

## Analysis

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## Turkey’s Third Wave – And the Coming Quest for Strategic Reassurance

by Dr. Ian O. Lesser

Turkey may be entering a “third wave” in the evolution of its modern foreign policy, with continued regional activism played out in a strategic environment that is increasingly insecure and crisis prone. The prevailing mix of self confidence, assertiveness, and coolness toward Western partners may not be sustainable as Ankara once again requires greater reassurance against conflict and chaos on its borders. The return to brinkmanship in the eastern Mediterranean is a further complicating factor, and one that may play a growing role in Turkish-Western dynamics. After a decade of commercial engagement and soft power, hard security issues are returning to center stage. The deepening PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) challenge from Northern Iraq, and potentially from Syria, is just one facet of an increasingly troubled security picture across Turkey’s neighborhood.

### From Deterrence to Commerce

The first wave of Turkish foreign and security policy, a security- and alliance-centric approach that prevailed from the end of the Second World War, through the end of the Cold War, and beyond, was already in decline by the time of AKP’s rise to power. For decades, Turkish policy had been

driven by the need to deter a major adversary to the north, and a minor adversary across the Aegean. In the 1990s, the security agenda came to include the threat posed by Syrian safe havens and support for PKK operations in southeastern Anatolia. This extended period of security-driven strategy coincided with an era in which external policy was set, almost exclusively, by senior military officials and professional diplomats. Even in the context of Turkey-EU relations, economic concerns were trumped by political and identity issues. Deterrence and sovereignty-consciousness were at the center of Turkey’s worldview, and security partnerships with the United States and NATO had high priority, even if these partnerships were often troubled and difficult to manage.

The advent of AKP government, and perhaps more importantly, the post-2001 period of high growth and economic dynamism that continues to this day, changed the balance in Turkey’s international policy. Many analysts describe this shift in East-West terms. But the real shift was from security to commerce and from distant partners to the immediate neighborhood. To be sure, Turkish policymakers deserve credit for

helping to defuse a series of crisis-prone relationships on Turkey's borders, most notably with Greece and Syria. "Zero problems with neighbors" may have been a self-defined caricature, but it has been a reasonably accurate description of the benign regional environment facing Turkey over the last decade. This was also a highly permissive environment in economic terms, encouraging a significant expansion of Turkey's commercial ties with Middle Eastern and Eurasian neighbors, including Syria, Iraq, Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, and above all, Russia. Political scientist Kemal Kirisci's description of contemporary Turkey as a "trading state" is very apt. To reverse the traditional maxim, Turkish policy under AKP has been a case of the flag following trade.

The erosion of Turkey's security-centric worldview coincided with a period in which the PKK insurgency, while not eliminated, appeared relatively contained. Certainly, the level of violence, while rising in recent years, has been low when compared to the 1990s, when perhaps 40,000 people were killed in the insurgency, counter-insurgency, and political violence. Despite the continued prominence of PKK attacks in Turkish perceptions, Turkish public opinion had become progressively less "hawkish" on foreign and security policy. This trend is clearly illustrated in recent findings from the German Marshall Fund's *Transatlantic Trends* survey. In the 2011 edition of the study, Turks and Europeans exhibit virtually the same views on the question of the "use of force to obtain justice," with only a third regarding this as acceptable.<sup>1</sup> (The most recent spate of PKK violence, above all the October 19, 2011 attack that killed 24 Turkish troops, may well reverse this trend).

A relatively benign regional environment, coupled with high growth, took the edge off of Turkey's traditionally conservative, status quo-oriented, and elite-driven foreign policy. Over the last few years, in particular, the AKP leadership has embraced what might be described as an increasingly nonaligned strategy, seeking new ties to other emerging powers and adopting some of the foreign policy vocabulary of the global south and the fashionable obsession with soft power. The affinities and concerns of the prime minister and the foreign minister — and much of the Turkish public — have also been reflected in a confrontational policy toward Israel, the Palestinian issue,

and Gaza in particular. On these, and on other questions, personalities play a role; this is hardly a unique example, but encouraged by a strategic environment in which Turkey's traditional alliance relationships have been of secondary concern.

### The End of a Permissive Environment

Are we looking at the end of Turkey's ambitious "second wave" in international policy? Several signs point in this direction. First, the extraordinary economic growth that Turkey has enjoyed in recent years may not be sustainable. Current projections suggest that Turkish growth may fall from the prevailing 8-9 percent to perhaps 2 percent next year — and that might still be high by U.S. and European standards. At the same time, economic conditions in Turkey's Middle Eastern neighborhood have deteriorated substantially. Chaos in Syria, new sanctions and a less positive relationship with Iran, and an unsettled environment from North Africa to the Gulf will likely put the brakes on Turkey's trade and investment ties to the region. Traditional markets in Europe will remain critical to the Turkish economy, but the outlook there is equally dim. Overall, it is questionable whether Turkey can maintain a commercially driven external policy when the international economy appears set for protracted low growth, if not renewed recession.

Second, the strategic environment in Turkey's immediate neighborhood is now far from benign. In the space of a year, Turkey's relations with Syria have gone from boom to bust. The political relationship between Ankara and the Bashar al-Assad regime has deteriorated to an extraordinary degree. Even if the regime in Damascus manages to hang on to power, the extent of its repression and alienation from the international community suggests that there can be no going back in terms of Ankara's engagement with Syria. Under Assad, the country will remain an unstable pariah. Under other scenarios, Turkey may face a chaotic and conflict-ridden Syria for some time to come. In either case, the possible security implications will be stark from a Turkish perspective, and will range from uncontrolled refugee flows to the revival of PKK safe havens across the border. Turkey's recent large-scale cross-border operations against PKK havens in northern Iraq suggest that Ankara is unlikely to tolerate the revival of a Kurdish insurgency based in Syria. Even short of this, a standing state of military confrontation with Syria is not out of the question, a

<sup>1</sup> German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2011: Key Findings*. [www.transatlantictrends.org](http://www.transatlantictrends.org). The comparable figure for U.S. respondents was 60 percent.



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condition that Turkey's recent military deployments along the Syrian border may anticipate.

Third, Turkey is likely to face a series of longer-term geopolitical challenges of a kind that Ankara has not had to ponder for at least a decade. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's appeal to Egyptian opinion aside, a post-revolutionary Egypt is unlikely to be comfortable with a high level of Turkish activism in the Arab and Muslim world. A resurgent Egypt, possibly with a strong Islamist bent, is more likely to be a regional competitor than a strategic partner for Ankara. This may not pose a direct threat to Turkish interests, but it could well limit Turkish activism in economic and political terms.

In a very different quarter, a relatively benign Russia can no longer be taken for granted. At a minimum, current political dynamics in Russia suggest a series of disturbing open questions for Turkey's leadership, including the possibility of new conflict around the Black Sea, Russia's return to political and security engagement in the Mediterranean, and a potentially tougher relationship between Moscow and Ankara on energy issues. A more troubled security relationship between Russia and the West as a whole will pose further challenges for Turkey, from nuclear strategy to the conventional military balance. Russia's recent acquisition of Mistral class amphibious assault ships from France may not seem so benign from a Turkish perspective against a backdrop of more competitive relations with Moscow. Ankara is unlikely to reconsider its resistance to expanded NATO operations in the Black Sea, even under these conditions. But the notion of confronting a more assertive Russia or a chaotic Russia on a protracted trajectory of decline — or both — on a unilateral basis will be unattractive to a Turkey already facing multiple security problems.

The prospect of a nuclear or near-nuclear Iran will also take on a different character when the regional environment is unpredictable and insecure. Turkey is highly exposed to Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile ambitions. Beyond the risk to Turkish population centers, a nuclearizing Iran may use its perceived strategic weight to pursue a more aggressive regional policy through proxies in Lebanon and elsewhere. Or the loss of Syria as a regional ally may add to the isolation of the regime and reinforce the Iranian interest in acquiring a nuclear capability. Over the past decade, Turkey's leaders have taken a low-key approach to this risk,

and have tended to see themselves as privileged interlocutors with Tehran on this question. Signs of change on this front are already visible. Turkey's decision to participate in the new NATO missile defense architecture, including the basing of U.S. radars on Turkish territory, is one indicator. The increasingly strident Iranian discourse about Turkey and its regional role is likely to heighten Ankara's unease and raise the specter of a looming, longer-term geopolitical competition with Iran.

Security dynamics are also becoming more complex on another front. The recent brinkmanship over offshore gas development in the Eastern Mediterranean harks back to the years of instability in Turkish-Greek and Turkish-Cypriot relations.<sup>2</sup> For over a decade, Turkey and its European and U.S. partners have had the luxury of developing their regional policies without the constant impediment of day-to-day crisis management in the Aegean. Today, there is a very real risk of serious military incidents at sea or in the air, this time in a more complicated, multi-faceted frame, with Turkey, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and other regional stakeholders. Behind the competition over potentially very extensive energy reserves — some analysts see Israel's Leviathan field alone as transforming for the regional energy picture — lurks a steady deterioration of strategic relations among the principle players. Clearly, the question here is not one of reassurance or deterrence when it comes to Turkish relations with Greece, Cyprus, or even Israel, but rather confidence building and a return to regional détente. Without predictable ties to NATO partners, and in the absence of progress in Turkey's EU candidacy — Turkey has threatened to freeze ties to the EU when Cyprus holds the European presidency from July 2012 — the problem of stability and crisis prevention in the Eastern Mediterranean will be even more serious.

### What Next?

The return of security questions to the top of the Turkish agenda will surely heighten the tension between Ankara's desire for active diplomacy in its neighborhood, some of which has been at odds with European and U.S. interests, and the growing need for deterrence and strategic reassurance. The scale of the security problems facing Turkey suggests that only Turkey's traditional Western partners can fill this need over the longer term. The alternative is a costly,

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Leigh's recent piece on this theme, "Brinkmanship in the Eastern Mediterranean," German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Take*, September 23, 2011.



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unilateral, and explicitly nationalist strategy that will neither deter nor reassure. In short, the end of a benign environment and the transition to a more unstable and unpredictable one will confront Turkey's leaders with much tougher choices. For the moment, the AKP leadership may enjoy a secure position in domestic politics, but the regional equation is hardly reassuring.

Beyond these “meta” choices, Turkish, EU, and NATO policymakers can focus on a short list of steps that can help forestall trouble in the near-term, and build a basis for renewed partnership on bigger geopolitical challenges. Dialogue aimed at crisis prevention in the eastern Mediterranean should be a priority. In the absence of a greater degree of transparency and understanding of the risks on all sides, there is a real danger of political miscalculation and operational misjudgment leading to conflict. The lessons of decades of brinkmanship in the Aegean should not be forgotten.

The proliferation of shared security concerns argues for serious pursuit of structured security cooperation between Turkey and the EU, regardless of the vagaries of the accession process. Indeed, a “privileged security partnership” is precisely what is required to address the challenges of Syria, Iran, Russia, and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. Waiting ten or fifteen years for a full institutional answer to this conundrum poses significant risks.

Finally, Turkey's NATO ties require explicit reaffirmation. Turkey is a member, of course, and is likely to remain one. But the atmosphere in Turkey's Alliance relations has been less than positive in recent years, with concerns about the credibility of commitments on all sides; this, at a time when NATO's most prominent security challenges are concentrated in Turkey's neighborhood, and when Turkey's contributions matter. NATO can also be a more explicit focal point for U.S.-Turkish partnership, where experience shows that multilateral initiatives are often the best and most acceptable vehicle for defense cooperation between Washington and Ankara. If Turkey, Europe, and the United States are in search of a new project for strategic cooperation, the allies need look no further than understanding and managing the increasingly unstable neighborhood in Turkey's “near abroad.”

### About the Author

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