

Analysis

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Summary: Relations between Turkey and its partners in the Atlantic Community are not what they used to be. The shifts in Turkish foreign policy emanate from three sources: the altered policy environment after the end of the Cold War, the ideological proclivities of the AKParty government, and the rhetoric that has characterized the pronouncements of Turkey's leadership. Policy divergences exist between Turkey and its allies, but there are ample grounds to judge that it is alive, and there is also ample space for improvement.

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Turkey and the Western Alliance: Uncomfortable Partnership

by *Ilter Turan*

Introduction

Relations between Turkey and its partners in the Atlantic Community are not what they used to be. Such is the prevailing judgment today in both NATO and EU circles when evaluating whether Turkey is easing its way out of the multiple links that have tied it to the United States and Western Europe after World War II. Rather than accepting these appraisals, it may be useful to engage in a critical analysis of recent Turkish foreign policy so as to offer a perspective on the extent it differs from earlier times and the reasons for this difference. It is proposed here that the shifts in Turkish foreign policy emanate from three sources, in descending order of importance: the altered policy environment after the end of the Cold War, the ideological proclivities of the AKParty government, and the rhetoric that has characterized the pronouncements of Turkey's leadership.

Declining Alliance Cohesion

At the height of the Cold War, NATO members were all agreed on the nature of the threat facing them and where it came from. There was also a broadly shared agreement that the United

States was NATO's leader, that it would plan the organization's strategy and provide its nuclear muscle. Turkey, being a frontline state with a fragile economy, was a staunch ally that benefited both from the military security NATO gave it and from the economic support extended by allies. Even at the height of the Cold War, however, discord among allies was never lacking. France usually charted a different foreign policy course than others, which included staying out of NATO's military organization. Some others declined the deployment of nuclear weapons on their soil, hoping that they could therefore avoid becoming a target in a nuclear war. And Turkey was constantly at odds with its allies, especially the United States, regarding its Cyprus policy.

As the Soviet threat began to recede, each NATO member developed its own multi-dimensional foreign policy, a tendency that became even more pronounced after the Cold War ended. As "out of area" interventions became frequent, it became more difficult to build a consensus around whether a threat existed, its seriousness, what needed to be done about it, and how burdens would be shared. Over time,

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Analysis

considerations pertaining to NATO's overall security declined as NATO members became more attentive to their own particular needs. German preferences, for example, now became more frequently at variance with those of the Americans and other major allies. Furthermore, as security concerns were perceived to decline in importance, those linked to questions of economic prosperity began to play a bigger role in shaping foreign policy. In this altered environment, Turkey also tried to develop multi-faceted and closer relations with its neighbors, particularly Russia and the countries of the Middle East, and to reach out to new countries, regions, and markets. While such behavior conformed to the general trend, it deviated from the expectations of Turkey's allies, notably the United States, that was accustomed to a highly accommodating Turkey. Slowly, however, attitudinal adjustments were made, and despite centrifugal pressures, Turkey and its allies found ways of working together to achieve security in an increasingly volatile international environment.

The end of the Cold War also gradually undermined Turkey's integration into the EU. As long as Turkey was seen as indispensable for Western security, there was consensus that Turkey belonged to Europe. When security needs became redefined, however, the relationship became more difficult to sustain. The admission of Cyprus to the union, for example, led Turkey to put NATO-EU cooperation on hold, causing as much unhappiness in the EU as the Cypriot accession had caused in Turkey. Yet, both parties have recognized that retaining the façade of ultimate EU membership for Turkey is preferable to an irreparable rupture.

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Ideology and Foreign Policy: A Questionable Combination

After 2009, Turkey began to incorporate new ideology into its foreign policy. That year, the now prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, became the foreign minister. Whether changes emanated from him or then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is not clear, but after 2009, two ideological elements, Sunni Islam and third worldism, began to influence policy. Apparently, the shift was triggered by the government's growing confidence that the country, enjoying enhanced economic prosperity and political stability, had now become the main power in its region, that it wanted to act more independently, and that it deserved to have a greater say in world affairs. Hence, the third worldist challenges directed at the UN and its system of governance dominated by the five permanent members of the Security Council as well as attempts to procure weapons from sources outside of the alliance such as missiles from China.

In the case of the Muslim Middle East where it saw itself as a natural leader, Turkey's new assertiveness was confounded by the traditional suspicion the religious right holds for the West, viewing it as an unwanted intervener in the Muslim world, responsible for the endemic ills of the region. Events facilitated the changes. First, Israel breached Turkey's trust in the latter's efforts to broker a peace between Israel and Syria. Turkey immediately assumed leadership in defending Palestinian causes. The attack on the high seas on a ship, part of an international fleet, aiming to deliver aid to Gaza, in which ten Turkish citizens died, constituted a *coup de grace*, making Turkey an unqualified adversary of Israeli governments and their policies and *vice versa*. The policy made Turkey popular in the Arab street, which Turkey's leaders misjudged to be an enhancement of the country's regional power position.

Then came the misnamed "Arab Spring," raising hopes that the Muslim Brotherhood might be the new master of the Arab regimes. Hesitant at first, Turkey's foreign policymakers soon determined that their moment had come to lead a regional bloc comprised of countries with Sunni Muslim majority populations. The euphoria was short lived, however. The Egyptian Brothers, overplaying their hand, were ousted by a military intervention. Libya fell into chaos. The Syrian "Spring" degenerated into a civil war that is yet to be concluded. Its policy preferences also put Turkey



Analysis

in conflict with the monarchies of the region, who found the “Spring” to be threatening to their own stability. As a result, Turkey’s regional influence began to wane, but no policy adjustment came. Turkish leaders insisted that they were morally right, retaining policies that led to Turkey’s increasing isolation in the region and among world powers who were interested in achieving greater regional stability. A current example is Turkey’s less alarmed and slower approach to joining military cooperation in responding to the rise of the Islamic State group, which all others have identified as an immediate threat to the governments of the region as well as to the domestic peace of Western Europe and the United States. It seems clear that allowing ideology to develop into a critical component of foreign policy has led to problematic outcomes in Turkey’s relations with the countries of the region as well as its allies. A reconsideration of policy is in order.

It is Not What You Say, It is How You Say It!

The confrontational, accusatory, populist, and occasionally arrogant style of communication its leadership has displayed in foreign affairs has reinforced a growing sense of distance between Turkey and its allies. The style, it should be noted, is pervasive; its use is not limited to questions of foreign policy; and the aim is usually no more than impressing the voters. Unfortunately, its employment in international politics produces strong reactions both among foreign leaders and publics, intensifies tensions, and renders communication and cooperation among both neighbors and allies more difficult. For example, the hesitation Turkey displays in throwing itself fully behind the anti-ISIS coalition derives, in part, from its concerns that religiously based terrorism may easily spread to Turkey where it may find some local support. But, when presented on higher grounds of principles, integrity, sincerity, etc. which others may presumably be lacking, it reinforces confrontation rather than generating feelings of empathy. Or when conversations with U.S. President Barack Obama are misrepresented to the public, trust among allied leaders is undermined. Comparable incidents abound. Even in instances where what the Turkish government says may deserve to be heard, the way it is said reduces the willingness to listen, inspiring feelings of anger among Turkey’s partners.

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Turkey and the Western Alliance: An Uncomfortable Partnership

Under the circumstances, where does Turkey stand in its relations with the North Atlantic Alliance? Sometimes, immediate problems may lead us to overlook the amount of cooperation that still continues to characterize the relationship. Turkey is currently benefiting from the presence of three Patriot missile batteries, which give it air defense capability against Syria. Turkey has supported NATO-affiliated peace-building and peace-keeping operations in the Balkans and in Afghanistan. Turkey is very likely to be involved in some capacity in the development of a force designed to alleviate fears the Baltic countries have of invasion. Turkey continues to benefit from intelligence furnished by its allies in its fight against terrorism. It continues to acquire most of its military ware from allied countries, and so on.

It is true that policy divergences exist between Turkey and its allies today that are magnified by the rhetoric and the style of communication the current Turkish political leaders have chosen to use. After recognizing that a certain amount of policy difference among partners in a large alliance of democracies is natural, the critical question is to ask whether common interests are so lacking that the alliance relationship is no longer sustainable. The answer, I feel, continues to be in the negative. However uncomfortable the partnership may be, there are ample grounds to judge that it is alive, but there is also ample space for improve-



ment. Furthermore, there are indications that after its initial assertiveness, global developments such as Russia's new foreign policy have created reasons for Turkey, once again, to appreciate its alliance ties.

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About the Author

İlter Turan is an emeritus professor of political science at Istanbul's Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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