

With Bilateral Ties Flourishing, Clinton Visits Turkey

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Brief Analysis

President Clinton's trip to Turkey for the November 18-19 OSCE summit will be historic for U.S.-Turkish relations. The November 15-17 bilateral portion of the trip (perhaps now in doubt following another shocking earthquake in Turkey today) will mark only the third visit by a U.S. president to Turkey and the first-ever address to the Turkish parliament. Though little of substance is likely to take place, the visit punctuates a decade of increasingly close U.S.-Turkish relations.

The bilateral agenda. The primary event will be Clinton's speech, the first-ever comprehensive presidential address on U.S.-Turkish relations. Diplomatically, Clinton's bilateral agenda in Turkey will be topped by perennial stand-bys, Cyprus and Greek-Turkish relations, and by energy issues. No dramatic breakthroughs are expected, but there is a good chance that the President will succeed at least in re-starting a Cyprus negotiating process. That would be a noteworthy achievement, given the glacial pace of Cyprus diplomacy. There also may well be an event to signify, and try to lock in, recently improved Greek-Turkish atmospherics perhaps a meeting between Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis at the OSCE summit.

Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan may sign agreements reinforcing their commitment to building gas and oil pipelines that would traverse their nations and form a Western outlet for Caspian Sea energy. That would be viewed as a diplomatic achievement for the U.S., which has championed these projects. But no agreement will be signed on financing, suggesting that realization of the pipelines is far from a certainty. Also, a shadow is cast by reports of Turkish plans just after the OSCE summit to sign a new agreement with Russia for a trans-Black Sea gas pipeline, unofficially opposed by the U.S.

President Clinton will also visit sites of devastation from the August 17 earthquake that jolted northwestern Turkey, killing over 17,000. That will take on added poignancy after today's huge quake in Duzce, mid-way between Istanbul and Ankara. After the August 17 earthquake, Clinton promised that the U.S. would "do all we can to help," but, with little budgetary room to maneuver, the U.S. has been able to provide only limited aid.

Bilateral gains. U.S.-Turkish relations have become closer than ever in recent years. During the 1990s, U.S. policy toward Iraq, more than any other issue, has made Turkey crucially important for Washington. The U.S. stages Operation Northern Watch (ONW, formerly known as Operation Provide Comfort) from Incirlik air base in southern Turkey, enforcing a "no-fly zone" over northern Iraq to deter Iraqi attacks on the Kurdish-majority population there.

Were Turkey to expel ONW--once, but seemingly no longer, a distinct possibility--it would be a major, probably decisive, setback to U.S. efforts to contain the Saddam Husayn regime.

For its strategic assistance to the U.S., Turkey has been more than paid back in kind. The U.S. has stood by Turkey, virtually alone, in support of three of Ankara's most important strategic goals this decade:

1) PKK. The U.S. adopted Turkey's view that the PKK is a "terrorist" group, defended Turkey's right to pursue the PKK in cross-border land and air operations in northern Iraq, backed Turkey's demand that PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan be extradited after he was expelled from Syria last year, and has all but acknowledged that it assisted in Turkey's capture of Ocalan in Kenya.

2) European integration. Washington helped engineer the customs union agreement the European Union signed with Turkey in 1995, has prominently backed Turkey's bid for candidacy and "eventual membership" in the EU, and has fought to prevent Turkey's exclusion from the EU's efforts to develop an autonomous "European Security and Defense Identity."

3) Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. U.S. leadership has kept alive this proposal for transporting Caspian oil westward through Turkey, even though the key Caspian oil consortium was long resistant. If realized--not a certainty, but clearly a possibility--Turkey's regional importance would be enhanced at the expense of Iran and Russia.

In explaining his controversially robust support of Washington against Iraq after the 1990 Kuwait invasion, the late President Turgut Ozal is alleged to have used a gambling metaphor: "I put in one and take out three." The above calculus suggests that Ozal was precisely prophetic. In reality, of course, Turkey "took out" more than three. Its post-Cold War "strategic partnership" (in President Clinton's words) with the U.S. has seemingly assured it a priority place in U.S. foreign-policy calculations for the next several years.

In addition to the primary pursuits noted above, Washington and Ankara are involved in a growing number of joint efforts in Turkey's several bordering regions. For example, Turkey has been a strong supporter and a full participant in all of NATO's operations in the Balkans and can perhaps be given some credit for convincing the U.S. to assume a more muscular posture in Bosnia in 1994. In the Middle East, Turkey has established extraordinarily close relations with Israel; Turkey and the U.S. joined with Israel in a trilateral search-and-rescue exercise last year and, according to reports, will do so again soon. Turkey also retains good relations with Yasir Arafat and was one of a handful of European countries invited by both Israel and the Palestinians to participate in the "Temporary International Presence in Hebron," a monitoring group established by the 1997 Hebron agreement. Over the course of the Clinton administration, Washington also has come to share some of Ankara's concerns about potential resurgence of Russian aggression in the region. Those concerns may be highlighted during OSCE discussions of Chechnya and a draft agreement updating limits on conventional forces in Europe.

A new phase. U.S.-Turkish relations are more mature and balanced than during the Cold War. Turkey's economic success in the 1990s (4-5% growth per annum) has enhanced its international stature; foreign aid ended last year. Of course, security ties remain fundamental to bilateral relations. Turkey is a leading U.S. arms customer, with some 80% of its military inventory consisting of U.S. equipment.

The thickening network of bilateral ties may be gradually de-linking U.S.-Turkish relations from U.S.-Greek relations--a longstanding Turkish goal. In a seeming change from past practice, U.S. cabinet ministers now often visit Turkey without visiting Greece as well. In a November 8 foreign policy speech, Clinton spoke respectfully of Greece as a force for democracy and stability in the Balkans. But he spoke expansively of Turkey as a factor that will affect the shape of the world in the twenty-first century and as an important force in three regions: Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Elaborating that vision, he urged that Turkey become "fully a part of Europe" and that America's European allies recognize that "it is at Turkey where Europe and the Muslim world can meet in peace and

harmony."

The biggest challenge for Turkey in further developing its ties with the U.S. is internal. Human rights concerns have impeded arms sales. Also, because of the Kurdish issue, the often decisive role played by the military, and other human rights problems, Americans tend not to see Turkey as a nation that fully shares their values. More than for any other topic, Clinton's unprecedented speech to the Turkish parliament will be scrutinized for how much it focuses on human rights. If delivered with regard to Turkish sensitivities emphasizing freedom of expression and avoiding the complexities of state-religion issues it may well have an impact on Turkish political evolution and thereby reinforce the "strategic partnership."

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