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# Turkey's global strategy: Turkey and the United States

## Report

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## ➤ Turkey and the United States

Emiliano Alessandri

**The recent evolution of US-Turkish relations highlights broader challenges of the transition from American unipolarity to a still inceptive 'multipolar world'. The relationship cannot be understood unless its evolution during the 20th century is contrasted with the recent reality of the fluid interaction between a self-described 'emerging power' (Erdogan, 2011) with regional aspirations and a global superpower with extended interests in Turkey's many neighbourhoods (including the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East) but a declining international influence.**

In this context, the ultimate test for the Turkish-US relationship does not lie in Turkey choosing between 'West' and 'East'. The challenge is, rather, about America and its long-standing European allies (including Turkey) being able to redefine the West and reaffirm its relevance, as American unipolarity is replaced by an interdependent but also more plural international environment. The Turkish-US relationship will remain in flux in the years to come not only because of the instability that characterizes one of Turkey's neighbourhoods, the Middle East, but also because it epitomizes more broadly the internal convulsions of the West in an age of hegemonic transition and global change.

As America explores the foundations of a new relationship with Turkey, Ankara is called to determine how much of its current ambition as a rising actor can be sustained in the longer run by a more independent course and to what extent its strategic aspirations can still be more effectively served by reliance on traditional alliances, such as the one with the US, and participation in international Western institutions of which Turkey has been for decades a loyal member, such as NATO.

One thing is certain: the relationship will remain difficult for Washington and Ankara to manage until new geopolitical realities are acknowledged and sources of mistrust are honestly discussed with a view to extinguishing them. America's dialogue with Turkey is impaired by a certain patronizing attitude that characterizes also the US approach to other 'junior partners'. This is evident in the recurrent US debates on the risk of 'losing Turkey' (which assume that at some point Turkey was at America's disposal) and in the tendency of the Washington policy community to treat Turkey as an 'issue' instead of as an 'actor', as openly lamented by Turkish elites. This attitude, moreover, has been coupled with the difficulty to contain the influence of a wide array of Turkey's detractors in the US, which can be found among elements of the political elite obsessed with the risk of Turkey's 'Islamization', pro-Israel groups, or among representatives of the American Armenian Diaspora.

Turkey's view of the US, on the other hand, is negatively affected by a widespread conspiracy mentality which leads many Turks to resent US 'imperialism', long-standing fears about America's involvement with Kurdish separatism (despite years of shared intelligence and military cooperation against groups such as the PKK), and by the tendency to hold Washington accountable for any stance taken by Israel. The latter has been a regional ally of Turkey for decades, but in particular since Israel's Gaza offensive in 2008, the relationship has been fraying as ever larger sections of the Turkish elite and public have held Israel responsible for human rights violations against the Palestinians, and harshly criticized the

Israeli government for its allegedly uncompromising and zero-sum-game approach to relations with Muslim communities in the region. This evolution has significantly complicated Turkish-US relations. Both anti-US and anti-Israel sentiments are becoming more widespread among the Turkish public (Transatlantic Trends).

## **THE BACKGROUND**

The golden age of Turkish-American relations during the Cold War is largely a legend. As with other relationships between the American superpower and regional allies, difficulties emerged at various points, including the tensions which erupted in the early 1960s over the future of the US nuclear capable missiles stationed on Turkish soil during the Cuban missile crisis, and US sanctions and arms embargo against Turkey following the Turkish army's invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Turkey's participation in US-led international alliances, moreover, did not invariably translate into a strategic restraint, as evidenced by the repeated tensions between Turkey and Greece – two NATO allies – over issues such as their respective possessions in the Aegean.

Furthermore, the question of Turkey's belonging to the West was no less complex than is today; it was simply less debated in international circles. Not many US leaders during the Cold War identified Turkey's semi-democratic system and the pattern of repeated military coups (1960, 1971, and 1980) as formidable impediments to the nation's development as a Western country. What was different until the 1990s was not so much the stability of Turkish-US relations, but rather the relative clarity and predictability of the larger strategic context: an international system divided into two main blocs, organized under US leadership in the West, with Turkey firmly siding with anti-Soviet countries.

Turkey's support for the US-led international intervention against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 seemed to suggest that Ankara could become a critical regional partner in the establishment of the 'new world order' envisioned by George H. W.

Bush. But the 1990s proved to be a critical period of change for Turkey, with a mixed impact on its international orientation and relationship with the US. In the context of a rapidly evolving international system no longer divided into blocs, Turkey soon realized that it was no longer sealed in the Western camp and confined to the role of a diligent guardian of NATO's southern flank. Thanks to the reforms passed during the Turgut Özal era (1983-1993), which the US supported, the country liberalized its market internally while opening up its economy, thus laying out the foundations of a new, multidirectional, regional integration. This led to a renewed interest in European integration but also to establishing links with countries in Turkey's rediscovered southern and eastern neighbourhoods, which in some cases happened to be in America's 'black list', such as Iran.

Clashes with the Kurds, moreover, intensified and Islamist movements rose to political prominence, risking undermining Turkey's secular identity, and its ongoing liberalization process, as well as its Western strategic orientation. Particularly troublesome for Washington was Turkey's inclination in the 1990s to interpret its newly-found active regional role as requiring confrontation with its neighbours in some cases. Growing tensions with Greece in the mid-to-late 1990s were viewed with great alarm as they could lead to open conflict between two US allies in the already conflict-ridden Balkans. Turkey's strains with Syria, which led to a showdown in 1998 that stopped just short of war, caused great concern for their possible broader regional ramifications even if they helped cement the Turkish-Israeli alliance.

## **'NEW TURKEY' AND US-TURKISH RELATIONS**

The 2000s brought with them a set of new challenges for Turkish-US relations. America supported the single most important societal and political development taking place in Turkey: the rise of the post-Islamist, culturally conservative, market-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) – which represented at once the rise of the Anatolian Turkish elites and the decline of the traditional urban Kemalist secular

establishment. Recep Tayip Erdogan was received in Washington in 2002 and met with the US president before he became the country's Prime Minister and when he was still a relatively unknown international figure – a non ritual, exceptional event. The idea that as a secular democracy, ruled by a moderate Islamic party, Turkey could boost America's efforts to communicate and implement a new agenda of change in the Middle East after the 9-11 attacks was appealing in US circles, particularly conservative and neoconservative ones, then in charge of foreign policy.

This vision, however, was soon to prove largely delusory. The Turkish Grand National Assembly's 'no' vote to logistical support to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was just the first act of a long saga featuring a rising regional actor who has, since then, in many instances resisted or opposed US actions in the Middle East that Washington has justified as promoting security and democracy, but that have translated into new instability around Turkey's borders. The specter that has constantly haunted Ankara is that of a Kurdish state arising from the ruins of post-Saddam Iraq, powerful enough to support Kurdish separatism in Turkey's South East. The concern, however, has gradually become larger. As an actor increasingly integrated with the economies of its neighbouring countries (including some of America's rivals such as Iran and Syria), Turkey has found it difficult to accept US-sponsored policies aimed at altering the already fragile balances of the Middle East with the goal of imposing Western outcomes.

Therefore, US-Turkish relations have become tense since 2003 not because Turkey 'has gone Islamist', but because the alliance has not fully adjusted to the new reality of Turkey as a regional power with its own legacies and interests in its neighbourhood. In this context, the economic, strategic, security, as well as psychological impact of the Afghan and Iraq wars on Turkey – both taking place next to its borders, but conceived and run by Washington – has been consistently underestimated by the US. The US foreign policy elite has preferred to focus on

the 'new directions' of Turkish foreign policy rather than to acknowledge America's own foreign policy transformation – from a guarantor of stability to an agent of transformation (and sometimes a factor of instability) in the Greater Middle East – especially during the Bush years.

Faced with an American counterpart only limitedly receptive of Turkish claims and views, Ankara's growing inclination has been that of distinguishing itself from US policies in the region, by emphasizing the use of 'soft power' as opposed to hard means, and the need for dialogue and cooperation, instead of competition, even with the more problematic regimes. This has led to initiatives that have created significant disagreement and tensions with Washington, such as Ankara's engagement with Hamas in Palestine, the shift from confrontation to cooperation with Syria in the 2000s (when Washington was on the contrary trying to isolate Damascus), but also to valuable mediating efforts, such as Ankara's brokerage in 2008 of peace talks between Syria and Israel.

Turkey has, in fact, shown considerable convergence with US policies and goals when stability was the main objective and diplomacy was as central as hard power: the stabilization Afghanistan (to which Turkey has contributed by participating in the political dialogue as well as by sending aid and troops), Lebanon (in which Turkey has played a critical role in the UN peace mission), as well as post-war Iraq. Initially focused on a largely unilateral military effort to stop the transborder activities of Kurdish violent groups, Ankara has later pursued engagement with the new Iraqi Kurdish authorities in Northern Iraq as a more promising way to confront the PKK threat and to prevent the rise of a hostile neighbouring Kurdish state more broadly. Turkey has got deeply involved in the political discussions among Sunni and Shite Iraqi factions and the Americans with the objective of avoiding a protracted civil war and preventing the fragmentation of the Iraqi state into new independent entities, including a Kurdish one, next to Turkey's borders.

Despite this blend of orientations and policies, the debate in the US has increasingly revolved around the question (for some already a reality) of Turkey's 'drift' from the West. Although the disagreement over the handling of Iraq had ceased to be an issue by the time the Bush administration finished its second term, both Turkish and US leaders could agree at the end of the 2000s that the relationship needed a major overhaul if levels of strategic convergence similar to the one achieved during the Cold War were to be ever attained again.

### **US-TURKISH RELATIONS DURING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION**

The Obama administration has to be credited with the attempt to 'modernize' the relationship with Turkey (Gordon, 2010). The many faces of what has come to be known as 'new Turkey' have been carefully taken into account, even though old metaphors, including the 'bridge between the West and the East' one, have too often offered the foundation of an understanding of contemporary Turkey that tends to remain stereotyped. While trying harder to understand Turkey, the US administration has conducted a review of America's role in the Middle East as part of a broad reflection on the US international strategy in a globalizing world. The US has also reviewed its relations with the 'emerging powers', espousing the paradigm of 'engagement' over containment or confrontation. Understanding how critical the relationship with Turkey is to such undertaking, the Obama administration has sought a 'model partnership' with Ankara (Obama, 2009), as if by engaging with the 'new Turkey' Washington intended to send a signal to other Muslim countries and emerging powers more broadly.

Three years into the Obama administration, however, frustration is the common feeling in Washington. Faced with a stalling accession process to the EU, persisting suspicion in US circles, but above all galvanized by its economic success and growing influence in its neighbourhood, the Turkish ruling elite

has turned more nationalistic, becoming increasingly fascinated with the idea of Turkish 'non-alignment' or an 'independent foreign policy'.

Cooperation with the US in the stabilization of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Iraq has continued. At the same time, however, in particular relations with Iran and Israel have caused deep tensions reverberating across the Atlantic. As already mentioned, Turkish-Israeli relations have become particularly tense after Israel's Gaza offensive of 2008. Although itself sometimes critical of Israel's policies, the Obama administration has seen with concern Turkey's choice to dramatize its differences with Jerusalem and to capitalize on the region's negative views of Israel to boost its image among the Arab peoples. The 'Mavi Marmara' incident in May 2010, which brought Turkish-Israeli relations to an all-time low, materialized Washington's worst fears. Even if the US has mainly focused on preventing conflict between its two allies, Ankara has seen Washington's reactions to the incident as betraying a clear pro-Israel bias.

Relations with Iran have too created deep tensions with Washington. Turkey's 'no' vote in June 2010 on UN-mandated sanctions against the Republic of Iran caused damage to America's efforts to build international consensus on the Iranian nuclear question and inflicted a major blow to the Turkish-US relationship (the Obama administration insisted until the last moment that Turkey would at least consider abstention). Contending that isolation is not an effective strategy for stopping Teheran's nuclear plans, Ankara has decided to keep cultivating its economic relationship with Iran, embracing an open-ended dialogue with the regime without the threat of coercion. This is a path that no EU country or NATO ally considers any longer acceptable or viable.

America's selection of priorities in the Middle East and its securitized approach to relations in the region may be questionable from the Turkish perspective. It is significant and alarming, however, that on an issue as important as Iran, the Turkish – US relationship

has failed to deliver. Fraying relations with Israel, moreover, have raised serious doubts in Washington about the concrete implementation of Ankara's self-styled 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. Turkey has stressed that its goal is the same of the US and European countries: peace and prosperity in the region. But as Turkey redefines its place in the changed strategic context, it will find it increasingly hard to shield behind the appealing but largely neutral formula of 'stability'. Turkey's rise and the rapidly evolving regional environment will by definition require Ankara to choose priorities and select partners. The most recent developments in North Africa and the Middle East underscore this problem.

Turkey has been arguably more prompt than the US, and certainly more than EU countries, to lend its support to the Arab movements demanding change. Turkey's claim that it represents a source of inspiration for Muslim societies demanding better governance and more equitable development has not been contested by Obama administration, which on the contrary has appreciated Turkey's aspiration to play an active role in facilitating and securing the democratic transitions in countries like Egypt and Tunisia.

Turkey's attitude towards Libya and Iran, and its close ties with an authoritarian regime such as Syria, however, have highlighted serious contradictions in Turkish policy, and revealed the possibility for continued tension with the US in the region. Ankara expressed reservations about the adoption of economic sanctions against Libya and initially opposed military intervention against the Gaddafi regime. As in the past, Turkey has also remained embarrassingly silent on popular protests in Iran, just as when the Iranian opposition and Washington were instead hoping that that the 'Arab spring' could give leverage to the Iranian people to finally overthrow the Ahmadi-Nejad regime in Teheran.

Turkey's difficult balancing act between endorsing democratic change and preserving stability and

good relations with some of its regional partners highlight tradeoffs and dilemmas that the US and other Western countries are themselves facing. The recognition that this is the case should lead Turkey to actively seek consultation and coordination with Washington. Turkey has been right to reject the view that the US or the EU can decide on its behalf what Western policy is, especially in its neighbourhood. Ankara is also right that the emergence of a multipolar order compels a review of Western strategy and a rebalancing of the relationship between the American superpower and its allies so as to accommodate the new geo-economic and geopolitical realities. However, if it is interested in developing this idea, Ankara should now be proactive in engaging Western allies on its views, promoting a dialogue with the US and the EU on how the Middle East should develop in the years ahead. Faced with an America only slowly revising its long-held assumptions and policies and an EU that is divided on its views of Turkey, Ankara's activism in the most recent years has seemed directed at carving out a space for itself more than at seriously developing a new idea of international engagement agreeable also to Washington. ■

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