

REDEFINING TURKEY'S STRATEGIC ORIENTATION

The Republic of Turkey continues to undergo a profound reexamination of the very tenets of its national identity, driven by a combination of internal reforms and external challenges. An equally significant strategic reorientation involving Turkey's role within the region and its future position in a broader international context is Turkey's robust reassertion of its strategic importance, as a global actor with an emboldened agenda of activity within a number of international organizations, ranging from its traditional partners like NATO and the UN, to the more unconventional, such as GUAM and even the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). And most crucially, partly as a result of both frustration with the European Union (EU) and a decline in its relationship with the United States, this new strategic reorientation may very well determine the future trajectory of the Turkish Republic.

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If the many abrupt shifts in security and geopolitics stemming from both the global ‘war on terror’ and the war in Iraq, the Republic of Turkey represents one of the most dynamic models of profound change and strategic reorientation. As a model of change, Turkey continues to face its deepest and potentially most disruptive degree of change, with a profound reexamination of the very tenets of its national identity, driven by a combination of internal reforms and external challenges. But more recently, there has been an equally significant strategic reorientation involving Turkey’s role within the region and its future position in a broader international context.

The depth and degree of change and redefinition in Turkey is also historically significant, arguably as profound and powerful as the birth pains of the modern Turkish state in 1923. In this sense, Turkey today resembles the early throes of revolution when the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, unleashed a bold bid to remake and retake the Turkish nation beyond its Ottoman legacy. Turkey is now, as then, engaged in a battle with itself, redefining itself and the very core of its identity.

Although the central external driving force of this change has been most obviously demonstrated in the frustrated process of the Turkish bid to enter the European Union (EU), the scale and scope of internal change in Turkey has assumed a much greater intensity driven by more fundamental questions over the very meaning of Turkish identity and the core pillar of the role of Islam within the Turkish state. The dynamic question of Turkish identity has already been raised, most profoundly through the legislative attempt to modify Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which criminalizes statements determined to insult Turkish identity, the Turkish state or its institutions. Although the article has been routinely used to combat any mention of the Armenian Genocide or regarding the Kurdish issue, the Turkish government’s attempts to revise Article 301 and some efforts in parliament to impose limits on its prosecution demonstrate that the central issue of reexamining the core concept of Turkish identity has assumed a special significance beyond a need to mollify European demands for reform.

One of the clearest examples of the fundamental nature of Islam in Turkey is the recent plan to ease restrictions on Islamic headscarf, which the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) justified as a move toward greater civil and religious freedom. Although public opinion polls have revealed that a large majority favors such an easing of the ban on headscarf, the issue has only confirmed fears that the AKP is committed to pursuing a dangerous Islamist agenda.¹

The degree of internal change is matched by an equally dynamic readjustment to Turkey’s strategic orientation, bolstered by the imperative to address a set of external challenges. And just as Turkish identity is very much a product of its

¹ “Trouble for Turkey?” The Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU), 13 February 2008, www.economist.com.

geography and history, its strategic significance is also rooted in both geopolitics and geography. This convergence of geopolitics and geography as a key driver for Turkey's enhanced strategic importance is also a reflection of Turkey's position as a stable, strong and secular state firmly anchored along the European-Middle Eastern axis. As scholar Parag Khanna recently noted in his impressive study of globalization and geopolitics, "Turkey is one of Europe's two main prongs to the East, and the gateway to the world's principal danger zone of Syria, Iraq and Iran."²

Turkey's Strategic Reorientation

In terms of a powerful strategic reorientation, Turkey has already moved well beyond an initial period of redefining its post-Cold War role, long defined by Turkey's position as a frontline NATO member and as a key U.S. military partner. Instead, Turkey has graduated to a more sophisticated recognition of its strategic significance, reflecting an imperative of looking to the EU to replace the loss of its traditional Cold War role as a "frontline" Western ally, but also incorporating a more recent emphasis on a greater self-sufficient and assertive role as a regional power.

One of the most recent elements of Turkey's strategic reorientation is also the most dramatic –a move away from a role within a larger multilateral Western alliance toward a more unilateral assertion as an aspiring regional power. This reorientation encompasses both a renewed Eastern shift toward the South Caucasus and Central Asia and a greater level of engagement within newer global and regional security structures and arenas.

This rather profound move has been largely driven by Turkey's frustration with its often delayed and overly complicated path toward the European Union. Despite the obvious economic and trade benefits of EU membership, the appeal of joining has lost much of its initial lure. Tension between Brussels and Ankara over the pace of economic and political reforms as prerequisites for ascension talks was not the only factor contributing to Turkish frustration, however. After a round of elections within the EU, the political transition in three key European powers, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, Turkey's candidacy was increasingly treated as either more of an American priority or an unnecessary burden.

Expressed as an over-ambitious component of EU enlargement, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has downplayed much of the progress Turkey has achieved to date and has proposed to downgrade the Turkish bid for membership to an offer of 'privileged partnership' instead. Backed by German Chancellor Angela

² Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* (New York: Random House, 2008), p. 37.

Merkel, this recent French counter to Turkish hopes for finally garnering what Ankara sees as a just reward for unprecedented patience, has only been strengthened by a marked decline in British support, as Prime Minister Gordon Brown has shown much less of a commitment to Turkish EU membership than his predecessor Tony Blair.

The Turkish reaction, notable but natural, was viewing such an offer of privileged partnership as an insult, even sparking Mehmet Şimşek, Turkey's Minister of State responsible for economics, foreign trade and the treasury, to warn that Turkey would accept nothing short of full EU membership, adding that "we cannot accept dilution of the (EU's) commitment to Turkey."³

The result from such a negative shift among the three leading EU member states has been somewhat destabilizing for Turkey, and seriously devastating for the most determined proponents of a Turkey within the EU. The implications from denying Turkey an avenue to the European Union are not limited to damaging Turkey, however, but also diminish Europe itself. As Parag Khanna affirmed, "Europe increasingly needs Turkey," which he defines as representing a "geopolitical asset (that) Europe cannot do without."⁴

The recognition of Turkey as a strategic asset is not limited to Europe, but also includes a broader role as a component of Western security in general and as a contributor more than a consumer of security within the context of the global war on terrorism more specifically.

Turkey and the Global War on Terrorism

As a contributor to security, Turkey holds an essential position within the post-September 11th security architecture and the subsequent U.S.-led global 'war on terrorism.' Specifically, Turkish membership within the EU inherently offers a greater significance and relevance for both Brussels and Washington due to the strategic necessity of having an Islamic, but secular Turkey as a full member of the 'Christian European Union'. This view has also largely conformed to the strategic view of many within the Turkish nationalist camp and among the Turkish military who held that the question was now no longer one of Turkey needing Europe, but rather, of Europe (and the West) needing Turkey.

For the Europeans, the Turkish bid for EU membership has generally been viewed as an important defensive move—to both contain and deter discontent and to help understand and integrate Muslims within Europe. For the Americans, this idea of a Turkey within the EU was also a convenient façade to the U.S.-led war on terrorism, providing a counterweight against the mounting interpretation

³ Tony Barber, "Turkey warns on 'dilution' of EU goal," *Financial Times*, 7 November 2007.

⁴ Khanna (2008), p. 44.

of the war on terror as a war on Islam. Of course, the utility of such a position was abruptly refuted by the realities of both the mounting insurgency in Iraq and the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Yet even if Turkey's negotiations with the EU improve, the damage has already been done. The perception of European reluctance and resistance to a strong Turkey is even more important than the reality, and has bolstered a new, more self-confident and assertive Turkish reaction. Such a stance is most significant because it is now based on shifts in Turkish national security to meet a set of more pressing and worrisome trends. More specifically, these trends are defined by three broader regional challenges: instability in war-torn Iraq, and the related emergence of a Kurdish proto-state; the escalation of tension between the West and an emboldened Iran; and the reassertion of Russian power and influence, most notably in both the Black Sea and the neighboring South Caucasus. A fourth, larger challenge to Turkey comes from beyond the region and stems from a serious deterioration in Turkish-U.S. military relations.

The Kurdish Challenge

One of the more ironic aspects of Turkey's Kurdish issue is the Armenia factor. This was first evident in early 2007, when the assassination of prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in Istanbul sparked a renewed focus on Turkey's troubled relations with its small neighbor Armenia. But the most significant aspect of Turkish-Armenian relations is its role in offering a potent economic tool in suppressing Kurdish, and even Islamist, extremism.

Within a broader context, the Armenian issue has traditionally been seen as a threatening element in the deeper debate over Turkish identity, and the Turkish military has tended to be the most vocal and strident opponent whenever the Armenian issue was raised. And although Turkey remains critically sensitive to Armenian attempts to pursue international recognition of the 1915 mass killings of Armenians within the Ottoman Empire as genocide, there has been a recent trend toward recognizing both the necessity and the benefits of normalizing relations with Armenia.⁵ And it is this new view of the Armenian issue as an integral component of stability and security that is most profound.

The more recent record of Turkish-Armenian relations has also been blighted by both a refusal to extend normal diplomatic relations with Armenia and a trade embargo and transport blockade, imposed on Armenia in 1993 in support of Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Yet by their very nature, these very same tactics are now seen as tied to a discredited approach and a failed policy by a disparate set of Turkish elite. The first component of this elite originates from Turkey's leading business circles, led in part by Kaan Soyak,

⁵ Amanda Akçakoca, "The EU & Turkish-Armenian Relations - A Catalyst for Change?" *Zaman*, 18 March 2005.

the co-chair of the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC), as well as the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TÜSİAD), which sees the reopening of the border with Armenia as offering new opportunities for Turkey well beyond the small Armenian market but as facilitating access and lowering transit costs for broader trade with Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and Iran.⁶

A second key element of this elite consists of a group of Western-trained young officers brought into senior posts within the Turkish Military's General Staff. These Army colonels authored a preliminary, semi-official internal study in late 2006 that presented several new strategic initiatives, including a reconsideration of Turkey's long-standing hesitance toward addressing the stalemate with Armenia. This spurred a closed, internal debate among some senior Turkish military figures, most of whom were centered around Army General Edip Başer and General Staff Chief General Büyükanıt, over the feasibility of a strategic opening toward Armenia.⁷

For Turkey, however, the potential advantage of opening its border with Armenia is rooted not simply in the benefits of trade and new markets, but centers on the economic aspects of Turkish national security. But the real test will be determined not by Turkish commercial interests, but within the Turkish military, between those who see a necessity in ending the Turkish blockade and embargo of Armenia and those that fear it. The opponents to any breakthrough with Armenia are elements from within the shadows of the Turkish intelligence community, security services and the armed forces, known by some Turkish liberals as the "deep state" that acts independently of elected governments.

The concept of the Turkish 'deep state' is not new, but only surfaces at times of crises in governance. The most ominous warning came in an April 2005 speech by former Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, who not only cited the existing of a 'deep state' within Turkey, but defined it as "the state itself," including the military, which "always fears the collapse of the state." He further described the 'deep state' as only becoming active when the state is "brought to the verge of collapse" and noted that "they are not a separate state, but when they intervene in the administration of the state, they become the 'deep state'".⁸

But as the military now sees the border issue as a tool not a threat, the more conservative elements of such a 'deep state' may actually not act, and may even support such a move as a means toward addressing a dangerous trend. More specifically, the Turkish military sees a worrisome trend emanating from Iraq, as the emergence of a Kurdish proto-state is viewed as a critical threat to Turkish

⁶ Richard Giragosian, "Turkish Military Seeks Armenian Détente," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, 12 February 2007.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yusuf Kanlı and Göksel Bozkurt, "Demirel: Deep state is the military," *Turkish Daily News*, 12 February 2007.

security and stability. Fears of regional instability from Iraq are only exacerbated by internal concerns, as the restive Kurdish-populated areas of Eastern Turkey are already showing signs of a reemergence of a strident Kurdish nationalism.

In terms of Turkish security and longer term stability, the impoverished and remote Kurdish regions of Eastern Turkey pose a formidable challenge for the Turkish military. The most productive strategy in dealing with this threat is one of stabilization, through economic development. And as these Kurdish regions would be the first to benefit from border trade with neighboring Armenia, the reopening of the Turkish-Armenian border offers the only real key to stability and security.

Such an economic view of Turkish national security is also essential to ensuring a more comprehensive approach to containing and combating support for extremism. This is especially critical in light of the January 2007 operation by the Turkish police that effectively dismantled an Islamist network (with alleged al-Qaeda links) in five separate Turkish provinces. Thus, the border opening issue represents not only an economic implement to forestall the rise of Kurdish separatism, but also offers an economic instrument to tackle the roots of Islamist extremism.

Conclusion

As Turkey continues on its path toward redefining its strategic orientation, Turkish national security will undergo similar shifts. But the extent of external challenges are particularly daunting and pose what are some of the most pressing threats to Turkish stability and security. These threats are further exacerbated by the near simultaneous set of internal changes now underway within Turkey. Based on this new threat environment, Turkey is now forging a sophisticated strategy of greater engagement coupled with a bolder assertion of power in the region. And while it remains to be seen exactly how this strategic reorientation will conclude, with the instability in neighboring Iraq, the rising threat from the emergence of a Kurdish proto-state and the strengthening position of a nuclear-ambitious Iran, it seems clear that Turkey faces its most profound test.

At the same time, Turkey's strategic significance is only enhanced by the very same set of threats and, for the West, Turkey offers an essential avenue toward containing threats from both Iraq and Iran, checking a reassertion of Russian power and influence, and securing the vital Black-Caspian Seas region. More specifically, Turkey is now engaged in a more robust reassertion of its strategic importance, as a global actor with an emboldened agenda of activity within a number of international organizations, ranging from its traditional partners like NATO and the UN, to the more unconventional, such as GUAM and even the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

And most crucially, partly as a result of both frustration with the European Union (EU) and a decline in its relationship with the United States, this new strategic reorientation may very well determine the future trajectory of the Turkish Republic. But the culmination of new threats and dynamic change suggest that Turkey also faces a unique opportunity to emerge as a key partner, and no longer as a proxy, for both Europe and the United States.