



# TURKEY AND THE WEST AT A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS?

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A sound relationship with Turkey is central to advancing a broad range of U.S. interests in Eurasia and the Middle East. Profound changes in Turkish politics and society—reflected in the dramatic 2007 electoral victories of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)—as well as shifts in relations with neighbors have altered many Turks' views of their national interests. Years of papering over differences and a number of festering near-term problems have strained bilateral relations with the United States and Europe. This situation has raised concerns that Turkey will drift from its Euro-Atlantic moorings, with damaging consequences for its allies.

## CHANGING CONTEXT

Throughout the Cold War, the United States and Turkey had a clear strategic relationship. Bilateral ties were anchored in a multilateral security framework, with Turkey as the lynchpin of a containment strategy that protected the West from communist expansion. That status reinforced Turkey's quest for deepening integration into the transatlantic community. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, the central rationale for that framework disappeared and secondary and tertiary issues soon began to dominate Turkey's relations with its longtime allies.

The Gulf War of 1991 appeared to give new purpose to the Ankara-Washington relationship. Turkey played a key role in the U.S.-led war effort and came to be viewed in Washington as an anchor of stability in a volatile region. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and European hesitation about actualizing mutual defense commitments, highlighted Turkey's need for strong ties with the United States. Cooperation on nonsecurity matters, particularly energy, also grew. U.S.-Turkey defense cooperation remained robust, and Turkey made valuable contributions to the containment of Saddam Hussein and to NATO operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. However, these positive outward signs disguised unease beneath the surface.

Turkey's relations with the United States and Europe have grown more strained since 2003. On the eve of the Iraq War, several European governments again balked at a U.S. request to reaffirm NATO commitments to the defense of Turkey, and the Turkish parliament later refused permission for U.S. Army units to enter northern Iraq from Turkey. After 30 years of associate membership and implementation of significant political, judicial, and human rights reforms, Ankara began formal accession talks in 2005, but negotiations have been opened on only 4 of 35 ne-

gotiating "chapters." The EU partially suspended negotiations in December 2006 because of the lack of progress on Cyprus issues. Turkey's future relationship with the EU has become further clouded with the election of French president Nicholas Sarkozy, who supports a "privileged partnership" as an alternative to Turkish membership in the Union. France has slowed Turkey's accession talks and limited their future scope to chapters that would be consistent with such a partnership.

Turkish disillusionment with the United States has grown in the aftermath of the Iraq War. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a terrorist group that waged a bloody insurgency in Turkey between 1984 and 1999, has regrouped in northern Iraq, where an autonomous Kurdish state has also begun to take shape. Many Turks see the U.S. failure to halt PKK activities in northern Iraq as evidence of a double standard with respect to terrorism, and they fear that an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq will fuel secessionist tendencies among the 14 million Kurds concentrated in Turkey's southeast border regions. The Turkish General Staff has repeatedly called for cross-border operations into northern Iraq against the PKK. Escalating PKK violence led to a nearly unanimous vote by the Turkish parliament in October 2007 authorizing the government to launch such operations, raising fears of a wider conflict and another crisis in Ankara's relations with Washington.

## ALTERNATIVE COURSES

In the face of these growing doubts about the United States and Europe, some Turkish leaders have begun to ponder a "Eurasian option" that would downplay integration into the Euro-Atlantic community and emphasize balancing relations with the West with ties to their eastern and southern neighbors. Turkey's alternatives could include new relationships with Iran, Syria, Russia, and China. Turkey may also seek a

greater sphere of influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus/Black Sea region. But any such strategy faces a number of challenges.

Despite historical wariness, differing interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and their country's growing dependence on Russian natural gas, most Turkish political leaders are upbeat about cooperative relations with Russia. Ankara also does not share Washington's view of Teheran as an imminent threat and opposes U.S. military action to halt Iran's nuclear program, fearing further regional destabilization. Turkey's close cooperation with Israel, born of mutual concerns about their neighbors, has become more circumspect due to differences over the Iraq War and the growth of political Islam in Turkey. Although many Arabs continue to regard Turkey warily, the country offers a vibrant example to its neighbors of a Muslim country integrated into the global economy.

Leaders of the traditional secular parties in Turkey have lost influence at home, but also feel betrayed by the United States. While the governing Justice and Development Party is seen by many Turks as having a thinly veiled "Islamist" agenda, it has maintained cooperative relations with the United States and Europe. In August 2007, after several months of political turmoil, the AKP government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan returned to power with a stronger mandate, and the parliament elected Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, a centrist member of the AKP, as president. The AKP's control of the government and the presidency, a bastion of the Kemalist legacy of strict secularism with veto power over legislation, has raised concerns about Turkey's future course.

Can Turkey and the West pursue a constructive future, or are we drifting apart? Turkey's growing prosperity and political stability are linked to integration into the global economy, which puts a premium on good relations with the United States and the EU. Although Turkey's interests are no longer as convergent with those of its NATO allies as they once were, enduring mutual interests remain in maintaining stability in the Middle East, countering terrorism and extremism, securing energy flows, and advancing the sovereignty of the states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Pursuing this agenda will require restoring mutual trust and developing a new strategic framework for relations that allows effective pursuit of enduring mutual interests and management of policy differences. ■

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