

Turkey's Foreign Policy Gambit

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U.S. policymakers once lamented that Washington needed Turkey more than the other way around, but this is no longer true.

Ankara's policy of targeting the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus is Turkey's most brazen foreign policy gambit ever. Modern Turkey rose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire as a post-imperial and, therefore, inward-looking state in 1923. Now, for the first time ever, Ankara is pursuing a policy of regime change in a neighboring country. During the past two years, Turkey has positioned itself as the chief regional opponent of the al-Assad regime, supporting the Syrian uprising with all available means, including direct aid to the rebels.

Not surprisingly, modern Turkey's most daring foreign policy gambit presents it with what could become its most existential threat to date. And to face this challenge, Turkey needs its old and trusted ally, the United States. The Syrian War may have hurt the Arab Spring, but it has ushered in springtime for U.S.-Turkish ties.

From Ankara, Syria looms as a huge and increasingly uncontrollable mess.

With the notable exception of Stalin demanding Kars, Artvin, and Ardahan in northeastern Turkey and a base along the Bosphorus from Ankara in 1945, the Syrian War poses unique threats to Turkey. First, Turkey is exposed to the heat of the Sunni-Alawite civil war next door that threatens to spill over into Turkey, stoking conflict between the Sunni and Alawite Turkish citizens of Arab origin in southern Turkey.

The prolonged civil war next door also threatens Turkey's carefully nurtured image of a stable country. Stability has been a key driver of the economic miracle in the past decade that has taken Turkey from poverty to standing a chance of joining the ranks of high-income countries in the next three years, according to World Bank economist Martin Raiser.

Turkey's financial markets have benefited from the wealth fleeing the country's unstable neighbors, as well as attracting investment that bypasses such neighbors. In 2012 alone, more than \$40 billion of international money went into the Istanbul stock market, alleviating a chronic problem of the Turkish economy, the lack of capital.

Turkey is growing because it attracts international capital, and such capital prefers to go to Turkey because it is not Syria, or for that matter, because it is not Iran, Iraq, Greece, or Cyprus.

The Syrian War could cause the meltdown of this economic miracle.

And it gets even worse. The proliferation of chemical weapons and al-Qaeda fighters along the country's 510-mile-long border with Syria could mean calamity for Turkey. These risks will grow should the conflict continue to grind on and as al-Assad continues to lose authority in large parts of the country. The ensuing weak or failed state scenario with al-Qaeda and chemical weapons that are unaccounted for would be a nightmare for Turkey's security. Even Stalin's demands would pale next to the threats coming from Syria.

In years past, U.S. policymakers lamented that Washington needed Turkey more than the other way around. This is no longer true; the foundations for a truly interdependent relationship are rising from the Syrian conflagration.

Soner Cagaptay, director of the the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute, is the author of the forthcoming 'The Rise of Turkey: The 21st Century's First Muslim Power' . ❖

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