

Turkey's Foreign Policy Pivot

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What made Ankara do an about-face and re-embrace the West? Recognition of what gives it power in the Middle East.

Turkey's foreign policy has come full circle in the last year. Far from confronting Washington on a range of issues, Ankara is embracing its membership in NATO while working closely with Washington on Middle East issues, including Iran and coordinating Syria policy. What has changed?

First and foremost, Ankara has come to appreciate a constant in the value of its foreign policy: Turkey is east if you view it from the perspective of the West, and west if you view it from the perspective of the East.

In the 2000s, Ankara's pivot away from the West almost upset Turkey's unique identity. The nation entered a period of increasingly cold relations with the United States and turned its interest to the Middle East in hopes of becoming a regional power. This strategy, however, did not exactly make Ankara a formidable power in the Middle East. Take, for instance, the Saudis' and other Persian Gulf countries' yearning for a regional counterbalance against Iran. For them the Turkey of the 2000s, isolated from NATO and Washington, began to resemble a "wealthy Yemen," i.e., a prosperous, large Muslim nation with no real value added to regional security. Ankara's strategy even started to erode its national prestige, although it initially was popular with the people.

Ultimately, Turkey came to realize that its strategic value to the Middle East is not rooted in the fact it's a Muslim power -- the region has many such states -- but that it is a Muslim power with strong ties to the U.S., access to NATO technology and muscle, and the ability to sit at the table with the Europeans. This realization was the catalyst for Ankara's foreign policy turnaround. Accordingly, in September 2011, Turkey made the strategic choice to join NATO's missile defense project.

That was a major foreign policy move by the Turkish government. If the Cold War defined NATO's identity in the 20th century, then the missile defense project defines NATO in the 21st. Just as members of the alliance agreed to defend one another against communism during the Cold War, with the missile defense project, the members of

NATO have now agreed to defend one another against a new threat, namely ballistic missiles that would likely come from Iran, Russia, China or other volatile regions.

This is what makes Ankara's decision to join the missile defense system the most important Turkish foreign policy move of the last decade. It is Turkey saying Ankara's relations with the West remain key, but more important, that Turkey now appreciates the effect its Western overlay -- i.e., NATO membership -- will have in making it a regional power.

For the Saudis and other Arab nations in the Middle East, Turkey is no longer a "wealthy Yemen" but rather the strong Turkey that Ankara sought to be when it launched its Middle East policy a decade ago.

Of course, other factors have helped foster Ankara's foreign policy change. One is the close relationship that has emerged between President Obama and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan likes to be liked, and Obama has given him attention and respect, which in turn helped remold Turkish foreign policy through Erdogan's powerful personality.

At the same time, the Arab Spring has exposed the limits of Turkey's "act alone" strategy in the Middle East. For example, the uprising in Syria demonstrated that Turkey cannot deal with massive regional instability unilaterally. Ankara reportedly has asked for NATO assistance to contain the fallout of the Syria crisis, such as dealing with a probable massive refugee flow from Syria.

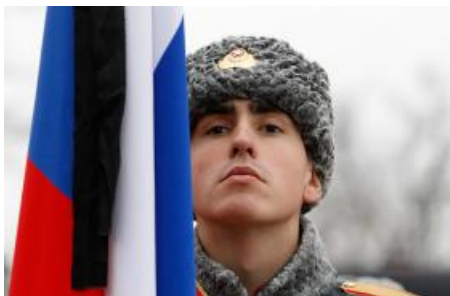
Moreover, the uprising in Syria has further cast Turkey and Iran as regional adversaries: Turkey supports the Syrian opposition; Iran arms the Assad regime. During the 2000s, Turkey approached Tehran to establish good relations, but today Iran considers Turkey a rival. This is one more reason why Ankara turned to Washington and NATO.

Turkey's new foreign policy perspective even provides Israel with a unique opportunity. But the Israelis first need to move beyond the paralysis in their relationship with Ankara, which seems to boil down to the "apology" issue over the 2010 flotilla incident off the coast of Gaza. Ankara too should be interested in repairing ties with Israel because Turkey's value to the region would be increased if Erdogan could pick up the phone and call any world leader, including Israel's. This is the logic behind Turkey's pivot.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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