

# OFF AUTOPILOT: THE FUTURE OF TURKISH-US RELATIONS

*To the extent that the U.S. pursues a more active policy aimed at transforming societies and compelling changes in behavior in regions adjacent to Turkey, Ankara will be presented with continuing and difficult choices. Changes in the foreign policy debate on both sides, against the backdrop of turmoil in Iraq, make clear that the bilateral relationship can no longer be left on autopilot. Failure to explore a new approach could spell further deterioration in the outlook for cooperation.*

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For decades, the relationship between Ankara and Washington has been described as “strategic” – durable and supportive of the most important international objectives of both sides, especially in security terms. Today, the strategic quality of the relationship can no longer be taken for granted as a result of divergent perceptions of the Iraq war, and more important, changing foreign policy debates in both countries. As a result, a bilateral relationship of great geopolitical significance, but one that has operated largely on “autopilot” since the early years of the Cold War, is now in question. A reinvigorated strategic relationship will be in the interest of both countries, but is likely to have quite different contours.

To be sure, disagreements in the bilateral relationship between Turkey and the U.S. are nothing new. The “Johnson Letter” and the arms embargo following the 1974 Cyprus crisis were only the most striking examples of periodic friction between successive Turkish and American administrations, even against a background of shared strategic purpose. For decades, the need to contain Soviet power shaped the relationship, and set expectations about what Washington and Ankara could offer in security terms. The potential demands on the relationship were substantial, including the use of Turkish territory for nuclear strikes against targets in the Soviet Union. At the same time, the U.S. might have been required to risk nuclear retaliation against its own territory in defense of Turkey. In retrospect, these contingencies seem highly improbable, but they were not seen as remote or inconceivable even as late as the 1980s.

In the Cold War period, the strategic relationship appeared solid because it was never really tested in terms of mutual defense. It was only later, with the Gulf War of 1990, that Turkey was called upon to provide extensive support for coalition operations (Turkey's own requests for air defense reinforcements from NATO were met only after substantial delay – an experience that still influences Turkish thinking about the country's collective defense arrangements). Turkey's forward leaning stance in the Gulf War left important and somewhat divergent lessons for both sides. In the U.S., the experience of 1990-91 reinforced the image of Turkey as a strategic ally, at the forefront of new security challenges emanating from the Middle East, an impression Turkish policy makers have sought to reinforce with American policy audiences.

In Turkey, by contrast, the first Iraq conflict and the experience of operations Provide Comfort and Northern Watch are widely viewed as the place where the “trouble” started, with trouble defined as the PKK insurgency, more complicated relations with Syria and Iran, and more contentious relations with Washington. It is worth recalling that the years following the first war with Iraq were characterized by frequent bilateral disagreements, over the conduct of counter-PKK operations in southeastern Anatolia and northern Iraq, but also over Turkish and Greek policy in the Aegean. In the mid 1990s, many Turks came to see the U.S. as a less-than-reliable ally, and some Americans came to see Turkey as part ally, part rogue state. In this climate of mistrust, which was also part of the

equation in Turkey-EU relations, it is not surprising that Ankara sought to develop strategic alternatives, including a deeper defense relationship with Israel.

Even in the post-Cold War period, when the geopolitical containment of Soviet power was no longer a driver of security policy, both Ankara and Washington have persisted in seeing Turkey's geographic position as the basis for Turkey's strategic importance, and, ultimately, as the center of gravity for bilateral cooperation. Turkey's proximity to areas of interest and crisis – in the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Middle East, has made questions of access – for the projection of military power, or the transportation of energy – the center of gravity for strategic cooperation with Ankara. This realtor's view of strategy – “location, location, location” – has not served either side well in a post-containment era of diffuse regional problems, less than existential threats, and new debates about national power and purpose on both sides of the Atlantic.

### *A Different Turkey*

Domestic developments and changing national perceptions are part of the equation on both sides. In Turkey, several factors have driven policymakers and the public toward a more wary and ambivalent approach to bilateral relations. Some of these factors may be transitory, others are almost certainly structural.

First, the accelerated pace of Turkish-EU relations has changed the foreign policy debate in ways that inevitably affect relations with the U.S. Regardless of the actual outlook for Turkish membership, a path fraught with pitfalls but also many opportunities over the next decade or more, the process of continued Turkish convergence with European practices and institutions is likely to continue. This process of convergence is, ultimately, what counts for Europe and the U.S., and quite possibly for Turks as well.

The U.S. has been a consistent champion of Turkey in Europe, even if Washington's ability to push Turkey's case (and the need to do so) has declined steadily since the Helsinki Summit. Now that Turkey is launched on the path of accession, however uncertain, policymakers on all sides will need to ask more serious questions about the implications for US-Turkish relations over the next decade. Some Europeans may persist in their fear that Turkey within the EU will serve as a “Trojan Horse” for American foreign policy preferences. In reality, closer Turkey-EU relations will almost certainly pose a greater challenge of adjustment for Washington. Turkish policy is already within the European mainstream, and far closer to European than American approaches on a range of key issues, not least Iran, Iraq and the Middle East peace process. This essentially European orientation extends to contentious global issues, including the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto protocols on climate change.

Even if Turkey's candidacy stalls, or proves hollow over the coming years, the result is unlikely to be closer ties with Washington. Under conditions of estrangement from Europe, Turkish opinion could well shift in the direction of a more sovereignty conscious, nationalistic posture, a development that would complicate relations with Washington as much as Brussels. Only against a background of vastly heightened

regional risk, against which American deterrence and reassurance would be essential, would a return to closer strategic cooperation with the U.S. be the natural outcome. Scenarios that could trigger this response include renewed competition with a more assertive Russia, or friction with a nuclear-armed Iran. If Turkey's candidacy proceeds apace and the process of Europeanization continues, this could encourage a useful diversification and deepening of Turkish-U.S. ties, especially on the economic front. Under this scenario, movement toward Europe can have a multiplier effect on trade and investment links to the U.S. This effect could also be felt in the political and security realm, but only if transatlantic relations as a whole develop positively.

Second, new regional dynamics have complicated cooperation. America's intervention on Turkey's Middle Eastern borders has given the question of bilateral relations a much sharper edge. The Iraq war touches on the most sensitive problems affecting Turkish society and politics, above all, the issue of Kurdish identity within Turkey and across the region. The AKP government may have encouraged a more open and active debate on the Kurdish issue, but it remains a flashpoint across the political spectrum. Experience since 1990 has reinforced the impression that developments in Iraq (as well as Syria and Iran) are intimately linked to Turkey's own internal security. The recent revival of the PKK insurgency has only underscored the significance of developments in this area, and revived fears of western – and especially American – encouragement for Kurdish nationalism in northern Iraq, and potentially inside Turkey. Ankara very nearly came to blows with Syria over its support for the PKK in 1998, and Turkey has intervened in northern Iraq as part of its cross-border counter-insurgency strategy. In short, the Kurdish-Iraqi equation is the most troubled dimension of the country's external policy, and one subject to historic sensitivities at the public and elite levels.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the Iraq War, it has also become the focal point for bilateral engagement – and friction – with Washington.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, many Turks misjudge American strategy and intentions with regard to Kurdish separatism and Iraq. Successive American administrations have made clear that the U.S. does not favor a break-up of Iraq, or an independent Kurdish state, and certainly not one that might threaten the integrity and security of a NATO ally. Repeated assurances on this score have done little to reduce the now widespread Turkish suspicion regarding American policy in northern Iraq. The most tangible demonstration of American commitment to the policy of a united Iraq and a secure Turkey would be concerted action against PKK bases and cells in the region. Many American strategists would favor this. But with immense demands on American attention and resources elsewhere in a still highly unstable Iraq, few policymakers will be enthusiastic about opening new fronts inside the country, especially in a region that appears *relatively* secure from the vantage point of Washington. As a result, American policymakers have

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<sup>1</sup> Kemal Kirişci and others have analyzed the continuing role of the “Sevres Syndrome” in Turkish foreign policy.

<sup>2</sup> For an assessment of what went wrong in American-Turkish negotiations in the run up to the war, see Michael Rubin, “A Comedy of Errors: American-Turkish Diplomacy and the Iraq War,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Spring 2005.

been unable to act in the one area that might reassure Turks about the direction of U.S. policy.

Beyond Iraq, Turkey under the Erdoğan government has pursued a policy of more active engagement in the Middle East, even as relations with Europe have taken center stage. This is not to say that Turkey has overcome its traditional ambivalence regarding relations with Middle Eastern neighbors. Few Turks would seriously argue that ties to the south and east represent a real economic and foreign policy alternative to relations with the West. But the two can certainly coexist as areas for Turkish external engagement, and the AKP government seems inclined to test this proposition to a far greater extent than its predecessors. High level discussions with Syrian and Iranian policymakers, and some high-profile visits and cooperation agreements point in this direction, at a time when U.S. – and European -- policy toward both Damascus and Tehran is becoming more assertive.

Third, public opinion now counts in Turkish foreign policymaking, and as polling results suggest, this opinion has turned distinctly anti-American in recent years. Recent surveys indicate that Turkish public attitudes toward the U.S. are now the most negative in Europe.<sup>3</sup> This marked deterioration in perceptions of the U.S. has special significance for relations between the Erdoğan and Bush administrations. Here, an avowedly populist government in Ankara must deal with a more active and interventionist leadership in Washington, one that confronts Turkey with multiple policy dilemmas in its neighborhood. It is a challenging mixture, and one that is not, of course, unique to Turkish-American relations. Indeed, Turkish public opinion, sensitive to both European and Muslim concerns (e.g., Palestinian aspirations), has multiple sources of pressure when it comes to attitudes toward the U.S. To this must be added the tendency of some American foreign and security policy elites to ignore the changes that have taken place on the Turkish scene over the last decade, in particular the greatly increased role of public opinion and the emergence of new actors in the Turkish policy debate. In this as in several other key areas, relations have remained on autopilot, with only limited attempts to engage new constituencies beyond traditional bilateral partners on the Turkish side. Indeed, even the traditional partners, such as the Turkish military and security establishment, appear ambivalent regarding strategic cooperation with the U.S. (this was also the case in the early 1990s).

The trend toward strongly negative attitudes about the U.S. might be reversed, or at least offset, by new policy initiatives seen as favorable to Turkish interests, most notably on the issue of the PKK presence in northern Iraq, or on Cyprus, although the latter is increasingly seen as an area for European initiative by Washington.<sup>4</sup> So too, an overall improvement in transatlantic relations and perceptions of the U.S. would probably have an effect on public attitudes in Turkey. Yet, without change in these areas, the state of

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<sup>3</sup> See *Transatlantic Trends 2005* (German Marshall Fund, Compagnia di San Paolo, Fundacao Luso-Americana and Fundacion BBVA, 2005), as well as Pew surveys of recent years.

<sup>4</sup> See Soner Cagatay, *Turkey at a Crossroads: Preserving Ankara's Western Orientation* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005).

Turkish public opinion will continue to limit the scope for bilateral cooperation, especially visible cooperation at the regional level. When unreservedly positive Turkish public attitudes toward the U.S. are confined to single digits, bilateral relations face a serious challenge – a challenge given further meaning by the heightened international debate about American power and purpose.

On the Turkish side, relations with the U.S. have been transformed by the emergence of Europe as a leading center of gravity for the country, by new regional dynamics, especially in Iraq, and the rise of a more diverse and active foreign policy debate inside the country. The result has been a more wary, ambivalent and often negative attitude toward the U.S., against a background of a bilateral agenda that remains, in essence, a legacy of Cold War requirements.

### *A Different America*

There is an understandable tendency among America's international partners to particularize their relations with the global hyper-power, to focus on the unique and historically distinctive in their bilateral relationship with Washington. But viewed from the U.S., these relationships, even the most important, are part of a global perspective, with interests that cut across regions. Over the last decade, and most dramatically since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, American foreign and security policy has been transformed in ways that have also changed the nature of the U.S. as a partner for Turkey.

First, the overwhelming focus on counter-terrorism has led to the subordination of many traditional foreign policy priorities, and has spurred greater activism in areas seen as directly related to domestic security. In key areas such as the Middle East and Eurasia, it is only a slight exaggeration to describe the current American strategy as one of extended homeland defense. Given the primacy of internal security concerns in Turkey's own strategy in recent decades, this approach is not necessarily unfamiliar to Turks. But the growing attention to challenges such as terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction also means that longstanding regional ties and policies will be measured much more closely in terms of their ability to contribute to specific functional requirements. If Turkey (or other NATO allies) can offer active assistance, the way is clear to closer cooperation. If not -- as in Iraq -- the perceived "strategic" utility of the relationship will decline. The current environment is one of sharper requirements and sharper judgments in terms of bilateral relations, at least in security terms. The traditional "fly wheel" of Alliance commitments and cohesion has lost a good deal of its momentum, and will be less effective in sustaining the relationship in times of disagreement.

Second, to the extent that the U.S. pursues a more active policy aimed at transforming societies and compelling changes in behavior in regions adjacent to Turkey, Ankara will be presented with continuing and difficult choices. Iraq is only the most pressing, ongoing example. The desire to "shake things up" in Syria, or to forestall Iran's nuclear ambitions through the use of force, would pose new dilemmas for Turkish policy. For decades, the U.S.-Turkish strategic relationship was based largely on the defense of the

regional status quo, territorial and political; an approach well suited to Turkey's essentially conservative foreign policy outlook. Today, Turkey faces an American partner with more dynamic, even revolutionary objectives in areas of shared interest.

The lack of an agreed bilateral approach to power projection issues, including the use of Incirlik airbase for non-NATO contingencies, will be an even greater liability for the relationship under these conditions. Elements within the American strategic community tend to regard the breakdown of bilateral cooperation in advance of the Iraq war as a watershed event, casting grave doubt on the predictability of US-Turkish defense cooperation in regional crises. In reality, successive Turkish governments have been unwilling to allow the use of Incirlik for anything other than the most limited, non-strategic operations in Iraq since the end of the first Iraq war in 1991. Ankara's reticence regarding the use of Turkish territory and airspace for American power projection should come as no surprise to American policymakers. Cooperation along these lines, absent a NATO or UN mandate, or pressing Turkish defense needs that cannot be met in other ways, has been, and will remain, exceptional.

Third, Turks will continue to be uncomfortable with prevailing American thinking about Turkey's role in the broader Middle East and North Africa. Few Turks welcome the notion of Turkey as a "model" for political development in the Arab Middle East, because they prefer to see Turkey's role described in Euro-Atlantic terms, because they are skeptical about the exportability of democracy, or both. In somewhat different terms, and with somewhat different language, the EU is also attempting to promote democratic transformation in the Mediterranean and the wider European neighborhood. Turkey, too, has a stake in this transformation, but will naturally prefer the less intrusive, "soft power" approach emanating from Brussels, especially against a background of widespread anti-Americanism in Turkish public opinion. American (and possible European) pressure for new political and economic sanctions aimed at Syria or Iran will be particularly difficult to reconcile with Ankara's recent policy of greater engagement with these neighbors.

Finally, the critical transatlantic context for the bilateral relationship is in flux – to say the least. When Europe was the center of gravity of American strategic concerns, Turkey had a specific and predictable place in terms of European defense. Absent a return to more competitive relations with Russia, American strategy will continue to be cast in terms of functional challenges of an essentially global nature. Over time, there will be real potential for a structural shift of American attention to China and the Asia-Pacific region. European observers have periodically expressed concern about this possibility. With the rise of China as a strategic competitor in many sectors, and the ongoing risk of a crisis over Taiwan, the next decade may actually see a marked shift of attention eastward, with implications for American engagement in Eurasia and the Middle East. From the Turkish perspective, this could mean a world in which the American presence as a regional actor is less predictable, and the need for an enhanced European role on the periphery of the continent may be increased. In some areas, such as the Gulf, there may be too much American influence for Turkish taste. In other areas of Turkish interest, such as the Balkans, there may well be *too little* American engagement.

### *Contours of a New Strategic Relationship*

Changes in the foreign policy debate on both sides, against the backdrop of turmoil in Iraq, make clear that the bilateral relationship can no longer be left on autopilot. Failure to explore a new approach, especially under conditions of troubled alliance relationships, could spell further deterioration in the outlook for cooperation. This analysis points to some substantial challenges. It also suggests some areas of opportunity – steps that could bolster damaged perceptions on both sides and help to restore the strategic character of the relationship.

It is essential to acknowledge that a strategic relationship conceived essentially in bilateral terms is unsustainable. The most important external element in the future of the relationship is undoubtedly the evolving nature of transatlantic cooperation as a whole. Both sides have an interest in assuring that Euro-Atlantic relations are set on a new and positive course. A dysfunctional transatlantic relationship, including a diminished role for NATO, would place even greater pressure on Turkish-US relations, and would force Ankara into a succession of uncomfortable policy choices in the coming years. For this reason, among others, Washington will benefit from continued Turkish convergence with Europe – as long as transatlantic relations are stable.

Turkish and American policymakers still need to address the challenge of developing a more diverse, broad-based relationship. The prevailing security-heavy framework is a leading and problematic legacy of the Cold War years. For structural reasons, Europe will remain the natural focus of economic cooperation for Turkey. But much more can be done to encourage American trade and investment in the country, including participation in less traditional areas such as financial services. The most important factor in this regard may well be Turkey's own movement toward EU membership, a development that is likely to spur much greater private sector interest in Turkey across the board. Here, as in other areas, the European and transatlantic "vocations" are complimentary and reinforcing, rather than competitive.

American policy toward the Kurds and northern Iraq is an unavoidable part of the bilateral equation, especially in the context of Turkish public opinion. Over the last decade, Washington has been remarkably unsuccessful in reassuring Turkish policymakers and opinion shapers about America's commitment to Turkish national integrity and security in this setting. To the extent that the large-scale American presence in Iraq can be reduced and replaced by a multinational arrangement, perhaps under NATO leadership, and possibly with a substantial Turkish involvement, the bilateral relationship will benefit. But this is a longer-term objective. For the moment, the U.S. remains absorbed with the task of bringing a reasonable level of stability to Iraq, and is reluctant to extend the counter-insurgency campaign to address PKK violence emanating from northern Iraq. That said, the U.S. can do and say much more than it has about threats to Turkey from this quarter, not just to court Turkish opinion, but to bolster the security of a NATO ally.



If there is to be an enhanced NATO role in Iraq, countering PKK infiltration along Turkey's border with Iraq might be a logical place to begin. It is also possible to imagine a new and more cooperative bilateral approach to Iraq as a whole, in which Washington assists with Turkish concerns regarding the PKK, and Ankara helps to pressure Damascus regarding the infiltration of insurgents across the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Finally, Turkish and American policy planners need to open a much more explicit discussion about future challenges and strategic cooperation, aimed at reducing the pervasive sense of unpredictability in the relationship. Scenarios to be taken up should include an assessment of the longer-term implications of further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East – that is, how to deal with a nuclear or near-nuclear Iran.

A new and more predictable strategic relationship is possible. But it will require, new approaches, a wider range of participants and issues for engagement, and not least, more modest expectations on all sides. It will also require an end to the idea of cooperation based largely on Turkey's location – the real estate perspective – and the development of an approach based on forward planning and concerted policies.