

Turkey and the Bush Administration:

The Question Marks

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Brief Analysis

Turkey's economic crisis is naturally the leading issue in bilateral U.S.-Turkish relations, and it is almost certainly topping the agenda of today's meetings of Foreign Minister Ismail Cem with Vice President Richard Cheney and other senior officials. Of course, these meetings pose the difficult question of how much Washington should do, if anything, to bail out its strategically vital ally. But this is only one of several uncertainties characterizing U.S.-Turkish relations in the early days of the Bush administration. Because so much of Turkey's importance to the United States derives from its critical strategic location, bilateral relations are greatly affected by U.S. policies toward other states in Turkey's region. Of most concern to Turkey will be the evolution of Bush administration policy toward Iraq, Iran, and Russia, and also toward Europe's nascent bid to develop an autonomous security capacity.

For years, Iraq has been the most difficult issue in U.S.-Turkey bilateral relations. Turkey has a large stake in the outcome of the Bush administration's Iraq policy review, and Ankara's support will be crucial to the success of any revamped policy. Turkey will bless the concept of "smart sanctions," provided it means increased economic opportunity for Turks. Although not happily, Turkey can also probably live with the idea of foreign inspectors stationed on its border with Iraq if other states in the region are subjected to similar regimes.

Nevertheless, Ankara has been hostile to the notion of the forcible overthrow of the Saddam Husayn regime, which, it fears, will lead to the break-up of Iraq and the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Although not publicly acknowledged, Turkey's concern is that such an eventuality would encourage further separatism among its own Kurds. Turkey also generally opposes the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the diaspora-based Iraqi opposition that, shortly after its formation in 1992, endorsed the notion of Kurdish "self-determination" within Iraq. Somewhat ironically, many of Turkey's strongest backers in the Bush administration are also supporters of "regime change" and the INC; in the best of circumstances, they will be hard-pressed to sell Ankara on the merits of their approach. But Ankara's own attitude toward Iraq is somewhat ambivalent if not contradictory. Most Turkish decisionmakers recognize that a more powerful, WMD-stocked, and revenge-minded Saddam would again be a menace to the region and probably specifically toward Turkey, which strongly backed the 1991 Gulf War.

Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan (B-T-C) Pipeline Through effective jawboning, the Clinton administration sustained the vision of

a pipeline that would carry Caspian Sea oil from Azerbaijan through Georgia to a Mediterranean outlet on the Turkish coast. Washington's primary motives in supporting the B-T-C proposal were to isolate Iran and to bolster the former Soviet states by easing their dependence on Russian pipeline networks. Both Iran and Russia seek to host the major export pipeline for Caspian oil, and both oppose B-T-C. As sites for the main pipeline, both Russia and Iran offer certain advantages that B-T-C does not, at least in the view of some oil companies. B-T-C's commercial viability remains uncertain in any circumstance: so far, not enough oil has been found in the Azerbaijani Caspian to justify the project commercially. President Bush endorsed B-T-C this week, but the project's prospects will likely be doomed if the new administration lacks the commitment to isolate Iran and support the independence of the former Soviet states. For now, that commitment to both objectives remains untested.

European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) Turkey continues to insist that it be fully integrated into the European Union's plan to develop an autonomous military capacity centered around a 60,000-troop rapid reaction force linked to, but not controlled by, NATO. The EU is thus far willing to allow Turkey to participate in the force, but not in the planning and early decision-making stages. Holding out for a better deal, Turkey late last year vetoed a NATO proposal that would have, in effect, bestowed NATO's blessing on the EU plan. As a member of NATO but not of the EU, Turkey worries that the ESDP project will undermine NATO, thereby weakening Turkey's own role in European defense. Some in the Bush administration share Turkey's concern; others welcome ESDP as an incentive for Europeans to bolster their defense capabilities in a way that could ease America's responsibilities in Europe. Turkey is convinced it has a large stake in the outcome of that Bush administration debate.

On several other issues as well, Turkey awaits a determination of administration policy. In the Balkans, for example, Turkey has been a strong supporter of NATO's peace-keeping role with full participation by the United States. Early on, the Bush administration signaled its intent to withdraw U.S. troops from the Balkans at the earliest possible moment, although it seems to have backed off from that position. Cem also differs with the U.S. "wait-and-see" approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, urging Washington to assume a proactive role in convening negotiations, violence or no.

Cyprus/EU Perhaps not yet on the radar screen of bilateral U.S.-Turkish relations but quite likely to emerge as the biggest issue facing Turkey's relations with the West during Bush's term is prospective Cypriot accession to EU membership. With efforts to reunify Cyprus in seemingly interminable deadlock, there is a growing likelihood that the Greek Cypriot-controlled Republic of Cyprus will enter the EU, probably in 2003 or 2004, as a divided island and without Turkish Cypriot participation. That prospect angers Ankara, which resents what it sees as preferential treatment for the Greek Cypriots, worries that the whole weight of the EU will subsequently be brought to bear on the side of the Greek Cypriots in the Cyprus dispute, and frets that Europe will, in effect, draw its permanent border between the Hellenic and Turkic worlds. The Turkish Cypriots are Turkey's leading national cause, and it is almost certain that Turkey would warn that EU accession by a divided Cyprus will cause an irreparable breach between Turkey and Europe. In reality, such an EU decision would likely exacerbate tensions on Cyprus and between Greece and Turkey, and deal a body blow to Turkish-European ties; none of these developments are in U.S. interests.

Turkey no doubt will want to urge Washington to lobby its allies in the EU not to take such a step. For its part, Washington may not want to get involved in such an effort unless it feels there is some prospect of success. Even then, domestic political considerations or other foreign policy concerns may constrain it from such a course. In seeking U.S. intervention in the process if they so choose, the Turks would be handicapped if, as is currently the case, the Western world's perception that the Turkish Cypriots are the more recalcitrant party persists.

Financial Crisis Regarding the most important near-term issue, the financial crisis, Washington is clearly reluctant to offer more than moral support for now. Skepticism about Ankara's ability to use new funds wisely reinforces the non-interventionist proclivities of the Treasury Department. Once Turkey and the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) agree on a new program and once Washington is convinced that the Turkish government has the requisite will to carry out the new program the United States would probably support accelerated disbursement of \$6.25 billion in loans the IMF promised last year and which are otherwise due for disbursement later this year and the next. But the bilateral funds Turkey requests from the U.S. are unlikely to materialize any time soon. Washington surely would provide generous assistance if it feared a strategically crucial ally like Turkey were indeed about to collapse, but that is not its current assessment. Turkey's new economic policy chief Kemal Dervis may yet prove prophetic in his warning that the U.S. should pay less to stabilize the situation earlier rather than pay more to save it later. For now, however, the administration does not appear to buy that logic.

The Bush administration is better stocked with individuals in senior positions who know Turkey well and are favorably disposed toward it than any U.S. administration in history. Nevertheless, on numerous issues that affect Ankara's important national interests, the new administration's positions are either uncertain or out-of-synch with Turkey's. If the administration wants Ankara's cooperation regarding Iraq and perhaps other regional issues, it almost certainly will have to help Turkey achieve some of its key strategic goals as well.

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