

The Importance of Gul's Presidency

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Articles & Testimony

The following is an edited translation of an article that originally appeared in the January 16, 2008, edition of the Turkish daily Yeni Safak. [Read the Turkish version online \(http://www.yenisafak.com.tr/yorum/?t=02.02.2008&c=12&i=93511\)](http://www.yenisafak.com.tr/yorum/?t=02.02.2008&c=12&i=93511).

The January visit of Turkish president Abdullah Gul to the United States sparked a great deal of debate and discussion in Turkey. One concern was the timing of the trip, especially since Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had just visited Washington on November 5. Some analysts and opinion leaders proposed that nothing new could be achieved by Gul's visit, since Erdogan had already reached an agreement with Washington during his visit to combat the PKK. The latest trip, however, was more important than some pundits suggested; years from now, it will be looked on as the beginning of a new era in which Abdullah Gul emerged as Turkey's "foreign policy" president.

President Gul has clearly expressed his willingness and determination to influence Turkish foreign policy and its main pillar, U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey has elected four presidents since the enactment of the 1982 constitution, a development that rendered the presidency relatively powerful. Although presidents Kenan Evren and Ahmet Necdet Sezer chose not to interfere with the country's foreign affairs, Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel actively determined the course of Turkey's foreign policy. It is possible to infer from the four reasons discussed below that Gul aims to be one of these foreign policy presidents in the mold of Ozal and Demirel.

First, Gul's visit was important because of the very fact it took place, not so much because of the content of the discussions. Moreover, Gul met not only with President Bush, but also with Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -- with whom he is on friendly terms -- and the Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Having lead Turkish foreign policy from 2003 to 2007 as foreign minister, Gul signaled to his American counterparts with this visit that he is the address for foreign policymaking in Turkey.

Second, Gul's meetings with foreign policy experts such as Democratic advisor Richard Holbrooke shows his vision in opening alternative channels with the U.S. foreign policymaking elite in case the White House changes parties after the November 2008 election.

Third, Washington values Gul's display of willingness and capability in terms of acting as an intermediary between the United States, Syria, and other Middle Eastern countries that are deemed problematic.

Finally, it is important that central Eurasian energy issues were brought forward during the meetings. At a time when Middle Eastern affairs (chiefly Iraq) occupy Turkey's daily agenda, Eurasian energy issues provide the most feasible avenue of U.S.-Turkish cooperation. The oil- and gas-rich countries of central Asia -- Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan -- are landlocked. Getting their oil and gas wealth to the outside world is a chief concern to the United States and others.

Four countries surround the Eurasian energy domain: Iran, China, Russia, and Turkey. Given that China seeks those energy sources for itself, Washington does not consider it a prospective partner. While Iran ranks among the least probable partners for Washington, Russia actively tries to keep the United States out of the regional energy market.

In such an environment, there are many initiatives that the United States and Turkey can take in the Eurasian energy game. Dialogue on this issue was possibly the most important product of Gul's visit.

What then, are the thorny issues for Gul's foreign policy presidential era? The first is Russia. During Turkish president Suleyman Demirel's tenure, Turkey and the United States cooperated fully on Eurasian energy affairs. When they built the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which connects the Azeri oilfields to the West through Turkey, Russia was headed by Boris Yeltsin and was economically and politically bankrupt. Today, Russia benefits from exorbitant gas and oil prices, is awash with cash, and is lead by the politically astute Vladimir Putin. Moscow will therefore do all it can to prevent unconditional U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the energy field. The question, then, is what Gul will do on the issue and where he will balance Russian and American interests.

Two other thorns for Gul are in Turkey's backyard, the Middle East. First, as Turkey looks to act as a facilitator between the United States and the countries of the region, what will its stance be on the Arab-Israeli conflict? Will Turkey be able to use its good relations with both the Israelis and Palestinians as witnessed during Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas's November 2007 visit to Ankara? Or will Turkey put itself into a difficult corner as it did during the February 2006 visit by Hamas leaders? Second, how will Turkey balance its energy interests in Iran and developing economic and political relations with Tehran on the one hand, and U.S. sanctions toward Iran on the other?

As Gul emerges as Turkey's latest foreign policy president, he will have two important vehicles: first, the experienced bureaucracy and advisors from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who were with him during his time there; and second, countries like Azerbaijan and Syria, with which Turkey seems to have political clout. Should Gul rise as a foreign policy president, he is likely to add more countries to this list, providing Turkish foreign policy with maneuvering space in its regional strategies. In the end, Gul's most important heritage could turn out to be his foreign policy presidency; the milestone of this heritage could well be his January 2008 visit to the United States.

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