

The Future of Turkish-Western Relations

Toward a Strategic Plan

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Turkish society, politics, and economy have evolved substantially over the past decades. The pace of this change has increased in recent years, and has included the rise of a much wider and more active debate on foreign and security policy—with new dimensions and new actors. These changes have important implications for Turkish policy, and the future of relations with the West. In this context, three developments have special meaning: (1) the rise of Turkish nationalism and greater sensitivity to sovereignty issues; (2) the polarization of traditional and modern elements in Turkish society; and (3) the emergence of a dynamic private sector, offering a new constellation of interlocutors in relations with the United States and Europe.

Turkey's external policy is also undergoing revision and redefinition in response to regional challenges and opportunities. Turkey will have a number of options in terms of foreign policy focus—European, Eurasian, Middle Eastern—as well as the possibility of concentration on the bilateral relationship with the United States. The most likely outcome is a more multidimensional approach based strongly on Turkish national interests. Relations with the West will remain the core orientation, but with a more capable and assertive engagement elsewhere—generally, but not always, pursued in a multilateral frame.

Western stakes in Turkey continue to evolve in the post-Cold War era. As both European and U.S. strategy shifts to focus on the periphery of Europe, Turkey looms larger as a “pivotal state.” The United States and Europe will have a strong stake in Turkish stability

and democracy—crucial elements if Ankara is to play a more capable and positive regional role. In an era of power projection, the United States in particular will wish to see Turkey foster U.S. freedom of action in adjacent regions. To the extent that the European Union (EU) develops a more independent and concerted foreign and security policy, Turkey can also play this role in support of European interests—if the character of Turkish-European relations encourages this.

The future outlook will turn critically on a shared sense of strategic purpose between Turkey and the West. During the Cold War, Turkey played a critical role in the containment of Soviet power. There was agreement between the United States and West Germany, in particular, on the central importance of Turkey in Western strategy. A similar recognition of the Turkish role generated support and assistance for Turkey on Capitol Hill. As a result, although there were episodic problems in U.S.-Turkish relations, for much of the Cold War, Turkey was a major recipient of U.S. economic and military assistance.

With the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical environment and strategic priorities changed. For much of the past decade it has been unclear what Turks, Americans, and Europeans, as one, have been for and against. Security debates in the United States and Europe acknowledge Turkey's geopolitical significance and the need to reinvigorate relations with Turkey. But there has been relatively little progress in defining what a new agenda for strategic cooperation between Turkey and the West should include.

This report suggests that a new strategic agenda for Turkish-Western relations should focus on four key areas. These hardly exhaust the list of important areas for cooperation, but each in its way illustrates regions and issues where stakes are shared; where successful management will be important to the security and prosperity of Turkey, Europe, and the United States, and where Ankara has a natural and significant role to play.

The first item on the agenda concerns energy security. Turkey occupies a unique position adjacent to globally important oil and gas resources in the Persian Gulf, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, and astride alternative routes for bringing these resources to world markets. Access to adequate energy supplies at acceptable prices will also be essential to Turkey's own development over the longer term.

Second, Turkey and the West have a special stake in countering the proliferation of ballistic missiles of increasing range, as well as weapons of mass destruction. Since the Gulf War, Ankara and Washington have been at the forefront among the Western allies in focusing on this troubling trend. For the moment, Turkey is the NATO ally most clearly exposed to missile systems based in the Middle East, but this is rapidly emerging as a more widely shared vulnerability for Europe as a whole. Addressing these risks, through common policies, and by integrating Turkey in a future ballistic missile defense architecture, should be high on a new agenda, tailored to new challenges.

Third, Turkey is also most exposed to the security consequences of alternative Russian futures. Ankara would be on the front line in any renewed competition between Russia and the West, and today's potential areas for regional friction involving Moscow—from the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Gulf—are close to Turkey. Of more immediate concern, Turkey is exposed to the spillover effects of turmoil in Russia and the former Soviet Union, including refugee movements, transnational crime, and ethnic conflict around the Black Sea. Ankara seeks reassurance from the West in dealing with a potentially more difficult Russia. As a leading economic partner, Turkey can also be part of a more active and positive engagement with a reforming, cooperative Russia. In either case, a concerted strategy toward Russia must be part of a future triangular agenda.

Finally, the United States, as well as Europe, actively needs to ensure that the path toward closer Turkish integration in Europe remains open and anchors Turkey irreversibly to the West. The United States will have a strong stake in this process, and its interests will be undermined along with Ankara's if the EU's Helsinki decisions provide only a "hollow candidacy" for Turkey.