

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey remains an indispensable partner of the United States and the EU in a strategically relevant region. On a host of issues, however, the reason why Turkey may be currently seen as “indispensable” is more often a negative calculation about the harm an increasingly vulnerable and dealigned Turkey could do if it became fully self-absorbed on issues like energy and security. European and transatlantic partners should support Turkey in reducing its negative exposure to Middle Eastern instability, so that it can become the fully-fledged partner it has the potential to be.

The Indispensable Partner? Turkey in the Evolving Triangulation with the United States and Europe

by *Emiliano Alessandri*

Introduction

Despite recent questions surrounding its allegiance to Western defense, and the continuing cynicism accompanying an elusive EU membership quest, Turkey remains an important respects an indispensable partner of the United States and the EU in a strategically relevant region. Discussions at the 11th meeting of the Trilateral Strategy Group — a GMF-led forum created to promote expert discussions together with, rather than on or about, Turkey — undoubtedly reiterated this key tenet.

On a host of issues, however, the reason why Turkey may be currently seen as “indispensable” is no longer, or not as much, the country’s unique contribution to Western interests. Rather, it is more often a negative calculation about the harm an increasingly vulnerable and dealigned Turkey could do if it became fully self-absorbed, thus falling short in acting as the “bridge” it has been typically likened to. In other words, Turkey unfortunately seems increasingly relevant for the liabilities it can create

rather than for the assets it could provide.

Between Wish and Reality

The first topic of discussion at the Trilateral Strategy Group meeting was energy, a field in which Turkish assets have always been quite limited but Ankara’s ambition was prominently on display, at least so until a few years ago. But Turkey’s aspiration to emerge as an energy “hub” (with related price-setting power) has yet to materialize. If anything, this prospect looks increasingly improbable in light of persistent rivalries and given the many conflicts plaguing the neighborhood, which until recently Turkey thought it was destined to control.

On one hand, Turkey’s internal needs have significantly raised domestic consumption, deepening the economy’s already heavy dependency on foreign sources. On the other, Turkey has been largely played by the geopolitics of energy rather than the other way around (a fairly predictable outcome given the country’s lack of an energy source of its own).

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With EU-driven plans such as the proposed Nabucco pipeline project never acquiring the traction they would have needed, Turkey has most recently placed its bet on the negotiation of the so-called “Turkish Stream” with Russia, itself a Plan B for Moscow after “South Stream” was also abandoned.

This project promises to deliver natural gas via the Black Sea at a cheap price. But even if the deal was to be concluded in a way favorable to Turkey, the new link would further exacerbate Turkey’s dependence on Russia. Moreover, while the bilateral rationale of this project is straightforward, its regional dimension is far from sorted out. Possible economic gains, moreover, need to be offset against the clear political cost of running business as usual with Moscow even as Turkey’s transatlantic and European partners strive to hold a common front against Russia.

The balance sheet becomes even more ambiguous if it is accepted that the crisis over Ukraine is not really about the future of one country, but calls into question the very foundations of the European order as we know it, including the protection of principles such as the independence and territorial integrity of sovereign states that have been so important for the security of Turkey as a post-imperial entity. Ankara is also not constructively approaching the issue of the discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, which could turn this corner of the world into a new mini natural powerhouse. For now, gas discoveries have mainly acted as the driver of renewed tensions and competing claims among old rivals, possibly further accentuating Turkey’s rift with the Republic of Cyprus and undermining an otherwise increasingly pragmatic relationship with Greece.

Two recent developments may work to Turkey’s advantage: relatively low energy prices and a potential Iranian nuclear deal, scheduled to be finalized in June. While certainly positive for an oil-importing country like Turkey, low energy prices risk weakening some of the energy producing economies on whose demand Turkey depends for its much-vaunted export sector. Low energy prices are also lessening the incentive for investment in non-renewable technologies, which Turkey should, however, pursue relentlessly if it really wishes to reduce its dependency and gain a modicum of bargaining power.

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When it comes to Iran, the prospect of a “rehabilitation” of this country following a deal would clearly open up opportunities for revived bilateral cooperation with Turkey, including in the energy field. Even if that were to happen, however, the outcome could well be similar to the current unequal relationship with Russia, with the additional complication of dealing with a neighbor that on a range of issues stands on the other side of the barricade, as Ankara learned the hard way with the Syrian civil war.

In this complex context, Turkey could be considered successful enough if it would honor the more basic yet surely significant role of “transit” country, setting the “energy hub” aspiration aside. For the present, moreover, the challenge remains ensuring favorable, or at least suitable, energy prices for the domestic economy, thus helping revive growth trends that have considerably slowed down. Any future talks about Turkey’s relationship with the forming EU Energy Union should take these realities into account.

Strategy and Security

Moving to security issues, what seemed to concern participants at the Trilateral Strategy Group meeting is not only Ankara’s tinkering with a strategic issue such as missile defense, an area in which Turkey is very controversially exploring deals with Chinese companies. Rather, it is Ankara’s once much-praised “web of regional relations” turning on itself and now entrapping Turkey that is most worrisome.

Largely regardless of the actual content of the prospective Iranian nuclear deal, nobody — perhaps not even the optimistic U.S. President Barak Obama — expects Iran to become a more restrained regional actor as a result. If the deal succeeds in diverting Iran from pursuing the nuclear



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weapon, the end of isolation and the removal of sanctions would uplift the country economically and politically, further solidifying Teheran's position as regional power, which Turkey will find increasingly hard to compete with.

While the border between these two neighbors is one of the oldest in the region, Turkey and Iran have been rivals for centuries. So it is disappointing yet not fully surprising that Ankara's contribution to the recent deal was clearly not at the level of original international expectations. Turkey's role as a regional broker suffered a blow in 2010, when the United States judged a Turkey-Brazil-Iran deal insufficient and inopportune, and has not yet fully recovered.

On the other hand, Turkey has been increasingly dragged into the devastating Shite-Sunni confrontation, which pits its neighbor Iran against a range of actors in the Middle East and in the Gulf. In a shift that was not necessary, Turkey has increasingly sided with Sunni powers, even if this meant getting engulfed in uncontrollable and ultimately self-harming contests, such as the proxy conflicts being waged in Iraq and Syria.

The same may be said for places like Libya, where Turkey has leaned toward certain factions, confirming support for certain factions of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has reinforced Western concerns about the orientations of Turkey's political leaders as well as put Ankara in a collision course with other U.S.-backed regional actors such as Egypt.

If one adds the counter-terrorism angle, the liability side of Turkey's foreign engagement becomes even more bother-

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some. Until recently, Turkey had been criticized for allowing groups that have later lent support to the self-proclaimed Islamic State to use its territory as well as becoming, more broadly, a highway for Jihadists headed for the Middle East. As this is a very serious accusation, it must be made clear that Turkey has strongly rejected these allegations and Ankara says it remains firmly committed to the goal of fighting Islamic terrorism.

What has upset external observers above all is a certain cynical approach Ankara seems to have taken, opportunistically tolerating certain regional developments that have served priorities that apparently could not be subordinated, in particular the yet-to-happen fall of the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria. This is particularly regrettable and puzzling given that Ankara is itself traditionally critical of the short-sighted way in which Washington has incited Middle Eastern factions and groups only to be later haunted by them. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan can ill-afford this approach; this dangerous game exacerbates the conflict in its own region while making it less controllable.

Turkey was stronger, and more appreciated, when it provided water for the region's many fires and when it strived to serve as a "bridge." Can that role be recovered?

It Is Not All Gloom and Doom

It would be a serious mistake for Europe and the United States to see ongoing issues with Ankara as ultimately leading to some kind of divorce. This erroneous judgment would underestimate the many contributions Turkey still makes to the cultural and political, not only strategic, reality we sometimes call the West. It would also fail to appreciate the attempts at self-correction that are already being tried even under the present unfavorable circumstances.

While embattled and tested, a ruling elite facing a critical national election on June 7 has strived to prove that Turkey can indeed offer a strong bulwark against negative tendencies sweeping the region, including radical ideologies that lead to violence. As part of a more balanced course, Ankara's support for controversial groups seems to have lessened, at least in places such as Libya. At the same time, Turkey has done much to revive its troubled relationship with the EU, in spite of the unfulfilled promises from the latter.



Discussions about upgrading the EU-Turkey Customs Union established in 1995 are certainly a positive development. Commitments will now have to be reinforced with concrete acts. In this regard, the plan to include areas such as services and public procurement in the expanded agreement would represent a major turning point. But it is quite right to remain skeptical. Turkey's attention has been focused on gaining some control over trade policy (the Customs Union forces non-EU member Turkey to accept trade deals made by the EU with third parties) rather than on the hard task of truly opening up the Turkish market to competition.

These recent discussions, however, are as bold as one could have hoped for and as such they should be encouraged. Ankara's hope is that the upgrading of the Customs Union with Brussels may in turn lure the United States into signing a free-trade agreement with Turkey, thus preserving a U.S.-EU-Turkey triangulation that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) — a cornerstone of the emerging transatlantic geo-economics — in its present form does not envisage.

It is precisely by rediscovering and deepening its interdependencies with European and transatlantic partners that Turkey should be supported in the goal of reducing its current negative exposure to Middle Eastern instability. Neither a liability nor invariably an asset, a more interdependent Turkey could continue to be an important engine of those integrative processes that have been historically associated with the Western project.

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