not mean that Turkey is turning its back on the West or that its policy is being “Islamized,” as some critics charge. Rather Turkey’s recent foreign policy activism is aimed at overcoming the anomalies of the Cold War. It represents an attempt to broaden and diversify Turkey’s foreign policy, not change its basic orientation.

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This is not to argue that the current ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) Islamic roots have had no influence on Turkish policy, *but they have not been the main driving force behind Turkish policy*. Ankara’s foreign policy primarily represents an attempt to adapt to Turkey’s new strategic environment and exploit the new flexibility and freedom of maneuver afforded by the end of the Cold War.

Turkey’s new foreign policy outreach has not been limited to the Middle East; it has also included an effort to improve ties to the newly independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus.³ Turkey’s opening to Central Asia and the Caucasus began well before the AKP came to power in November 2002. In the first few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey, under the dynamic leadership of President Turgut Özal, launched a concerted campaign to expand relations with the newly independent states of Central Asia. Ankara opened up cultural centers in the Central Asian republics, established extensive scholarship programs to allow students from these countries to study in Turkey, and expanded its television broadcasts in an effort to extend its cultural influence in the region.

The AKP has built on Özal’s early efforts and given them new impetus. The main driving force behind the AKP’s policy in Central Asia, however, has been energy not Islam. Under the AKP, Turkey has focused largely on intensifying ties with the energy-rich countries of the Caspian basin, especially Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, which have few energy resources, have received far less attention.

Similarly, the significant improvement in Turkey’s relations with Russia in the last decade has little to do with religion or the AKP’s Islamic roots. As in Central Asia, the rapprochement with Moscow has been driven primarily by economics, particularly energy concerns. Russia is Turkey’s largest trading partner and its largest supplier of natural gas. Moscow supplies nearly 65 percent of Turkey’s natural gas imports and 25 percent of its crude oil imports. These close economic and energy ties have given Ankara a strong vested take in maintaining cordial po-

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litical relations with Russia. At the same time, the loss of momentum in Turkey’s EU membership bid has reinforced Ankara’s desire to expand its ties to other areas. Part of Turkey’s recent foreign policy activism has had its roots in the growing frustration and disenchantment with Europe and the problems encountered in

its EU membership bid. As Turkey’s problems with Europe have increased, Turkey has sought to broaden its ties elsewhere, especially with those areas and countries where it has long-standing historical and cultural ties.

Domestic factors have also had an impact on Turkey’s foreign policy. The democratization of Turkish politics in the last several decades has changed the dynamics of Turkish foreign policymaking by reducing the influence of the military in Turkish politics. The military remains an influential force in Turkish politics, but it does not have the political clout it used to enjoy a decade ago and is subject to much stronger civilian control. Today, there is a vibrant and diffuse foreign policy debate, with a diversity of actors striving to influence it. This has made foreign policy much more difficult for the traditional Kemalist elite to control, and has also made U.S.-Turkish relations more difficult to manage.

In short, the United States has to deal with a very different Turkey today than the Turkey during the Cold War. The disappearance of the Soviet threat has reduced Turkey’s dependence on the United States for its security and deprived the U.S.-Turkish security partnership of a clear unifying purpose. At the same time, Turkey’s geographic role and interests have expanded. Turkey now has interests and stakes in various regions it did not have two decades ago. It is thus less willing to automatically follow the U.S.’s lead on many issues, especially when U.S. policy conflicts with Turkey’s own interests.

This does not mean that Turkey is turning its back on the West or the United States. Turkey still wants—and needs—strong ties with the United States. But the terms of engagement have changed. Ankara is a rising regional power and is no longer content to play the role of junior partner. American policymakers are dealing with a “New Turkey” —one which is politically more self-confident and more willing to assert its own national interests.

Turkey has the 17th largest economy in the world and the sixth largest in Europe and has seen an average annual growth rate of nearly 7 percent in the last five

years. While Turkey's high growth rates may not be sustainable over the long haul, as Ian Lesser has noted, a more assertive and independent Turkish policy line is likely to persist and Western governments, including the United States, will need to learn how to live with it.⁴

The Danger of Strategic Drift

The problem is not that Turkey's policy has become "Islamized." The real danger is "strategic drift" and an increasing decoupling of U.S. and Turkish security interests. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, both the U.S.'s and Turkey's policies have lost their agreed sense of common strategic purpose. The result has been an increasing decoupling of U.S. and Turkish strategic interests. The AKP's Islamic roots have reinforced this trend but they have not caused it.

The problem has been aggravated by a sense of disappointment on the U.S. side. President Obama has invested a lot in the relationship with Turkey, which he argues is "more important than ever."⁵ The administration has stepped up military cooperation and assistance to Turkey in its struggle against the PKK-Turkey's number one security problem and a source of tension with the Bush Administration. It has also strongly backed Turkey's bid for EU membership, the rapprochement with Armenia, and the Erdoğan government's "Kurdish Opening"—three other important Turkish policy priorities.

But many U.S. officials feel Obama has received little in return for his efforts. While cooperation with Turkey has been effective in many areas such as Iraq and the Balkans, on critical security issues of great concern to the United States, such as the imposition of UN sanctions against Iran, Turkey has opposed the U.S. position. This has led many U.S. officials and congressmen to question whether the United States can really rely on Turkey in a crunch.

These strains have been given new impetus by the publication by WikiLeaks of classified cables from the U.S. embassy in Ankara which portray Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu in an unflattering light. However, while embarrassing, the leaked cables represent a diplomatic tempest in a teapot and not a serious crisis in bilateral relations. The most controversial cables were written by mid-level diplomats during the Bush Administration at a time when strains in U.S.-Turkish relations were more pronounced than they are today. Davutoğlu has gone out of his way to downplay the significance of the leaks, stressing the close

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Photo: AA, Kayhan Özer

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and cordial ties that exist at the highest level with U.S. officials in the Obama Administration, and both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama have publically reiterated the importance that the United States attaches to good relations with Turkey

Prospects for the Future

The attempt by both sides to downplay the impact of the Wikileaks cables does not mean that U.S.-Turkish relations are likely to be trouble-free in the future. Several issues are likely to pose important policy challenges. The most important challenge is posed by differences over Iran's nuclear program. U.S. and Turkish strategic interests regarding Iran basically coincide: Neither side wants to see the emergence of a nuclear Iran. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran could spark a destabilizing nuclear arms race in the Middle East. It could also provoke a divisive internal debate in Turkey about whether Ankara should seek to acquire its own nuclear arsenal.

The differences between Ankara and Washington over Iran are primarily over *tactics*. The Erdoğan government believes sanctions against Iran will not be ef-

fective and will only serve to reinforce Iranian intransigence. Turkish officials argue that Turkey's close ties to Tehran enable it to influence the Iranian leadership behind the scenes.

However, Turkey's emphasis on diplomatic engagement with Tehran has produced few visible concrete results so far. Iran has agreed to reopen negotiations led by Lady Ashton under the P5 plus 1 formula. But the severity of the sanctions has been main factor that has induced Iran to return to the negotiating table, not sweet talk from Ankara.

At some point down the line, Turkey could play an important role in facilitating a resolution of the nuclear issue with Iran. It thus makes sense for Ankara to keep diplomatic channels open to Tehran. However, such a mediating role is likely to have a serious chance of success only when Tehran concludes that its current policy of evasion and obfuscation has failed and become a serious obstacle to its economic and political stability and development. Prudently applied, the sanctions can help to hasten that day. Realism and a little "tough love" on Ankara's part would help as well.

In addition, Ankara needs to take steps to repair relations with Washington. Turkey's opposition to the imposition of UN sanctions against Iran has weakened support for Turkey in the U.S. Congress and raised questions in the minds of many congressmen about Turkey's reliability as an ally. If these differences persist, they could complicate Turkey's ability to obtain congressional support for important weapons procurement requests in the future.

The sharp downturn in Turkey's relations with Israel poses a second important area of discord with Washington. The deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations adds a new element of instability to the already highly volatile situation in the Middle East and could have a spill-over effect on U.S.-Turkish relations. While Turkish-Israeli relations are unlikely to regain the warmth or strategic importance they enjoyed in the late 1990s, a reduction in current tensions with Tel Aviv would not only enhance security in the Middle East but would also remove an important irritant in U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations.

The Armenian Genocide Resolution (H. R. 252) poses a third potential irritant. The U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee passed the resolution by a one-vote

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margin in early March 2010, prompting Ankara to recall its ambassador. While the Obama Administration subsequently persuaded the House leadership not to bring the resolution to a floor vote, the issue is far from dead and could re-emerge after the new Congress returns to work in January 2011.

As a result of changes precipitated by the mid-term elections last November the Republicans will control the House in the new Congress.. This normally would work to Turkey's advantage. The Republicans have traditionally given strategic considerations priority in the debate over the resolution. However, many Republicans such as Ileana Ros -Lehtinen, the new chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, are staunch supporters of Israel and have been angered by Erdogan's strident attacks on Israel and Turkey's vote in the UN against imposing sanctions on Iran. Thus Turkey cannot automatically count on strong Republican support to the same degree it could in the past. Lehtinen's voting record on the Genocide resolution, for instance, is mixed: she voted against it 2007 and 2009 but voted for it from 2000-2005.

In addition, Turkey could take several actions of its own which could weaken congressional support for the resolution. The first would be to show greater political support for Western sanctions toward Iran, especially those U.S. sanctions that go beyond the sanctions called for in the U.N. resolution. As noted earlier, Turkey's opposition to the imposition of sanctions in the U.N. has angered many congressmen, including many Republicans, and weakened support for Turkey in Congress. If Turkey were to support some of the unilateral U.S. sanctions beyond those mandated by the U.N., this could enhance Turkey's image in Congress and help Ankara regain some of that support.

The second action that could help would be for Ankara to restart the dialogue on normalization of relations with Armenia broken off in April 2010. This would enhance Turkey's image in Congress and help defuse support for the genocide resolution. Such a move, however, would need to be carefully coordinated with Azerbaijan in order to avoid stimulating new fears in Baku that Turkey was putting its interest in detente with Armenia above its friendship with Azerbaijan

Turkey's approach to missile defense will also have an important impact on bilateral relations. Missile defense is one of the Obama Administration's top priorities and has strong Republican backing. Turkey's support for missile defense at the NATO summit in Lisbon in November has brought U.S. and Turkish policy into closer alignment. But many details still remain to be worked out regarding the deployment of the missile defense system. If Turkey gets cold feet or raises

new conditions regarding deployment, this could provoke new strains in relations with Washington as well as with many of Turkey's European allies.

Finally, the U.S.'s use of Turkish bases, particularly the Incirlik air base, is likely to remain a sensitive issue in bilateral relations. Turkey has allowed the United States to use Incirlik to transport men and materiel to Iraq and Afghanistan. However, given its expanded interests in the Middle East, Turkey is likely to be very cautious about allowing the United States to use its bases to conduct combat operations in the Middle East unless these operations are clearly perceived by Turkish leaders to be in Turkey's national interest. As a result, the United States cannot automatically assume it will have access to Turkish facilities in future Middle East contingencies.

Endnotes

1) This article is a revised and expanded version of a presentation by the author at the Insight Turkey Conference, "Debating 'New Turkey'", Washington DC, December 3, 2010.

2) For a comprehensive discussion, see F. Stephen Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership. U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change* (Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation, MG-899-PAF, 2010).

3) For a comprehensive discussion, see F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey's Eurasian Agenda," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter, 2011), pp. 103-120.

4) Ian. O. Lesser, "US-Turkish Relations and the Risks of Strategic Drift," *Turkish Policy Center 2010*, p. 2.

5) Tolga Tanis, "Relationship with Turkey 'more important than ever,' US president says," *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, December 19, 2010.

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