

Allergic Partners: Can U.S.-Turkish Relations Be Saved?

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Articles & Testimony

When Turkey's Parliament on March 1, 2003 failed to approve the Bush Administration's request for a "northern front" against Iraq, it became clear that the Iraq War would prove a watershed in U.S. - Turkish strategic partnership. Left unanswered at the time were fundamental questions of how relations would develop after such a shock. Two years later, the answers are largely in, and they are not reassuring. In such key areas as Iraq, defense and diplomatic cooperation, and economic relations, the tone and substance of U.S.-Turkish partnership has become more "allergic" than "strategic." Condoleeza Rice's early 2005 visit to Ankara may be a turning point. But it will take more than just nice words to keep this relationship from reverting to the caustic default mode of recent years.

In the Spring 2003 edition of Turkish Policy Quarterly ("Starting Over: US - Turkish Relations in the post-Iraq War Era") I posited that the Iraq War -then still underway- would be a watershed in relations between Washington and Ankara.

The Bush Administration's decision to go to war with Iraq had accelerated a shift in perceptions on both sides of the "strategic partnership" declared by Bill Clinton in the late nineties. When Turkey's Parliament on March 1, 2003 failed to approve the motion that would have allowed US forces to invade Iraq through Turkey, two stark facts emerged:

- On a request of paramount importance to the President of the United States, Turkey had said "no";
- On a set of issues affecting Turkey's paramount national interests, Turkey's elected representatives had not trusted the intentions or assurances of its "strategic partner."

While both sides bore responsibility for the fiasco, "strategic partnership," meant something very different in both Washington and Ankara on the evening of March 1 than it had that morning.

I went on to suggest that the episode might, nonetheless, have a silver lining: policymakers in each country might in its wake understand better the risks of taking the other for granted. That might result in a more systematic effort to understand and be responsive to the needs of the other, and in the emergence of a post-Iraq War US - Turkish agenda different from the one on which classical "strategic partnership" had been based in the late 1990's. While it was premature at the time to predict precisely what such an agenda would look like, I posed a series of questions, the answers to which would inevitably shape the process of "starting over."

Two years on it is worth reviewing those questions, and the answers that have emerged or are emerging.

Iraq

I correctly identified developments in Iraq as likely to play the decisive role in defining US-Turkish relations in the near term. Would the relative importance Washington in the run-up to the war attached to Turkey and to groups inside Iraq (i.e., the Kurds) not change once the objective was no longer going to war, but rebuilding Iraq? How would

Turkey's value as a "paradigm" (Muslim, democratic, secular, etc.) be affected by the emergence in Iraq of an Arab state sharing some of the same attributes? To what extent would Turkey be able to participate in the potentially lucrative rebuilding of Iraq?

Just reviewing the questions is a reminder of the extent to which Iraq has since been an unmitigated disaster for US-Turkish relations. The fact is that ongoing disorder in Iraq has kept the relationship from evolving into the "post-Iraq War" phase I had anticipated. Instead of being able to focus on building a new agenda based on common interests, both sides have spent the past two years reacting to excruciatingly difficult and emotion-laden problems emerging from inside Iraq. Too frequently each has made the other's task more difficult.

Washington deserves an important share of responsibility for what has gone wrong. A failure adequately to plan for the "post combat" phase of the operation reinforced Turkish doubts about American competence (and, in some cases, intentions.) So did an abortive appeal for Turkish troops to help provide security in Iraq. Washington and its representatives inside Iraq, overworked and focusing single-mindedly on avoiding disaster, too often ignored Turkish appeals for a measure of involvement in a process in which Ankara's interest was both clear and legitimate. In particular, assurances that "there is no place" for the PKK in the new Iraq were never acted upon; and efforts to involve the Turcomen in Iraq's emerging political process appeared pro forma. Finally, the undignified seizure of Turkish military personnel outside Suleymaniya on July 4, 2003 had a profoundly negative impact on Turkish perceptions.

Ankara, on the other hand, did try in the period after the March 1 episode to close the gap with Washington. It granted over-flight and other support during the major combat phase, agreed to send troops when asked, and repeatedly tried to engage US officials.

When its overtures were ignored, Ankara ultimately adopted a more distant stance. Ankara's hands-off posture became significant when dramatic reporting of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and operations against Fallujah and other Sunni cities fueled a firestorm of anti-Americanism in the Turkish media. Turkish official silence in the face of increasingly tendentious coverage of the war and American intentions created an "anything goes" environment in which allegations of "genocide" and war crimes began to set the tone. Moreover, Ankara's fixation throughout the period on the Kurdish question (and its identification with Iraq's Sunnis, more generally), raised questions about Turkey's agenda inside Iraq and complicated relations with Iraq's emerging political leadership. Prime Minister Erdogan's suggestion that the January 30 Iraq elections were "anti-democratic" in their treatment of some groups cannot have been welcome in Washington, which saw those elections as validation for its decision to depose Saddam and everything that followed.

By any objective analysis Turkish and American interests in the post-Saddam Iraq ought to have been convergent. Instead, Iraq over the past two years has repeatedly eroded confidence and mutual perceptions at both the popular and official levels, to the point that paradigm shifts in how citizens of each country view one another are well advanced or may already have occurred.

The Defense Relationship

A second set of questions that I identified as critical to the emergence of a new US-Turkish agenda had to do with dynamics between the defense establishments of the two countries, traditionally the core of bilateral relations. Would US forces remain in Turkey once Saddam was gone? Would Turkey be willing in the future to undertake the kind of roles that had in the past gained it a reputation as so reliable a partner on security issues? Would it support strong measures, for example, to deal with support for terrorism by Syria and Iran? How about sending forces to hot spots like Afghanistan, Somalia or Hebron? What role would the US play in promoting Turkey's military capabilities? And how would NATO's inability before the war to meet Turkey's request for defensive systems affect Ankara's view

of the organization?

What was missing from these questions was an awareness of the extent to which the tension over Iraq would spill over into the defense relationship between the two countries. As in the relationship more broadly, events in Iraq essentially hijacked the traditionally close working relations on defense matters between the two countries.

- At the most basic level, the March 1 experience left scars. US civilian decision-makers, military planners and troop commanders were surprised and angered when Turkey did not permit US forces to attack Iraq from its territory, forcing them to develop a “Plan B.” These sentiments may have been a factor in subsequent American unresponsiveness to Turkish appeals for greater involvement in rebuilding Iraq, on the one hand, and for action against the PKK, on the other.

- Any urge to “get even” was facilitated, moreover, by the fact that, after Saddam's overthrow, Turkey's importance as a platform for US military operations objectively declined. With no further need to contain Saddam in northern Iraq, and with access to new bases throughout Iraq, US aircraft based at Incirlik since the first Gulf War were withdrawn in the spring of 2003. This removed a major source of Turkish leverage over Washington, making it easier than it had been in decades for American decision-makers to ignore Ankara's views.

- On the Turkish side, the Suleymaniya incident was a deeply-felt affront to the military's honor that has been neither forgotten nor forgiven. It reinforced frustration over repeated, unsuccessful efforts in senior military and other channels to convince American authorities to take seriously Turkish concerns in Iraq.

Meanwhile other elements of the traditional defense relationship were coming unglued. A decision to cancel long-running negotiations with Bell Helicopter on an attack helicopter for the Turkish army has raised questions - particularly in view of Turkey's success in securing a date for negotiations on EU membership to begin - as to whether American companies will continue to be the primary suppliers of Turkish military hardware. Indeed, American defense companies are interpreting recently announced parameters for future competitions as designed to disqualify US firms, who are handicapped by relatively tighter technology transfer restrictions. And with Germany's Prime Minister questioning the future relevance of NATO, a major platform for past US-Turkish defense cooperation may be at risk.

Questions as to whether after March 1, 2003 Ankara retains the political and national will to deploy forces to international trouble spots were answered when Turkey again assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and recent Turkish statements suggest a willingness, should the need arise, to contribute non-combat support to putting the Israeli-Palestinian relationship on a more positive track. Such undertakings suggest there is potential for meaningful cooperation between the US and Turkish militaries in the future.

But it is equally clear that Ankara is not handing out blank checks. In terms of regional strategy, Ankara and Washington are on different pages today regarding how to deal with states like Iran and Syria. On the technical level, a 2003 US proposal to permanently redeploy combat aircraft from Germany to Incirlik appears to have been dead on arrival. A separate request to develop Incirlik as an all-purpose logistic hub has languished for months. The fate of that request will be an important indicator of the scope for future US-Turkish defense cooperation.

Diplomacy

I argued in 2003 that diplomacy would be another determinant of US-Turkish relations in the next phase. To what extent, I asked, would Turkey's EU drive be affected by the sometimes acrimonious debate within the EU over Iraq? Would that debate affect US support for Turkey's EU candidacy? More broadly, how well would post-Saddam American Middle East policy mesh with that of the AKP government, whose opening moves suggested important differences of perspective on relations with Israel and other regional players?

The questions on Europe were definitively answered during 2004. Between January and December, bold Turkish political leadership and skillful diplomacy cut through decades of inertia and conventional thinking to defuse Cyprus as an obstacle to starting membership talks and to meet the Copenhagen Criteria beyond reasonable doubt. Washington's support for the process leading to the EU Council's December 17 decision to open membership negotiations in October, 2005, was constant, appropriately low-key, and sincere.

The December 17 decision is the start of a new and important chapter in Turkey's long history with the nations of Europe. Less clear is what it may mean for the US-Turkish relationship.

I have argued elsewhere that, with the best of intentions on both sides, the enormity of the task facing Turkey in working through the EU's technical and other requirements, combined with the gravitational pull of Europe's geographic, economic and historic ties to Turkey, will inevitably mean Ankara's attention will henceforth be focused more on Brussels than Washington. The past two years have provided ample polling and other evidence that Turks generally share - and in some cases exceed - European concerns about the recent direction of American foreign policy. While this may change to the extent Europe and the Bush Administration move beyond their first-term antipathy, and while it is within the EU's power so to antagonize Turkish public opinion that Ankara at some point abandons the path to Brussels, the days when Washington was Turkey's foreign policy lodestar are probably gone for good.

Europe's gravitational pull can also be perceived in the evolution over the past two years of Turkish foreign policy. While Turkish positions have almost certainly not changed simply to please Brussels, during this period they have been consistently closer to those of core EU countries than to the Bush administration on such issues as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran and Syria. Even in the case of the Broader Near and Middle East Initiative (BMENA), for which Washington initially envisioned a prominent role for Turkey, Ankara's initial enthusiasm has been replaced by a more cautious approach within clearly defined limits. Meanwhile, Ankara's pursuit of greater "strategic depth" through a "multi-focal" policy seeking closer relations with countries throughout the globe appears to imply a de facto, if not declaratory, de-emphasis of the US relationship.

The diplomatic picture, in short, stands in stark contrast to the heyday of "strategic partnership" during the late nineties, when US and Turkish foreign policy and strategic assessments almost universally overlapped.

Economics and Trade

A final set of questions I posed in 2003 had to do with the impact of the Iraq war on Turkey's economy and prospects for shoring up a bilateral trade relationship that had wilted since the nineties. Would the AKP government hew to the commitments its predecessor had made to the IMF and World Bank? With the cloud of impending war with Iraq removed, would foreign direct investment begin to flow into Turkey? Should Turkey stumble, would Washington be prepared, as it was in 2001, to support new multilateral financial aid?

This is the one set of issues on which most of the news has been good. The war's direct economic impact on Turkey was negligible; recovery of the tourism and other industries was quick and dramatic; and Turkish entrepreneurs moved quickly (and ultimately at great risk) to exploit their geographic and other advantages in a re-opened Iraqi market. The AKP government scrupulously followed the road-map they inherited upon coming to office, ushering in two years of strong growth, precipitous drops in inflation, and a strengthening lira. Turkey's credit rating has risen with the strength of its currency; the Istanbul stock market surged in 2004 as Turkish and foreign investors correctly bet that Turkey would receive a negotiating date at year's end.

The downside, for purposes of this article, is that little of the good news directly involved the United States. While Washington had appropriated 1 billion USD in cash/loan guarantees after March 1, 2003 to protect Turkey from war-related economic damage, the appropriation proved unnecessary and has never been used. (Ironically, language

conditioning use of the appropriation on “cooperation” in Iraq generated more criticism than gratitude in Turkey.) And while Turkey's economic surge saw sharp expansion of Turkish trade with Europe, Russia and other markets, commerce with America stagnated; sagging to about half what it had been in the late nineties. American investors by and large remain deterred by negative experiences of US firms with Turkish courts in the late nineties, and by a privatization process that has too often become a football between Turkey's government, labor unions and courts. Meanwhile the phase-out this year of American textile quotas seems likely to cramp what has been a major component of Turkey's exports to the US.

With the progress it has made over the past two years in setting its economic house in order and creating the foundation for sustained growth, Turkey logically ought to become more attractive to American businessmen and investors. And Turkish entrepreneurs have demonstrated they can succeed in the American market. But at this point, the mutual interest in bilateral trade and investment that was one of the prime movers behind “strategic partnership” in the nineties is missing in action.

What Next?

In the immediate aftermath of the March 1 Parliamentary decision, the words “strategic partnership” dropped out of Washington's lexicon with respect to Turkey. Interestingly, the phrase has recently staged a comeback. Condoleeza Rice and Abdullah Gül both used the expression during the Secretary's visit to Ankara early this year. It has been used since by authorities on both sides.

Based on the analysis above, however, one has to wonder what those who today use “strategic partnership” to describe the current state of US - Turkish relations mean. Since 2003, relations have often seemed more “allergic” than “strategic.” Small wonder that, when authorities on either side seek to go beyond formulaic phrases, they lapse into banalities.

It need not be this way. Whatever the difficulties that have arisen between Turkey and the United States over the past two years, the fact is that the two countries do not have the luxury of going their separate ways.

In the words of my 2003 article:

“...the United States will find that Turkey remains important for many of the same reasons it has been important to America for 60 years and more. Size, location and demographics alone will ensure Turkey a place among that restricted group of “key countries” to which Washington will always have to pay attention. Turkey's Muslim character, and the important experiment its new government represents in the post-September 11 world, will only reinforce its significance. It is hard, by the same token, to imagine any advantage that would accrue to Turkey by allowing relationships with Washington that have been strained by the debate over Iraq to fester.”

I believe that assessment still to be correct. In practice, Washington has in the two intervening years been guilty of failing adequately to “pay attention.” Turkey has recently “allowed its relations with Washington ... over Iraq ... to fester.” And both sides have in one way or another paid a price for doing so. But at the end of the day two facts loom large: (1) US involvement in the region surrounding Turkey is likely to be significant, active and essentially permanent; it will therefore inevitably affect major Turkish interests; and (2) Washington will always find it easier to work with Turkey than around Turkey. (What is the current request for logistic access to Incirlik about, if not that?)

If there is a single cause for the missteps and mistakes that have contributed over the past two years to strained relations between Ankara and Washington, it is that policymakers on both sides have allowed themselves to be distracted by other issues. Understandable as that may have been, given the imperatives that leaders on both sides have faced, this has meant that such “partnership” as has occurred between Turkey and American during this period has been episodic and, often, exploitative. At the end of the day, leaders in neither capital have had very good talking points when asked what his partner has done for him lately.

This needs to change. With Europe looming larger in Turkey's vision of its future, and with America's vision for the region expanding, US-Turkish relations cannot be left on autopilot. Serious people on both sides need to define areas of convergence in goals and objectives systematically, and to develop together joint strategies in pursuit of them. This was the way the US and Turkey worked together in the nineties to protect Muslim communities in the Balkans, build the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, defeat the PKK in Turkey and try to reconcile Armenians and Azeris or Israelis and Arabs. That kind of strategic cooperation, where both sides are able to see clear and concrete benefits, is the surest antidote to the anti-Americanism that has emerged in Turkey over the past year, or the shallow Turkey-bashing that is now breaking out on this side of the Atlantic.

There is evidence as this goes to press that leaders on both sides have, in fact, come to realize this. Historians may cite Secretary Rice's visit to Ankara as the turning point. While she brought no changes in policy, the medium of the visit was an important message: her predecessor's first official trip to the region (to discuss Iraq!) did not include a stop in Turkey. Her visit may have signaled that the very top levels of the new Bush foreign policy team recognize they have allowed the relationship with Ankara to get out of hand. She reportedly undertook to look into some of the Iraq-related issues on which Ankara has been unable to get clear answers to date, and Turkish official and media treatment of the visit was refreshingly upbeat.

It will take more than nice words and good meetings to move US-Turkish relations in a more positive direction. If there is no follow-up to the Rice visit, or if policymakers on either side allow extreme views to dominate the debate, things can quickly revert to the default mode of the past two years. That would be a shame. In terms of common interest, there is today in the region and in the world far more that unites Americans and Turks than divides them. With a little more focus, and some hard work, there is no reason why Washington and Ankara cannot once again be working as partners with a common agenda.

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