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Colloquium Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College and
The Atlantic Council of the United States*



THE EVOLUTION OF U.S.-TURKISH RELATIONS IN A TRANSATLANTIC CONTEXT

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KEY INSIGHTS:

- Turkish accession to the European Union (EU) remains a central question in determining the future of Turkish relations with Western Europe and the United States. Any support that the United States can give to the acceleration of Turkish accession will be valuable and helpful to these ties.
- While U.S.-Turkish relations have undergone severe strain as a result of difference over the Iraq war, considerable potential for improvement exists. Turkish public opinion is not inflexibly anti-American, and the Turkish public strongly differentiates among various American politicians and policies which are viewed with either approval or disapproval.
- Turkey continues to view NATO as a vital institution despite the end of the Cold War and differences with the United States over the Iraq War.
- Turkey has continued to implement the much more activist and involved policy toward the Middle East that it began in 1991.

The Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College and the Atlantic Council of the United States conducted a colloquium entitled "The Evolution of U.S.-Turkish Relations in a Transatlantic Context" on March 25, 2007. Additional support for this conference was provided by the Washington Delegation of the European Commission and the Heinrich-Boell Foundation. The colloquium brought together serving and retired academics, diplomats, and military officers from the United States, Europe, and Turkey.

The opening address, entitled, "Turkey's Future Course: a European Perspective," was presented by a German legislator with a special interest in European-Turkish relations. She stated that the future of Turkey is both an external and internal issue for Europe. She asserted that the future of Europe depends on the integration of Turkey into Europe and expressed concern that Turkey was not invited to the March 2007 "Fifty Years of Europe" celebration commemorating the moves toward European unity following the Treaties of Rome. This snub sent the wrong message to the Turks.

She stated that Western Europeans had a great deal of experience dealing with Turkey on Human Rights issues and the Cyprus question. Turkey is no longer the same country as it was in the 1980s, and there have been major reforms in the legal system such as the abolition of capital punishment and the prohibition of torture, as well as a growth of civil society. She also stated that there had been "breathtaking" economic development in some areas.

She stated that a credible prospect of Turkish accession to the European Union (EU) supports European security, the Turkish reform process, and Turkish economic development. American support for EU accession has therefore been valuable. The speaker also noted that there were enough common values for Turkey to become a member of NATO in the early 1950s, so why are there any questions about whether these common values exist for purposes of joining the EU? She further stated that a democratic Turkey is the key to the Kurdish question after years of war. The speaker maintained that after September 11, 2001 (9/11), Europe was at increased risk, and that these threats could be made more serious by engaging in a "false culture war" with the Islamic World. Turkey can help Europe and the United States avoid this and also serve as tangible proof that democracy and Islam are not incompatible.

She took issue with the concept of Turkey not being part of Europe because it is not part of the Christian Occident. She stated that the concept of a less than total membership for Turkey in the EU is unacceptable. Any sort of

“privileged partnership” with Europe is, in fact, a “privileged expulsion” from Europe. She further asserted that Turkey must make progress on women’s and Kurdish issues. The speaker noted that Turkey is striving to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria, and Europe must not say no to Turkish EU membership after it makes the required progress. She also stated that prohibitions against torture must be fully enforced.

She continued by noting that Cyprus must not use its EU membership to pressure Turkey. She also stated that the January 19, 2007, murder of journalist Hrant Dink cannot be ignored. She stated that Article 301 of the Constitution, which forbids “insulting Turkishness” or the Republic, poisons Turkish politics and must be repealed. Mr. Dink had previously received a suspended sentence under that statute for challenging the official Turkish version of the 1915 Armenian genocide.

After the opening address, a panel convened on the state of U.S.-Turkish relations. A U.S. scholar speaking on “The state of U.S. Turkish relations--moving beyond geopolitics,” noted that the United States and Turkey are not natural allies as they are divided by distance and, to some degree, culture. Turkey has sometimes been viewed by Americans as a bridge between the Muslim world and the West, while in the traditional Cold War context, it was viewed as a strategic barrier to Soviet expansion. Turkish leaders also viewed the alliance with the United States as useful in containing Ankara’s regional adversaries. The continued focus on geopolitics over policy issues has led to considerable frustration and volatility in the bilateral relationship. He stated that Turkish-American relations since the 1960s have been characterized by recurring tensions including disagreements over northern Iraq, arms embargos, and territorial issues regarding the Aegean Sea. There is a myth of a “golden age” of Turkish-American cooperation, but the issues have been controversial for decades, and Turkish domestic politics have often been characterized by significant levels of anti-Americanism.

The speaker stated that what is new is the substantially changed foreign and security policy outlook on both sides. The United States has sometimes displayed a tougher style in dealing with allies, and key defense constituencies within the United States remain disenchanted with Turkey based on the March 2003 experience. In Turkey, the U.S.-led Iraq invasion and continued U.S. presence in Iraq have triggered a more profound debate about both the specifics of American policy and the nature of American power.

The speaker suggested that a reinvigorated U.S.-Turkish relationship will be less bilateral, with lower expectation and less geopolitical theorizing. It will be more focused on practical cooperation. The speaker suggested that there are a variety of ways to begin this rebuilding

process, including putting Turkey at the center of regional diplomacy for Iraq. While diplomatic initiatives regarding Iran and Syria are often discussed, Turkey’s role is rarely mentioned. Another step would be for the United States and Turkey to develop a coordinated response to the Iranian nuclear weapons and long-range missile programs. Additionally, Turkey and the United States need to foster a more diverse relationship that is not so heavily focused on security issues.

The second speaker discussed policy recommendations for Turkish-American relations. He noted that the relationship was traumatized by the March 2003 differences over the possible use of Turkish territory for a land invasion of Iraq, and that problems still linger. Despite this, he maintained that the U.S.-Turkish relationship had an extremely solid foundation. He noted that the two countries were military allies through NATO and that they had fought in various wars and conflicts side-by-side. He stated that they have shared democratic ideals and that the relationship had survived earlier disappointments such as the arms embargo applied to Turkey following the Cyprus intervention in the mid-1970s. He did note that economic ties are not strong, and that there is relatively little trade between the two countries.

The speaker stated that the U.S.-Turkish relationship is a sensitive and fragile one which “underperforms” when it is not managed carefully. He asserted that military and security issues have declined in importance to the relationship, while other issues including energy, democracy, secularism, and gender equality have become more significant. He suggested that the relationship was stunted by such issues as differences over how to deal with the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) in Iraq and the Armenian genocide resolutions before the U.S. Congress. Incidents such as the mistreatment of Turkish Special Forces by U.S. troops in Suleymaniye also caused problems, as did the statements of politicians on both sides. The speaker noted that it was difficult to envision a full recovery of the relationship, given the high level of anti-American sentiments in Turkish public opinion.

The next session discussed partnerships in the fight against terrorism. The first speaker, who is Turkish, stated that the West needed a success story in the struggle against terrorism. Since Turkey is 99 percent Muslim, its ability to defeat terrorism within its own borders is a valuable example for the rest of the Muslim world. It is geographically close to Iran and other centers of terrorism and regional conflicts. This proximity adds to the danger of Turkey suffering from new terrorist attacks. Turkey is also a target because it has strong ties to the United States and Israel. Like the United States, Turkey supports democracy in the region.

The next speaker also addressed the issue of terrorism, noting that Europe has maintained a long history of

refusing to designate the PKK as a terrorist organization. He noted that a great deal of the funding for the PKK comes from Western Europe, and that the PKK needs to be taken out of the regional equation because it can only undermine the relations between Turkey and Iraq.

A third speaker stated that terrorism within Turkey is almost always local and specific. He noted that the PKK is very active and continues to commit terrorist attacks. Of the acts of terrorism within Turkey, 90 percent can be attributed to the PKK. While al-Qai'da has engaged in terrorism operations in Turkey, it is definitely a secondary threat. The speaker suggested that the problem has been exacerbated because in parts of Europe there is a "romantic view" of Kurdish nationalism. The banning of the PKK in Germany vastly improved the situation. The speaker noted that PKK financial campaigns continue in Germany, but their collections have been cut in half. The speaker noted that the improvement of the Turkish judicial process, as well as the conditions for prisoners, has undercut some of the fundraising efforts in Europe.

The keynote address by a senior Turkish diplomat focused on U.S.-Turkish relations. He stated that in the last few years, U.S.-Turkish relations had displayed ups and downs, but that both countries had strong reasons for continuing to support each other. He noted that Turkey was at the epicenter of the vast geography of Eurasia, and that events in Turkey therefore had widespread regional implications. He stated that Turkey has come to the fore of regional politics over issues such as secular democratic development, rule of law, human rights, and cooperation with the United States.

The speaker stated that since 2000 Turkey has also moved forward on economic development. He stated that in 2000, the Turkish economy was in a slump, but it had improved significantly since that time. He stated that huge advances in the Turkish gross domestic product (GDP) and exports occurred during this time frame, and that Turkey is an energy hub. He acknowledged that unemployment in Turkey remains a problem. He also stated that Turkey is grateful to the United States for supporting Turkish accession to the EU. The speaker stated that Turkey and the United States had cooperated on a number of regional problems, including in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. He noted that the leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan has rotated to Turkey three times already, and that Turkey has been active in Operation ACTIVE ENDEAVOR, which involves naval operations in the Mediterranean Sea.

The next panel addressed Turkey's role in the EU and NATO. The first speaker, a former U.S. diplomat, previously held a high-ranking diplomatic posting in Turkey. He noted that the Turkish role in NATO was an important factor in helping to define the bilateral relationship

between the two countries. He stated that NATO had been good for Turkey and helps to bind Turkey and Europe. Turkish membership in NATO also helps to legitimize the European role in Central Asia. The U.S. approach to Turkey's NATO membership may have focused too heavily on the anti-Soviet role and neglected the continuing importance of Turkish involvement in NATO following 1991.

The speaker suggested that the Turks have often preferred to deal with regional problems through NATO, while the United States has shown an increased preference for ad hoc coalitions. The Turks were particularly pleased that U.S.-led support for Afghanistan has involved NATO and UN roles. The Turkish leadership is also concerned that Iraq may become permanently destabilized. The speaker noted that NATO cannot replace the EU.

The next speaker stated that Turkey views NATO and eventual membership in the EU as twin pillars of its security policy. He stated that Turkey hoped to maintain NATO's role as the primary institution for security and defense in Europe. He also stated that Turkey supports NATO as the primary institution for the security and defense of Europe and seeks to strengthen the Turkish role in European security and defense. He stated that Turkey achieved a considerable degree of success in reaching these goals in the 1990s as a "virtual member" of the Western European Union (WEU). This victory was only temporary, however, due to the Saint Malo Agreement of 1998 which began the process of moving security and defense functions into the EU structure and away from the WEU.

He also stated that the Cyprus issue has continued to generate problems for Turkish membership in the EU, but in general, Turkish foreign policy has been in line with EU foreign policy. The speaker asserted that it is possible that the United States as a P-5 member and the world's sole superpower might help to break the deadlock on Cyprus. At the current time, it is not clear what sort of a relationship Cyprus would like to have with NATO, but it is doubtful Turkey would acquiesce in a Partnership for Peace agreement in the absence of a larger agreement. The speaker suggested that the EU may have made a strategic blunder in accepting Cyprus as a full member.

The speaker also stated that NATO's importance for Turkey remains undiminished despite the end of the Cold War. He maintained that Turkey's exclusion from EU security structures also underscored the importance of NATO to Turkey. He noted that almost all of the issues being discussed by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) were of serious concern to Turkey. He stated that Turkish and overall NATO threat assessments tend to focus on many of the same problems, and that Turkey views

NATO as both a political and military organization with a role that is not limited strictly to military matters. The political role would include NATO's use as a platform for alliance members to discuss global and regional issues with a security dimension.

The next presentation was given by a U.S. Government official, providing the perspective of the current administration. The speaker talked about the need to rebuild U.S.-Turkish relations. He stated that he believed that 2003 provided a major opportunity to improve and elevate the partnership, but this "slipped through our fingers." He nevertheless noted that Turkey and the United States have a great deal to offer each other. He stated that Turkey is a "shining example" of, but not a model for, wider democracy in the Islamic world. He noted that democracy will look different in every country. The special role for the military in Turkish democracy may be an approach unique to the Turkish system.

The speaker noted that Caspian energy projects could pull Turkey into the Caucasus in a constructive way. He suggested that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the South Caucasus pipeline projects were enormously successful and have opened up a major source of investment linking the Caspian Sea to Europe. He noted that the gas from these projects will not be used by Turkey but will instead go to Europe. He stated that some of the inefficiencies in the European energy sector will be addressed by the increased competition created with Caspian gas development.

The speaker acknowledged that differences between the United States and Turkey over the PKK have caused problems between the two countries, but suggested that these differences were being overcome. The United States helped to turn around the mood in Europe regarding the PKK and its terrorist activities. The speaker noted that the appointment of General Joseph Ralston as a U.S. Special Envoy countering the PKK has been extremely valuable in providing a specific individual to lead the efforts to address these problems in conjunction with our Turkish allies.

The final panel addressed the search for regional stability. The first speaker noted that a variety of new problems affecting Turkey were emerging in the Middle East, including the sharpening of some differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites and the potential strategic vacuum in Iraq. He stated that the potential destabilization of Iran was of serious concern because it could have a further negative impact of Turkey's Kurds. He stated that the Baker-Hamilton report was compatible with Turkish values.

The next speaker spoke on Turkey's new Middle East activism. He noted that since 1991 Turkey has played an increasingly important role in the Middle East, reversing earlier decades of neglect and disinterest. This interest

began with the Gulf crisis and war in 1990-91 and was accelerated by ongoing problems in northern Iraq following the U.S. ouster of Saddam Hussein. While the Turks did not like Saddam Hussein, they saw him as helping to assure stability on their southern border. They also remain angry about the 2003 war and the upsurge of violence in the Kurdish areas of Turkey that began in June 2004. The speaker quoted a poll by the German Marshall Fund that reported Turkey had the lowest approval rating among Europeans for President Bush's handling of international affairs. Of the Turkish public, 81 percent disapprove of his approach, while only 7 percent approve.

The speaker noted that Turkey's greater involvement in the Middle East has been reflected in its efforts to strengthen ties to regional neighbors. Turkey also has strongly improved its relations with Syria and Iran, largely due to a shared concern about uncontained Kurdish nationalism. The Turks are also interested in better relations with Iran for energy-related reasons. The speaker also noted that Turkey's policies toward Israel have undergone important shifts under the Erdogan government which is more pro-Palestinian than its predecessors.

The final speaker noted that while the EU and the United States had differing policies on Turkey, they sometimes employed similar reductionist arguments against the Turks, with certain elements within both the EU and the United States viewing Turkey as "the other." She noted that Turkey's neighborhood is the main focus of EU security concerns, and chauvinistic approaches to Turkey are consequently pursued only at great peril. She suggested that Turkey is playing an important role in subregional integration and is playing a major role in four central Asian republics. She also stated that Iran, the EU, and Turkey share a number of interests and can productively work together.

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This colloquium brief is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

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