

Center of the Earth

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Articles & Testimony

If U.S. President Barack Obama were using Google Earth to zoom into various geographic locations mentioned during his daily morning briefings on the state of world affairs, he is probably not zeroing into villages in Iraq's Anbar province. Until recently considered to be the center of the geostrategic earth, Washington's foreign policy focus has shifted to the Durand Line, the tumultuous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. A new, versatile term in Washington for these two countries, AfPak, demonstrates the interwoven nature of the United States' challenges, namely persistent al-Qaeda operatives, resurgent Taliban, and instability in Kabul and Islamabad along the Durand Line. AfPak occupies most of Washington's energy and is the new center of its geostrategic earth.

In his recent trip to Turkey, Obama highlighted areas of cooperation between Turkey and the United States. In Ankara's view, maintaining stability in Iraq would appear to be the critical goal of Turkish-U.S. cooperation. As important as this issue is, it pales in immediacy to Washington's most pressing concern: success in AfPak. Combating al-Qaeda and Taliban presence in the Pashtun highlands along the Durand Line, while achieving stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, is the center of the earth in American foreign policy.

As such, in it lies the real opportunity for Turkish-U.S. cooperation.

In the Obama age, Turkey has much to benefit from a close relationship with the United States. From cooperation along the East-West energy corridor to Washington's ability to move Turkey's European Union train along the accession tracks, a strong relationship with the U.S. is vital to Turkey. Even before Obama's trip to Turkey, the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government suggested that "U.S. and Turkish foreign policy agendas overlap completely." In this regard, if Turkish assistance to the United States to help withdraw troops from Iraq would win Ankara brownie points in Washington, then Turkish-U.S. cooperation in AfPak would take the cake.

There are three avenues for Turkish-U.S. cooperation in AfPak. First, Turkey can share with the United States its insight into fighting terror with velvet gloves in AfPak. For al-Qaeda and the Taliban to be defeated along the Durand Line, the Pashtun peasants there must be swayed away from supporting both organizations. In the hierarchy-driven and feudal Pashtun lands, such a shift will not occur unless the Pashtun elders decide in that direction.

This effort requires incentives for the elders, as well as benefits such as improved services and security that they can transfer to their peasants, and finally, trust-based communication with the elders. NATO can provide these incentives, improved services and security. As NATO's only Muslim-majority country, not counting smaller Albania, which has just joined the alliance, Turkey could provide the communication bridge between NATO and the Pashtun elders.

Even if it were to win the Pashtun elders and peasants, NATO would still have to fight some al-Qaeda and Taliban elements, especially those who have come to the region from outside and are invested in these organizations' political goals more than the local peasants.

The use of Turkish troops to support the United States in its fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban is a tricky business. This will happen only if Turkey feels that its own terror threat emanating from Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, presence in northern Iraq has abated. Lately, there have been several promising signs in this regard: The Iraqi Kurds seem more willing than before to help Turkey fight the PKK as they did in the 1990s when Ankara and the Iraqi Kurds together brought the PKK to its knees.

If the United States can align the Iraqi Kurds with Turkey toward paralyzing the PKK, and it should be mentioned that Washington is already giving Turkey intelligence to this end, this would alleviate Turkey's threat concerns about PKK terrorism. Only then would Turkey consider increasing its troop presence in Afghanistan. At the moment, there are around 1,200 Turkish soldiers in the country. The key to NATO's success in Kandahar perhaps goes through Erbil.

The third area of Turkish-U.S. cooperation would be through Ankara's promotion of ties between ties Kabul and Islamabad who are, more often than not, at odds with each other. Since the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey has followed an activist foreign policy in the Middle East, suggesting that it has the power to bring together countries in conflict such as Israel and Syria. That has not happened because Turkey is not always seen as an honest broker in Middle East issues.

However, in AfPak, Turkey is viewed an honest broker. Ankara has maintained historically good and close ties with the Afghan and Pakistani governments, and common Afghanis and Pakistanis have only nice things to say about Turks. To illustrate, there is an old saying that if a Turk were blindfolded and walked through the Middle East toward South Asia, he would know when he had arrived in Afghanistan or Pakistan when anti-Turkish jokes would end and he started to hear people praising the Turks.

Turkey has already taken steps toward acting as a bridge between Afghanistan and Pakistan through the initiative started by President Abdullah Gül to iron out the differences between the two countries. This initiative could be further promoted through the inclusion of the common Afghanis and Pakistanis. The Durand Line, drawn in the late 19th century, was named after Sir Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of the British Indian government.

Sir Durand had probably no idea that one day his name would stand for ground zero of American foreign policy. If I were in Ankara, I would zoom into the Durand Line; this is where Obama looks every morning.

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