

Turkey in the New Geopolitical Context
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In some ways, Turkey has a better claim than China to be the “the middle kingdom.” Ankara sits at the center of a vast web of geopolitical relationships, most of which interact with each other as well as with it, but all of which can be seriously perturbed by changes in Turkish policy. Turkey’s multi-faceted geopolitical position gives it considerable leverage over the major European powers as well as Russia, the United States, and even China. Sooner or later, all great powers learn that they cannot hope to conduct a successful policy toward a very long list of countries and organizations without Turkish cooperation or acquiescence. Turkish positions on foreign policy issues are of vital interest to:

- Turkey’s immediate neighbors – Armenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq, and Syria;
- Nations in or closely related to the former Ottoman domain – Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, the Balkan countries, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and the Gulf Arab states;
- The Turkic-speaking peoples of the Caspian Basin and Central Asia as far east as Chinese Xinjiang;
- Russia, (Turkey’s historic rival) and the fifteen percent or more of Russians who profess Islam; and
- Wealthy and powerful associations of nations, like the European Union, NATO, and the fifty-seven member-strong Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

As the 20th century ended, Turkey struck a notably independent posture. It rejected American aid conditioned on its acceptance of US-professed human rights standards. In the first decade of this century, the Turks set out to reaffirm their brotherhood with other Muslims and to expand their regional and global influence under the slogan “zero problems with neighbors.” Ankara pursued an historic compromise in Cyprus, normalization with Armenia, mediation between Israel and Syria, a nuclear deal with Iran in partnership with Brazil, and energy and construction deals with Russia. It sought domestic tranquility through talks with its domestic Kurdish terrorists. Turkey came to be seen as a model Islamic democracy with diplomacy that reflected an admirably fair-minded approach to regional issues. Meanwhile, the network of schools organized by Hizmat – the Turkish quasi-Sufi Gülen movement – in Central Asia, East Africa, Europe, and the Americas added greatly to Turkish global soft power.

But a series of developments, including Israel’s renewed savaging of Gaza, the overthrow of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the destabilization of Syria by the final stage of the Arab uprisings of 2011 have utterly transformed this image. Turkey now has no neighbors with which it does not have major problems. And, long before the failed putsch of July 2016, President Erdoğan was engaged in rooting out Gülenist influence at home and abroad. Turkey has come to be

seen as an atavistic autocracy that has badly lost its way. It is on the warpath against its own Kurds as well as those in Syria, who have been U.S. allies in the fight to degrade Daesh – the so-called Islamic Caliphate. And it has taken sides in many intra-Arab quarrels.

Many of the shared purposes and all of the warmth have disappeared from US-Turkish relations. Turkey and America are on opposite sides of an increasing number of issues. These include how to handle Russia in the wake of its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Syria; how to deal with Iran, Israel, the Palestinians and the Kurds; what priority to assign to regime change in Syria; and whether to exploit or combat Salafi Jihadism there and elsewhere. In recent months, Turkey has tried to repair its international isolation by reaching out to U.S. adversaries like Iran and Russia as well as to Israel (which has become estranged from the United States)

In the wake of the U.S. policy debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq and the disastrous results of the so-called “Arab Spring,” Washington’s onetime obsession with imposing democracy abroad is yielding to demands from American citizens to put the U.S. house in order at home. America’s transformative foreign policy ambitions have waned. This makes it easier for Washington to focus on the U.S. interests Turkey holds hostage, not its progressive deviation from democratic ideology. But the Erdoğan government, which has levied preposterous charges against Fethullah Gülen and others in the United States in connection with this summer’s failed putsch, will not easily abandon its anti-American grudges. And Turkey is in the process of repositioning itself internationally, this time not just between Europe and the Islamic world but also between NATO, Russia, and Iran.

Though no one can tell how far it will go, it is a mistake to dismiss this repositioning as simply a bargaining position calculated to blackmail America into concessions. Turkey is adapting to a truly remarkable range of changes in its international environment. These include:

- Russia’s post-Cold War weakness, US-sponsored Ukrainian and Georgian assertiveness against Russia, and the reemergence of NATO as an anti-Russian alliance in an era when Russia poses few credible threats to Turkey;
- The collapse of the post-Ottoman Sykes-Picot regional order;
- The civil war in Syria and the massive human dislocations it has generated;
- The relative success of aggressive Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and Syria;
- Renewed terrorism at home by Kurds as well as combatants from Syria;
- An increasingly disunited, anti-Muslim, and otherwise unwelcoming EU;
- Iran’s expansion of its influence in West Asia;
- The emergence of Saudi and other Gulf Arab sectarian chauvinism and overt Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry;
- Israel’s international self-delegitimization and isolation;
- Egypt’s politico-economic implosion;

- ▀ The unrelenting crusade of the Armenian diaspora to condemn the Turks for genocide;
- ▀ Estrangement from the U.S. and its policies as well as major European members of NATO; and
- ▀ Diminished credibility for the United States as a protector of client states in the region, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, in an era in which Russia is upping its reliance on its nuclear arsenal.

This is far from a complete list of Turkish interests affected by change, but it illustrates the complexity of the challenges Ankara now faces. It is striking that the United States is irrelevant or a negative factor in all of them. That illustrates a little-noticed new element in the geopolitical realities that determine the US-Turkish relationship. America now needs Turkey much more than Turkey needs America to conduct its wars and carry out diplomacy in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Iran, Israel-Palestine, Egypt, and Afghanistan, not to mention the EU, NATO, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. This gives Turkey a bargaining position and freedom of maneuver in the current regional order that it lacked in the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was a menace that overhung everything else. Turkey can now afford to adopt foreign policy positions independent of or even antagonistic to those of the United States. Without regard to America, it can and is exploring:

- ▀ Abandoning its hostility to Russia and crafting selective regional partnerships with it in the Caucasus and the Levant;
- ▀ Cooperating with Russia and Iran in Syria;
- ▀ Sponsoring Kurdish satellite states or working with the Kurds' Arab and Iranian neighbors to crush them;
- ▀ Revised relationships with the United States and NATO -- ranging from active cooperation to de facto withdrawal from NATO (on the Gaullist model) – in favor of strategic independence;
- ▀ Using refugee and other migration issues as leverage against the EU;
- ▀ Abandoning any effort to join the EU, given European Turkophobia and Islamophobia;
- ▀ Developing a political system that is more Islamist; and
- ▀ Arming itself with nuclear weapons – as Russia, Israel, and Europe have -- and as many speculate Iran is yet likely to do.

The United States has been slow to recognize that Turkey has many options and many of them could estrange it further from longstanding U.S. policies in its region. In short, U.S. policy has yet to adapt to the reality of a more assertive Turkey in a region that is undergoing rapid, violent change. A more autocratic, intolerant, nationalistic, and detached Turkey is emerging to deal with the complexities of the post-Sykes-Picot Levant, violent Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Western antipathy to Islam, and the post-Cold War disorder in Ukraine and the Caucasus. It would be nice to think that the next administration would have the vision and acumen to rise to the challenge this poses. But neither candidate for president nor her or his advisers gives any indication of understanding this.

Ankara and Washington still share an agenda of common interests, if much reduced from the past. This provides a basis for recrafting the relationship. But to secure Turkish cooperation, the United States will have to assign greater weight to Turkish perspectives. Most Americans currently have little sympathy for these. This

means that there is a difficult process of mutual adjustment ahead. We can expect a lot of emotional bruises and hard bargaining between the two countries and their regional partners as they work out how to deal with each other in changed circumstances.

The new world disorder is being shaped by many factors. Uncertainties in Turkish-American relations are now among these. The only thing that is certain, given the centrality of Turkey to so many issues of concern to the United States, is that how Turks and Americans decide to deal with each other will have a decisive effect on the course of the 21st century.