As Turkey enters the 21st century, it faces a troubled environment, domestically and internationally. Uncertainties regarding the country’s future and its external policies have increased significantly as a result of Turkey’s own economic crises and political turmoil, troubling developments in nearby regions, and challenges further afield. As a consequence, the task of understanding and assessing Turkey’s international role has become more complex and far more difficult.

During the Cold War, Turkey acted as a bulwark against the expansion of Soviet influence into the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. With the end of the Cold War, Ankara’s policy horizons have expanded and Turkey has become a more assertive and independent actor on the international stage. Where once Turkey primarily looked West, today Turkey is increasingly being pulled East and South as well. As a result, Turkey has been forced to redefine its foreign and security policy interests and to rethink its international relationships.

If Turkey were a small state located in Antarctica or the South Sea Islands, these changes might matter little. But Turkey stands at the nexus of three areas of increasing strategic importance to the United States and Europe: the Balkans, the Caspian region, and the Middle East. Thus, how Turkey evolves is important, both to the United States and to Europe.

Turkey’s sheer size, moreover, gives it important geostrategic weight. Turkey’s population is currently nearly 68 million—the second largest in Europe behind Germany—and may be close to 100 million by the middle of the 21st century. This would make Turkey the most
populous country in Europe. Integrating a country and economy of this size will place significant burdens on a European Union (EU) already reeling from the demands posed by admitting much smaller countries from Central and Eastern Europe. The challenges for Turkey and Europe will be daunting. How each side responds to these challenges will have an important effect not only on Turkey’s evolution but on Europe’s political and strategic evolution as well.

TURKEY AS A REGIONAL ACTOR

In the past decade, moreover, Turkey has emerged as an increasingly important regional actor, wielding substantial military as well as diplomatic weight. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the Middle East. This growing involvement in Middle Eastern affairs represents an important shift in Turkish policy. Under Atatürk—and for several decades after his death—Turkey eschewed involvement in the Middle East, but in recent years, Turkey has been heavily engaged in the region. This more active policy contrasts markedly with the more passive approach that characterized Turkish policy before the Gulf War.

At the same time, Turkey’s greater involvement in the Middle East has complicated relations with Europe. Many Europeans are wary of Turkish membership in the EU not only because of the political, economic, and cultural problems it would present but also because they fear it will extend Europe’s borders into the Middle East and drag Europe more deeply into the vortex of Middle Eastern politics. Thus, Turkey’s Middle Eastern involvement has raised new dilemmas about its European or Western identity. The deeper its involvement in the Middle East, the more problems this poses for Turkey’s Western orientation and identity.

The end of the Cold War has also opened up new horizons for Turkish policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia—areas that were previously closed to Turkish policy. Although Turkey has been cautious about exploiting these possibilities, the emergence of the Caucasus and Central Asia has given a new dimension to Turkish policy. Turkey now has interests in the region that it did not have during the Cold War. This inevitably affects its security perceptions and relations with its Western allies.
At the same time, Turkey’s interest and involvement in the Caucasus and Central Asia have complicated relations with Russia and given the historical rivalry between the two countries new impetus. Increasingly, Russia has come to see Turkey as a major rival for influence in the region and has sought to stem Turkey’s efforts to establish a geostrategic foothold there. But Russia also remains an increasingly important trade partner. This gives Turkey a strong incentive to keep relations with Russia on an even keel. Indeed, the growing economic interaction between Russia and Turkey is one of the most important developments in Turkish policy toward Eurasia and could have a significant effect on Turkey’s relations with Moscow over the long run.

Turkey’s relations with Europe are also undergoing important and stressful change. At its December 1999 Helsinki summit, the EU decided to accept Turkey as a candidate for membership, after years of keeping it at arm’s length. Since then, Turkey has undertaken a number of important reforms designed to meet the EU’s Copenhagen criteria, including abolition of the death penalty and an easing of restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language. However, many Europeans are still not convinced that Turkey should be admitted, both for cultural as well as economic reasons; their reservations are compounded by the sheer scale of Turkey as a society.

Perhaps the area where Turkey’s relations have witnessed the most dramatic change, however, is with Greece. After years of hostility, Greek-Turkish relations have slowly begun to improve, bolstered in part by “earthquake diplomacy.” The key question, however, is whether the recent rapprochement simply represents a tactical maneuver or fundamental strategic change in the nature of relations. So far, the thaw has been limited largely to nonstrategic areas such as trade, the environment, tourism, and a variety of nontraditional security matters. However, if it is to be durable, it will need to address the core issues of the Aegean and Cyprus.

In the Balkans, too, Turkish policy is in flux. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, Turkey effectively withdrew from the Balkans. But the end of Cold War has witnessed renewed Turkish interest in the region. Turkey’s relations with Albania, Macedonia, and Bulgaria have visibly improved. Turkey has actively participated in peacekeeping and stabilization operations in Bosnia and Kosovo and
would likely contribute to any Western peacekeeping operation in Macedonia. But Turkey’s sympathy for the Muslims in Bosnia and elsewhere worries many Europeans—especially Greeks—who fear that at some point Turkey might be tempted “to play the Muslim card.” So far, Ankara’s approach to the region has been moderate and multilateral. But a more nationalist government in Ankara might not be as restrained.

Finally, Turkey’s relations with the United States have witnessed important changes. Turkey’s increasing involvement in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East have increased Turkey’s strategic importance in Washington’s eyes. The United States has come to see Turkey as a key strategic ally and a more capable actor in these regions. In addition, the war on terrorism, and the U.S. desire to bolster moderate voices in the Muslim world, have reinforced Turkey’s strategic importance to the United States.

But U.S.-Turkish perspectives differ on many issues, especially in the Gulf. Turkey has strong reservations about U.S. policy toward Iraq, which it fears will lead to the creation of a separate Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. A U.S. invasion of Iraq could put new strains on U.S.-Turkish relations. Ankara also does not share Washington’s view about the need to isolate Iran, which is an important trading partner and a source of natural gas for Turkey. These differences hinder the development of a true “strategic partnership” between Turkey and the United States.

THE TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSION

Turkey’s interests and policy are also shaped by a number of cross-cutting transnational—and transregional—issues, especially the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the proliferation of ballistic missile technology. Turkey’s increased exposure to WMD is bound to influence its security perceptions in the future. At the same time, this exposure gives Turkey a much stronger interest in missile defense than many of its European allies, which do not (yet) face the same degree of vulnerability to these threats.

Terrorism is another transnational issue having a significant effect on Turkish security perceptions. The number of assassinations of prominent Turkish officials and journalists in the last decade, and
the persistence of left-wing and right-wing terrorism inside Turkey, have heightened Turkish sensitivity to the dangers of international terrorism and given Ankara a strong interest in combating its spread. This could become an issue in Turkey’s relations with the United States, especially if some of Turkey’s neighbors, or groups within Turkey, were to begin to conduct terrorist attacks against Turkish bases from which U.S. forces were operating.

Energy has also emerged as an important factor influencing Turkish policy. Turkey’s growing energy needs have given Turkey a strong interest in developing ties to energy-producing states in the Middle East and the Caspian region. Turkey’s strong support for the development of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline has become a critical element in its strategy in the Caucasus and Caspian region. Turkey has also sought to expand economic cooperation with Iran in the energy field despite strong U.S. objections. And it has been eager to revive energy cooperation with Iraq and see the current sanctions regime against Baghdad lifted. With the development of new oil and gas routes to bring Caspian and Middle Eastern supplies to world markets, Turkey is also emerging as a key energy entrepôt and transshipment state, especially for Europe.

Finally, Turkish policy has been affected by the increased emphasis on human rights in Western policy. The Kurdish issue, in particular, has been a source of tension in Turkey’s relations with Europe, especially Germany. But human rights concerns have also had an important effect on relations with the United States. Concerns in this area have had a substantial influence on the character of the bilateral relationship in recent years, including security cooperation and arms transfers.

INTERNAL CHANGE

These changes are occurring at a time when the Turkish domestic scene is also experiencing important changes, many of which are having an effect on Turkey’s foreign and security policy. In the last decade, many of the key tenets of Atatürkism—Westernization, statism, secularism, and nonintervention—have come under increasing assault. The democratization of Turkish society has created space for a variety of new groups and forces that have challenged the power of the Kemalist state. These challenges, including challenges
from Turkey’s secular reformists to the traditionally strong state apparatus, will be a key force shaping Turkish society and policy over the next decades.

In addition, the Islamist movement in Turkey has undergone an important evolution in the last several years. The dominant tendency among Turkey’s religious politicians today—many operating under legal bans on political activity—is toward what is described as “Muslim democracy,” loosely patterned on the model of Christian democratic parties in Europe. The foreign policy orientation of these Muslim democrats appears increasingly mainstream but reflects a degree of wariness regarding globalization and integration and can be nationalistic in tone.

Indeed, the reassertion of Turkish nationalism is arguably a far more important influence on foreign policy than religious politics in Turkey. Although nationalism has been a key component of Turkish foreign policy going back to Atatürk, the Gulf War gave it new impetus. Many Turks felt that Turkey paid too high an economic and political price for its support of the United States in the Gulf War. Moreover, these sacrifices did not bring the expected rewards, namely, membership in the European Union. The tepid European response provoked considerable resentment among the Turkish public and reinforced a sense that Turkey had to look after its own interests more vigorously. Events in Bosnia and Chechnya, where Turkish affinities are engaged, reinforced this nationalist inclination.

In a very different fashion, Turkey’s current economic crisis—and resentment over the role of international financial institutions—has also been a spur to nationalist sentiment.

Another important trend has been the growing influence of the independent media, especially television. The media played an important role in the crisis over Imia/Kardak, which brought Turkey and Greece to the brink of war in January 1996, as well as in the first Chechnya crisis. Moreover, Islamist and other political groups now have their own television stations, giving them unprecedented access to a much broader cross section of the Turkish public. Public opinion and the media are now far more important factors in Turkish external policy than ever before.
At the same time, the growth of a dynamic private sector has served to weaken the role of the “strong state” and strengthen the power of civil society. The business community, in particular, has emerged as an important political force in Turkey. The Turkish Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association and other institutions have emerged as outspoken advocates for reform and have proposed new policy initiatives on a broad range of social, economic, and political issues, including the Kurdish issue. Turkish entrepreneurs have also played a leading role in the expansion of economic ties to Russia, Central Asia, and the Middle East and have been at the forefront of the recent rapprochement with Greece. Together with the changing role of the military in Turkish society, the landscape for debate and policymaking on a range of issues, including foreign and security policy, is changing rapidly, with new actors operating alongside traditional elites.

Finally, the role of the Turkish military is evolving. The military has traditionally regarded itself as the custodian of the Atatürk legacy and has directly intervened three times when it felt democracy in Turkey was threatened. Each time, however, it has returned to the barracks after a short period of direct rule. Today, the military is much less inclined to intervene directly in Turkish politics. But it remains an important political force behind the scenes, as its ouster of the Erbakan government in a “silent coup” on June 1997 underlines. This political role is regarded by many EU members as inconsistent with a modern democracy and could pose an obstacle to Turkey’s membership in the EU over the long term.

In sum, Turkey today is at an important crossroads. Externally, it faces new challenges, especially in Europe and the Middle East; internally, it has reached an impasse that requires important changes in the way Turkey is governed—and by whom. Incrementalism and “muddling through”—approaches that have characterized Turkish policy in the past—are unlikely to be sufficient in the future. The threshold for unrest in Turkey remains high, but a continuing economic crisis, with social and political cleavages left unresolved, could push Turkey toward greater instability, making extreme or more chaotic outcomes possible. Although far from inevitable, these outcomes would have serious implications for Turkey’s external relations. In particular, a Turkey in turmoil would result in even more resistance to the idea of Turkish membership in the EU. Turkey
would also become a much less dependable ally for the United States. Hence, how Turkey resolves these challenges matters—both for Turks and for Western policy.