



Executive Summary

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TURKEY'S NEW REGIONAL SECURITY ROLE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

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With much of Europe paralyzed due to domestic economic problems and with Washington's attention drifting eastward toward Asia, Turkey has become one of the most influential North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries and U.S. allies, partnering with Washington and other U.S. friends and allies to promote shared interests in critical regions. Turkish policymakers have bolstered their country's international profile by hosting high-level summits, participating in peacekeeping missions, and promoting Turkey's secular democracy in the midst of Middle Eastern dictatorships and authoritarian governments. Turkey's economy has grown to become one of the largest in the world, joining the elite Group of Twenty (G-20) leading industrial countries, and has negotiated free trade agreements with many foreign partners. Turkey is slated to take over the presidency of the G-20 next year. Turkey's armed forces have made important contributions to a range of NATO, European Union (EU), and United Nations (UN) missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, demonstrating its capacity and political will to support international peace and security. Like the United States, Turkey's national security leaders have adopted a multiregional perspective that encompasses Europe, the Balkans, Asia, the Middle East, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean.

Turkey-U.S. relations have recovered from almost a decade of strained ties. The Turkish parlia-

mentary decision in 2003 not to allow U.S. forces to use its territory to open a northern front in the Iraq War significantly harmed U.S.-Turkey relations. The war resulted in a precipitous deterioration in Turks' opinion of the United States. After the U.S. occupation of Iraq experienced major setbacks, Turkish leaders complained about a rise of terrorism and instability in their region, which was scaring off investors. In addition, they worried that the U.S. occupation was allowing Iraqi Kurds excessive autonomy, creating a sanctuary for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or PKK), a militant organization whose goal was Kurdish independence from Ankara, along the joint Iraq-Turkish border. The winter 2008-09 Gaza War further alienated the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) from Israel. Tensions were exacerbated when the Israeli military killed nine Turkish citizens while intercepting a Gaza-bound aid flotilla from Turkey in 2010, generating unprecedented strains in the security alliance between Ankara and Tel Aviv. The disputes ended Turkish-Israeli joint exercises and reduced other forms of military cooperation, depriving Israel of an important Muslim ally and Turkey of some supporters in the U.S. Congress. At times, Turkish and U.S. policymakers sharply disagreed regarding how to respond to Iran's nuclear program. Turkish attempts to mediate the dispute backfired in 2010 when Western governments rejected a confidence-building

deal Turkey crafted with Brazil. Disagreements over how to respond to Iran's nuclear program, U.S. suspicions regarding Turkey's outreach efforts to the regimes in Tehran and Damascus, and differences over Armenia, Hamas, and the Black Sea further strained ties as leaders in both countries struggled to manage these differences.

Several factors have led to an improvement in U.S.-Turkey ties in the last few years. The most important drivers have been the U.S. military withdrawals from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other regions near Turkey; the Arab Awakening that has led both countries to partner to support democracy and security in the Middle East; and setbacks in Turkey's reconciliation efforts with Syria, Iran, and other countries, which led Turkish leaders to recognize the value of having good security relations with the United States. President George W. Bush helped to mend this relationship in 2007 when he agreed to provide enhanced support to anti-PKK efforts at a time of crisis for the Turkish security and political establishments. At the outset of the Barack Obama administration, U.S. officials made clear their intent to emphasize the importance of a multifaceted strategic relationship with Turkey. In April 2009, President Obama, speaking of a "model partnership," visited Turkey during his first presidential trip abroad and addressed its Parliament in Ankara. He said that "Turkey is a critical ally. . . . And Turkey and the United States must stand together – and work together – to overcome the challenges of our time."¹ Notwithstanding Turkey's reconciliation with Iran and break with Israel, the Arab world's upheavals and the Syrian War soon led to a Turkish-U.S. reconciliation. By 2011, President Obama was calling Recep Erdoğan one of his five closest international allies and praising Turkey as "a NATO ally and a great friend and partner on NATO issues." Similarly, the Turkish press began referring to a "golden age" in U.S.-Turkish relations.² The U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 removed a source of tension and gave Turkey a greater incentive to cooperate with Washington to influence developments in that country. Iraq became an area of converging Turkish and U.S. interests as the two governments seek to support political pluralism in Baghdad while constraining Iranian hegemonic aspirations in

Iraq. By establishing excellent relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Ankara has emerged as the *de facto* protector of Iraqi Kurds, the most pro-American element of the Iraqi population. The AKP has embraced moderate Iraqi Kurdish leaders as a sort of role model of Kurdish limited self-determination, applicable within Turkey and perhaps Syria. Furthermore, Turkish and U.S. policymakers have partnered since 2011 to promote democracy and security elsewhere in the Middle East, which has boosted Turkey's popularity in that region. Turkish and U.S. diplomats have collaborated to manage the regime transitions in Libya and Egypt. Turks and Americans both want to see democratic secular governments in the region rather than religiously sanctioned authoritarian ones. Setbacks in Turkey's reconciliation efforts with Syria, Iran, and other countries led Turkish leaders, inclined to rely on soft economic and social power, such as deepening commercial, cultural, and religious ties with Iraqis, to realize the importance of having access to Washington's hard power resources. Like Japan in East Asia, another country that depends on U.S. military power to complement its economic might, Turkish leaders realized that having good relations with the United States was essential for achieving their goals in the Middle East and beyond.³

Even during the years of tension in the mid-2000s, Turkey's defense policies have remained closely integrated with those of the United States and other U.S. allies. These countries are now working closely with the Turkish Armed Forces (Turkish: Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri, or TSK) to bring peace to Afghanistan, the Middle East, and other global hotspots. Turkey has regularly assigned one thousand or more soldiers to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. These soldiers have trained the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and pursue various civil construction projects. In recent years, Turkey has complemented its longstanding military and economic contributions to Afghanistan with diplomatic initiatives aimed at establishing a supportive environment for an Afghan-led peace process. Turkish diplomats seek to mediate a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgents

and also have been pursuing regional peace initiatives such as the Istanbul Process aimed at reconciling the quarreling government of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The decision of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to make Turkey an official dialogue partner could help in aligning NATO and SCO efforts to promote stability in Afghanistan. Elsewhere, Turkish warships are supporting important NATO maritime security operations in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean. NATO's new Military Command Structure leaves Turkey with one of the few major NATO headquarters on its soil. Ankara has supported NATO's membership expansion since the new entrants are often located near Turkey, so membership enlargement promotes stability in Turkey's neighborhood. Turkey is playing a crucial role in promoting NATO's energy security by serving as a vital conduit for oil and gas reaching Europe from Eurasia, especially the Caspian basin and Russia. Although neither Turkey nor NATO is eager for the alliance to become involved in Syria's civil war, if NATO were to intervene militarily in Syria, it would probably do so from Turkish territory. Furthermore, Turkey made the domestically controversial decision to host a U.S. missile defense radar, within the NATO context, to reinforce Ankara's security ties with Washington and Brussels. Turkey also helps support NATO's nuclear policies. Despite its challenging neighborhood, Turkey has an exemplary nuclear nonproliferation record. Turkish leaders have valued NATO because the Alliance strongly affirms Ankara's ties to Western Europe, has served as an important point of reference for the Turkish military, has deterred Russian military threats, and most recently has helped anchor Turkey's foreign policy as the AKP struggles to overcome setbacks in its relations with Iran, Syria, Iraq, and other neighbors. Ankara's security ties to Washington are at the heart of the NATO alliance, but also independently offer a supplementary guarantee.

Despite recent gains, the Turkish-U.S. relationship is still prone to problems. Turkey-U.S. relations have ebbed and flowed in recent years, depending on the issue. In particular, differences between Ankara and Washington are widening

regarding several important world issues, such as Iran's nuclear program and the Syrian Civil War. The potential exists for these gaps to grow further, making it difficult for Turkish and U.S. national security managers to keep them compartmentalized. Turkish-U.S. divergences over Iran, mostly latent at present, could become more serious in future years if Iran either developed nuclear weapons or fully reconciled with the United States, offering Washington a competing regional security partner to Turkey. Possibly the most significant divergence of foreign policy stances between the United States and Turkey is now over the Syrian Civil War. The Turkish and U.S. governments have both taken a strong and vocal stand against the Assad regime, but while Ankara has invested heavily in a military solution under a victorious Sunni insurgency, the Obama administration has been drifting in the opposite direction, especially since August 2013, when it achieved an agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons.⁴ Even excluding the PKK factor, a Turkish decision to take up arms on behalf of Assad's opponents risks labeling Turkey a regional champion of Sunni Arabs rather than a supporter of democratic change and popular sovereignty. Turkish feelings of betrayal toward the United States could return if Turkey does not receive adequate tangible support from Washington in a shooting war with Assad. Furthermore, Turkey would find it difficult to manage an Israeli-U.S. attack on Iran, while Washington would react negatively to another Turkey-Israeli clash. The two governments' differences over Israel have been managed rather than resolved, a situation that has limited support for the AKP government in the U.S. Congress and public. Regional explosions that could lead to bilateral strains include another Armenia-Azerbaijan or Russia-Georgia war. Greek-Turkish military tensions might regress to the mean from their unusually nonconfrontational nature of recent years. Turkish-U.S. differences would deepen if the U.S. combat withdrawal from Afghanistan leaves behind a chaotic Afghanistan and insecure regional environment in Central Asia. Likewise, in Egypt, while the AKP has continued to back deposed President Mohamed Morsi, the Obama administration has sought to develop a work-

ing relationship with the new military regime in Cairo.⁵ In Iraq, where Ankara works almost exclusively with the Kurdish Regional Government, Washington continues to favor deeper Iraqi unity under the Baghdad government, which is seen as the best counterweight to Iranian influence. Meanwhile, as the scandals have shown, Turks are very eager to sustain economic and energy ties with Iran despite U.S. concerns.⁶ Turkey is well-positioned to develop deeper security ties with China and Russia, which would also not be welcomed in Washington.

Domestic issues in Turkey also complicate relations with the United States and other Western countries. These include the government's repression of media freedoms, the stalemated efforts to solve the problem of Turkey's Kurdish minority, and the lack of strong oppositional parties. Turkey has recently experienced some of its most serious corruption scandals and popular protests in years. Senior government ministers and executives have been charged with bribery, money laundering, and gold smuggling. Starting in June 2013, mass anti-government demonstrations began against growing authoritarianism, mistreatment of minorities, and repression of civil rights and media freedoms. The corruption, protests, and crackdowns have severely harmed Erdoğan's international standing, especially in the West.

Turkey aspires to have a leadership role in NATO and to remain a major U.S. ally, but various problems could lead to thwarted expectations. Turkish officials need to adopt more of the perspective of a collective NATO stakeholder seeking the greater good of the West rather than that of a frustrated Turkish nationalist engaged in petty squabbles with NATO policymakers. With respect to the Middle East, Turkey and its NATO allies need to develop comprehensive plans for what might happen should the government in Syria or other Middle Eastern countries retaliate, resign, or collapse. Even if the regime in Damascus falls, the result is less likely to be a gentle transition to a liberal democracy, than fighting among the elements of the winning coalition over their division of the spoils with other neighboring countries having a strong incentive to support

local proxies. Changes in other Middle Eastern countries could have implications for U.S. military bases and deployments in the region, requiring further adjustments in the U.S. military presence in Turkey and other regional partners. The United States must adopt proactive measures to avert a crisis that could abort the recent upturn in Turkish-U.S. relations. For example, the United States should launch major initiatives to resolve differences between Turkey and other U.S. partners such as Armenia, Israel, Iraq, and the EU. Otherwise, Washington could find itself constantly torn between key allies. The United States also needs to clarify its arms sales and defense technology transfer policies regarding Turkey, especially given the deepening ties between Turkey and China, a potential U.S. military adversary. In addition to the substance of any policies, improving communications between Ankara and Washington is essential for avoiding further misunderstandings between these pivotal partners regardless of who is in power in either country.

ENDNOTES

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2. Richard Outzen, "From Crisis To Cooperation Turkey's Relations With Washington and NATO," No. 12, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, June 2012, p. 4, available from www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote12.pdf.

3. Soner Cagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power*, Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2014.

4. Zanotti, p. 27.

5. Tim Arango, "Growing Mistrust between U.S. and Turkey Is Played Out in Public," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2013, available from www.nytimes.com/2013/12/24/world/europe/growing-mistrust-between-us-and-turkey-is-played-out-in-public.html?_r=1&.

6. Zanotti, p. 29.

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