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TURKEY, EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES: QUO VADIS?

It has been clear for some time that 2002 will be a crucial year in determining the direction of Turkish foreign policy in the new millennium. By the end of this year, Turkey will know whether the European Union (EU) will finally respond positively to its long-pursued goal of accession or once again exclude it from its next wave of expansion. Another European rebuff, which unfortunately seems likely at the moment, will inevitably intensify the current discussion in Ankara on the redefinition of Turkey's relations with the West and, in particular, an even closer relationship with the United States.

BEYOND THE COLD WAR ALLIANCE

By joining NATO exactly fifty years ago, Turkey gained a tangible badge of membership in the Western community of nations. This was precisely the kind of acknowledgment the Turkish Republic had been seeking from the West since its creation in 1923 by Kemal Ataturk out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. It is noteworthy that Turkey was finally admitted into NATO after a frustrating and dangerous three-year delay due to opposition from a number of Western European countries. Significantly, its entry was facilitated by U.S. Cold War strategic imperatives and, as the United States hoped, Turkey then played an invaluable role in confronting the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. In return, the United States and NATO provided Turkey with military and economic assistance, while demonstrating a willingness to tolerate lapses from Western democratic practices and standards.

The frightening but comfortable certainties of the Cold War were eliminated by the collapse of the Soviet Union that ushered in fundamental changes in NATO's very mission as well as in the transatlantic relationship between the United States and its Western European allies. However, the United States and Turkey avoided the difficult redefinition of Turkey's precise role in the post-Cold War era as they stressed the benefits of their bilateral partnership in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans, and the Middle East. More often than not, rhetoric outstripped the substance of actual cooperation between Washington and Ankara while contradictions - such as differing priorities with respect to Russia and its residual role in the countries of the former Soviet Union - were downplayed.

THE IRAQ FACTOR

The one area where there has been effective and significant cooperation between the United States and Turkey during the past decade or so is Iraq. Turkey demonstrated solidarity with the United States after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 by shutting off Iraqi oil exports through Turkey and permitting U.S. air strikes from the Incirlik air base in southern Turkey. Support continues to this day with Operation Northern Watch enforcing the no-fly zone above the 36th parallel and excluding Saddam Hussein's authority from northern Iraq. Successive Turkish governments have maintained this policy despite serious misgivings that the

power vacuum Turkey helps to sustain will lead ultimately to the emergence of a Kurdish state in Iraq and even threaten Turkey's own territorial integrity. In return, the United States has provided diplomatic support and a continued willingness to overlook or downplay the failings in the Turkish political system. More significantly, Washington has also discreetly led efforts to prop up the ailing Turkish economy through over \$30 billion in IMF standby loans during the past three years.

Although Turkish civilian and military leaders continue to express grave reservations on possible U.S. action against Saddam, including during Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to Ankara last month, growing dependence on Washington might nevertheless still ensure some degree of Turkish support if satisfactory assurances are given with respect to the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Iraq. However, the test of the strength of the Ankara-Washington axis by military action in Iraq seems likely to be delayed as a result of the escalating crisis in the Middle East. The crisis has preoccupied the United States while straining Turkey's attempts to develop its close strategic alliance with Israel even as it maintained good relations with the Arab world.

LOOKING AHEAD

With Turkey's NATO membership simply not as significant as in 1952 and the relationship between Turkey and the EU heading into choppy waters, Turkey is inevitably looking to the United States for even greater support. This will put a greater share of the burden of maintaining Turkish adherence to the West on Washington. In contrast to the previous U.S. administration, which constantly pressured the EU on Turkey, the current administration has been focusing instead on the bilateral relationship with Ankara while maintaining formal support for Turkey's EU membership. Moreover, the administration has also refrained from the admittedly monumental task of fashioning a long-range policy for Turkey as it concentrated on the immediate imperative of having Ankara on its side in the looming confrontation with Saddam Hussein.

As Turkey faces the possibility of exclusion from the European integration process with all its implications for Turkish foreign policy, economy and reform process as well as domestic politics, it is imperative for Washington and Ankara to jointly formulate the future scope of their relationship and what each can realistically provide the other. However, as the two countries prepare to proceed into uncharted waters in their relationship, they need to recognize that the short-term advantages in their bilateral relations could well be outweighed by the failure to tie Turkey firmly to the West through EU membership. After all, the process of Westernization and modernization in this unique country, which straddles Europe and Asia geographically as well as culturally, is the product of centuries of complicated interaction with the admittedly difficult Europeans.

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