

Estrangement: The United States and Turkey in a Multipolar Era

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The growing chill in the relationship between Turkey and the United States reached the point that it attracted considerable attention in 2010.¹ If experts and pundits had not noticed the trend before, the very public US-Turkish feud over how to deal with Iran's nuclear program brought the animosity out into the open.² The government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan sharply criticized the Obama administration's hard-line policy toward Tehran, especially the US drive to impose additional economic sanctions, both unilaterally and through the United Nations.³

Instead, Ankara advocated a more robust diplomatic effort to resolve the nuclear crisis. When the United States (and the major powers of the European Union) showed little enthusiasm for that approach, the Erdogan government charted its own policy course, first reaching out to Russia and China, countries that also seemed skeptical about intensified economic coercion, and when those powers became more receptive to the US strategy, making common cause with another rising regional power and sanctions skeptic, Brazil.

1. Mary Beth Sheridan, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Moves Raise Concern in West and at Home," *Washington Post*, 7 June 2010; Morton Abramowitz and Henri J. Barkey, "The Turkish-American Split," *National Interest Online*, 17 June 2010; and Sabrina Tavernise and Michael Slackman, "Turkey Goes from Pliable Ally to Thorn for U.S.," *New York Times*, 8 June 2010.

2. Janine Zacharia, "Spat over Iran May Further Strain Relations between Allies U.S, Turkey," *Washington Post*, 24 May 2010; and Desmond Butler and Karoun Demirjian, "Analysis: Turkey's Iran Standoff Role Irks Allies," *Associated Press*, 25 May 2010.

3. Mauricio Rabuffetti, "Brazil, Turkey Sharpen Tone with U.S. over Iran," *Agence France Presse*, 28 May 2010.

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Matters came to a head in May when Turkey and Brazil negotiated an agreement with Iran under which Iranian nuclear fuel would be sent out of the country for enrichment and then returned, under proper safeguards, for peaceful electric power generation. Turkish and Brazilian leaders were hopeful that their diplomatic exertions had produced a solution to the nuclear crisis—one that would avoid the rising tensions they feared would result from additional sanctions.

Such a benign outcome was not to be. While Ankara and Brasilia were busy with their joint diplomatic initiative, Washington was busy encouraging, and often pressuring, the other members of the UN Security Council to approve another round of economic penalties against Iran. Even Moscow and Beijing were ready to go along with US demands, although only with respect to a somewhat diluted sanctions resolution, and only with considerable reluctance.

The US-led response to the Turkish-Brazilian initiative was either terribly clumsy or a deliberate attempt to embarrass the upstart regional powers. Just days after the 17 May announcement by Ankara, Brasilia, and Tehran that they had reached an accord on the fuel enrichment issue, Washington stated flatly that the Security Council would go ahead with a new round of sanctions. That statement was followed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's harsh comments criticizing Turkey and Brazil for even engaging in such free-lance diplomacy.⁴

Brazilian leaders were angry, and Turkish leaders were furious at what they interpreted as a gratuitous rebuke for all their hard work. And when the sanctions vote took place in the Security Council, both governments voted against the measure. And once again, the Obama administration was irritated.

US officials openly criticized the Turkish and Brazilian governments. Publicly, American policy makers termed the diplomatic initiative unhelpful—and implied that the negotiators were naïve, at best. Unnamed “senior officials” contended that the two countries had been hoodwinked.⁵ Privately,

4. Andrew Quinn and Brian Ellsworth, “U.S. Rift with Brazil and Turkey on Iran Deepens,” Reuters, 28 May 2010; and Robert Dreyfuss, “U.S. Slams Turkey, Brazil over Iran,” TheNation.com, 28 May 2010.

5. Quinn and Ellsworth.

some US officials considered the joint effort to be little more than obstructionism. They were annoyed at Brazil's behavior, but they were even more concerned that this episode seemed to be the merely the latest in a series of Turkish actions that undermined Washington's policies in the Middle East.

There is a bitter irony in the emergence of an increasingly hostile relationship between Washington and Ankara, for several generations of US policy makers sought the closest possible ties with Turkey. Since the late 1940s, American officials had regarded Turkey as an important, loyal US ally. Throughout the Cold War, a succession of US administrations viewed that country as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's indispensable southeastern anchor. That belief even caused American leaders to ignore or excuse Ankara's sometimes troubling behavior in the international arena, most notably its aggressive territorial claims regarding Greek islands in the Aegean and the 1974 invasion and ongoing occupation of northern Cyprus.

In the immediate post-Cold War period, many members of the American foreign policy community insisted that Turkey was a more important US security partner than ever before. Paul Wolfowitz, who would become deputy secretary of defense under President George W. Bush, was one of several prominent experts who argued that there were a handful of "keystone" or "pivotal" powers in the international system, and that Turkey was high on that list. Pro-Turkish analysts insisted that in a post-Cold War environment, Turkey not only remained NATO's southeastern anchor, it was now also a crucial bridge between Europe and the Middle East and a valuable conduit for Western, secular influence in much of the Muslim world, especially the Central Asian republics that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union.

A Lengthening List of Quarrels

Despite such high expectations (at least on the American side) for a close security partnership, trouble in the relationship has been building steadily for many years. The first major disagreement emerged in late 2002 and early 2003 as the Bush administration prepared to launch the invasion of Iraq. US leaders sought Ankara's permission to open a northern front from Turkish territory. Turkey's leaders balked at the request and demanded a huge sum (reportedly in excess of \$30 billion) to permit such an operation. The demand

angered Washington, and administration officials ultimately abandoned plans for a northern front in the war against Saddam Hussein.

But even if Washington had accepted Ankara's price, it is not clear that the Turkish government would have gone ahead with the agreement. An Islamist civilian government led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had taken office following the electoral rout of the traditional Kemalist secular parties in November 2002. That new regime was not inclined to back yet another US war against a Muslim country—especially when opinion polls indicated that more than 90 percent of the Turkish population opposed an attack on Iraq.

Washington could not count on support from Turkey's military for that venture either—a point that embittered US military leaders, who complained about the ingratitude of America's ally. But Turkish military commanders were at least as worried as the civilian politicians about the probable impact of the Bush administration's strategy to depose Saddam. In their view, such a step would exacerbate the already troublesome developments in Iraq's Kurdish region that the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the subsequent imposition of the northern no-fly zone had caused.

The Kurdish problem was not a minor issue for Turkey. Although about 20 percent of the Kurdish population in the Middle East resides in Iraq, fully 50 percent is in southeastern Turkey, where a low-level insurgency by the Marxist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) remains stubbornly persistent. Both civilian and military Turkish leaders viewed the autonomous Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq, which emerged as a result of the no-fly zone that prevented Saddam's forces from maintaining control of the area, as a potential threat to the unity of the Turkish state. Now, Ankara believed, Washington was about to make that problem even worse by overthrowing Saddam's regime.

The gap between US and Turkish goals grew to a chasm in the years after Saddam's ouster. Although Iraqi Kurdistan is still supposedly just a semiautonomous region, the reality is very different. The regional government has its own flag, currency, anthem, and military force (the Pesh Merga). In virtually every way that matters, Iraqi Kurdistan has become a *de facto* independent state.⁶

6. See Ted Galen Carpenter, "Staying Alive," *National Interest*, no. 94 (March–April 2008): 29–31.

To Turkish leaders, both military and civilian, this alarming development is the inevitable product of myopic US policies, and they are seething.

Matters became especially tense in late 2007 and early 2008. PKK fighters had repeatedly used Kurdish territory in Iraq as a sanctuary from which to launch attacks inside Turkey. Ankara's complaints about the Kurdish regional government's failure to rein in the PKK mounted. Finally, the AKP government, under pressure from the military, warned Washington that it intended to clear out the PKK sanctuaries in Iraq. US officials, facing the prospect that its long-time NATO ally and the most pro-American region in Iraq might go to war, mediated a settlement whereby Turkey scaled back the scope of its military intervention and the Pesh Merga promised not to confront the invaders.⁷ But neither side was happy with the arrangement, and Turkey continues to rile the situation by threatening to initiate new offensives—and periodically conducting (thus far, relatively minor) attacks.⁸

Ankara's repeated warnings that it would not tolerate Iraq's oil-rich city of Kirkuk coming under the jurisdiction of the Kurdish regional government is also a source of tension between the United States and Turkey. From Washington's standpoint, Turkey has been acting more like an adversary than an ally with regard to policy toward Iraq. At a minimum, Ankara's behavior has complicated America's already troubled mission in Iraq, and US officials are unhappy and resentful. From Ankara's standpoint, US policy in Iraq is clumsy and obtuse and undermines important Turkish interests. That dispute has clearly been a catalyst, perhaps the principal catalyst, for the chill in US-Turkish relations.

But there are other manifestations of the growing estrangement between the two countries. Ankara seems to be deliberately de-emphasizing ties with its traditional NATO allies, including the United States, and is placing greater emphasis on strengthening links with Muslim countries and other states. There are several developments over the past three or four years that highlight that policy pivot.

The shift is perhaps most evident with respect to policy toward Iran. Not

7. Ted Galen Carpenter, "Middle East Vortex: An Unstable Iraq and Its Implications for the Region," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 25–6.

8. Abdul Hamid Zebari, "Turkish Troops Enter Iraq after Kurd Attack," *Agence France Presse*, 20 June 2010.

only are Ankara and Washington on very different pages about how to deal with Tehran's nuclear program, but there is evidence of a Turkish-Iranian rapprochement with respect to other issues. In particular, there is an increasing degree of common ground with respect to the Kurdish issue. Iran seems nearly as worried as Turkey about the possible impact of a de facto independent Iraqi Kurdistan on Iran's own Kurdish minority. And as Ankara has done, Tehran has launched punitive raids against insurgent sanctuaries across the border into northern Iraq.

There have been several high-level meetings between Turkish and Iranian officials over the past three years in which there apparently have been discussions about coordinating policies regarding Iraqi Kurdistan. A June 2008 comment by General Ilker Basbug, Turkey's land forces commander, underscored the extent of the cooperation. "We are sharing intelligence with Iran, we are talking, we are coordinating," Basbug stated bluntly. "When they start an operation, we do too."⁹ He became even more specific: "They carry out an operation from the Iranian side of the border, we from the Turkish side."¹⁰ The sequential nature of Turkish and Iranian assaults in the spring of 2010 suggests that the coordination is still taking place.

Ankara has also shifted its policies with respect to the Israeli-Arab dispute. Previously, Turkey maintained cooperative relations with Israel, much to the annoyance of other Muslim states. That has changed in a dramatic fashion. Ankara's harsh criticism of the Israeli military offensive into Gaza in 2009 caught many observers by surprise, but it was just an early indicator of a rapidly deteriorating relationship. Matters grew worse early the following year when the Israeli deputy foreign minister publicly humiliated the Turkish ambassador—by, among other actions, having him sit on a couch markedly lower than his host's chair, thereby making him look like a school child awaiting a scolding from the principal.

That incident had barely subsided when tensions flared even higher after Israeli special forces attacked and boarded ships in a Turkish-led relief flotilla, supposedly on a humanitarian mission to Gaza. Several Turkish nation-

9. Quoted in Associated Press, "Turkey and Iran Unite to Attack Kurdish Rebels," *New York Times*, 6 June 2008; and "Report: Iran, Turkey Coordinate Iraq Strikes," *USA Today*, 5 June 2008.

10. Quoted in "Iran and Turkey Coordinate Strikes in Iraq," Assyrian International News Agency, 5 June 2008.

als were killed in that confrontation, and relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv reached a new nadir.¹¹

The growing Turkish-Israeli animosity does not merely have bilateral implications. The United States is deeply unhappy about Ankara's policies toward America's favorite ally in the region. Some of the same neoconservatives in the United States who have long praised Turkey as a vital US ally have suddenly become some of that country's sharpest critics. Related to that shift is an ever louder drumbeat of anti-Turkish stories in the American news media.¹²

As unhappy as US officials are about the deteriorating relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv, they are equally concerned about the rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow. That has been an especially unpleasant surprise to American policy makers. Turkey and Russia have long had a tense, sometimes highly confrontational relationship. Indeed, many of those tensions predate the creation of the modern Turkish state — originating with the bitter rivalry between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. During the Cold War, Turkey was predictably hard-line in its policy preferences regarding the Soviet Union, which made the prevailing US view of Turkey as a staunch NATO ally quite understandable.

But relations between Ankara and Moscow have been warming for some time. Energy deals that might have been difficult to reach in previous eras now seem almost routine. There is a greater convergence of views on security issues as well. Both Russia and Turkey have been skeptical about the US push for strong sanctions against Iran (although Russia's views have softened slightly on that issue in recent months.) And much to Washington's disappointment, Turkey steadfastly refused to take sides in the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Although some other NATO members also were reluctant to support Washington in taking a strong stance against Russia, Turkey's refusal to do so was especially surprising and disappointing.

In addition to such developments, US-Turkish relations were damaged

11. Yigal Schleifer, "Gaza Flotilla Raid: Will It Change Turkey's Regional Role?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 June 2010.

12. Typical examples include "Turkey's Radical Drift," editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, 3 June 2010; and "U.S. Lawmakers Blast 'Disgraceful' Turkey over Iran, Israel," *Agence France Presse*, 16 June 2010.

further in the spring of 2010 when the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives approved a resolution condemning the Armenian genocide that had taken place during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. Turkey reacted to the resolution with fury, and Ankara recalled its ambassador to Washington for several weeks.

Underlying Causes of the Estrangement

Following Turkey's UN Security Council vote against the sanctions resolution regarding Iran, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates asserted that the EU was largely at fault for that unpleasant development. According to Gates, the EU had needlessly alienated Turkey by being insufficiently responsive to Ankara's professed goal of joining that association.¹³

Gates' comments woefully oversimplify, and perhaps even totally misconstrue, the reasons for Ankara's increasingly independent behavior. Even if Gates were correct about the impetus for the estrangement between the EU and Turkey, it doesn't explain the even more pronounced estrangement from the United States and its policies. It certainly doesn't account for why that trend has grown during the Obama years.

A prominent feature of President Obama's foreign policy from the outset was an effort to improve America's relationship with the Muslim world; an especially high priority was given to strengthening ties with Turkey. Much to the surprise of many observers, Obama put Turkey on his itinerary for his first overseas trip as president in April 2009. His speech to the Turkish parliament erased any lingering doubt about his priorities. Noting that he had just finished attending the NATO and EU summits, the president added that "some people have asked me if I chose to continue my travels to Ankara and Istanbul to send a message to the world. And my answer is simple: *evet* — yes. Turkey is a critical ally; Turkey is an important part of Europe. And Turkey and the United States must stand together—and work together—to overcome the challenges of our time."¹⁴ In other high-profile events, including

13. Marc Champion and Peter Spiegel, "Gates Says EU Pushed Turkey Away," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 June 2010; and Daniel Dombey, Alex Barker, and Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "U.S. Blames Europe for Turkey Vote Against Iran Sanctions," *Financial Times*, 10 June 2010.

14. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament, Ankara, Turkey, 6 April 2009," 1.

meetings with Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul, President Obama reiterated those objectives. Yet despite his desires, the estrangement with Ankara has only grown worse on his watch.

That development suggests that there are other, more fundamental causes for the shift in Turkey's foreign policy. One of those causes is the change in Turkey's domestic politics. It is hardly surprising that the growth in religious sentiment, and the corresponding increase in the popularity and power of the religious AKP, has also led to changes in foreign policy — especially a desire to improve relations with other Muslim states.

But there are also international considerations that help explain the new foreign policy orientation. One is the desire to increase Turkey's "strategic depth."¹⁵ Throughout the history of the post-Ottoman period, Turkish leaders seemed to regard all neighboring states with pronounced suspicion and apprehension. Relations with Washington were good largely because the United States was a friendly, distant power. Under the AKP government, though, that orientation has changed. With the exception of relations with Cyprus, and the partial exception of relations with Greece, Ankara has sought to ease tensions with other regional powers, thereby reducing the number and severity of possible security threats — and opening up greater economic opportunities.¹⁶ That trend has been most pronounced with Iran and Russia, but it is noticeable with respect to such countries as Saudi Arabia and Syria as well.

Another factor in Ankara's foreign policy pivot is an apparent quest for enhanced status as a serious regional power. Turkish leaders seem to be chafing at being expected always to follow Washington's lead. Deferring to the United States may have made sense in the bipolar strategic environment of the Cold War. Soviet power and intentions seemed to pose a serious threat to Turkey's security, and the United States was the only country that could provide reliable protection. But the situation in the post-Cold War setting is much different. The possible threats are both less serious and more diffuse. Therefore, always following Washington's policy lead is not only unnecessary, it could sometimes be counterproductive to Turkey's interests.

15. Yasin Aktay, "Politics at Home, Politics in the World: The Return of the Political in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 71–5.

16. Ibid; Landon Thomas Jr., "Turning East, Turkey Asserts Economic Power," *New York Times*, 5 July 2010; and Simon Cameron-Moore, "'Anatolian Tigers' Go Where Turkey's Diplomacy Leads," Reuters, 13 July 2010.

And Turkey is not the only mid-size regional power that seems to have reached that conclusion. One sees manifestations of similar behavior on the part of such countries as Brazil and Indonesia. The policies of both countries appear to reflect a drive for the twin goals of greater policy independence and greater prestige. For that matter, even some of America's most prominent Cold War allies, such as Germany and Japan, are exhibiting more independence.

In addition to the quest for greater status, influential regional powers seem uneasy about the specifics of some US policies. Such nations as Turkey and Brazil conclude that various actions by Washington are not consistent with their own best interests. Turkey, for example, saw no benefit in confronting Russia over Moscow's parochial spat with Georgia regarding the secessionist goals of two small Georgian regions. There was a sharp split with the United States over the substance of Washington's preferred strategy in that conflict. Similarly, such regional players as South Korea and Indonesia are unenthused about enlisting in an implicit diplomatic and military containment policy that Washington seems to want to implement with respect to China.

Indeed, overall US behavior is ringing alarm bells in the capitals of various regional players. Normally, the leading power in the international system behaves as a conservative, status quo actor. That is not surprising, since the existing system benefits the preeminent power, often disproportionately, and that power is reluctant to incur the risks inherent in major changes. But in various regions, especially the Balkans and the Middle East, the United States has been acting as an aggressively revisionist power. That strategy has already created major disruptions, and promises even more turmoil. Significant countries are understandably uneasy about such instability in their regions. That creates an incentive to distance their policies from Washington's, and perhaps even to try to undermine US initiatives.

Without the existence of a looming, major security threat from an external adversary to keep allies in line behind US leadership, Washington will find the kinds of policy deviations that Ankara has exhibited in recent years to be more and more the norm internationally. US leaders can no longer use the Soviet menace as a reason to prod recalcitrant powers. And substitute specters, such as the threat of Islamic radicalism or a rising China, do not have the same impact.

It is important for the United States to adjust gracefully to this change, for it is not about to go away. The kind of treatment that Washington meted out to Ankara and Brasilia for having the temerity to adopt a different strategy regarding Iran's nuclear program is precisely the wrong approach. Humiliating rising regional players is not a good way to improve America's image or to achieve policy objectives. Washington needs to adopt a better strategy than throwing the foreign policy equivalent of a temper tantrum whenever its views do not prevail. Developing a better understanding of the deep-seated reasons for Turkey's policy independence, and trying to minimize the inevitable resulting tensions, would be a good place to start.