



From Crisis to Cooperation Turkey's Relations with Washington and NATO

By **Richard Outzen**

In January 2011, The Washington Institute presented an in-depth assessment of political and strategic trends in Turkey's relationship with the United States and NATO. At the time, the focus was necessarily on discord, disappointment, and growing concern: in the wake of a disastrous 2010, with memories of the Gaza flotilla incident and Turkish dissent on Iran sanctions still fresh, the horizon was clouded and turbulent.

The intervening year and a half has brought a dramatic turnaround, however. Three major factors—the increasing clash between Iranian and Turkish regional interests, Ankara's disillusionment with the Assad regime in Syria, and the NATO campaign in Libya—have created a more promising landscape for Turkey's return to a strategic posture generally aligned with the United States. To be sure, the shift seen over the past year has not removed all major irritants in Turkey's Western relationships; Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's strongman tendencies are an example. Broadly speaking, though, any strategic assessment of Turkey from the U.S. and NATO perspective must recognize the major, positive changes over the past eighteen months.

In a relationship marked over the past decade more by crisis management than by opportunity, the United States now has important policy openings with Turkey. The top priority should be leveraging Ankara's commitment to NATO on missile

defense as a way of reaffirming both Turkey's role as the alliance's southern political anchor and the notion that common threats should be met with common action by democratic states (Iranian missiles having replaced Russian tanks as the threat in question). Another key priority will be using that anchor position to support democratic tendencies in Arab countries undergoing uprisings. A third will be using the momentum from Ankara's positive shift to prevent crises related to the political nexus of energy, territory, and identity currently enveloping Turkey, Israel, Cyprus, and the European Union. This priority takes on growing importance at a time when Cyprus is assuming the rotating EU presidency. Against the backdrop of the May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago, challenging global and regional conditions demand vigorous U.S. efforts to build on the Turkey-NATO momentum and ensure that strategic synergy between the two remains durable and effective.

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Historical Perspective

To understand the recent crisis and recovery in Turkey's relations with the West, one must bear in mind the volatile nature of those relations in general. Put in proper historical context, the disenchantment of 2010 and renewed commitment of 2012 are by no means anomalous:

- **1947–1952:** Washington recognizes Ankara's critical role in stemming Soviet expansionism as the Cold War dawns and makes Turkey a focal point of Marshall Plan aid. The Joint American Mission for Military Aid to Turkey (JAMMAT, later JUSMMAT) is formed to direct major construction, equipping, and training programs. The United States funds and builds new airbases at Diyarbakir, Eskisehir, and Adana (Incirlik), and upgrades about a dozen other major ground and air bases. By 1952, Turkey accedes to NATO and becomes a major contributor of combat troops to the UN force fighting in Korea.¹
- **1964–1967:** The first serious deterioration in Ankara's relations with Washington and NATO occurs over violence between Turkish and Greek communities on Cyprus. President Lyndon Johnson writes a letter threatening not to support Turkey in any Cyprus-related clash with the Soviets, and warning that Turkey cannot use NATO-provided equipment or resources for any operation involving the island. By 1968, Turkish students are holding anti-American and anti-NATO protests, and some rioting occurs. This negative trend is reinforced by diplomatic tension over the opium poppy trade. In the latter part of the decade, Turkey tries to reduce its Western alignment and improve ties with the Soviet Union and nonaligned nations.²
- **1974–1975:** As the Soviets grow more assertive in the Eastern Mediterranean in the early 1970s, Ankara comes to recognize the shared Turkish-U.S.-NATO interest in maintaining robust deterrent capabilities on Turkish soil. By 1974, experts estimate that NATO forces in Turkey were forcing the Soviets to station twenty-four ground divisions on or near the border, decreasing the number of forces available to threaten central Europe. Despite occasional student protests, U.S. and NATO military forces in Turkey have essentially total freedom of movement. Turkey hosts these forces at roughly twenty-six installations, including intelligence-gathering sites, air bases, missile launch detection facilities, naval support facilities for the Sixth Fleet, and custodial units for a variety of nuclear weapons (see map for the geographic distribution of these sites). In addition, Ankara hosts the headquarters of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), the West's security cooperation framework for the area from Turkey to Iran and Pakistan. This all changes with the greatest rupture in modern Turkish-Western relations, the 1974 Cyprus crisis. Following Turkey's occupation of northern Cyprus, the United States embargoes further arms sales or military support to Ankara. In retaliation, Turkey shuts down U.S. military facilities, veers toward nonaligned status, and enters a period of growing political crisis. Ankara does not fully resume military cooperation with Washington and NATO until after the coup of 1980.³
- **1990–1991:** Turkey's commitment to NATO and the United States resurges in the 1980s—an American-Turkish Council is formed in 1981, and a robust agenda of bilateral and alliance exercises and support operations is back in place by mid-decade.⁴ The time seems ripe for an enterprising Turkish leader to take the next step of fully placing the country in the Western policy mainstream, and Turgut Ozal does just that in 1990, gambling that full support of Operation Desert Storm will reap economic and diplomatic gains commensurate with the risk he will incur. In response, NATO steps up to Turkey's side, conducting airborne early warning (Operation Anchor Guard) and air defense (Ace Guard) efforts on Ankara's behalf.⁵ Ozal earns warm personal thanks from President George H. W. Bush, who comes to consider him a close personal friend and Turkey a great ally.



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U.S. NUCLEAR WEAPONS STORAGE SITE
- 
U.S. COMMUNICATIONS STATION
- 
NATO RADAR EARLY WARNING & TRACKING STATION
- 
U.S. MISSILE & NUCLEAR TEST MONITORING SITE
- 
NATO AIR BASE

Past and Present NATO Installations in Turkey

- **1998-2003:** Events over the next decade do not pan out as Ozal had hoped, and Turkey is left holding the bag. As the 1990s unfold, the country suffers escalating terrorist violence in the southeast, economic damage that contributes to a major crisis in 1994, a domestically unpopular legacy operation in northern Iraq, increased political polarization, and an apparent decrease in Western interest and support amid troubled times.⁶ Ozal does not live to see the worst of it, but many Turks remember 1991, rather than 2003, as the year the wheels came off the relationship.⁷

It is not difficult to see why Turks in the 1990s might have developed serious buyer's remorse for previous support of the United States and NATO. In addition to balking at "out of NATO area" operations near Turkey's volatile southern and eastern borders in the wake of the Gulf War, the alliance's European members increasingly dismissed Turkey's security concerns altogether. Much of Europe refused to treat the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization, with several giving substantial tacit support to the group.⁸ And in February 2003, as another invasion of Iraq loomed, Europe explicitly rejected Turkish appeals under Article IV of the NATO treaty for protection against possible retaliation from Saddam Hussein's forces.⁹ Instead, EU leaders enthusiastically focused their defense planning efforts on formulating a common security identity for Europe—one that did not include Turkey.¹⁰ These signals naturally fed Ankara's inclinations toward a more muscular, unilateral security approach, manifested most clearly in the 1998 ultimatum to Syria that resulted in the flight and capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.¹¹ Although Turkey supported NATO operations in Bosnia and Kosovo during this period, these were special cases with historical resonance for the Turkish public rather than signs of rapprochement.

In light of Gulf War disappointments, Europe's exclusionary post-Cold War security arrangements, and the success of unilateralism in bringing down Ocalan, Turkey's refusal to play the good soldier during Operation Iraqi Freedom should not have caught the press and public off guard. Even so, the

Turkish parliament's refusal to authorize ground and air combat operations from its soil marked a stark breach with the fifty-year pattern of U.S.-Turkish relations. This was not simply a message about lingering unhappiness from a difficult decade—it was the definitive end of an era in Turkey's commitment to security collectivism with the West under Washington's lead. The failed parliamentary resolution (or *tezkere*) chilled U.S.-Turkish military and diplomatic relations for the better part of a decade. Turkey would go on to provide modest support in Iraq (e.g., restricted overflight access and transit for noncombat supplies via ground convoy), but its abstention greatly complicated the American-led war effort. The ugly twin sister to the legislative fiasco was the Sulaymaniyah incident of July 2003, in which U.S. soldiers detained, blindfolded, and handcuffed Turkish special forces conducting a longstanding liaison and intelligence mission under joint agreement with regional Kurdish authorities. The incident was deeply embarrassing for the Turks, sparking widespread outrage and causing a precipitous drop in support for the United States and the West among the Turkish public.¹²

In short, Turkey's relationship with the West has long been—and remains—a cyclical process. Even in the post-2003 chill, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Erdogan found a *modus vivendi* for Iraq and the broader relationship. And Bush established a positive trend in 2007 when he agreed to provide enhanced support to anti-PKK efforts at a time of crisis for the Turkish security and political establishments. New elements entered the equation in 2010, though—chiefly Iran and Israel—and gave even longtime Turkey watchers reason to fear that the relationship was headed off a cliff.

Touching Bottom Again in 2010-2011

In terms of Turkey's relations with the West, 2010 was not a good year, and prospects remained fairly bleak throughout early 2011.¹³ There were grounds to suspect that a long-term rift was opening as an intentional product of Turkey's desire for a new strategic identity. In particular, Ankara proved

intransigent on a key American policy initiative for the region: sanctions against the Iranian nuclear program. It was also obstinate in demanding an Israeli apology in the wake of the May 2010 Gaza flotilla incident. Polling data was bad and getting worse: the Transatlantic Trends survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. indicated that only 6 percent of the Turkish public supported close cooperation with the United States, 43 percent saw NATO as inessential, and 20 percent preferred that Ankara align with the Middle East rather than the EU. Public support for the abrasive international approach of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) seemed evident in popular backing for the government's domestic initiatives: 58 percent of Turks approved the AKP-drafted constitutional referendum, and both Erdogan and his party remained well liked. None of this augured well for improving Turkish cooperation with the West. Former U.S. ambassador James Jeffrey summed up the 2010 situation neatly: Turkey under the AKP had "a special yen for destructive drama and rhetoric," "Rolls Royce ambitions but [Land] Rover resources," and a habit of presenting itself as the Islamic conscience of NATO—a role that cast a long shadow on its accession talks with the EU.¹⁴

On a personal note, the author spent most of 2010 in Kabul, Afghanistan, serving with the Turkish brigade in charge of security there and watching with Turkish colleagues as press accounts of the Gaza flotilla crisis rolled in. Subsequent discussions lent an appreciation for why the bloom was off the Western rose for Turkey. Not just soldiers, but Turkish businessmen, diplomats, and visiting political leaders weighed in with sharp remarks on the incident specifically, and Turkey's treatment from the West more generally. In their view, Turkey had stood by NATO and the United States for decades while simultaneously chasing an evasive EU with unrequited ardor. Meanwhile, Western leadership had purportedly led the world to global economic crisis, messy wars in Muslim lands, a growing Muslim-Western cultural divide, and the apparent impunity of "rogue" actions that resulted in the death of Turkish citizens—or so the flotilla incident was depicted

in these circles. Particularly in a place like Afghanistan—where the limits of Western and American power were so evident and the Turks well regarded by Afghans of nearly every stripe—the paradigm of "loyal (but dysfunctional) Turkey" seemed antiquated and irrelevant. With impressive unanimity among individuals with Kemalist, religious, or liberal nationalist inclinations, these Turks had already leaned toward endorsing a more independent and less reflexively accommodating strategic alignment; the flotilla was just the last straw.

Judged from that perspective, Turkey's strategic alignment seemed headed for, at best, a sort of Gaullist "hold your nose" relationship with the West or, at worst, active alignment with authoritarian regimes seeking to neutralize Western power. Although grateful for Turkish participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, many personnel from other NATO countries downplayed the actual contributions of the Turkish contingent and made no secret of the prevailing view that these troops had more in common with the Afghans than with the French or British. And at the official level, Turkish-NATO relations were mired in the complications of Cyprus, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, Turkey's political flirtation with Iran and military flirtation with China, and Turkish discussions of an "axis shift."¹⁵

Another reversal soon set in, however, as 2011 saw the allure of Ankara's strategic free agency shatter against the practical limits of Turkish power. Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu learned in succession that Turkish mediation in Libya, Syria, and Iraq did not create space for compromise or negotiation as they had hoped. They also learned that regional organizations such as the Arab League still saw Western leadership as indispensable for resolving important regional issues, and if Turkey did not stand with the West, it might be marginalized altogether. The year was so transformative that by late 2011 and early 2012, President Obama was calling Erdogan one of his five closest international allies and praising Turkey as "a NATO ally and a great friend and partner on NATO issues."¹⁶

Similarly, the Turkish press began describing 2012 as the “golden age” of U.S.-Turkish relations, and the shine of that gold could only bolster Turkey’s attachment to its NATO identity.¹⁷

Changed Dynamics in 2011–2012

When considering the changed horizon for Turkish relations with Washington and NATO as of early 2012, it is useful to first consider what did not occur in mid-to-late 2011. For one thing, while Turkey’s leaders did not pursue conciliatory policies toward Israel, neither did they markedly exacerbate the difficult, wounded relationship. This relative restraint was especially notable given Turkey’s clear unhappiness over both the UN report on the flotilla incident and unsettling Israeli-Cypriot gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸ Ankara also avoided reprising high-profile, poorly coordinated diplomatic initiatives such as the abortive May 2010 attempt to partner with Brazil on mediating the Iranian nuclear issue.¹⁹

Furthermore, Turkish public opinion toward the West did not seem to worsen appreciably in 2011. Mid-year polls by Pew Research Center showed that the majority of Turks did not see Middle Eastern orientation or identity as a replacement for the West and still favored EU membership.²⁰ The Transatlantic Trends survey showed a mixed but improving picture.²¹ Turkish approval of Obama’s foreign policies improved from 23 to 30 percent (though still well below the 2009 level of 50 percent), and public support for EU accession rebounded to 48 percent, a level not seen since 2006. The number of Turks supporting cooperation with the EU and Washington increased slightly, while the number advocating a unilateralist foreign policy decreased significantly. In general, then, polling data indicated that the wounds between Turkey and the West, while not fully healed, had stopped bleeding and begun to show some signs of recovery.

Of more immediate importance, perhaps, Ankara’s commitment to collective action through NATO increased rather than decreased throughout 2011. Turkey continued to play a major, active role in the alliance’s political and command structures

and actually increased its operational tempo within NATO as the year wore on. A quick tour d’horizon may be instructive.

Political structure and politics. Turkish participation in the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO’s political wing, has not encountered significant disruption despite negative trends in Turkish public regard for the alliance. According to one observer, “On the issue of the continuation of membership in an updated NATO, a feeling of disconnectedness and emptiness is prevalent in the majority of the Turkish public.”²² Yet the permanence of this disenchantment is not preordained: in the wake of the turmoil brought on by the Arab Awakening, Prime Minister Erdogan need only praise Turkey’s membership and NATO overall in a sustained manner in order to measurably reverse the negative sentiment.²³ In this regard, it is worth noting the tone of Foreign Minister Davutoglu’s press remarks following his visit to the NAC to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of Turkey’s accession to NATO. He spoke of Ankara’s continued commitment to NATO as a story of two partners who had both transformed since the Cold War—but remained mutually committed.²⁴

Command structure. NATO’s military command structure includes a supreme headquarters and overall command node in Belgium, three subordinate operational commands, and roughly a dozen tactical commands of various stripes. Two of these major tactical headquarters—an air headquarters in Izmir and a ground corps headquarters in Istanbul—are based in Turkey, and NATO’s plans call for these sites to play a continued robust role in command-and-control arrangements.²⁵ The air headquarters will reportedly be shut down this year and its responsibilities transferred to Ramstein, Germany; thereafter, however, Izmir will host the new NATO Land Forces Headquarters, to be commanded by an American three-star general who will oversee standardization and training of all NATO ground forces.²⁶ Turkey also hosts one of NATO’s fifteen accredited Centers of Excellence, the COE for Defense Against Terrorism (COE-DAT) in Ankara.²⁷

Operations. Turkey's major contributions to NATO's various combat operations have continued despite the tensions of 2010–2011:

- *ISAF Afghanistan.* Nearly 2,000 Turkish troops support Regional Command–Capital in Kabul as well as Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Wardak and Jawzjan.
- *Counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.* Turkey is currently in command of the six-ship Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 in Operation Ocean Shield, and over the past several years it has regularly provided a frigate to the operation on a rotational basis.²⁸
- *Security and counterterrorism efforts in the Mediterranean.* Turkey contributes naval assets to NATO's Operation Active Endeavor.²⁹
- *NATO mission in Kosovo.* Turkey contributes 318 of the 5,790 soldiers in Kosovo Force (KFOR) and has been a major troop contributor over the life of the mission.
- *Libya.* Despite its initial reluctance, Turkey agreed to support military operations to protect civilians from the Qadhafi regime's attacks beginning on March 22, 2011. For example, it assented to NATO use of the Allied Air Command in Izmir to provide command and control for the air campaign over Libya, supporting Operation Unified Protector through its completion in October of that year.³⁰ In addition, the Turkish navy provided NATO with four frigates, one submarine, and one tanker ship.³¹ (For more on Ankara's Libya strategy, see the separate section on that subject below.)
- *Missile defense.* Perhaps most surprising, Turkey agreed in 2011 to play a central role in the deployment of NATO's missile defense shield. Participation was not a foregone conclusion given the likelihood of damage to Turkey's relations with neighbors Russia and Iran. The decision makes Turkey one of only a handful of countries hosting components of the multilateral shield.

The United States and Turkey also have significant bilateral military ties beyond the NATO framework. U.S. European Command (EUCOM) maintains a fifty-person Office of Defense Cooperation in Ankara to facilitate training exchanges and military equipment sales. Other units facilitate liaison and information sharing related to Iraq and the region as a whole. And U.S. forces still conduct a variety of missions out of Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey. While military cooperation may be lower in profile than during the Cold War, it continues apace.

Turkey has also been supportive of NATO's efforts to update its capabilities and methods for the twenty-first century. The alliance has sought to maintain relevance by becoming global in focus, more mobile and flexible in deployment and operational capabilities, and more attuned to nontraditional threats and emerging political and strategic realities.³² Accordingly, Turkey has transitioned to a smaller, technically modernized force structure over the past two decades, one centered on smaller brigades and special units rather than the large divisional formations of the Cold War. At the same time, it has kept defense spending near 4 percent of its gross domestic product, unlike most NATO partners, who have sunk to the 2 percent range. The military has also accepted increased subordination to civilian control—a trend that emerged before the supposed Ergenekon/Balyoz conspiracies against the military.³³

This is not to say that NATO and Turkey are getting all they want out of the relationship. Europeans remain frustrated over the wall of separation Ankara maintains between its EU and NATO roles. The Turks have scrupulously guarded that wall since 2004, believing that the EU reneged on a promise not to admit Cyprus into the union until the island's political division had been resolved. Cypriot accession put Turkey in the position of occupying force on an EU member's territory, with a host of negative implications for Ankara's security and diplomatic interests. Therefore, Turkish acceptance of overlapping EU and NATO security roles is not conceivable until Cyprus is resolved.³⁴ In addition, polling data indicates that many Turks still view

NATO as more beneficial to the Christian nations of Europe than to the average Turk.³⁵ Concern over this seemingly lagging public support led NATO to undertake a media blitz commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Turkish accession to NATO earlier this year.³⁶

Despite these areas of concern, Turkey's commitment to NATO has proven more durable than some feared. Ankara remains one of the alliance's pillars, and the alliance certainly remains the most respected and effective forum for Turkey to pursue its national interests.

Why did the specter of Turkish unilateralism give way so quickly to renewed policy and operational collaboration? One part of the explanation might be the emergence of an apparently sincere and durable friendship between Obama and Erdogan; as mentioned previously, the president numbered the prime minister as one of his five closest foreign counterparts in a January 2012 interview with Fareed Zakaria.³⁷ Another part may be the lack of clear political benefit from policies that raise Washington's ire. Unlike confrontations with Israel over Palestinian rights, which play well at home, differences with the United States are not a guaranteed hit with the Turkish electorate. In fact, for generations of Turkish voters raised to think of managing the bilateral relationship as a primary job skill for their national leaders, friction with Washington could indicate that Erdogan is out of his depth. Appearing close to the United States without becoming a junior partner has long been the "sweet spot" of Turkish foreign policy.

Most important, events on the ground proved that Erdogan's ambitions to make Turkey a leading regional player could not be realized without a team effort that involved the United States and NATO. A series of regional crises unfolded in a complex, interrelated manner throughout 2011, demonstrating both the futility of unilateral measures and the efficacy of common action. Foremost among these were the fall of the Qadhafi regime in Libya, the eruption against the Assad regime in Syria, and the continuing struggle over Iran's nuclear program. Each of these crises contributed to Turkey's

movement away from an autonomous path and back toward joint action with the United States.

Strategic Evolution on Libya

One of last year's most dramatic turnarounds in Turkish foreign policy was on Libya. As late as mid-March 2011, Turkey was still arguing against a NATO role of any kind in the Libyan crisis.³⁸ Yet when a stalemate emerged between the regime and the rebels, Erdogan came under increasing domestic and international pressure to stop blocking more decisive action. He proceeded carefully, mindful both of the thousands of Turkish workers slowly filtering out of Libya and of his pious political support base at home, which was skeptical of Western-led interventions.³⁹ Ankara had both regional credibility and significant commercial and diplomatic interests at stake in the crisis, and it began to realize the danger of being left on the periphery as a postwar order formed—France in particular seemed poised to preempt Turkey's role.

After careful NATO negotiations on modalities, Turkey agreed by late March not only to approve and participate in air and naval operations aimed at blunting the Qadhafi regime's attacks, but also to allow activation of the NATO command node in Izmir to coordinate air operations.⁴⁰ Before this course change, grumbling against the Turks could be heard in Brussels and Libya alike; by August, however, Foreign Minister Davutoglu was back within the inner circles of NATO consultations about Libya's future as well as the good graces of the opposition leadership in Benghazi.⁴¹ The wisdom of operating with the blessing and full weight of NATO had borne fruit.

The Long, Slow Burn in Syria

Turkish policy toward the Syria crisis also changed dramatically in mid-2011. The results have yet to fully play out, but the shift placed Ankara firmly within the Euro-American policy mainstream.

Turkey's initial strategy was ambitious and autonomous: an evenhanded appeal to both the Assad regime and the opposition groups, seeking gradual transition toward a democratic opening

in line with Ankara's "zero problems with neighbors" approach to foreign policy. This appears to have been a serious miscalculation, one based on a misunderstanding of Syrian politics and Bashar al-Assad's relationship with Tehran.⁴² Erdogan was willing to incur Western ire with this approach, but he was ultimately shamed into a more aggressive position when Assad ignored Turkish appeals and began hammering the population.⁴³ Remarkably, Ankara began to openly advocate regime change by late 2011, believing that diplomatic avenues had been exhausted. As one observer noted, "Though refraining from backing military intervention, Turkey supported the Western-initiated unilateral sanctions, which were vetoed in October 2011 by Russia and China, despite the fact that this attitude contravened Turkey's policy of not acting outside the UN-endorsed legitimate platforms."⁴⁴ In fact, Turkey has quietly hosted and protected portions of the Free Syrian Army, one of several armed groups fighting the Assad regime.⁴⁵ By late March 2012, Turkey was reportedly even considering imposition of a security buffer zone to protect civilians in northern Syria.⁴⁶

Indeed, 2011 seems to have taught Ankara the limits of the "zero problems" approach and the utility of unified action with the West. The cost of this lesson was high—had Turkey tethered its Syria policy to the West's earlier, Assad and his Iranian patrons might not have had time to organize the crushing counterforce that has been applied throughout 2012. The international community's slow and disjointed response gave Assad breathing room, and gave Iran enough time to provide the weapons, ammunition, and technical experts needed to support his onslaught against Homs and other opposition strongholds.⁴⁷

Turkish-Iranian Regional Tensions

Last year was also the moment when the AKP government scanned the strategic horizon—Iraq, Syria, the Arab Awakening, Afghanistan, relations with the West—and realized that in nearly every case Iran was a competitor rather than a partner.⁴⁸ In Iraq, competition centered on Shi'ite-Sunni power sharing, with Tehran supporting Prime Minister

Nouri al-Maliki and Turkey advocating inclusion of the Sunni-oriented Iraqiyah bloc. In Syria, Ankara bristled at Tehran's aggressive arming and sustaining of the Assad regime, as well as its apparent contempt for Turkish attempts to achieve a negotiated solution. As for relations with the West, Iran tried to dissuade Turkey from playing a role in the NATO missile shield, even delivering a veiled threat to attack the radar installation after Turkey agreed to host it.⁴⁹ These three factors made clear by late 2011 that Turkey's ancient rivalry with Iran was alive and well.

Meanwhile, the gains Turkey had expected from closer Iranian ties never really materialized. Although bilateral trade increased to over \$15 billion, the growth was almost entirely limited to gas and oil sales.⁵⁰ In fact, Turkish and Iranian businesses have been locked in cutthroat competition throughout the region, especially Iraq; in Basra, for example, Turkish companies are direct rivals to businesses owned by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.⁵¹ On the security front, tactical cooperation with Iran against the PKK and the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) did not significantly hinder their activities in southeast Turkey.⁵² On the strategic front, simmering tensions over competing interests in the Caucasus—regarding energy routes, Azerbaijan's strategic orientation, and shared Russo-Iranian unease over Western influence in Georgia and the broader region—remained an underlying problem. And despite Turkey's nuanced position on Iran's nuclear program, the specter of Tehran acquiring nuclear weapons likely troubles Ankara no less than others in the region. Turkey still hosts a small number of NATO nuclear weapons and therefore has no incentive to develop its own such program.⁵³ Instead, it would like to see transparent and verifiable nuclear energy programs for itself and its neighbors, and probably views the NATO weapons and defense shield as good leverage toward that end.

Given these and other areas of friction, competition, and concern, the cooling of Turkish-Iranian relations seems inevitable—it is difficult to imagine that not being the case when two ambitious countries share a neighborhood. Erdogan's Turkey may

once have entertained the notion of being a bridgehead to the West for Iran and the Muslim world, but it now appears to have resumed something like the more traditional role of the West's bridgehead in the other direction. According to recent reports, Turkish diplomats have been quietly talking to Iran about stepping back its support for Assad, potentially in exchange for consideration of a deal with the West on a formally recognized, peaceful nuclear program.⁵⁴ If successful, such talks would ease several conflicts at once while reinforcing Turkey's nested role within NATO and the West. And even if they fail, Turkey appears firmly ensconced in the Western camp for any tumult to follow.

From Sudan to South Sudan

Another irritant between Ankara and the West—ties with the Omar al-Bashir regime in Sudan—was also greatly reduced in 2011. Previously, Erdogan had drawn much criticism for his warm ties with Bashir and his related assertion that Muslims could not commit genocide in Darfur or anywhere else.⁵⁵ This unfortunate association led to a facile linking of Turkey, Muslims, and genocide at a time when Europe was debating formal recognition of the 1915 “Armenian genocide”—a complication that was hardly in Turkey's interest.

Turkey's behavior since then has smoothed these tensions. After the South Sudanese voted for independence in January 2011 and declared statehood in July 2011, Ankara was one of the first capitals to formally recognize the new government.⁵⁶ Turkish businessmen soon began showing an interest in investing in South Sudan, and one major project has already been approved—the same approach that helped catalyze positive relations with the Kurds of northern Iraq following the Iraq war.⁵⁷ And in May 2012, Turkey agreed to start a health sector assistance program, to include training for South Sudanese doctors in Turkey.⁵⁸ Ankara has not entirely abandoned Sudan proper, of course; most recently, it attempted to organize an international conference on Sudanese development following the loss of southern oil reserves (the conference been postponed once and looks likely to be postponed a second time).⁵⁹

Implications

Last year, some Turks began joking that Erdogan and Davutoglu should adjust their foreign policy terminology to recognize the shift from *sifir* problems to *super* problems (in English, zero problems to super problems). Indeed, the zero problems policy—to the extent that it involved pursuing unilateral approaches, not taking sides, and seeking incremental solutions that pleased all parties—no longer seems to reflect Turkey's neighborhood or mindset. In its place has emerged a more nuanced policy: one that still seeks to remedy decades of neglect in Turkey's Eastern ties, but with less ambivalence about working with Western partners and institutions.

What does this mean for the next few years of Turkey-NATO and Turkey-U.S. relations? One must begin by clarifying what the reversal does not mean. It certainly does not mean that concerns over Turkey's strategic reliability have disappeared. Erdogan remains a deeply passionate, populist, and ideologically focused leader, one who is tremendously popular in both Turkey and the region. He is no longer constrained by a politically powerful Kemalist security establishment, a bad economy, a straightjacket constitution, a fully independent media, or a comparable opposition party. This dominance is also tied to the troubling use of extra-legal methods (e.g., fabricated evidence, threats, extended investigations and detentions) to punish and demoralize critics in the military, press, and civil society.⁶⁰ Although many applaud Erdogan for stripping the military of its privileged praetorian role, the institution had previously forged a strong, three-decade record of support for modernization, EU accession, and reform while providing insurance against strategic failure or reorientation.⁶¹ The politically neutered military has no apparent successor in that role.

The AKP's future leadership is another wild card. Erdogan is expected to run for the presidency in 2014, and his political base includes components focused on business, nationalism, political reform, and Islam. But the Turkish constitution stipulates that the prime minister cease his affiliation with the AKP to assume the post of nonpartisan presidency, and his exit from the AKP could expose

sharp edges of this disparate coalition, resulting in political turmoil and foreign policy volatility. External complications—such as a regional war involving Iran and Israel, open conflict with Cyprus and/or Israel over Eastern Mediterranean gas fields, or a crisis in northern Iraq—could also disrupt the generally positive trend of greater strategic harmonization between Turkey, Washington, and NATO.

In addition, observers recognize that Turkey has at least two strategic alternatives to NATO. The first is remaining ideologically agnostic, grouping with other emerging economic powers to maintain a truly nonaligned and balanced strategic approach. This entails acting in unison with the “BRICs”—Brazil, Russia, India, and China.⁶² The second alternative is to recognize that Turkey has more in common with other emerging democracies than with economically dynamic authoritarian regimes. This form of nonalignment would place Turkey in a wider group referred to as “IBSATI”—India, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and Indonesia. Although IBSATI would leave more room for Turkish cooperation with the West than BRIC alignment, it could still entail a pace and modality of action that precludes truly joint action.⁶³ For now, BRIC remains an analytic tool for investors more than for geostrategists, and IBSATI more of a pipe dream—nevertheless, NATO should jealously promote and guard its “Leading Acronym” status in Ankara.⁶⁴

The dramatic effects of the global economic crisis deserve mention as well. Many of Turkey’s Mediterranean neighbors are experiencing severe dislocations due to problems with debt, budgets, capital markets, and currency. Greece stands out as the primary example, but Spain, Italy, and several others might be added to the list. The possible political fallout from these troubles could significantly alter Turkey’s relations with its NATO partners. For example, what if nationalist backlash to budgetary austerity vaults xenophobic parties into power in these states, bringing anti-Turkish sentiment to the fore? What if socialist resurgence in France and elsewhere leads some states to abjure foreign military participation, rendering common NATO approaches impractical or irrelevant? Turkish leadership in NATO might actually become

more important under those conditions, but amid generally diminished capabilities for the alliance as a whole.

These concerns highlight the cyclical nature of Turkey’s attachment to the West and how sensitive that attachment is to regional events. In response to this broad lesson, Washington should proceed cautiously. At the same time, however, the ground seems fertile for a high degree of policy and operational collaboration moving forward.

Is the Missile Shield a Watershed?

In this most uncertain period for NATO, missile defense could prove to be the opening chapter of a “golden age” for Turkey’s role in the alliance. Although Erdogan did not immediately agree to the stationing of antimissile systems in Turkey, he subsequently appeared to recognize the huge consequences attendant to the choice. Regional trends seemed to convince him that NATO’s good graces were more important than the ability to portray his country as nonaligned. By November 2010, when the alliance held a summit in Lisbon, the conceptual groundwork for a compromise had been laid. Details were hammered out in the first half of 2011, and by mid-September, Turkey had agreed to the stationing of a U.S. radar system to complement interceptor missiles in Romania and Poland, along with seaborne components.⁶⁵ By February 2012, the X-band radar installation was installed and operating at Kurecik near Malatya, roughly 435 miles from the Iranian border.⁶⁶

The missile shield deployment may prove to be a foundational event for NATO in the twenty-first century. The alliance has struggled to clearly articulate purpose and relevance since the demise of the Soviet bloc, and the Afghanistan mission gave only a temporary reprieve, but missile defense offers the prospect of a fundamental resuscitation. As the agenda for NATO’s May 2012 Chicago summit indicates, the shield is the alliance’s main area of focus outside Afghanistan.⁶⁷ The West needed an unambiguous statement that Turkey’s leaders still see their destiny tied to NATO more than to their authoritarian neighbors. Ankara’s commitment to play a major role in the missile shield fit the bill.

Policy Openings

The current situation calls for a few prudent initiatives to both sustain Ankara's westward policy tilt and maximize Turkish contributions to regional stability, development, and democratization:

- NATO should design a program for new democracies in the Arab world similar to its post-Soviet Partnership for Peace initiative, assigning Turkey as the lead nation. A NATO mechanism with a heavy Turkish flavor would excite far fewer antibodies than bilateral security cooperation programs run by individual Western nations. It would also give NATO an opportunity to invest in Turkey through expanded training and exchange capacity without a large armed presence.
- The United States should cement the sine qua non of Ankara's commitment to NATO by protecting Turkey's vulnerable security flanks: Cyprus and the PKK. On Cyprus, Washington should use proactive, balanced diplomacy to keep the Turks at the table and bring the Cypriots there too. Although Ankara believes in the fundamental justice of its cause in Cyprus—supporting the island's Turkish-speaking community and preventing Turkey's own geostrategic encirclement—it is still open to a negotiated settlement. If the EU overplays its diplomatic and economic leverage, however, Turkey may do something rash like annex northern Cyprus, undoing the good work of the past year. As for the PKK, the United States should continue low-profile, high-value-added support to Turkey against that group as well as all other violent extremist organizations. Whenever Washington or Europe have proven tone deaf to Turkish concerns over Kurdish separatism and terrorism, as in the run-up to the Iraq war, Ankara's response has been predictably bad.
- The United States must take the lead in reconciling Turkey and Israel. It is difficult to imagine

full rapprochement happening without strong Israeli-Palestinian recommitment to two-state negotiations, since the conflict drives much of the rancor between Israel and Ankara. The wisest policy step Washington can take would be to arrange the following trade: Erdogan agrees to speak about and with the Israelis in the manner and tone of serious diplomacy, and the United States and Israel agree to treat Turkey as an interested and capable player in the process. This would require Erdogan to reduce the amount of anti-Israeli rhetoric in his domestic politicking and to end his reliance on opposition to Israel as the main support for his aspiration to regional leadership. For Israel and the United States, opportunities outweigh the costs of such a trade. After all, the moribund Quartet process was always a bit of a non sequitur, including as it did a remote, troubled Russia while excluding nearby, surging Turkey. Call it a "Quintet" if necessary, but any new effort to forge a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace process must find a constructive role for a newly assertive Turkey. The prospects for a two-state solution would improve with Turkey's support, but may suffer greatly if Ankara is left to the role of outside agitator.

In the final analysis, things are back to normal between Turkey and the United States—"normal" meaning a stable period of conditional cooperation and intermittent solidarity sandwiched between periodic crises and disappointments. During the recent NATO summit in Chicago, Turkey featured prominently in discussions of NATO's future strategic posture and defense capabilities.⁶⁸ Turkey remains a necessary, if dynamic, cornerstone of the alliance as much in 2012 as it did in 1952, and Washington should maintain the current, positive momentum to ensure the cornerstone remains firmly seated. Otherwise, the next crisis or misunderstanding may do more than cast a pall on bilateral relations: it may freeze NATO's forward movement altogether.

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