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Turkey: A Geostrategic Analysis

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TURKEY: A GEOSTRATEGIC ANALYSIS

I. Introduction

Turkey has long viewed its foreign policy priorities from the perspective of its difficult neighborhood. During the Cold War, Turkey's primary concern was the Soviet Union. It also turned a wary eye eastward, toward the ever-present possibility of instability emanating from the Middle East. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey has adapted to a much more complex geopolitical pattern, with often interlocking concerns in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia, and Western Europe. Differences with Greece and the Cyprus problem have persisted, but must be interpreted against the post-Cold War backdrop.^[1]

America's primary national security interest in Turkey is regional stability. U.S. strategy aims for Turkey to be a strong regional player, able to act in support of U.S. interests in a troubled region. For example, Turkey has a potentially important role to play in helping to reduce Balkan instability, influence Russia's future direction, contain Iran and Iraq, and guide developments in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Of particular importance is Turkey's location as a potential

corridor for Caspian energy resources.

Turkey is strong both economically and militarily. Turkey/U.S. bilateral trade has grown 30 percent over the past five years. It is a proven NATO ally with a long record of military cooperation with the U.S. It has begun to take important new steps toward Europe, following the EU's 1999 formal acknowledgement of Turkey's candidacy for membership. Some analysts have noted that Turkey has begun to assume a more activist foreign policy stance.

Despite congruence between U.S. and Turkish foreign policy priorities, Turkey's central role in the region is often overlooked in U.S. national security discussions.^[2] This is perhaps because Turkey -- the "bridge" between Europe, the Middle East and Asia, a country that is both secular and Muslim, and a society that is both modern and traditional -- is hard to categorize.

II. The Context: Political Culture and the Structure of Power

Modern Turkey is heavily influenced by three factors: the origins of the modern state, the geopolitical realities of the Anatolian plateau, and the legacy of the Ottoman experience.^[3] These factors, which blend history, culture, social structure, religion, and geography, are key in understanding the country's politics, economic performance and military power.

Turkey's founder, Gazi Mustafa Kemal Pasa, or Ataturk, has often been called

one of the greatest political figures of the 20th century. After World War I, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, his military victories over European forces led to international recognition of Turkey as a new nation state. Subsequently, as political leader he led the country in a cultural revolution that replaced monarchy with a parliamentary democracy, Islamic ethos with secularism, and traditional practices with his version of modernization. The new state was to be independent and non-expansionist, the latter in order to guarantee the peace necessary to pursue internal development.^[4] Turkey's orientation toward Europe, its tendency to interpret international events in terms of a regional balance of power, and its emphasis on military readiness are legacies of Ottoman political culture. The high position of the military in modern Turkey reflects the Ottoman past, in which the military's privileged position dates back centuries to the founding of the empire.^[5]

Turkey is located on historically coveted territory. Its transit routes have long been important for east/west trade, and served as channels for invasions and migrations. Its water resources provide an important source of supply to Syria and Iraq. Perceiving that its assets make it vulnerable to unfriendly neighbors, Turkey and the Ottomans before them have sought alliances to counterbalance potential opponents – NATO membership is the best modern example. Turkey's difficult relations with the Soviets and today's Russia echo the Ottomans'

difficult relationships with old Russia. Turkey views Arab lands to the east, which were formerly part of the Empire, as sources of instability that have shown a repeated tendency to exploit Turkey's internal divisions.^[6]

Modern Turkey evolved as a strong state, but with governments that have often been weak or short-lived. Ataturk's one party rule lasted from 1923 to 1950.

Since then, coalition governments formed of two or more of Turkey's numerous political parties have ruled. Periods of internal instability led to three military coups between 1960 and 1980. Policy differences among the major parties are minimal; rather, parties tend to compete for votes on the basis of patronage and benefits. The current government, elected in 1999, is considered relatively effective.^[7] Economically, Turkey follows Western models. It is in a customs

union with the EU, a member of the WTO and has signed a number of investment agreements with the U.S. However, foreign investors have been put off by concerns about political uncertainty and an inadequate regulatory environment.

Overall economic growth is limited by a series of fiscal and structural problems.

Turkey's politicians are finding it increasingly difficult to implement the far-reaching and comprehensive 1999 IMF reform program.

Turkish military power includes a role in civilian affairs that goes well beyond Western norms. It influences all major domestic and foreign policy decisions through its role on the powerful National Security Council.^[8] It has benefited

from years of U.S. military cooperation (totaling more than \$14 billion), and an ongoing modernization program that should lead it to far outstrip its neighbors. The military is popular with the public, which gives it much higher ratings than the politicians.^[9] The military sees itself as a kind of ultimate guardian of the founding principles of the state.^[10]

III. Domestic Challenges

A. The Economy

Turkey's economic problems are of concern to the U.S. because they can ripple through the region as well as bring internal instability. Repeated financial crises during the 1990s led the current government to restart important economic reforms that had faltered in the 1980s. The 1999 agreement with the IMF is intended to reduce inflation and interest rates to manageable proportions and encourage foreign and domestic investment. Privatization and liberalization are critical to the reform program but have proven difficult to implement, since state intervention in the economy has been a tenet of nationalist ideology and is a legacy of party populism. Opposition to the reforms has been growing within government, the bureaucracy and the business sector. The sensitive state of the economy has just been demonstrated by a financial crisis that has shaken the foundation of the reform program. The long term economic impact of the crisis is

uncertain, and prospects for a revised IMF program and for the path of reform are unclear.*[—]

B. Ethnicity and Religion

Two social issues -- the status of the Kurdish minority, and the role of Islam in society – have international implications, and, if left unsolved, threaten to weaken Turkey's internal stability and therefore its position in the international arena. One reason that these issues have seemed intractable is that they are closely linked to Ataturk's national and secular ideology, in which the Turkish nation is a homogenous political and social body formed by the citizens of the state. This leaves little room for separate identities based on ethnic or religious affiliation, despite the presence of many different ethnic groups in Turkey and the traditional importance of Islam in social life. Many of Ataturk's principles are formalized in Turkey's legal structure and thus hard to change. Moreover, they persist in the thinking of the country's political and military elite, and much of the population.^[11]

The Kurds are the largest minority in Turkey today. Millions of Kurds have integrated into Turkish society apparently without difficulty. Few Turkish Kurds are separatists; rather, their migration westward to Turkey's largest cities shows that they have been “voting for assimilation into Turkey with their feet.”^[12]

Despite this, Kurdish cultural expression elicits a harsh reaction from the

government; there are restrictions on open discussion of cultural diversity; and arrest of pro-Kurdish human rights campaigners is still common.^[13] Kurds have very limited voice over local affairs in their southeastern homeland. Turkey's Kurds have further suffered from the government's war with the terrorist group, the PKK.^[14] The civil war is now virtually over,^[15] ostensibly leaving an opening for reconciliation. The majority of Kurds want rights of free expression and public acceptance of their role as a significant ethnic group in Turkey. The role of religion in society, in particular Islam, has been an extremely contentious issue for Turkey's civilian and military elite. There is a persistent fear that Islamic fundamentalism will threaten the integrity of the state, but the risks seem modest. Islamist parties are a regular part of the mainstream political fabric, and have a special appeal among the many recent migrants to the cities, but they have rarely gotten more than 15% of the vote in national elections.^[16] Their control of government in the mid-90s is attributable more to popular discontent with traditional parties than religious fervor.^[17] The majority of Turks do not see a conflict between their religion and a secular state, or between their religion and modernization, but they do want greater freedom of expression.^[18] Yet there is still a small proportion of Islamists who espouse fundamentalist views; they could gain ground particularly among urban migrants

who face economic hardships.

There is a growing debate within Turkey about questions of religion and ethnic pluralism, but leaders still avoid discussing the most sensitive issues of Islamism and the Kurds.

IV. International Challenges

Turkey's views its most important security challenges in terms of its relationships with its vastly different neighbors. The U.S. sees these challenges similarly.

The Balkans. There is a strong convergence between U.S. and Turkish interests in the Balkans and shared concern about the danger that political violence will spread. Many Turks have an ethnic linkage to Balkan communities and maintain family ties that date back to Ottoman times. Turkey provided full military support to NATO operations in Kosovo, has participated in UN and NATO peacekeeping efforts, and is likely to continue to contribute to multilateral efforts to resolve conflicts in the region.

The Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia. Turkey is concerned about a resurgent Russia, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and about the possibility that instability in these areas might spread. These tensions are counterbalanced by the reality that the two countries need each other: Russia is Turkey's largest trading partner, largely because of Turkey's reliance on Russian energy.^[19] Turkey has

sound political and economic links in the Caucasus and Central Asia, especially with the Turkic countries, and hopes to stave off their dependence on Russia. However, Turkey's role is clearly limited by Russia's influence, and is careful not to antagonize Russia.[\[20\]](#)

The Middle East. Turkish/Middle Eastern relations have never been warm. Turkish-Syrian tension derives, among other factors, from differences over water (beginning with construction of the Ataturk Dam in 1950) and Syrian support for the PKK. The removal of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan removed a major point of contention but water issues remain unsettled, and are likely to increase as further work is done on the large Southeast Anatolia Project. Tensions with Iraq increased with Turkey's basing for and participation in the U.S. military's Operation Northern Watch to protect the Iraqi Kurds. Given Turkey's perspective on Kurdish ethnicity, Turkey strongly supports a solution for Iraq that maintains Iraq's territorial integrity. Turkey takes a cautious stance with Iran, given Iran's perceived regional weight, its missile program, and its suspected role in supporting the export of Islamic radicalism.[\[21\]](#) Turkey's growing military and trade cooperation with Israel gives Turkey additional leverage with its Middle Eastern neighbors and strengthens it within the framework of US strategic interests in the Middle East. Middle Eastern states view the relationship with suspicion, within the context of already strained relations.[\[22\]](#)

The Aegean. The long-running dispute with Greece and Greek Cypriots over Cyprus is Turkey's major regional security flashpoint. There have been recent positive steps, including agreements between Greece and Turkey on a number of non-contentious issues (such as environmental protection), and talks between the two Cypriot leaders restarted in 2000. Greek support of Turkey's EU candidacy, and its generous response to the recent Turkish earthquake disaster, were factors in the recent Greek/Turkish detente. Turkey realizes that resolving its bilateral disputes with Greece will help its effort toward EU entry. Perhaps there is emerging realization on both sides that the risks of full scale confrontation are no longer acceptable.[\[23\]](#)

V. Opportunities

The EU. In December 1999, the EU formally accepted Turkey's candidacy for membership. There is widespread support for entry among the military, the political elite and the general public. While membership will be extremely difficult to achieve, given the EU's strict requirements, the path toward accession provides an important opportunity for Turkey to overcome some of its internal weaknesses as well as cement its western orientation. The EU accession document requires Turkey to improve guarantees for the right of free expression and human rights, and implement judicial reform. Some small steps have already

been taken or are under consideration by Turkey's parliament. However, implementing approved changes will be hindered by deeply engrained attitudes and institutional weaknesses, especially within the police. In addition to providing an opening to the country's leaders toward greater tolerance of Kurdish cultural rights, the EU path is also likely to lead to a scaling back of military influence, more in line with European and American models.^[24]

Access to Energy. Access to energy from the Caspian Sea area is an important strategic opportunity for both Turkey and the U.S. Caspian oil and gas will enable Turkey to be less dependent on Russia and the Middle East. For the U.S., the Turkey-Caspian link is important to safeguard Western access to Caspian resources, since the alternatives involve Russia or Iran. The first hurdle, an international agreement for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline,^[25] has been met, but progress in exploration and production will require stability in the affected countries. U.S. support has been strong and will continue to be critical. Success in this endeavor would give Turkey greater influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, further orient that region to the west, and increase Turkey's leverage over Russia and Iran.

VI. U.S. Strategy: An Assessment

The primary U.S. national security interest in Turkey is regional stability. A second, special interest is access to energy resources, given the need to diversify

America's sources of oil. Fortunately, Turkey's view of its interests tracks closely with the U.S. view.^[26] American interests are reflected in a set of foreign policy goals that have been stated as a five point agenda for U.S.-Turkish relations:^[27]

1. *Strategic energy cooperation*
2. *Boosting trade and investment*
3. *Strengthening security ties*
4. *Collaborating for regional security*
5. *Removing Cyprus and Aegean tensions as flashpoints*

These goals encompass the fact that U.S. needs Turkey's cooperation in addressing regional threats. They also recognize that Turkey will be most valuable as a strategic ally if it is strong economically and militarily. While domestic governance issues -- particularly those related to cultural and religious expression -- are not on the official bilateral agenda, they are an underlying theme in bilateral relations since domestic stability is important to regional stability.

The following table illustrates specific foreign policy objectives that support the five goals, along with appropriate tools of statecraft:

Objectives	Means of Influence	Goals
Promote Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, including U.S. business involvement	Diplomacy (regional), economic programs	1
Support Turkey's efforts to join the EU	Diplomacy (EU, bilateral)	2,4
Support Turkish economic/political links to Caucasus/Central Asia	Diplomacy (regional)	2,4

Encourage economic reform, deter economic crises	Diplomacy (IMF, bilateral)	2
Promote U.S. investment and trade cooperation	Economic programs	2
Continue cooperation on containment of Iraq	Military (base use, cooperation)	3,4
Involve Turkey in cooperative efforts to address regional transnational threats (e.g. terrorism, instability, WMD proliferation)	Military cooperation, diplomacy	3
Encourage Turkey's military modernization and restructuring	Military cooperation	3
Encourage Turkish participation in NATO and possible EU peacekeeping ^[28]	Military cooperation (NATO, EU), diplomacy	3,4
Encourage a more pluralistic and inclusive democracy, including greater freedom of religious expression	Diplomacy, public diplomacy	4
Encourage resolution of tensions with Greece and solution for Cyprus	Diplomacy (bilateral)	5

Turkey sees itself as a frontline state amidst areas of instability, and to a large extent that is how the U.S. views Turkey. Recognizing the seriousness and complexity of regional threats, U.S. strategy has become more multidimensional over the last decade. Turkey's growing military and economic power is a favorable development, but in the medium to long term it could lead Turkey to become a more unpredictable actor.^[29] Moreover, Turkey's neighbors are likely to pose even greater challenges, while serious domestic challenges persist. While no changes are foreseen in American interests and goals, the relationship is likely to demand more attention in the future, and would benefit from more sustained U.S. involvement.

2. The EU – Accession. EU accession requirements are extremely difficult, prompting many observers to wonder whether Turkey will ever be able to meet them. However, the path to accession provides a useful rationale for implementation of difficult political and economic reforms, especially if public opinion continues to back accession. The question is intended to elicit current thinking on the likelihood and pace of EU-related reforms. *Question: It is more than a year since the EU formally acknowledged Turkey's candidacy for membership. The steps required to comply with accession requirements are daunting for all states aspiring for membership. How is Turkey handling this process? What prospects do you see for progress? What difficulties lie ahead?*

3. Economic Crisis. The February financial crisis highlighted the vulnerability of Turkey's economy to even minor political shocks, and called the IMF reform program into question. Of even more concern than the collapse of the lira, which was serious enough, is the possibility that political consensus for critical economic reforms may have collapsed. The prospects for reform are likely to evolve over the weeks before the trip. *Question: We are concerned about the long term impact of the financial crisis that shook the country in February. What is the status of the IMF program? What are the prospects for financial and economic reform in Turkey over the next year?*

4. Peacekeeping. Turkey views itself as a critical player in any future NATO or EU peacekeeping effort on the periphery of Europe. It has expressed concerns about the use of Turkish forces, through NATO, as part of a planned European rapid reaction force, citing the lack of input into key EU implementation decisions. The purpose of the question is to ascertain the current status of Turkey's concerns, in the context of how Turkey views its overall peacekeeping/crisis prevention role. *Question: Turkey has been an important part of peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, and Turkey's military is well-equipped to contribute to future peacekeeping missions,*

including those under possible EU sponsorship. How do you view Turkey's role? Have the differences with the EU over Turkish assets been sorted out?

5. The Aegean. There have been signs of an emerging détente with Greece, and some small but positive steps have been taken on the Cyprus issue. But the two countries' problems have often seemed intractable, and are exceedingly complex. The question is intended to get a current Turkish perspective on the issue. *Question: We have read about an improvement in Turkish-Greek relations. What are the reasons behind this? What are the prospects that continued improvements might lead to solutions to long-standing problems?*

6. The Middle East. While Turkey's relations with the Middle East have long been cool, and Turkey generally supports U.S. policy in the Middle East, there have been differences in Turkish and American perspectives on particular issues (for example, Iraqi sanctions). Differences are not surprising, given that America's distant problem states are Turkey's next door neighbors. The question is intended to elicit Turkey's concerns. *Question: The U.S. and Turkey share concerns about the intentions of Iraq, Syria and Iran. However, given America's distance from, and Turkey's proximity to, these countries, there are bound to be differences in how we both view the threats emanating from them. What differences do you see in Turkish and American perceptions?*

7. The Caspian. Access to Caspian energy is a special U.S. interest. The U.S. has been very supportive to date of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, especially given rival interests on the part of Iran and Russia. The purpose of the question is to get an update on the situation and reinforce U.S. concerns. *Question: What are the latest developments with reference to energy in the Caspian? Have any new steps been taken by other countries in the region?*

Should the U.S. consider further steps to assist Turkey?

8. Islam and Religious Expression. Turkish political elites fear the potential for Islamic fundamentalism to bring political instability. Limitations on religious expression are the norm. While few believe that fundamentalism is a real threat today, government actions could backfire, especially among those who are otherwise disenfranchised. The question is intended to highlight the importance of religious expression by taking a comparative view. *Question: Unlike in the Middle East, Islam coexists in Turkey with the secular, modern, democratic state. Do you see Turkey moving toward an American-style secularism, with people left to practice their religion as they see fit, as long as they do not bring religion into matters of government?*
9. The Kurds. The end of the civil war with the PKK, along with EU requirements for accession, provide the Turkish government with an unprecedented opportunity to improve the rights of and conditions for Kurds, especially in their southeastern homeland. That homeland is ravaged after years of war. Kurdish ethnic identity is an extremely sensitive topic. Any question must be asked very carefully. *Question: With the government's victory over the PKK secure, what plans have been made to improve the conditions in the southeast? The EU has noted the importance of Kurdish "rights." What steps is the government taking in response?*

Endnotes

* Following a disagreement between the President and the Prime Minister February 19 over anti-corruption reforms, the Istanbul stock exchange shot down sharply and there was a run on foreign currency reserves. On February 22, the government decided to let the Turkish lira float freely

(thus abandoning the IMF's "crawling peg regime") in hopes of easing the liquidity crunch. The lira lost 36 percent of its value against the dollar in two days. A return of double digit inflation is likely, as are other negative effects.

[1] "Introduction," in *Turkey's New World: Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy*, edited by Alan Makovsky and Sabri Sayari (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), 1-8 (Internet edition).

[2] For example, the current White House national security strategy discusses Turkey within a paragraph on Cyprus and the Aegean, with only minimal reference to Turkey's larger regional role. *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, The White House, 1999.

[3] Mustafa Aydin, "Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Historical Framework and Traditional Inputs," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 35, Issue 4 (October 1999), 1-22 (Internet edition).

[4] Graham Fuller, "Ataturk and After," *The National Interest*, Issue 61, Fall 2000, 1-4 (Internet edition); Edward McBride, "Survey: Turkey -- Ataturk's Long Shadow," *The Economist* (June 10, 2000), 1-3 (Internet edition).

[5] Metin Heper and Aylin Guney, "The Military and the Consolidation of Democracy: The Recent Turkish Experience," *Armed Forces and Society*, Volume 26, Issue 4 (Summer 2000), 1-15 (Internet edition).

[6] Aydin, 1999.

[7] Edward McBride, "Survey: Turkey -- Shifting Coalitions," *The Economist* (June 10, 2000), 1-3 (Internet edition).

[8] The National Security Council consists of president, prime minister, foreign minister, minister of internal affairs and five top generals.

[9] Michael Robert Hickok, "Hegemon Rising: The Gap Between Turkish Strategy and Military Modernization," *Parameters*, Volume 30, Issue 2 (Summer 2000), 1-11 (Internet edition); Edward McBride, "Survey: Turkey -- Last Line of Defense," *The Economist* (June 10, 2000), 1-3 (Internet edition); *Background Notes: Turkey*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European Affairs, October 1999.

[10] To back up this claim is the argument that the military has only intervened in times of genuine emergency, and has always reinstated civilian governments after a short period of military rule. Note, however, that the military's absence from visible leadership of the government since 1980 could be explained by its promulgation at that time of a new constitution that made it easier for it to exert influence.

[11] Aydin, 1999; Fuller, 2000.

[12] McBride, 2000

[13] Ibid.

[14] Years of civil war brought widespread abuses by the military and the police in the Kurd's southeast homeland, including the destruction of entire villages. The southeast has been left with enormous development needs. The PKK expressed a separatist objective, but the PKK was and is unpopular with most Kurds. The substantial population of Kurds in Istanbul and other western cities, would suggest that overall Kurdish support for a separate state is minimal to nil.

[15] Due in large measure to the capture of Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK leader.

[16] Whit Mason, "The Future of Political Islam in Turkey," *World Policy Journal*, Volume 17, Issue 2, Summer 2000, 1-11 (Internet edition).

[17] Svante E. Cornell, "Turkey: Return to Stability?," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 35, Issue 4 (October 1999), 1-16 (Internet edition).. After the Islamists gained control of the government in the mid-1990's, they began to take steps that the military thought went too far toward bringing Islamist principles into the state (such as the appointment of Islamist judges). Many believe that the military then used its influence to remove the Islamists from government. The military justified its actions on legal grounds, citing judicial provisions that prohibit the use of religion in politics.

[18] Turkey's secularism differs from the Western concept of separation of church and state. In Turkey the state controls important church decisions, for example it funds mosques, supervises religious education for all children, and pays the salaries of religious leaders.

[19] Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey in a Changing Security Environment," *Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 54, Issue 1 (Fall 2000), 1-9 (Internet edition).

[20] Daniel P. Klass, "Turkey's Ties: Increasing Confidence and Regional Influence," *Middle East Insight*, July-August 2000, 58-61. Turkish-Armenian relations are a negative exception to the regional pattern. Lacking resolution of the Azerbaijan/Armenian conflict over Nagorno Karabagh, Turkey has not normalized relations with Armenia and its border with Armenia is closed. Turkey's historical antagonism toward Armenia is heightened by the success of the Armenian diaspora to argue on its behalf and against Turkey with the U.S. congress.

[21] Lesser, 2000; *Country Report - Turkey*, EIU -- The Economist Intelligence Unit, January 2001.

[22] Alan Makovsky, "Israeli-Turkish Cooperation: Full Steam Ahead," *Policywatch*, Number 292 (January 6, 1998), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy; Alain Gresh, "Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Relations and their Impact on the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal* (Spring 1998), 1-11 (Internet edition).

[23] Lesser, 2000; EIU, 2001.

[24] EIU, 2001.

[25] To carry oil from the port of Baku in Azerbaijan through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

[26] With the understandable difference that Turkey would include “economic prosperity” as one of its vital interests, while the U.S. strategy sees Turkey’s prosperity as a key objective in achieving the overarching interests of regional stability.

[27] U.S. Department of State, 1999.

[28] Turkey is concerned about EU establishment of security structures outside NATO, since it is a member of NATO and not the EU, and Turkish forces and other assets are likely to be used to deal with crises in Turkey’s neighborhood. To date it has not found the level of participation in decision making allowed by the EU to be adequate.

[29] Hickok, 2000. There is evidence that Turkey’s military strategy is broadening to include a greater capacity for power projection in neighboring countries.