

Turkey's New Relationship with NATO: Implications for Washington

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Ankara's recent attempt to block the NATO mission in Libya and the 2010 quarrel with NATO over the missile-defense initiative point at a new Turkish stance vis-à-vis NATO. Ever since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) assumed power in Ankara in 2002, Turkey has grown gradually cold toward cooperating with the West in the Middle East. Now, the AKP is increasingly taking issue with NATO. On March 29th, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu told the BBC: "As the only Muslim country [in NATO-] for decades, we have certain sensitivities regarding NATO operations in neighboring countries."

U.S. President Barack Obama called the AKP leadership during the missile defense crisis and over Libya, and this personal plea from the White House persuaded the AKP to lift its objections to NATO taking charge in both cases. However, the two cases are still significant for they provide insight into a new relationship between the AKP and the Transatlantic Alliance. Washington can address this dynamic by studying the following policy suggestions:

Turkey is fast becoming the Alliance's "opt-out" member in operations in Muslim countries. The AKP seems to consider itself the defender of a politically defined "Islamic world" and will likely object to NATO missions whose area of responsibility falls in Muslim-majority countries even when such operations target criminal regimes or aim to protect civilians. Along these lines, on February 28, 2011 Erdogan objected to NATO intervention in Libya, asking, "What business does NATO have in Libya?" adding: "Turkey will never and never support pointing weapons at Libya."

Facing elections at home in June; the AKP will aim to avoid persistent quarrels with the US. This is since public perception of American support for the AKP will help the party at the polls. After coming to power in 2002, the AKP has stayed popular also thanks to economic stability. Until the AKP rose to power, the pattern of the Turkish economy was such that growth would always be followed by a downturn, as it happened in the 1993-1994, 1997, 1999, and the 2000-2001 crisis, creating a sense of perpetual economic instability.



This changed under the AKP as Turkey enjoyed almost a decade of stable growth with no annual downturns. Now, as it prepares for elections, the AKP will be interested in repeating this success. To this end, the party needs to avoid a public row with Washington over its policies. A major conflict with the United States could weaken the markets' confidence in the Turkish economy, creating politically damaging economic problems for the AKP in the run-up to the polls.

Therefore, over the next two months, the AKP will continue working with Washington even if it voices strong public objections to NATO-led missions in Libya and other potential theatres in the Middle East –hence, the AKP's willingness to come on board with Washington after initial foot-dragging over allowing NATO assume responsibility for the Libya mission.

Polls suggest that the AKP will win the June elections. Then, the AKP's policy of opting out of NATO would likely consolidate. At this stage, Ankara will emerge as the enfant noir of NATO. In the same way Greece opted out of and blocked NATO operations against criminal regimes in the Western Balkans in the 1990s, citing its "affinity with its Orthodox brothers," the AKP would use the "we will not act against Muslims and will not let others do so either" formula to abstain from or hinder NATO operations in Muslim majority countries.

The AKP will, however, remain in NATO. Membership to the Alliance provides Turkey with crucial technology and political clout; it is unlikely that the AKP will act to end Turkey's NATO membership. But particularly if the elections allow it to cement its rule, the AKP will increasingly use its NATO membership to slow down or block operations in Muslim countries out of sympathy for certain regimes, such as Syria, or in defense of its view of global politics whereby the party feels compelled to keep NATO out of Muslim countries.

U.S. President Obama himself will be a key component of U.S. policy to try to align the AKP with NATO. This is since the AKP government has a rather positive view of President Obama, even if it takes issue with particular U.S. policies. This

perception is rooted, firstly, in Obama's April 2009 visit to Turkey, his first overseas trip after coming to power. The AKP has come to view this gesture as a sign of appreciation for the party and its policies. Secondly, the U.S. president and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan have a good rapport, with President Obama regularly calling Erdogan to exchange views on foreign policy. In recent weeks, for instance, the president has phoned Erdogan at least a dozen times to discuss the events in Libya, Egypt, and elsewhere in Middle East. Finally, the AKP has an emphatic, if factually incorrect, connection with the president. This bond stems from the fact that, as one Washington-based Turkey analyst has stated, "Prominent AKP leaders believe that President Obama is a Muslim."

Therefore, frequent interventions by the President to relay to the AKP leadership U.S. policy will be needed to ensure AKP alignment with NATO over the coming year even as Ankara's policies slow down NATO's operations and hamper the Alliance's decision making process.



About the Author:

Dr. Soner Cagaptay serves **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy** as its **Turkish Research Program** Director. Dr. Cagaptay is an accomplished and influential author writing about evolving events within Turkey, political Islam and their impacts on national security issues.