

TURKEY'S REGIONAL ROLE: HARDER CHOICES AHEAD

The circumstances of the last decade have encouraged a much more active and imaginative Turkish debate about international politics and strategy. Observers of the Turkish scene are right to identify the rise of a new look in Turkish foreign policy under AKP, with many positive and some negative results. Without question, Turkey's international policy is now more diverse, both functionally and geographically. In the years ahead, Turkey may have fewer resources and fewer reasons to pursue a diffuse policy of engagement across multiple regions, some integral and some marginal to Turkish interests. The last decade has encouraged a policy in width; the next is likely to require a policy in depth, with more deliberate choices and more explicit priorities.

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Over the last decade, Turkey has been able to conduct its foreign policy under conditions that encouraged, even required a multi-dimensional approach. Without question, the war in Iraq has posed stark political and security challenges for Ankara. Turkey has been forced to live with what most Turks perceive as a highly undesirable American strategy in the region, and the prospect of protracted instability across the border in northern Iraq. Western confrontation with Iran over Tehran's nuclear ambitions is another obvious source of risk for Turkey and security in Turkey's neighborhood. But in other respects, Turkey has enjoyed a relatively benign strategic environment with many new opportunities for activism. Turkey's European path remains open, if troubled. Relations with Washington, also troubled, still continue to function well in key areas. In the Middle East, the AKP government has greatly expanded Turkey's engagement with the Arab and Muslim world, and has been comfortable in this new role looking east and south. Relations with Russia have deepened, especially in the economic sphere, and the discussion of Eurasian alternatives for Turkey continues to be fashionable. Turkey is now a far more visible diplomatic and commercial actor in Asia and Africa. In the Balkans and the Aegean, Turkey enjoys an atmosphere of détente, with many of the old challenges for crisis management removed or on their way out.

Under these conditions, it has been possible, even necessary for Ankara to pursue a more balanced, all azimuths policy embracing notions of "strategic depth", "zero problems", "rhythmic diplomacy", etc. The net result has been a more balanced engagement in east-west and north-south terms, with various forms of soft power at the core. Only in northern Iraq has this approach been seriously challenged, with continuing demands on Turkey's hard power. Over the past few months, a combination of negative developments has produced new risks for Turkey and its international partners. The rise of a less benign environment is also likely to call into question the viability of this all azimuths, soft power strategy. Harder regional choices lie ahead.

The Return of Hard Security

The August 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia is likely to have lasting and negative repercussions for Turkey's regional security environment. First, it points to the reality of a resurgent Russia with limited capabilities but significant perceived grievances and many opportunities for assertiveness around the Black Sea and Central Asia. The return of Russia as a security actor in the Mediterranean,

while not yet meaningful for military balances, could, over time, be relevant to the Turkish calculus on Cyprus and in relations with Syria, where Russia has proposed to upgrade air defenses and make use of the naval base at Tarsus.

Second, Turkey along with its NATO partners will now need to confront hard security issues of a kind that have been largely absent from the transatlantic discourse since the end of the Cold War. Questions of nuclear strategy and basing, and armscontrol, will come back to the agenda. “Article V” considerations regarding deterrence and territorial defense will come back to the top of the NATO agenda, and will certainly influence the formation of a new strategic concept for the Alliance. In the wake of the Georgia crisis, this concept may look much more traditional and much less expeditionary and globalized than some would have imagined a year ago. Turkey will face some difficult choices in this arena. In key respects, Ankara remains a NATO traditionalist looking to reinforce Alliance security guarantees and the capacity for territorial defense. But Turkey also faces a wide range of less traditional risks emanating from outside Europe. A more assertive Russia will compel a more serious debate on these issues in Turkey and elsewhere.

Third, a more competitive relationship between Russia and the West may not amount to a new Cold War. But whatever its form, this new competition is likely to be played out in Turkey’s neighborhood, in the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Levant, and on issues such as energy with special meaning for Turkish interests. Concerns over Russia and Russian behavior in the region will also bring new Western attention and presence. From the Turkish perspective, additional security and development assistance to Georgia or Ukraine may be welcomed; new forms of military presence may be less attractive and touch on Turkish sovereignty concerns. It is by no means clear, for example, that Ankara will welcome an enhanced NATO naval presence in the Black Sea, even within the terms of the Montreaux convention. A new strategic competition with Russia will reinforce the hard security aspects of European security that have had only a recessed role in recent years.

To Have and Have Not

Since 2001, Turkey has benefited enormously from an environment of high economic growth and the easy availability of capital for investment in emerging markets. Internal and external prosperity have also had important foreign and

security policy implications, supporting Turkey's role as an international partner, and contributing to the diversification of the country's strategic relationships, including ties with the U.S. This period of prosperity and global optimism is clearly over. The financial crisis in the U.S. continues and has spread to global markets. Few analysts now believe the early arguments about decoupling and the ability of European, Asia and emerging economies to remain insulated from economic turmoil in the U.S. As the crisis makes itself felt in the real economy, economic pressures may also have a range of geopolitical consequences, from the mild to the strikingly negative. Lower demand for energy will drive oil and gas prices down and place new pressures on Russia and Iran among others. Investments from the Gulf are likely to be scaled-back substantially, and the effects of this will be felt in Turkey and elsewhere. Elaborate new pipeline projects may be put on hold.

In the most damaging case, Turkey and its international partners may experience something like an "interwar scenario" in which the economic crisis leads to the renationalization of trade and investment policies, heightened political competition, and ultimately a more conflict-prone international system. Nationalism, already a potent force in Turkey's region –and in Turkey itself– could become an even more significant factor on the strategic scene. Under these conditions, Turkey may find it far more difficult to preserve a climate of "zero problems" with neighbors, and Ankara could once again face multiple problems of crisis management. The potential implications for the EU and Turkey's candidacy are obvious. A less prosperous, insecure and xenophobic Europe would be a far more difficult partner for Ankara – and the U.S.

Depth or Width?

The circumstances of the last decade have encouraged a much more active and imaginative Turkish debate about international politics and strategy. Observers of the Turkish scene are right to identify the rise of a new look in Turkish foreign policy under AKP, with many positive and some negative results. Without question, Turkey's international policy is now more diverse, both functionally and geographically. Turkey's success in gaining a rotating seat on the UN Security Council underscores the activism and professionalism of Turkish diplomacy. Yet, the emergence of a more stressful international environment may well place a premium on a policy of strategic depth in the functional rather than the geographic sense of the term. In the years ahead, Turkey may have fewer

resources and fewer reasons to pursue a diffuse policy of engagement across multiple regions, some integral and some marginal to Turkish interests. The last decade has encouraged a policy in *width*; the next is likely to require a policy in *depth*, with more deliberate choices and more explicit priorities.

This reality will bring Turkey and the country's international partners back to some of the core geopolitical issues that have defined the Turkish debate for decades. Turkey's EU candidacy and continued convergence with European norms will retain their transformative potential. If the European project is not given new impetus, this political and psychological vacuum is likely to be filled with something else – and few if any of the alternatives are likely to offer the same security and prosperity dividends over the long term. Some may argue for a Eurasian or Middle Eastern alternative, or even a return to an inward looking national posture. These, too, are problematic. Russia and Turkey's southern and eastern neighbors may be useful economic and political partners, but relations with these states cannot offer the kind of predictable reassurance and deterrence required in a more demanding security environment. These are not strategic alternatives in the full sense, and neither would fit comfortably with an effective Turkish-American relationship, however recast and reshaped.

Finally, the strategic relationship with the U.S. is likely to retain its significance for Ankara, and may well be reinforced by a combination of near and longer-term developments. The American elections and the advent of a new Administration in Washington will create new opportunities on all sides. To be sure, it may not be easy to attract the attention of a new American leadership under the pressure of economic and other domestic policy challenges. But Russia, Iran and Iraq will compel attention and Turkey will be a critical partner in managing each of these issues. With the U.S., Turkey is the leading international stakeholder in the future of Iraq as a whole, beyond the narrower question of northern Iraq. Just as Turkey was directly affected by the American entry into Iraq, Turkey will be directly affected by the nature and timing of an American exit from the country, and this prospect is on the horizon. So too, no American administration, and few NATO allies, are likely to ignore clear warning of Iranian movement toward a deployable nuclear capability. In very different ways, Georgia, the financial crisis, the end game in Iraq, and the potential for a direct clash with Iran, all point to a future in which Turkey will face starker regional choices and the need for more predictable strategic partnerships.