

The End of Zero Problems? Turkey and Shifting Regional Dynamics

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Turkey's ambitious foreign policy aimed at zero problems with its neighbors is under threat. The escalating crisis in Syria and related regional turbulence are complicating Turkey's important relationships with both Iran and Russia. This turmoil could strain the U.S.-Turkey alliance while presenting the next American administration with a new set of complex dynamics in the Middle East and Eurasia.

By choosing to visit Turkey three months into his presidency, Barack Obama underscored Turkey's importance to the United States. He reaffirmed the value of the strategic partnership formed during the Cold War and proposed to expand it through cooperation in forging a new relationship with the Middle East and wider Islamic world.

Obama and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan coordinated closely as the Arab Spring unfolded. They agreed on the value of the "Turkish Model" as Islamists previously shut out of the political system sought power through elections, and they watched as events in North Africa seemed to vindicate this approach. The conflict in Syria, however, now poses a fundamental challenge.

Rapprochement with Syria after decades of mutual hostility was the showcase of Turkey's zero problems policy. This is now history given Bashar al-Assad's refusal to consider a peaceful transfer of power. Iran and Russia are openly helping to sustain the Syrian dictator. This has presented Turkey with a complicated diplomatic equation given its overall foreign policy framework.

Even before the Syrian crisis, Ankara had difficulties maintaining a balance between the increasing Western pressure on Iran over its nuclear program and Turkey's zero problems policy. Turkey has maintained a close trade relationship with Iran parallel to its compliance with UN sanctions, as evidenced by the fact that 51 percent of its oil imports last year came from its eastern neighbor. Turkey views Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons as inimical to its security but does not assess the nuclear program as an imminent threat. It also remains adamant that economic and diplomatic engagement offer the best route to convince the Iranian government to forswear that quest.

Turkey voted against UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in 2010 despite U.S. pressure, but in late 2011 accepted deployment of a U.S. ballistic missile early warning radar on its territory, justifying the move as a purely defensive measure consistent with NATO obligations and longstanding missile defense plans. Iran saw it differently, threatening to make the Turkish site a primary target if Iran is attacked by NATO. Nevertheless, if the United States joined in or completed Israeli military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, the ensuing regional turmoil and domestic outrage would surely force Erdoğan to review Turkey's alignment with U.S. Middle East policy.

At the same time, Ankara has been appalled by Tehran's fomenting of Sunni-Shi'a tensions in Iraq and Bahrain while it supports Assad's bloody



campaign. If Assad manages to survive politically with Iranian help, Ankara might find itself confronting a Shi'a axis extending from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Hezbollah in Beirut determined to curb the exercise of Turkish influence in the Middle East.

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An increasing divergence of perspectives and agendas on Syria is also threatening to undermine Turkey-Russia relations, in spite of the overall positive trend in the relationship exemplified by Russia supplying 55 percent of Turkey's gas in 2011. Cooperation with Moscow allows Ankara to claim enhanced influence in Eurasia as part of its growing international clout. For its part, Moscow has sought

to leverage its ties to encourage Ankara to pursue a more independent stance in international politics, periodically challenging U.S. and European policies. The measured Turkish response to the August 2008 conflict in Georgia was a visible manifestation of Turkey balancing relations between its Western allies and Russia.

Despite the close personal relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin, Erdoğan has publicly decried Moscow's support for Assad and continuing arms supplies. While Erdoğan has been embracing and supporting political change in the Middle East in line with Obama, Putin has essentially favored the status quo seeking to retain traditional clients, fearing that the growth of democratic and Islamist groups in that region could inspire the development of similar movements in Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

While Erdoğan will make every effort to prevent a deterioration of relations with Iran and Russia, it is clear that there is real danger for the first time in a decade of a fundamental split because of Syria. It remains to be seen whether the strong Turkish economic links with the two countries will be sufficient to help immunize the relationships from the corrosive effects of the Syrian bloodbath. At a wider level, the next U.S. administration will have to consider the implications for the U.S.-Turkey relationship of the shifting dynamics in the Turkey-Iran-Russia triangle as it contends with all the other changes in the Middle East and Eurasia. ■