

LOSING TURKEY? IMPLICATIONS OF A FAILED TURKISH EU BID

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**LOSING TURKEY?
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ABSTRACT

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Despite a formal relationship with the EU that spans over fifty years, Turkey's bid for full membership remains stalled in political deadlock and faces growing resistance in some European capitals based on cultural grounds. This has led many observers, including the U.S. secretary of defense, to the conclusion that the EU is responsible for pushing Turkey to the East. This view has been heavily influenced by recent Turkish actions in the region. Foremost among them has been the public and acrimonious deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel, Turkey's independent negotiation with Iran over its nuclear program, and Turkey's increasingly close relationship with Russia. This paper considers the issue of Turkey "turning East" by looking closely at Turkey's foreign policy and examining those areas where Turkish and U.S. foreign policy objectives might come into conflict. As Turkey increasingly grows into its role as a key regional player, the U.S. must protect its national interests in the region and determine the best approach in managing its relations with Turkey. This will require a nuanced touch that walks the fine line between accommodation and confrontation.

LOSING TURKEY? IMPLICATIONS OF A FAILED TURKISH EU BID

In June 2010, U.S. Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, made a comment to reporters which, in not so subtle terms, accused the European Union (EU) of pushing Turkey to the East due to its resistance in allowing Turkey to become a full member of the EU. According to news reports, Gates stated:

“I personally think that if there is anything to the notion that Turkey is, if you will, moving eastward, it is, in my view, in no small part because it was pushed, and pushed by some in Europe refusing to give Turkey the kind of organic link to the West that Turkey sought.”¹

Gates’ statement is the closest any senior U.S. official has come to saying that the West risks losing Turkey.²

Turkey has had a longstanding relationship with the European Union that began in 1959 when it applied for associate membership in the European Economic Community (EEC), the EU’s predecessor.³ Since that time it has been the policy of successive Turkish governments to pursue EU membership. This long-term policy objective is largely seen as rooted in the legacy of modern Turkey’s founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and his vision of Turkey as a modern state, secular in nature, oriented towards the West, and amongst equals in the European family of nations.⁴

Despite some ups and downs in its democratic evolution in the intervening years, Turkey has made notable progress in reforming its political system, human rights laws, economy, legal system, civil-military relations, and constitution in order to conform to the EU’s *acquis communautaire* in its drive for eventual EU membership. Interestingly, the bulk of this work has been accomplished during the administration of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a party many secularists in Turkey view as harboring a secret Islamist agenda. Such an agenda would appear to

be at odds with the reforms required for EU membership. This is just one of the many paradoxes that surrounds the Turkish bid and lies at the very core of the issue of Turkish membership in the EU, along with the belief among many international observers that there has been a fundamental shift in Turkey's foreign policy orientation from the West to the East.

For its part, the EU has been a willing, if somewhat reluctant, partner during Turkey's long march to Brussels. In December 2004 the EU decided to formally begin accession negotiations with Turkey starting in October 2005.⁵ Despite this positive step, these negotiations have slowed down to the point that the process is no longer making any forward movement. This has resulted in a growing perception that the EU has no intention of ever allowing Turkey to become a full member and some European leaders have openly stated their opposition to full Turkish membership.⁶ On the other hand, recent statements by senior Turkish government officials,⁷ have injected a degree of ambiguity with regard to Turkey's commitment to its longstanding policy of EU membership, leading many to question the viability of this project. In fact, the current state of the accession process, the openly anti-Turkish comments from some European capitals, combined with Turkey's growing self-confidence and disillusionment with the accession negotiations have caused many analysts, both in Europe and Ankara, to conclude that there is very little likelihood of Turkey ever achieving full EU membership.

In a broad sense, this paper examines the issue of Turkey "turning East." It explores the reasons for the breakdown in Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU, looking at possible causes from both Ankara and Europe. It also attempts to predict the likely consequences of a decision – taken from either side – that terminates Turkey's bid

for EU membership. Specifically, Turkish foreign policy is examined from the perspective of where it intersects with U.S. foreign policy in a region widely seen as critical to U.S. security interests. The U.S. will be forced to deal with a Turkey that is emerging as a growing regional power, that is untethered by any foreign policy restrictions that may be imposed by EU membership, and that feels increasingly motivated to forge strong economic links with states that were formerly considered off-limits during the Cold War. How the U.S. manages this set of circumstances and its relations with Turkey will have important repercussions for the Middle East and the broader region, as well.

Background: Milestones in the EU – Turkey Relationship

Contrary to the current angst emanating from Washington over Turkey's foreign policy orientation, for many years Turkey was seen by the West as a reliable, if not pliable, partner who could be counted on to follow Washington's lead on key questions of foreign and security policy.⁸ To a large degree this can be seen in the context of the Cold War and Turkey's key role as a NATO member responsible for protecting the alliance's southeastern flank. At a deeper level, however, this orientation was part of Turkey's long-term objective to solidify its standing in the eyes of the West by becoming a full-fledged member of the EU.

The Ankara Agreement of 1963 established a path towards a customs union with the EEC and Turkey subsequently submitted its application for full membership in 1987. Yet it was not until January 1996 – 33 years after signing the association agreement – that the customs union entered into force. This delay was partly attributable to Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and a military *coup d'état* in 1980, both of which seriously strained relations between the two and brought the process to a virtual standstill.⁹

However, it is worth noting that these temporary interruptions in relations were not a significant departure from the norm.

A careful examination of the official record between Turkey and the EU reveals that the relationship has been a difficult one and that tensions have been a regular feature of it. This was characterized by the “Luxembourg crisis” when the EU decided not to grant candidate status to Turkey at its yearly summit in 1997, causing then-Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz to openly challenge the bloc.¹⁰ This decision was reversed two years later at the Helsinki summit and Turkey responded by passing over thirty reforms in order to meet the Copenhagen political and human rights criteria for EU membership.¹¹

In recognition of these efforts, the EU took the historic decision in December 2004 to formally recognize Turkey as a candidate country. Accession negotiations, which began in October 2005, established thirty-five policy areas, or chapters, of the *acquis communautaire* – the whole body of EU policies and legislation -- that must be adopted by Turkey in order to fulfill its accession requirements. However, this forward momentum came to an abrupt halt in December 2006 when the EU suspended talks on eight of the thirty-five chapters due to Turkey’s failure to implement the Protocol to the Ankara Agreement and open its ports to Greek Cypriot ships and aircraft.¹²

In July 2005 Turkey signed the Protocol to the Ankara Agreement (commonly referred to as the Ankara Protocol), in which it agreed to open its markets to all of the new EU members, including Cyprus, a state it does not recognize. For its part, Turkey claims that the EU has failed to implement the European Council conclusion of April 2004 in which it stated that it is determined to bring about an end to the isolation of the

Turkish Cypriots and will work towards the economic development of the Turkish Cypriot community.¹³ This however, did not overturn existing EU policy which bans direct trade with the northern part of the island, the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognized as a state by the EU. Turkey's stance is that its markets, ports and airfields will remain closed to Cypriot goods and vessels until the EU honors its side of the bargain. The EU has declared that no chapters will be provisionally closed until this dispute is resolved.¹⁴

This conundrum has effectively halted any significant progress on the accession negotiations and has brought us to the point that now, five years after accession negotiations began, only one chapter has been provisionally closed, thirteen have been opened and eight are blocked. This standstill has led most analysts to conclude that there is little real chance that Turkey will achieve full membership in the next ten years, or perhaps ever.

Turkey's EU Policy

Despite the periodic setbacks in its relations with the EU, Turkish policy with respect to membership has been relatively consistent over the years. At every turn, successive Turkish governments have pushed to deepen integration with the EU since its first formal application to become an associate member in 1959. In many respects this policy was seen as a means to raise the Turkish economy, improve the standard of living, and realize Ataturk's vision of Turkey as an integral part of Europe. It wasn't until early 2000 that the focus began to shift from primarily economic matters to issues relating to democracy, the law, the constitution, human rights and other aspects of politics and civil society. This trend received a strong impetus when the AKP was

elected to power in 2002 with EU membership a core element of its party platform and arguably its top priority.¹⁵

While improving Turkey's economic prosperity is important to the AKP, its emphasis on political reform, in many ways, reflects the desires of the AKP's religiously conservative supporters who have demanded a more inclusive, participatory role in the country's democratic process. For PM Erdogan, the reforms required by the EU have also provided the ideal mechanism for wresting the levers of entrenched power out of the hands of the secular Kemalist elite, who have traditionally exercised power through control of the military and the judiciary. Yet despite the flurry of reform activity that was achieved in the early part of the decade, the AKP has lately been sending signals that its commitment to EU membership is now open to question.

In a speech he gave in 2009, Turkish President Gul made reference to the "Norway formula" and stated that "when we reach the standards of the EU, maybe we would do what Norway did and stay aside the Union."¹⁶ Turkey's chief EU negotiator, Egemen Bagis, has made numerous references to the "Norway formula" and also introduced the notion that perhaps the issue of EU membership would have to be put to the Turkish citizens in a referendum, the outcome of which might not be assured.¹⁷ Poll results have shown that public support among Turks for EU membership has fallen from 70 percent in 2004 to 42 percent in 2008.¹⁸ A survey by the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. confirmed this tendency. In a recent interview Bagis also stated that the "EU is not the only option" for Turkey and flatly rejected French President Sarkozy's proposal of a privileged partnership-- in lieu of full membership – as insulting.¹⁹

PM Erdogan has added his own voice to these sentiments when he stated in 2007 that “it would not be a ‘disaster’ if Turkey were to be rejected by the EU as Turkey would ‘happily continue down its own road’.”²⁰ While these statements may be seen as nothing more than posturing for accession negotiations, an objective analysis indicates that Turkey is re-evaluating its EU bid and preparing for the possibility that it will never achieve full membership. They may also be a reflection of the popular mood of disenchantment with the accession process and the growing belief that the EU is a “Christian club” that will never allow a majority Muslim state to become a member.

The EU’s Policy on Turkish Accession

An assessment of the EU’s policy towards Turkey can also lead to the same conclusion. Throughout the course of its long membership process, the EU has always treated Turkey differently than any other candidate country, often imposing conditions and caveats that were not used with previous candidates. Given Turkey’s history of military intervention in politics (coups in 1960, 1971, 1980, and the “post-modern” coup of 1997), questionable policies on human rights and minority issues, and constitutional idiosyncrasies, it can be argued that this is not without justification.

However, just as the Turkish government’s policy on membership shifted focus over time, so has that of the EU and some of its leading member states. Initially, the Europeans’ primary concerns with taking on Turkey as a member revolved around its questionable human rights record, its weak economy, and the costs it would entail to integrate a country with such a large population and such expansive infrastructure requirements. Over time, however, and particularly in light of the rise of Islamic extremism and the rapid growth of large Muslim immigrant communities, Europe’s reluctance to admit Turkey as a full member has increasingly centered on the issue of

culture and the question of whether Turkey is really a part of Europe. A recent study published in the journal, *West European Politics*, presented empirical data which indicated that Turkish cultural differences from the rest of the EU member states are indeed significant and clearly mark Turkey as distinct from the current member states that were part of all previous waves of enlargement.²¹

Perhaps the most vocal of the European leaders to express this view is French President Sarkozy. He is on record as saying that he has “always been opposed to the entry of Turkey” into the EU because Turkey is “not in Europe.”²² Sarkozy believes the EU should suspend accession talks with Turkey and instead work towards a “privileged partnership.”²³ In a state visit to Turkey in March 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her preference for a privileged partnership for Turkey, but also identified the Cyprus dispute as the primary obstacle to greater Turkish integration into the EU.²⁴ According to polling data, these statements are not out of step with the sentiments of the majority of the EU’s citizens. In 2007, backers for Turkey’s EU membership continued to be a minority in every EU country and support was at only 21 percent throughout the EU.²⁵

These statements from the senior leadership of both sides are clearly indicative of a relationship that is foundering. And while the “cultural issue” has taken a more prominent role in the current debate over Turkey’s place in the EU, it is the dispute over Cyprus and Turkey’s failure to implement the Ankara protocol that constitute the real obstacle to re-invigorating the Turkish bid. A solution to the Cyprus dispute will unblock the eight chapters that are currently frozen and allow the actual closure of other chapters that are now only provisionally closed. Not only will resolution of the Cyprus

dispute allow work to proceed on blocked chapters, but it will undoubtedly improve the atmospherics, perceptions, and public mood on both sides. According to Turkey's chief EU negotiator, Egemen Bagis, Turkey would open its ports and airports to the Greek Cypriots "tomorrow" if the EU lifted its ban on direct trade with the Turkish Cypriot government in the northern part of the island.²⁶ Solving the Cyprus dispute doesn't mean the cultural issues have gone away, it simply means that with this obstacle out of the way, substantive discussions on the cultural issues will be able to take place with a newfound momentum and in an atmosphere that is less contentious and more conducive to mutually agreeable solutions.

American Policy on Turkey's EU Accession

For most of the last fifty years, the United States -- although supportive of Turkey's EU ambitions -- was mostly content to observe Turkey's drive for EU membership from the sidelines. The first real significant change to this approach occurred during the end of the Clinton administration when it successfully made a hard push for the EU to officially recognize Turkey's candidacy at the Helsinki summit in 1999.²⁷ This probably stands as the high water mark in U.S. advocacy efforts on Turkey's behalf. President George W. Bush also lobbied for Turkey's admission to the EU, although his reasons were slightly different.

In the wake of the terror attacks of 9/11 the Bush administration tried to convince its European partners that Turkey as an EU member would serve as a bridge and model for the Muslim world, thereby serving to limit the influence of rising Islamic extremism. While not enshrined in any of America's national policy documents, President Bush's remarks at Galatasaray University in Istanbul in June 2004 unambiguously articulated this policy.

“America believes that as a European power, Turkey belongs in the European Union. Including Turkey in the EU would prove that Europe is not the exclusive club of a single religion; it would expose the ‘clash of civilizations’ as a passing myth of history.”²⁸

The Obama administration has taken a similar approach. During his first trip abroad, President Obama made a point of travelling to Turkey and addressing the Turkish Parliament, where he clearly stated, “The United States strongly supports Turkey’s bid to become a member of the European Union.”²⁹ This policy was reiterated by Secretary of State Clinton during her trip to Turkey in March 2009³⁰ and by Assistant Secretary of State, Philip Gordon, during comments he made in March 2010 at the Brookings Institution.³¹

Turkey’s Domestic Struggle

Despite this strong support from the last three U.S. administrations, it has been argued that U.S. lobbying efforts have been largely ineffective since 2005, as that marks the point in which accession negotiations began and when Turkish-EU relations became internal EU business rather than a foreign policy issue.³² While this is certainly true, there is a growing school of thought which argues that the future of Turkey’s EU drive will actually be determined by the ongoing domestic struggle for power within Turkey. Some analysts, and many Turkish secularists, have long argued that Prime Minister Erdogan is nothing more than an Islamist in democrat’s clothing.³³ They maintain that he has been cynically using the political reforms associated with the EU accession process as a tool in his struggle to gain control of the military and the judiciary in order to undermine the secular foundations on which the Turkish Republic currently stands.³⁴

There can be little argument that the public struggle between the AKP and the military has largely gone in Erdogan’s favor, with the apparent backing of the majority of

the Turkish people. The Ergenekon case, in which top military generals and journalists have been indicted for plotting against the current government, has been widely seen as a severe blow to the once dominant military, reflecting the ascendancy of the AKP.³⁵ In January 2010 government prosecutors revealed the existence of another military plan to destabilize the government – known as Operation Sledgehammer – that has led to additional arrests and caused the military to fall even lower in the public's estimation.

All of this has led some to speculate that Erdogan is emerging as Turkey's most influential leader since Ataturk.³⁶ Unfortunately, this also includes a growing belief that Erdogan harbors strong autocratic tendencies, which are not exactly compatible with EU standards and democratic principles. There are accusations that the Ergenekon investigations have taken on a life of their own and that Erdogan has used them to persecute and crush his political rivals. Erdogan is notoriously intolerant of criticism and allegations of extensive use of phone taps on his critics are widespread. It has also been said that no prime minister in Turkish history has been as hostile to the press as Erdogan.³⁷ In the most well-known case, the Erdogan government levied a tax fine of \$2.5 billion on the largest, most influential – and most critical – media conglomerate, reflecting this authoritarian tendency.³⁸ Even noted columnist Thomas Friedman has weighed in on this issue, noting that he has never been to a democratic country where so many of his contacts requested anonymity out of fear of retribution by Erdogan's inner circle.³⁹

The AKP's critics also point to the slow pace of reform as indicative of Erdogan's lack of commitment to the EU. They claim that Erdogan's tenure in office can be divided into two distinct periods. During the reform period, from 2003-2005, he pressed Turkey's

bid for EU membership by recasting law to meet EU harmonization requirements.⁴⁰ The years since 2006, however, have been marked by little or no progress in this area. Revealingly, Turkey has opened only two chapters in its EU accession process over the last two years. In 2009 Turkey did not open a single chapter during the Finnish presidency of the EU. As the Belgian presidency of 2010 comes to a conclusion, the Commission reported that it has opened only two chapters, and that it was unable to open the chapter on competition due to Ankara's failure to fulfill the requirements that would allow this chapter to be opened.⁴¹

No EU Membership – The Effects on Turkey

In the end, it may be largely irrelevant if Europe rejects Turkey or Turkey rejects Europe; the end result is the same. A more important question is, what impact will this have on Turkey? With the possible exception of wounded national pride, the impact of such an outcome may not be as calamitous as previously thought. This is based on the assumption that the agreements between Turkey and the EU that have already been signed remain in effect. Thanks to the customs union, trade between the two entities – totaling 80 billion euros in 2009 – remains robust. Turkey is the EU's seventh biggest trading partner while the EU is Turkey's largest trading partner. Almost half of Turkey's total trade is with the EU while more than two thirds of foreign direct investment in Turkey comes from the EU.⁴² Financial assistance from the EU totaled some 654 million euros in 2010 (roughly one percent of its GDP), and is programmed to reach nearly 900 million euros by 2012. Also, Turkey would still be eligible for funding from the European Investment Bank under its external lending mandate for the EU's south-eastern neighbors.⁴³

Even the loss of the benefit of the freedom of labor to move throughout the EU will not have much of an impact on Turkey. As shown with the Romanian and Bulgarian enlargement of 2007, the EU restricted this right for a period of five years,⁴⁴ and the Commission is considering permanent safeguards concerning the free movement of labor with respect to Turkey.⁴⁵

Failure to achieve membership also means Turkey will be unable to join the Eurozone and adopt the Euro as its national currency. However, given the recent financial crises in Greece and Ireland, serious concerns about the viability of the Euro have been raised. Furthermore, Turkey would likely be reluctant to cede sovereignty on the formulation of monetary – and possibly fiscal⁴⁶ -- policy to the European Central Bank, especially after stabilizing its currency to the point that Turkey is now closer to fulfilling the criteria for adopting the euro than many of the troubled economies that are already in the Eurozone. It is well under the 60 percent ceiling on government debt (49 percent of GDP) and could well get its annual budget deficit below the 3 percent benchmark next year. That leaves the reduction of inflation, now running at roughly 8 percent, as the only remaining major policy goal.⁴⁷

Regarding political reform, the government appears committed to carrying out its reform agenda. The government took a serious step in this direction in September when it presented a referendum to voters on a sweeping package of constitutional reforms. These measures passed by a wide margin indicating that even without the promise of EU membership the Turkish people have demonstrated their desire to strengthen Turkey's democracy.⁴⁸ While this vote signifies an important shift away from a constitution that was imposed by the military 30 years ago, it does not rule out the

possibility of a more overtly Islamic government in the future. This is a potential outcome that would be unlikely to occur if the EU granted membership to Turkey.

Foreign policy is the one area that has probably garnered the most interest when discussing the consequences of a failed Turkish EU bid. As reflected in Secretary Gates' comment at the beginning of this paper, the growing consensus seems to be that the breakdown in the accession negotiations has pushed Turkey's foreign policy from a western to an eastern orientation. However, a careful review of the Erdogan government's foreign policy actions and pronouncements yields a different conclusion.

A Review of Turkey's Foreign Policy Under the AKP

With the possible exception of Prime Minister Erdogan himself, the person most responsible for Turkey's foreign policy orientation over the last eight years is the former professor of international relations and author, Ahmet Davutoglu. Although he has only been officially serving as the foreign minister since May 2009, he has been unofficially serving as PM Erdogan's principal foreign policy advisor since 2002. Davutoglu is credited with providing the theoretical framework for Turkey's new foreign policy.⁴⁹ This approach, commonly referred to as "zero problems with neighbors," lies at the core of Davutoglu's influential book "Strategic Depth," published in 2001.⁵⁰ This policy seeks to ensure stability on Turkey's borders by intensifying trade with neighbors, thus binding these states in an economic web that would make conflict increasingly unlikely and damaging to national interests.

Ironically, this is, more or less, the same theory that underpins the foundation of the EU. Yet, it is precisely this aspect of Turkey's new approach that has troubled Washington and raised voices of concern in the West, leading to the perception that it is "losing Turkey." Under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey has vastly improved its relations

with Syria, Iran, and Russia. This has largely been accomplished through increased trade, tourism, commercial ties, and the establishment of visa-free travel agreements, all of which have created a strong sense of economic interdependence. The preferred Western approach to these countries has relied more on confrontation and has favored isolation and marginalization, not engagement and investment.

One of the key components of this newly self-confident foreign policy is Turkey's surprisingly strong economy. By any objective measure it is one of the global success stories of the last eight years. A member of the G-20 for the last two years, Turkey now boasts the world's 17th largest economy. During the AKP's first term, from 2002 to 2007, Turkey's economy averaged an annual growth rate of 7 percent, and inflation has fallen from 45 percent in 2003 to 9.5 percent in 2009.⁵¹ Meanwhile the IMF predicted that GDP would grow around 6.25 percent in 2010.⁵² While European banks showed severe strain during the recent global financial crisis, Turkish banks showed resilience and emerged from the crisis in remarkably good shape. This economic strength has given Turkey the self-confidence it needs to approach not only its region, but also the world, with an assertiveness that has clearly caught the West by surprise. Simply put, Turkey's economic interests compel it to have better relations with all its neighbors.⁵³ Expressed another way, Turkey's foreign policy is being pulled by a dynamic breed of outward looking Anatolian capitalists, the bulk of whom are staunch supporters of Erdogan and the AKP.⁵⁴ This does not appear to be a case of the "EU pushing Turkey to the East."

Furthermore, Turkey's ambitions are not limited to its immediate region. Indeed, Davutoglu has been accused of pursuing "neo-Ottomanism," an effort to return Turkey to its Ottoman sphere of influence and beyond.⁵⁵ Turkey is also making a bold push into

Africa. In 2009 alone it opened embassies in Tanzania, Ghana, Mozambique, Madagascar, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Angola, Mali, Niger, and Chad, as well as in Colombia and Malta.⁵⁶ It is interesting to contrast this with a large number of EU countries which are closing and consolidating many consulates and embassies abroad. Turkey is even extending its reach to China, with whom it recently held a joint air exercise. Turkey's vision of its future extends into space as well. Erdogan recently set a date of 2012 for the launch of the country's first spy satellite in an effort to reduce its reliance on U.S. satellite support in its ongoing operations against the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK.⁵⁷

Growing Tensions? – The Intersection of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy

With Turkey's increasing self-confidence, its growing economic ties with countries the U.S. views as potential threats, and its freedom to pursue a foreign policy that is unconstrained by any EU obligations, it seems only inevitable that areas of conflict will arise in its relations with the U.S. It is self-evident that Turkey is a key player in a region that is critical to many U.S. national and security interests. These vital concerns include: the transit of energy from the Caspian Basin to Europe; stability in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region and the role of Russia; the status of Iran's nuclear program; the Middle East peace process and relations with the broader Islamic world; the security and development of Iraq and Afghanistan; the UN negotiated talks on Cyprus; and stability in the Balkans.⁵⁸ It is equally fair to say that for Turkey, the U.S. has a critical role to play in dealing with these challenges as well.

Indeed, senior officials from Washington and Ankara have taken advantage of every opportunity to highlight the fact that U.S. and Turkish objectives in nearly all of these issues are congruent and overlapping.⁵⁹ Why then, has there been an equal

amount of commentary about the fragile state of U.S. - Turkish relations and concern that Turkey is turning away from the West? Middle East expert Steven Cook offered one possible explanation in an article he recently contributed to *Foreign Policy* magazine, stating that although Washington and Ankara share the same goals, “when you get down to details, they are on opposite ends of virtually all of these issues.”⁶⁰ This divergence on how to address these problems is largely driven by fundamental changes to the international order, Turkey’s economically driven foreign policy approach, and the profound shift in Turkish domestic politics.⁶¹

The first significant indication that the game had changed occurred in 2003 when the Turkish parliament refused to allow the U.S. Army’s 4th Infantry Division to invade northern Iraq by transiting Turkish territory. This refusal was primarily based on Turkish security concerns about the counter-insurgency it was fighting against Kurdish rebels in the southeast. And to a lesser extent, it was also driven by economic considerations as Turkey claimed that war would severely diminish trade with neighboring Iraq.

Regardless of why, the message was clear: Turkish domestic politics and national interests will now trump the need to maintain good relations with the United States.⁶²

According to those who believe that Turkey has turned east, this theme has now become a worrisome trend. The following three cases have emerged as the most serious friction points in U.S. – Turkey relations and are illustrative of the type of problems that could bedevil the relationship in the future.

Israel – Syria – and the Middle East Peace Process

Perhaps more than any other issue, Turkey’s deteriorating relationship with Israel has starkly revealed the ways in which its new foreign policy can influence the region. The rupture between these two states has been dramatic and abrupt, unraveling a

partnership that had grown increasingly close over the last fifteen years. A warning sign of the troubles ahead occurred when Turkey publicly embraced Hamas after the 2006 Palestinian elections in which it garnered 44 percent of the vote. Turkey invited Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal to meet PM Erdogan despite Israeli protests and U.S. classification of Hamas as a terrorist organization. The decisive split occurred with the Israeli attack of Gaza in December 2008, which resulted in the death of 1,400 Palestinians. Shortly afterward, Erdogan publicly expressed his fury at Israel when he stormed off a panel he was sharing with Israeli president, Shimon Peres, at the Davos World Economic Forum. “You Israelis know how to kill,” he shouted.⁶³

Turkey expressed its disapproval in a more concrete way when in October 2009 it cancelled Israeli participation in its Anatolian Eagle air force exercise, an annual event of the last 15 years. The split became a chasm, however, in May 2010 when a humanitarian aid flotilla originating from Turkey and bound for Gaza was assaulted by Israeli commandos resulting in the death of eight Turkish citizens. PM Erdogan has demanded an apology from Israel and monetary compensation for the families of the victims. Turkey has also withdrawn its ambassador from Tel Aviv and has ruled out his return unless Israel complies with its demands.⁶⁴

One of the negative consequences of this rift has been the breakdown in settlement talks between Syria and Israel which Turkey had been mediating. These negotiations were suspended following the Israeli military offensive in Gaza and now appear to be moribund.⁶⁵ Another potentially destabilizing outcome concerns Israel’s search for a new regional military partner to replace Turkey. In what could be perceived as a subtle rebuke, Israel has drawn closer to Turkey’s long-time rival Greece, with both

prime ministers exchanging visits where they discussed increased military cooperation and the expansion of strategic ties.⁶⁶ Given the unresolved issues between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean and Cyprus, this burgeoning relationship could shift the regional balance of power resulting in unforeseen consequences in the eastern Mediterranean.

Iran and Its Nuclear Program

Perhaps even more so than its rift with Israel, Turkey's approach to Iran has contributed the most friction in its relations with the United States. The case of Iran exposes the weaknesses of Davutoglu's "zero problems" approach in that it appears to sacrifice values and respect for the authority of multi-lateral organizations like the UN, solely for the prize of increased trade and the uninterrupted flow of gas. Following Iran's flawed elections in June 2009 Turkey immediately recognized Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the legitimate victor despite widespread doubts in the rest of the world about the validity of this outcome. During Ahmadinejad's subsequent visit to Istanbul he was warmly embraced by Erdogan as a "dear friend."⁶⁷ The fact that Iran is Turkey's second largest supplier of natural gas and that Turkey has increased the volume of trade with Iran sixfold since 2002 appears to have trumped Turkey's commitment to universal values and support for democracy.

In U.S. eyes, this unseemly bit of diplomacy was easily eclipsed, however, by Turkey's handling of Iran's nuclear program. Despite the Obama administration's best efforts to present a united front with its international partners in its negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, it felt undermined when Turkey and Brazil reached a separate agreement with Tehran in May 2010 that would have accepted low-enriched uranium in a swap deal.⁶⁸ Even more troubling, Turkey – as a member of the UN Security Council – then voted against a U.S.-backed resolution that imposed sanctions on Iran over its

non-compliance with the IAEA. Once again, it appears that Turkey's fear of lost trade with Iran is driving this approach. On the one hand Turkish policy opposes Iranian acquisition or production of nuclear weapons, yet on the other hand Turkish policy staunchly opposes the use of sanctions, claiming that they are ineffective. Most tellingly, Turkey claims that it has suffered badly in the past – the sanctions regime against Iraq – and that it will be hit hardest in the event of sanctions or use of force against Iran.⁶⁹

Turkey's approach to Iran, however, can have far reaching consequences, as was recently seen during the NATO Summit in Lisbon where it decided to establish a missile defense shield. Succumbing to the threat of a veto, NATO yielded to Turkish demands and omitted any specific mention of Iran as a threat.⁷⁰ Despite the agreement to proceed with missile defense, there are still many details that must be ironed out and Turkey figures to play a prominent role in any outcome. PM Erdogan has yet to confirm if Turkey will allow the system's x-band radar to be stationed on Turkish soil⁷¹ and Turkish Defense Minister, Vecdi Gonul, has raised the issue of funding the system, hinting that Turkey will be more likely to cooperate if the U.S. is willing to financially contribute to the upgrade of its national air defense system.⁷²

Russia – Pipelines – Trade

In contrast to America's on-again, off-again relations with Russia, Turkey has boldly pursued closer ties with its powerful neighbor to the north, with confidence and a lack of fear. As with Iran, Turkey's focus is on the establishment of trade and economic linkages, underpinned by a strong demand for Russian energy. Despite conflicting views on the Caucasus, Russia and Turkey have done a remarkable job of transforming their relationship from confrontation to cooperation. Much of this is based on Russian energy and Turkey's role as both a consumer and a transit country.

Russia currently supplies more than half of Turkey's natural gas and one-fifth of its oil. Energy supplies make up nearly three-quarters of Turkey's Russian imports. Thanks to these imports Russia became Turkey's largest trading partner in 2008, while Turkey now ranks as Russia's fifth-largest trading partner.⁷³ The leaders of both countries recently announced their intention to increase their total volume of trade from \$38 billion to \$100 billion in the next five years. The two countries also agreed that Russia will assist Turkey in its plans for a nuclear future by building its first nuclear power plant.⁷⁴

Turkey figures to play a prominent role as a transit country in Russia's plans to bring its oil and natural gas to global markets via a comprehensive network of pipelines. In this role Turkey appears to have placed itself in between competing plans from the EU and the U.S. on one side, and Russia on the other. The U.S., and to a lesser extent the EU, have championed the Nabucco pipeline, which is supposed to bring gas from the Caspian basin to Europe via Turkey, while bypassing Russia. Russia has countered with its South Stream pipeline, which will bring Russian gas also to Europe, via Turkey but with a larger capacity and a similar target date for completion.⁷⁵ For the moment, it appears that Turkey may be prepared to favor the Russian-backed South Stream pipeline. Recent statements by Turkey's chief EU negotiator indicate that Turkey may be willing to hold up progress on Nabucco due to the EU's decision to block the accession chapter on energy. In his words, "If I cannot open the energy chapter, I'm not really motivated to solve your energy problems."⁷⁶

In many respects, Turkey's growing disenchantment with the EU and its frayed relations with the U.S. are mirrored by Russian mistrust of the U.S. and the West. This

mutual feeling of exclusion has served to draw Erdogan and Putin closer together. This new relationship between Russia and Turkey is, like Turkey's neighborhood policy, based not on ideological compatibility but on pragmatic calculations based on converging economic and strategic interests.⁷⁷ As ties in energy, trade, investment and tourism deepen, the security philosophies of the two countries have grown increasingly aligned.⁷⁸ Speaking to President Putin in 2005, PM Erdogan said, "Our views totally coincide with regard to the situation in the region, as well as to issues concerning the preservation of stability in the world."⁷⁹ Of particular interest to the U.S., this is best seen in the Black Sea where both Turkey and Russia want to see U.S. naval presence eliminated from the area.⁸⁰

Conclusions

While the final verdict on Turkey's EU bid has yet to be delivered, it looks increasingly likely that it will not achieve its original goal of full membership. After 36 years of division, the two sides in the Cyprus dispute appear no closer to a negotiated settlement despite years of UN effort and involvement. Without an agreement it is extremely unlikely that Turkey will recognize the current Greek Cypriot government and implement the Ankara Protocol, thus leaving the EU little option but to keep frozen the eight chapters that are currently blocked. The accession negotiations will remain stuck. In the meantime, public attitudes in Europe and Turkey will continue to harden with both sides holding increasingly negative views of each other. Thus, the "cultural issue" will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As this scenario has played out – and will continue to play out – Turkey has not allowed it to slow its rise as a regional power, with global ambitions. Its "zero problems" foreign policy approach coupled with its explosive economic growth has buoyed it with

the self-confidence necessary to play the lead role in the region that it envisions. This foreign policy, with its emphasis on economic growth, trade, and stability on its borders more closely resembles Beijing than Brussels: minimal interference in domestic politics and pragmatism remain its guiding principles.⁸¹ A refrain that is being heard with increasing frequency is that the EU will need Turkey more than Turkey will need the EU.

This activist Turkish foreign policy is likely to continue for the foreseeable future regardless of which party is in power, because it reflects the country's geopolitical and economic positions as well as its changing domestic politics.⁸² Therefore, Secretary Gates' comments and the view that the EU has pushed Turkey east seem to miss the essence of the issue. Turkey will conduct its foreign policy in a manner that is consistent with its cultural values and secures its national interests, regardless if this conflicts with EU or U.S. foreign policy objectives. Given the long history of U.S. – Turkish cooperation in foreign policy matters there is little doubt that the U.S. will continue to work closely with Turkey on issues of mutual interest. However, as evidenced by Turkey's evolving relations with Iran, Russia and Israel, the U.S. should be prepared for future instances of disagreement on issues that both sides view as important to their individual national interests. The challenge for the U.S. will be how it handles these cases and whether it will be able to manage a nuanced approach that walks the fine line between accommodation and confrontation.

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