

## Analysis

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**Summary:** This paper offers an American perspective on the evolving strategic environment in Europe's neighborhood, and the prospects for cooperation and friction with Turkey over the next decade. It also explores some potential scenarios for the future of Turkish behavior, and their implications for regional stability and transatlantic policy. How will Turkey perceive challenges on the European periphery? What should policymakers expect from Ankara?

## Strategy Toward Europe's Neighborhood and the Turkish Role: An American Perspective

by Dr. Ian O. Lesser

Not since the end of the communist order in Eastern Europe and Eurasia has there been such rapid and dramatic change across the European neighborhood. In the space of a few months, many of the old assumptions about the durability of regimes around the southern Mediterranean have been swept away. The outlook for the future is highly uncertain, from the Maghreb to the Gulf. After decades of dysfunctional policies toward the Mediterranean, there will be new demands for transatlantic engagement to Europe's south. At the same time, many members of the transatlantic community will rightly assert the need to complete unfinished business in the East — from the Baltic to the Balkans and the Black Sea, and beyond to Central Asia. The notion of the European security space as a place of gentle trends and few shocks — the prevailing assumption over the last decade — is increasingly illusory. Europe faces diverse and deepening security challenges on its periphery.<sup>1</sup>

Managing these challenges will pose critical tests for transatlantic cooperation. It will also place Turkey's changing role in stark relief, not least

because many of the most pressing problems are on or near Turkey's borders, or engage Turkish interests more or less directly. As Ankara becomes a more visible and assertive actor across a wide area, and as Turkey articulates its own "neighborhood policy," the question of the compatibility of this policy with European and American strategies will become more important. In this context, Turkish policy has already seen dramatic tests, from the Black Sea to North Africa. Developments in this sphere will also be increasingly central to the outlook for Turkey's troubled EU candidacy.<sup>2</sup> In the past, Turkey's foreign policy performance — with the exception of the Cyprus issue — was often seen as a key point of convergence in relations with Europe; a positive feature against a backdrop of negative assessments in other sectors. Today, Ankara's more assertive and independent international policy is more often seen as a sign of divergence from European norms. Without question, the scrutiny of Turkish foreign policy has grown, and is likely to grow further. The United States, for its part, has long argued that Turkey can make a unique contribution to European foreign



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<sup>1</sup> See Fabrizio Tassinari, *Why Europe Fears its Neighbors* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Emiliano Alessandri, "Turkey's New Foreign Policy and the Future of Turkey-EU Relations," *The International Spectator*, Vol. 45, No. 3, September 2010.



and security policy, and that Turkey's geopolitical position bolsters the case for EU membership. This, too, could be a more complex case to argue over the coming years if Turkish and transatlantic approaches diverge.

This paper offers an American perspective on the evolving strategic environment in Europe's neighborhood, and the prospects for cooperation and friction with Turkey over the next decade. It also explores some potential scenarios for the future of Turkish behavior, and their implications for regional stability and transatlantic policy. How will Turkey perceive challenges on the European periphery? What should policymakers expect from Ankara?

### **What is the European Strategic Space? Who Will Be Present?**

This was never a straightforward question. In terms of EU foreign policy vocabulary, the "neighborhood" is simply those places on the European periphery outside the immediate enlargement process meriting a specific development and security strategy. In overall geopolitical terms, the definition is much less appropriate. Some areas within the immediate enlargement space, particularly in the Balkans, continue to face significant security uncertainties. At the same time, some areas much further afield — from West Africa to South Asia, are likely to exert a substantial influence on the security of Europe over the next decade.

The American definition of the "neighborhood" is more expansive, not least because Washington will look to European partners to assist, even lead in the management of stability on a global basis. This will be particularly true in areas Europe can reach and where the transatlantic capacity for power projection is relatively balanced. Europe's immediate periphery — the European "near abroad" — is the most obvious case. In the Balkans, the Ukraine, and around the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, Europe is a leading economic actor and political stakeholder, and is capable of serving as a security manager, at least in an operational sense. This has been clearly demonstrated in the Balkans, where, for the last decade, Europe has been the leading external actor. It is also true in the Indian Ocean, where EU members and international partners have played the leading role in anti-piracy operations. In these nearby areas, the

principle limitation on European action is arguably political (including public opinion) rather than operational.<sup>3</sup>

This is also true in the Mediterranean. During the Cold War, and for some years after, the United States was the unquestioned security arbiter in the Mediterranean. American ground forces in Europe were drawn down, but the Sixth Fleet remained in strength, and American airpower was progressively redeployed to the southern periphery of NATO. But with growing, global security commitments after 2001, the American naval presence in the Mediterranean has been progressively reduced. Many Europeans — and many Turks — are hardly aware of the fact that, for some time, the United States has not maintained a carrier battle group presence in the Mediterranean. NATO's Operation Active Endeavour has been a very successful example of Allied and other naval power marshaled in the Mediterranean to permit the deployment of American naval forces elsewhere. Notwithstanding the current Libyan crisis, this shift of security burdens in the Mediterranean has acquired a more or less permanent character.

Indeed, the unfolding intervention over Libya, and offshore, reflects this shifting balance. Libya is close to Europe, and French and Southern European strategists have long planned against a possible humanitarian, refugee, or security crisis emanating from the southern Mediterranean. Like the Balkans, North Africa is a place of strategic consequence well within Europe's reach capability. Unlike many areas on the European periphery, including the Gulf and Central Asia, there is a rough equivalence of American and European capacities — political, economic, and military — in the Mediterranean.

The Turkish attitude toward these trends has been ambivalent. Turkey has participated in Active Endeavour, and has generally been well disposed toward multilateral security initiatives in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Ankara is also quite traditional when it comes to changes in NATO missions, headquarters, and force structure. Turkish officials have resisted suggestions regarding the closure of NATO facilities in Turkey, or changes in the NATO uses of Incirlik air base.

<sup>3</sup> For a pointed discussion of these dynamics, see Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard et al, *The Spectre of a Multipolar Europe* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2010); and Bastian Giegerich, ed., *Europe and Global Security* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010).



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At the same time, Turkey opposed the extension of Active Endeavour to the Black Sea, and took what can only be described as a minimalist stance toward the reinforcement of Allied military presence in the region during the Russia-Georgia war. Turkey went along with the NATO consensus on new missile defense architecture — largely afloat in the Mediterranean — outlined at the 2010 Lisbon summit. But Turkey is ambivalent about the positioning of missile defense assets ashore in the eastern Mediterranean, and has favored a generic approach to the issue, in which Iran is not the explicit target. On Libya, Turkey acted rapidly to evacuate its many expatriates, but has taken a minimalist approach to the UN Security Council mandate for intervention, and has been conservative with regard to NATO's role.

In short, Turkey looks to existing security arrangements with Europe and the United States as useful reassurance with regard to uncertainties in its unstable neighborhood, and is sensitive to the potential erosion of these arrangements. Ankara values the “seat at the table” these arrangements confer. Not surprisingly, Turkish policymakers also want to maintain these arrangements without undue provocation to regional competitors, including Russia and Iran, with whom Turkey has developed a web of commercial and political ties. Under stable conditions, this balance may be maintained at reasonable cost to existing and new partnerships. Under more unstable conditions, this balance could prove difficult or impossible to sustain. In this sense, Turkish-Western, and especially Turkish-U.S. differences over Georgia, Iran, and Libya, may well be harbingers of more stressful relations in the future.

### A New Look in Turkish International Policy

The new approach to Turkish foreign policy championed by the AK Party over the last decade (and with support that reaches well beyond their political orbit) has several features relevant to the question of policy toward the “neighborhood” — a term now widely employed in Ankara.<sup>4</sup> The objective of “zero problems” with neighbors has been heavily debated inside and outside Turkey in recent years. It suggests that the reinvention of Turkey's foreign relations

<sup>4</sup> For a good discussion of recent trends in Turkish policy, and their transatlantic policy implications, see Sinan Ülgen, *A Place in the Sun or Fifteen Minutes of Fame? Understanding Turkey's New Foreign Policy* (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, December 2010).

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starts with a focus on bordering and nearby states.<sup>5</sup> Much of the activism in this sphere has been fully compatible with U.S. and European policy. Examples include the establishment of a durable detente with Greece, and a multilateral, reformist, and integrative approach to the Balkans. Against the backdrop of unresolved disputes over Cyprus and the Aegean, it is easy to minimize these developments. But from the point of view of Washington and Brussels, these changes have been revolutionary. Until the late 1990s, Turkey's Western partners spent a good deal of time worrying about the prospects for Turkish intervention in the Balkans, and crisis management between Ankara and Athens. These issues are now essentially off the European agenda, even if many underlying disputes remain unresolved.

Outside the Balkan-Aegean-Black Sea space, Turkish behavior has been more vigorous, and sometimes at odds with transatlantic strategies. Several points are worth underlining here.

First, there has been a progressive shift in the geographic distribution of Turkey's international engagement, much of which goes beyond traditional diplomatic and security measures. Without question, Turkey now pays much more attention to developments in and relations with neighbors in the Middle East and Eurasia. This does not mean that ties with Europe and the United States have been sidelined. But there has been a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) change in emphasis. The drivers behind this change include

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Suat Kiniklioglu, “Turkey's Neighborhood and Beyond: Tectonic Transformation at Work?” *The International Spectator*, Vol. 45, No. 4, December 2010.



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the evolving affinities of Turkey's ruling political class and public opinion. Both are now highly attuned to causes and interests in the Muslim world.<sup>6</sup> The intense political and public focus on the Palestinian issue is one facet of this phenomenon; the growing identification with Arab and Muslim opinion on key international security questions, including North Africa, is another.

Second, as many analysts have noted, there has been a striking increase in the commercial dimension of Turkey's international engagement, and this change is most visible across Turkey's neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> With the Turkish economy posting growth rates of around 6-7 percent per year, Turkey's relative economic dynamism has affected the external outlook of the country, and has fueled a self-confident regional policy. Europe as a whole remains the dominant economic partner for Turkey. But the most rapid growth in Turkish trade and investment is occurring with neighbors in the Levant and the Gulf, and across Eurasia. North Africa has also been part of this equation (the activity of Turkish construction firms in Libya, in particular, is large and longstanding), along with Iran. Expanded political and defense cooperation has followed in the wake of these burgeoning commercial relationships. Reversing the late 19th century maxim, current Turkish policy is a good example of the flag following trade.

In practical terms, this also means that the construction, or reconstruction, of the vast area stretching from the Maghreb to Central Asia is being undertaken, in large measure, by Turkish firms. From airports to pipelines, from roads to shopping centers, Turkey is part of the economic development landscape. On the ground, and regardless of the formal convergence of Turkish and European strategies for development in the neighborhood, Turkey will remain a key player.

Third, as Turkey has acquired a more active neighborhood posture, this has been accompanied by the rise of a new foreign policy vocabulary. It has been fashionable to talk about Ankara's new approach as neo-Ottomanism. It is actually more revealing to talk about Turkish neo

non-alignment; a mix of traditional Turkish nationalism and sovereignty consciousness, independence, BRIC-like economic dynamism, and conscious skepticism regarding strategies "made in the West." The models for this outlook may be distant — Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa — but the application is often in the neighborhood. Ankara's differences with Western partners over Iran, or Libya, have been shaped, in part, by this tendency toward non-alignment. As Europe has developed a reasonably concerted policy toward the Iran nuclear issue, Turkey has been looking elsewhere for partners, including Brazil.

### Some Possible Scenarios

A combination of flux in the strategic environment, evolving European and American strategies, and changing strategy in Ankara makes prediction an uncertain business. But with some basic assumptions (all open to debate), it is possible to examine the range of possible Turkish behavior, and the consequences for transatlantic partners. These assumptions — the fixed variables — might include the likelihood of persistent challenges to security and development in the wider European neighborhood, east and south; continued European aspiration for a more active and concerted external policy; and undiminished American interest in and capacity for power projection around the European neighborhood, if perhaps with a preference for lower maintenance policies and greater political and operational burden-sharing.

Against this background, the Turkish variable can be discussed in terms of several alternative scenarios or paths. In the most likely case, Turkish policy will be a blend of these alternatives. But, for the purposes of analysis, it is worth presenting these in stark, sharply defined terms, from the most negative to the most positive — as seen from Washington.

**Strategic Estrangement.** In this scenario, the forces that have already produced substantial changes in Turkish policy toward the neighborhood, and a departure from automatic alignment with transatlantic strategies, are greatly reinforced and acquire a durable character. The collapse of Turkey's EU candidacy, the continued erosion of Turkish confidence in the credibility of the NATO security guarantee for contingencies in its neighborhood, and an even

<sup>6</sup> Successive GMF Transatlantic Trends surveys, and other recent polls, confirm the growing attention of the Turkish public to issues and partnerships in the Middle East. See *Transatlantic Trends 2010: Key Findings* (Washington: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2010). [www.transatlantictrends.org](http://www.transatlantictrends.org)

<sup>7</sup> Kemal Kirisci captures this trend very well in his description of Turkey as a "trading state."



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stronger nationalist impulse in Turkey (and perhaps elsewhere) would all contribute to a future of this kind.

Under these conditions, Ankara could be expected to go its own way in terms of security and development in adjacent regions. A variant on this path, possibly driven by internal political or economic stress, would be an inward-looking Turkey, stepping sharply away from the diplomatic activism of recent years. Under these conditions, Turkey would become a very different and more difficult actor in the Balkans, in the Mediterranean, and around the Black Sea. In practical terms, this scenario could spell a reversal of détente with Greece, and a more unilateral posture in Iraq.

**Vigorous Non-Alignment.** In some respects, this trajectory is already visible in Turkish policy. A continued impasse in relations with the EU, frustration with Washington, and a troubled but not deeply conflict-ridden neighborhood form the context for this scenario. Other critical components include continued economic dynamism in Turkey — possibly against a backdrop of slow growth in Europe. Key elements of this worldview are shared by younger elites in Turkey, spanning conventional political divides. In short, this scenario could unfold across a range of domestic political developments in Turkey.

This path does not foreclose the potential for close (if ad hoc) cooperation with transatlantic partners in key areas on the European periphery and beyond. But it implies a continued preference for soft over hard power strategies in the neighborhood, and a disinclination for external intervention. Over the longer term, it could reduce the relative weight of bordering regions in Turkish perceptions and policies, and encourage a greater focus on global issues, global governance, and distant partnerships with emerging economies. To the extent that it accompanies an ever more confident outlook, it might actually encourage a resolution of longstanding problems closer to home, including the Cyprus dispute.

**A New Strategic Deal.** This scenario is short hand for a reinvigorated Turkish-European (and possibly, by association, Turkish-U.S.) foreign policy partnership, with cooperation in the neighborhood at the core. But in this scenario, reinforced cooperation is accomplished outside the canonical membership path. This is cooperation via “privileged

partnership” or some similar formula, in which Ankara is given a seat at the table in key European foreign and security policy programs (e.g., EDA). Or it might simply coexist alongside a very slow moving and open-ended accession process — the current reality. It presupposes a functioning and credible NATO connection in which Turkey remains engaged.

This scenario is based on a central realization that Turkish and transatlantic security interests across the European neighborhood are essentially compatible, and that pressing crises demand a concerted response. The ongoing Mediterranean revolutions create some of the conditions for this approach, and the potential was demonstrated in the case of Egypt, where the thrust, if not the pace of Turkish, European, and American policy was similar. Libya provides a less positive example, and illustrates the pitfalls where distinctive national interests are at stake. Broadly, the turmoil to Europe’s south is likely to lead to a wholesale redesign of the Mediterranean dimension of the EU’s neighborhood policy, including the ill-fated Union for the Mediterranean. Turkey is a stakeholder and a natural partner in this, and so is the United States. The situation is not unlike that of the early 1990s, when after an initial period of skepticism, Ankara became an advocate for NATO enlargement as a way of stabilizing and integrating its troubled neighborhood to the West. In sum, this is a scenario that features a generally concerted approach to strategy in Europe’s neighborhood, without formal Turkish integration in Europe.

Ten years ago, this formula would have been anathema to many, perhaps most members of the Turkish policy establishment. Today, many Turks would view this as a reasonable objective. It is certainly attractive to many European elites, especially in France and Germany. It is not the consensus view in Washington, where most policymakers and analysts remain wedded to a more traditional approach. But it may well become the default position if candidacy proves hollow, and as the risks of Turkey’s strategic decoupling become more obvious. Obviously, this is an interests-based approach that discounts identity as a factor in the Turkish, European, and transatlantic security calculus.

**Auto Pilot “On.”** While in many respects this is the most desirable future, it is not necessarily the most likely. This scenario implies a return to the unrealistic assumption of



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relatively automatic Turkish-European and Turkish-U.S. cohesion that prevailed in past decades. It is worth recognizing that neither strategic relationship has been predictable or easy to manage. But in key places, at key points, cohesion has been achieved and has made a difference to security outcomes. The common approach to successive Balkan crises offers the best example, with common security interests trumping nationalist impulses.

This path is based on a reinvigoration of the established mechanisms for Turkish political and security integration — EU candidacy and more or less traditional NATO missions. For many Turks, including some in the ruling party, this would be the preferred approach. But achieving a concerted approach to foreign and security policy in the European neighborhood via this path will be challenging in the absence of a clear trajectory toward full EU membership. For a series of well-known reasons, this path is increasingly unclear.

Leaving aside the obstacles on the European side, there are some developments in the regional environment that could drive renewed Turkish interest in close, traditional, strategic cooperation with transatlantic partners. These include a more competitive, even aggressive relationship with Russia, in which Turkey, too, feels threatened; or more overt Turkish-Iranian competition, perhaps with a nuclear-armed Iran. Under these conditions, even an independent-minded government in Ankara might seek the strategic reassurance of revived transatlantic ties. Other circumstances that could drive Turkish policy in this direction (they might also apply to the previous scenario) would be revolution, chaos, or the emergence of a more assertive regime in Syria, and the risk of regional spillovers.

### Conclusions and Transatlantic Policy Implications

Given the range of pressing challenges across the European neighborhood, from the unfinished business of security and integration in the East, to the strategic dilemmas posed by Iran and Russia, to the revolutions in the Mediterranean, the question of Turkey's external policy has never been more relevant to the future of European security. Turkey is no longer a marginal player in a peripheral theater. Turkey's policy choices, and their compatibility with Europe's own

neighborhood policies, can affect the prospects for stability and development from North Africa to Central Asia.

For all of the shared attention to the European neighborhood, the trend has arguably been toward divergence in Turkish and EU approaches, especially in the security realm. This divergence is even more visible from Washington, with differences over Iran policy, Israel, the Black Sea, and now, possibly, Libya, at the core. Yet the instability in Europe's neighborhood, and the mounting frustration in many quarters regarding the shortcomings of EU strategy and approaches, also offers the opportunity to reinvent key policies toward the European periphery, from the Eastern Partnership to the Union for the Mediterranean. In theory, this also offers an opportunity to integrate Turkey (and the United States) more closely in these new policies. Some key conclusions stand out in this analysis.

**For all of the shared attention to the European neighborhood, the trend has arguably been toward divergence in Turkish and EU approaches, especially in the security realm.**

First, the elements that have contributed to the new look in Turkish foreign policy — shifting affinities, the rise of public opinion, commercial dynamism, and changing measures of the “strategic” — are now well entrenched. A more diverse, independent, and even non-aligned Turkish policy is here to stay. Turkey, too, is focused on its neighborhood, and that neighborhood, more often than not, is now the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Second, the prospects for closer Turkish integration with Europe in foreign and security policy terms — and a more concerted policy toward the European neighborhood — are not bright under current conditions. At the moment,



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Turkey has neither the clear prospect of membership to impel a concerted approach, nor a concrete alternative framework for cooperation. An interim — or alternative — framework for EU foreign and security policy cooperation with Turkey is badly needed.<sup>8</sup> Many Turks may now be open to such an approach, even if it implies privileged partnership. While not the American preference, it is also compatible with American interests in light of the pressing need for Turkish cooperation in dealing with Iran, Russia, Black Sea security, and the crises in North Africa.

Third, the revolutions in Turkey's Mediterranean near abroad open up the possibility of engaging Ankara in a broader strategy of democratization, stabilization, and development on the European periphery. Turkey has many assets to bring to the table, from significant political and economic ties, to engineering and security know-how.<sup>9</sup> Turkey's greatly improved standing in the Arab world, and the tendency of many Turks to see the Middle East and North Africa as a place of opportunity, and not just a locus of risk, reinforces the logic of an active Turkish role.

Fourth, on the security front, both NATO and the EU will benefit from a discourse on Iran, Russia, arms control, and other matters that addresses Turkey's own hard security problems. Prevailing differences over Iran policy are largely about the politics of dealing with Iran rather than the challenge of Turkey's own exposure to Iranian proliferation. The implementation of NATO's post-Lisbon approach to missile defense architecture will be a key near-term test of this approach.

Finally, there are limits to describing the prospects for Turkish cooperation with transatlantic partners in sweeping, multi-regional terms. In the most likely case, Turkish policy in some parts of the European neighborhood, such as the Balkans, will remain predictable, multilateral, and complimentary to EU strategy. In the Middle East and North Africa, and around the Black Sea, the outlook is far more mixed, and will be driven by an activist, independent, national calculus. Turkey sees the strategic environment in all of these areas as essentially multipolar — and increasingly seeks to act as a key pole in its own right.

<sup>8</sup>This point is made very clearly in Charles Grant, "A New Neighborhood Policy for the EU" Center for European Reform, 2011.

<sup>9</sup>Turkey's role as a mentor for the Arms Control and Regional Security talks as part of the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process in the 1990s offers a useful precedent.

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