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BEYOND 'BRIDGES,' 'CROSSROADS' AND 'BUFFER ZONES':
DEFINING A NEW INTERNATIONAL ROLE FOR TURKEY

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Introduction: Turkey in Metaphors

When US President George W. Bush, attending the NATO Summit in Istanbul in June 2004, delivered his speech in support of Turkey's EU membership at Galatasaray University, near the shores of the Bosphorus, two landmarks were in the background: Ortaköy Camii, a baroque Ottoman mosque and the Bosphorus Bridge linking Europe and Asia.¹

The location of the speech was meaningful in the sense that it eloquently illustrated Turkey's commonly ascribed international role: a Muslim country that used to be a buffer zone during the Cold War against the Soviet Union, located at the crossroads of East and West, with the capability of bridging the two.

This essay advances two arguments that challenge this prevailing view regarding Turkey's role in contemporary world politics. First, I argue that Cold War era metaphors such as bridges, crossroads, and buffer zones are not the best parameters to use to describe Turkey's role in the post-9/11 world. These metaphors are misleading because they convey a preset expectation

¹ George W. Bush, "Bush Says Democracy Will Bring Justice, Freedom, Prosperity, 29 June 2004," available at <http://usinfo.state.gov/utills/printpage.html> .

of uniformity and a degree of passivity in Turkish foreign policy across regions and issues areas.² By examining Turkey's engagement with three different regions—the post-Soviet space, Europe and the Middle East—I demonstrate that the nature of the ties that Turkey has with these regions is different, and consequently, these metaphors are ineffective in formulating Turkey's response to its new geopolitical environment.

Second, I develop the argument that, Turkish foreign policy, which is known for its elitism and isolation from domestic politics will in the coming years influence and be influenced by Turkey's internal dynamics more than ever before. The domestic-level dynamics of Turkey, such as business lobbies shaping Turkey's ties to the post-Soviet space, the internal cleavages of Turkey partially determining the European Union (EU)-Turkey relationship, and the nationalist reflex that might be triggered depending on the formulation of a policy for the Armenian, Kurdish and Cyprus questions, will become as important as the external ones, like the EU and US foreign policy towards Turkey.

The opportunity and challenge determining Turkey's engagement with different regions in this post-9/11 world, in other words, will depend on accepting the reality that the scope of Turkey's ties with different regions is unique and that in the foreseeable future, these ties, and thus Turkey's engagement, will very much be dependent on domestic factors.

Strictly Business? Turkey in the post-Soviet Space

In the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey and Russia started their relationship off on a sour note. Some Turkish leaders saw the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to expand Turkey's sphere of influence over the Turkic republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia with which Turkey was ethnically associated. When American policy makers' desire to promote Turkey as a "model" country (Muslim yet secular and democratic)

² The "activism," and passivity, for that matter, in Turkish foreign policy have been studied by various scholars. Just to cite a few: Alan Makovsky, "The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy," *SAIS Review*, Vol. 19, No.1, (Winter/Spring 1999), pp. 92-113; Alan Makovsky and Sabri Sayari, eds., *Turkey's New World: Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: WINEP, 2000); Philip Robbins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*, (London: Hurst and Company: 2003); Sabri Sayari, "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post Cold War Era," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (Fall 2000), pp. 169-183; Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey in a Changing Security Environment," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (Fall 2000), pp. 183-199.

was coupled with the overconfident slogans of Turkish leaders insinuating the possible union of all “Turks” “from the Adriatic Sea to the Chinese Wall,” Russia started to perceive Turkey as a rival vying for influence in its backyard.

By the mid-1990s, however, it became clear that Turkey could have no such sphere of influence in the region. Especially after several diplomatic *faux pas* between Turkey and Azerbaijan and Turkey and Uzbekistan, it became clear that Turkey, already consumed with its own domestic problems and the love/hate relationship with Europe, had neither the means nor the energy to become a model for these newly independent Turkic countries.

This reality regarding Turkey’s capability in the region not only tamed Russia’s fears, but, in some sense, prepared the ground for economic cooperation between Turkey and Russia. For example, in the years immediately before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the volume of trade between Turkey and the Soviet Union was only around \$400 million. This number increased to \$1.5 billion following the collapse of the Soviet Union and rose to \$8.5 billion in 2004.³ While Turkey and Russia have become each others’ leading trade partners, Turkey has not been able to attain such trade volumes with any of the post-Soviet states including the Turkic ones, despite the establishment of diplomatic ties filled with the rhetoric of brotherhood.

The most important traded good between Turkey and Russia is now the natural gas delivered from Russia to Turkey through the Blue Stream Pipeline underneath the Black Sea. Launched in January 2003 to augment the natural gas deliveries coming to Turkey via the Balkans, Blue Stream boosted the volume of trade between the two countries. However, more than increasing trade volume, Blue Stream demonstrates the power of the business lobbies both in Russia and Turkey.⁴ First, Blue Stream was selected over the Trans-Caspian pipeline that

³ Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu, “Rusya Ülke Bülteni, January 2005,” available at <http://www.deik.org.tr/bultenler/2005117111242Rusya-Ocak2005.pdf>, p. 14. These numbers do not include “shuttle-trade” between Russia and Turkey, Turkish investments in Russia, which are estimated to have reached 1.5 billion dollars in the recent years, and also construction projects undertaken by Turkish companies since the end of the Soviet Union that are believed to be around 13 to 15 billion dollars. *Ibid*, p. 17. Russian investments in Turkey, for the time being, are much smaller, estimated to be around 50 million dollars according to Foreign Economic Relations Board. Others account it to be around 200-300 million. See for example, Mustafa Ünal and Mirza Çetinkaya, “Russian Investors to Participate in Privatization,” *Zaman*. July 19, 2005.

⁴ Gareth M. Winrow, “Pivotal State or Energy Supplicant? Domestic Structure, External Actors, and the Turkish Policy in the Caucasus,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, (2003), pp. 89, 90, 91; Zeyno Baran, “Corruption: The Turkish Challenge,” *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (2000), pp. 140-141.

would have delivered cheaper gas from Turkmenistan to Turkey.⁵ Second, Blue Stream was constructed despite warnings about the downside of being tied to one country for natural gas deliveries.⁶ Third, before, during and after its construction, the pipeline was mired in allegations of corruption for overpricing and for advance and excess payments favoring Russian and Turkish companies that had close ties to Russia.⁷ In other words, Blue Stream was not only a technological marvel for being the deepest underwater natural gas pipeline, but also highlighted the power of business lobbies in Turkey and Russia to dictate political decisions.

Because this higher economic cooperation coincided with a decrease of political tension between Turkey and Russia some observers have accused Russia and Turkey of joining forces and have claimed that Turkey is moving towards “Eurasianism.”⁸ It is true that Turkey and Russia have managed to overcome a long list of political problems ranging from Russian opposition to the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, to perceptions of Turkey as a rival, and from mutual accusations of harboring the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK) and Chechen fighters to the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE).⁹ Still, it seems premature to assume Eurasianism. With the reduction in political tension, the link between Turkey and Russia is turning out to be more and more “strictly business” pushed by the business elites and seemingly devoid of politics. And, when politics is lacking it may be difficult to make a strategic alliance.

The ties are likely to be politicized if the threat perceptions of either Turkey or Russia change, and they start engaging in deeper military cooperation. In terms of military cooperation, Turkey and Russia (along with several other countries) came together under BLACKSEAFOR

⁵ Harun Gürek, “Moskova’da Ne İşiniz Var?” *Milliyet*, October 7, 1999

⁶ Şükrü Elekdağ, “Mavi İhanet,” *Milliyet*, May 13, 2001; Abdullah Muradoğlu, “Mavi İhanet,” *Yeni Şafak*, November 5, 1999; Gülümhan Gülten, “Enerjide İran ve Rusya’ya Tam Bağımlılık MGK’yı Tedirgin Etti,” *Vatan*, November 11, 2005. These fears came to be true in late January 2006.

⁷ “Turkey: Former BOTAŞ Officials to Be Investigated for Blue Stream ‘Corruption,’” *Anatolia, News Agency*, October 9, 2002; Ahmet Kıvanç, “Kapitülasyon Geri Geldi,” *Radikal*, December 5, 2005.

⁸ Zeyno Baran, “The Future of Democracy in the Black Sea Area,” Testimony Before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 8, 2005, available at <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2005/BaranTestimony050308.pdf>, p. 10; Claude Salhani, “Eurasianism, an EU alternative?” *UPI International*, December 22, 2005; Bruce Pitcairn Jackson, “The Future of Democracy in the Black Sea Area,” Testimony Before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 8, 2005, available at <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2005/JacksonTestimony050308.pdf>.

⁹ Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, “Turkish-Russian Relations: The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership,” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (Spring 2000), pp. 59-82.

and also held several joint military exercises.¹⁰ Furthermore, in the past few years, Russia has frequently expressed interest in selling combat helicopters to Turkey.¹¹ In January 2006, in addition to the helicopters, Russia offered to jointly manufacture S-300 missiles—the same missiles that once led to a crisis between Turkey and Russia because of their possible sale to Greek Cypriots.¹² While military ties are likely to politicize relations between the two, military cooperation is likely to expand business ties as well.

This “strictly business” attitude is now an observable trend in Turkish foreign policy towards the Turkic republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia as well, and is likely to remain so. Once it became clear a Turkish foreign policy based on unrealistic assumptions of ethnic affiliation would not work, pragmatism became the main pillar of Turkish foreign policy towards these countries. That is, Turkey aligned its interests with the interests of the great powers, and mostly preferred protecting Turkish economic interests in the region. When the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan took place in May 2005, for example, Turkey recommended “caution” and “common sense” to the Uzbek people and made sure that the Uzbeks remove the small Turkish flag from the four-wheel drive vehicles, donated earlier by Turkey, that were used in crushing the uprising.¹³ Similarly, during the riots that followed the Kyrgyz presidential elections in March 2005, Turkey evacuated its citizens from Kyrgyzstan, declared that it would work with the group that assumed power and tried pressure the Kyrgyz government for the payment of the damage incurred to Turkish businesses during the riots.¹⁴

Among the post-Soviet countries, the most politically complicated relation that Turkey has (or, does not have, to be more precise) is with Armenia. What makes the non-existent ties so politically complicated is the existence of several political conundrums: the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the mixed statements of Armenian leaders on genocide and the Turkish embargo on Armenia—all intertwined with each other.

¹⁰ “Russia-Turkey Hold Joint Naval Exercises,” *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, May 4, 2005; “Russia: Russia-Turkey Hold Joint Military Maneuvers,” Interfax quoted in *FBIS-UMA-98-291*, October 18, 1998.

¹¹ Ümit Enginsoy and Burak Ege Bekdil, “Old Rivals Turkey, Russia Forge New Ties,” *DefenseNews.Com*, March 21, 2005.

¹² Metehan Demir, “Füze Kalkanı,” *Sabah*, January 23, 2006.

¹³ Elif Ünal Arslan, “No Appetite for Central Asia,” *Turkish Daily News*, May 22, 2005; “Turkey Urges Uzbek Government to Act With Commonsense,” *Turkish Daily News*, May 16, 2005; “Taşkent’e Jip Uyarısı,” *Radikal*, May 22, 2005.

¹⁴ “Türklere Saldırı,” *Radikal*, March 26, 2005

Turkey has stated that without the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, it is unlikely that Turkey will open the land border with Armenia, end the embargo and establish diplomatic ties. The Nagorno-Karabakh problem, however, despite the numerous behind the scenes meetings of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, has not been resolved so far. Yet the conundrum might get even more convoluted if the EU during Turkey's accession negotiations insists on the fulfillment of "Turkey's unequivocal commitment to good neighborly relations" and ask for the betterment of its ties with Armenia.¹⁵ This could mean either opening the land border and establishing diplomatic ties or granting some level of recognition to genocide, without waiting for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

Despite the not-so-publicized meetings that took place between Armenian and Turkish diplomats,¹⁶ civilian initiatives like Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Council, and the recent steps taken towards openly discussing the Armenian genocide in academic circles, Turkey's readiness to establish ties with Armenia is debatable. Even an acknowledgment of "the events of 1915" (let alone the recognition of "genocide") is likely to enrage not only the nationalists both on the right and the left of the political spectrum (the so-called Kızıl elma coalition), but also might create public resentment in Turkey in general. So, if the improvement of ties becomes one of the *sine qua non*s of the EU, and if it involves conditions that might be considered concessions by the Turkish side, this might mean lessening of support for the pro-EU AKP government in the years to come.

Put differently, with the exception of Armenia, Turkey in the post-Soviet space is currently maintaining a "strictly business" attitude. Though there is nothing wrong with this, the challenge here will be to root out corrupt business-state ties that can dangerously impair political decision making. Yet given the intertwined nature of these ties both in Turkey and most of the post-Soviet space, it is a very difficult thing to do. Driven by the business lobbies, these lucrative business ties, especially with Russia, are likely to be maintained in the near future. However, the relations between Turkey and Russia might develop a political component as the military cooperation between the two deepens.

¹⁵ "Negotiating Framework," Article 2, available at http://www.abhaber.com/haber_sayfasi.asp?id=7718.

¹⁶ "Ermenilerle Gizli Buluşma," *Milliyet*, July 13, 2005.

Strictly an Ideal? Turkey and Europe

Since the start of the Westernization movement in Ottoman times, Europe has been an 'object of desire' as well as a 'source of anguish' for Turks. These conflicting emotions, due to Turks' yearning to be accepted as part of Europe and Europe's constant refusal to accept them, have persisted since Turkey began its European journey with the signing of Ankara Agreement in 1963. Turkey's application for full membership in 1987 was followed by frequent episodes of hopes raised and dashed, until finally, on October 3, 2005, the EU started accession negotiations with Turkey. The negotiations will undoubtedly include more episodes of hopes raised and dashed because, Turkey's EU membership, more than an ideal has turned into a two-level strategic game à la Robert Putnam, in which there will be three games to watch:¹⁷ the negotiations between Turkey and the EU, the attitudes of constituencies within EU towards Turkey, and most crucially the attitude of various cleavages within Turkey.

First, the negotiations themselves are not likely to be easy. By including statements in the framework agreement referring to the "open-ended"¹⁸ nature of the negotiations and their possible suspension "of them in the case of a serious and persistent breach...of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law..."¹⁹ the EU has the upper hand.

Second, it has become clear on several occasions that Turkey's EU membership may become an important election campaign issue in the EU countries, where the public negatively regards Turkey's membership in the EU. Such was the case during the September 2005 elections in Germany. Austria's last minute objection just before October 3, the date set for the start of the accession talks, was also partially attributed to the local elections held in Austria around that time. Furthermore, Turkey is likely to be on the agenda in the upcoming French presidential elections. If this high level of Turco-scepticism²⁰ in the EU persists, Turkey's EU membership will be exploited as an election issue even if Turkey does its EU homework. This exploitation

¹⁷ Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (1988), pp. 427-460.

¹⁸ "Negotiating Framework," Article 2, available at http://www.abhaber.com/haber_sayfasi.asp?id=7718.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Article 5.

²⁰ According to a recent poll taken by TNS Sofres in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Britain and Poland in December 2005, 40% of those surveyed were in favor of Turkey's EU membership while 46% of them were opposed to the idea. See "Support for Turkey's EU Membership Diminishes," *Turkish Daily News*, December 4, 2005.

might prove especially detrimental towards the end of the 10-15 year negotiation period projected for Turkey.

Third and most critical is the continued support for the pro-EU AKP government during the negotiations. Ali Babacan, State Minister in Charge of Economic Affairs, who has been appointed as Turkey's chief negotiator, has said "the real negotiations will take place within Turkey."²¹ What he meant was that it would be more difficult to persuade various groups within Turkey of the need for further EU harmonization than to persuade Europeans to let Turkey in. According to a poll that appeared in *Milliyet* in October 2005, 67% of those surveyed said that they wanted Turkey to become an EU member, but only 40% of those thought that Turkey could become a full member, indicating some level of skepticism.²² The negotiations will mean more adjustment and harmonization, but if various groups in Turkey start perceiving these negotiations as irrevocable concessions, the support for EU and thus for the AKP might diminish or totally disappear in the elections expected in late 2007. The possible weakening of support might mean two things: either replacement of the AKP, which at the moment is not quite likely, or the formation a coalition government, slowing down the pace of EU-led reforms, and drawing the wrath of the EU.

Moreover, at the domestic level several elements and issues will be vital in maintaining the support for Turkey's EU membership (though with some levels of skepticism) as well as for the pro-EU AKP: the business community, the military, the AKP's own and potential voters, and the (re)emerging nationalists (the Kızılelma Coalition) as well as thorny issues such as the Armenian issue, the Kurdish issue, and the Cyprus question as well as AKP's response to the EU's demands on these issues.

For now, a large part of the business community represented by TÜSİAD, is one of the most important supporters of the AKP-led reforms. Recently, in December 2005, while TÜSİAD commended the AKP government for recent privatizations in Turkey, at the same time, it was very critical about several issues, among which was the perceived slowness of the AKP government in the EU process.²³ MÜSİAD, which brings religiously conservative businesspeople together, though initially opposed to Turkey's customs union with the EU, now

²¹ Can Dündar, "Asıl Müzakere İçerde Olacak," *Milliyet*, July 28, 2005.

²² AB'ye Bizi Alırlar Mı?" *Milliyet*, October 14, 2005.

²³ "Ankara Çıkışı," *Milliyet*, December 21, 2005.

says that it is not against the EU, but rather against the idea of unconditional support given to the EU.²⁴ Clearly, there is a variation in the level of support from the business community, but at the moment, their support seems firm.

Despite the pro-EU rhetoric²⁵ maintained by the Turkish armed forces, the Turkish military's support for the EU, on the other hand, is a conditional one. Though, at times, the military objects to various steps taken by the government, especially on minority issues, and also resents the EU for not "understanding the Turkish military's social role."²⁶ As Ersel Aydınli et al., argued in a recent article the military is likely to support the EU process, as long as it is quite certain that the EU will provide acceptable solutions, especially for the Kurdish and Cyprus questions and for rising Islam.²⁷

Another group whose support for the AKP might fluctuate is the AKP's own constituency. There are two interesting details regarding AKP voters. First, the voters who carried the AKP, a party which mostly was formed by the defectors from the hard-line Islamist National View Movement, to power in November 2002, expect the AKP to keep its pre-election promises on issues such as head scarves, religious vocational schools, etc. Second, the polls conducted before and after the November 2002 election showed that AKP supporters are Eurosceptics who neither fully reject nor fully embrace Turkey's EU membership.²⁸ So, if the AKP's own voters think that the AKP is too occupied with the EU, but the EU, as promised, is not solving their problems, the voters might decide not to lend the support that they previously gave at the ballot box. Erdoğan's comments on adultery while the new Turkish Penal Code was being drafted, on the role of "ulema" in having a final say on the headscarf issue, and the recent

²⁴ Harun Odabaşı, "AB'yi Destekleme Misyonumuz Yok," *Aksiyon*, June 28, 2004. MÜSİAD also claims that "EU's human rights, basic freedoms ve rule of law criteria is a strait jacket for people who carry a Muslim identity." "MÜSİAD'ın AB Raporu," *Yeni Mesaj*, April 4, 2005.

²⁵ One of the latest examples of this support came from the Chief of Staff, Hilmi Özkök who said that "EU is a mean to carry Turkey, established by immortal leader Atatürk, beyond the level of contemporary civilizations," during his Victory Day speech. Semih İdiz, "Hilmi Paşa'nın AB Yanlısı Mesajları," *Milliyet*, 29 August 2005.

²⁶ "Komutandan Üç Önemli Mesaj," *Milliyet*, August 25, 2005; "Türkiye Filistin Haline Getirilmek İsteniyor," *Vatan*, August 31, 2005.

²⁷ Ersel Aydınli et al., "The Turkish Military's March Toward Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, (January/February 2006), pp. 77-90.

²⁸ Hakan Yılmaz, "Europeanization and Its Discontents: Evidence from Turkey," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the ECPR, 18-21 September 2003, Marburg, Germany, p. 12.

attempt to ease restrictions on vocational high school graduates (which naturally includes religious high school graduates as well) to attend university can be considered a move, at least at the rhetorical level, to please the AKP's own constituency.²⁹ However, the silver lining regarding voter support is that if the AKP progresses well with EU negotiations, manages to maintain the macroeconomic stability that was gained with the help of the IMF, and helps alleviate unemployment, it might get the support of those that initially did not support AKP. Put differently, given Turkish people's (skeptical) desire to join the EU, AKP might ride the EU wave to power the second time around.

When people's attitudes in general are considered, the AKP's stance or capability to find solutions to the Armenian, Kurdish and Cyprus issues will be quite important in determining the level of nationalistic reflex, the support for the AKP and, in some sense, Turkey's drive towards the EU. Similar to the Armenian question, if Europe asks for the fulfillment of conditions in Kurdish issue that might be perceived as concessions by the Turks, and if the Cyprus question remains unresolved despite Turkey's goodwill,³⁰ and more importantly, if the EU changes the goalposts for Turkey's membership creating double standards, those resenting the EU and thus the AKP's EU pursuit, might increase, possibly expanding this anti-EU nationalistic constituency in Turkey.

In sum, Turkey's relationship with the EU has become more than an ideal; it has turned into a strategic game. What remains to be seen in Turkey-EU relations is how these three different games, two at the domestic level, one at the international level, will be played out. Persuading the public on both sides, Turkey and EU, will be challenging yet crucial. And here, much of the burden of proof rests with Turkey. What Turkey should do is an essay topic of its own, but suffice it to say, given the "open-ended," "suspendable" and "resumable" nature of the negotiations, along with the better application of the EU led reforms, Turkey needs to make more

²⁹ Interestingly, in the past year, articles in Turkish media referring to AKP's 'fatigue' started to appear more frequently than ever. See for example, "AKP'den Umutluyduk," *Milliyet*, December 26, 2005; M. Ali Kışlalı, "AKP Dengesi Bozulurken," *Radikal*, December 24, 2005; Hasan Cemal, "AKP'ye Karşı 'Ama'lı Vozurdama Başlamış," *Milliyet*, May 3, 2005. See also Etyen Mahçupyan who argues that this a deliberate attempt to inflict damage on AKP. "Bu Adamlar..." *Gazetem.Net*, January 22, 2006.

³⁰ For EU complicating the situation in Cyprus see, Meltem Müftüler Bac and Aylin Güney, "The EU and the Cyprus Problem, 1961-2003," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2, (March 2005), pp. 281-293.

persuasive and detailed arguments justifying its EU bid both in Turkey and in the EU. In a worst-case scenario, in which Turkey's EU membership ends with something other than full membership, doomsday scenarios like Turkey becoming "the hotbed of anti-Americanism and extremism,"³¹ are premature. After all, Turkey has at least 10 more years and during that period the EU might become an entirely different entity.

Strictly Political? Turkey, the Middle East and the United States

The Iraq War that started in March 2003 opened a 'Pandora's Box' in US-Turkey relations. While the war itself became the source of all the misfortunes that drove the relation between the two countries downhill, it also trapped hope—hope for the betterment of relations.

All wars are unfortunate, but the misfortunes of Iraq War were more than plenty. First of all, like many other people around the world, the Turkish people, were against the war in Iraq.³² Second, the government and the Turkish military were slightly more enthusiastic towards the war, but their enthusiasm was not enough to pass the motion through the Turkish Grand National Assembly to allow American troops use of Turkish soil and open a Northern Front in the war.³³ This not only spoiled months of diplomatic negotiations between Turkey and the US, but also American war plans, earning Turkey the 'unreliable anti-American' partner label. The tension between Turkey and the US and thus the unpopularity of the US in Turkey (and around the world as well) further grew as the so-called "Çuval Olayı," or "Hood Incident" (in which Turkish special forces operating in Iraq were captured by US forces), the torture at Abu Ghraib Prison, detainees at Guantanamo, and the bloody suppression of the resistance in Fallujah and Tal Afar started to appear in the media. In the mean time, a Turkish-Syrian rapprochement that took place just as the US wanted to isolate Syria, made this 'unreliable anti-American partner' label that Turkey had received earlier even firmer. When, on the other hand, Erdoğan accused Israel of committing "state terror," against the Palestinians, it led to the cooling of relations with Israel, in a sense, damaging a partnership that was in the making since the early 1990s.³⁴

But more than anything, the Iraq War made two issues an alarming concern for Turkey: the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state in Iraq—out of the fear that it might set a

³¹ David L. Phillips, "Turkey's Dreams of Accession," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 5, (September/October 2004), pp. 86-97.

precedent for Kurds elsewhere, including in Turkey, and the PKK's rise from grave, which after finding a safe haven in Northern Iraq, resumed its terrorist activities in Turkey.

The new Iraqi constitution has confirmed Turkish fears by giving Kurds autonomy. From Turkey's point of view, the best hope is that all groups in Iraq (and thus Iraq) stay together and that Kurdish autonomy does not turn into full independence—creating a breakaway Kurdish state. Turkey has come to accept this reality by organizing a meeting in Istanbul bringing together Sunni parties of Iraq before the Iraqi elections.³⁵ Though Iraqi elections are over, it still is in Turkey's interest to maintain its efforts to keep Iraq together.

However, considering US-Turkey relations and Turkey's own security, the resolution of the PKK problem is where both the opportunity and challenge lie. Turkey has held the American occupation in Iraq responsible for creating ideal conditions for the resuscitation of the PKK in Northern Iraq. Consequently, it has asked the US to take military measures against the PKK.³⁶ But so far, according to the media, although the US has said that the PKK is a “common problem” of Turkey, Iraq and the US, it has argued that the military measures should be taken by the Iraqis, and has limited its obligations only to “the elimination of the financial sources of the PKK and creating a framework to bring those that have committed crimes to justice.”³⁷

However, although American help is needed to fight the PKK in Northern Iraq, much of the solution for the PKK and the Kurdish question rests within the internal dynamics of Turkey. The first step is defining the nature of the problem. Despite the opening made in the Kurdish question during the Özal years, the Turkish military mostly continues to argue that the problem in South Eastern Turkey is one of security.³⁸ The AKP government, or, to be more correct, Erdoğan, on the other hand, has accepted, at least at the rhetorical level, the presence of a

³² According to a poll conducted by EOS Gallup, only 43% of the respondents in Turkey saw Iraq as a threat. See “Gallup: Türkler Irak'tan Çekinmiyor,” *Milliyet*, January 31, 2003.

³³ See for example, “Türkiye Savaşın Gidişatını Değiştirebilecek Konumda,” *Milliyet*, January 9, 2003; “ABD Kürtleri Frenleyecek,” *Milliyet*, January 31, 2003.

³⁴ “Erdoğan'dan İsrail ve ABD'ye Kınama,” *Hürriyet*, May 20, 2004. For the making of relations with Israel in the 1990s, see for example, Robbins, *Suits and Uniforms*, pp. 239-270.

³⁵ “Sünni Araplarla İstanbul Uzlaşısı,” *Radikal*, December 6, 2005. Also the attack on Turkey's Ambassador to Iraq was blamed on Turkey's broker role. “Bagdad Elçisine Pusu,” *Radikal*, January 3, 2006.

³⁶ “İşte Amerika'nın Göz Yumdukları,” *Milliyet*, August 4, 2005.

³⁷ Matt Bryza quoted in Fikret Bila, “ABD: Kandili Bombalamak Sorunu Çözmez,” *Milliyet*, August 27, 2005.

³⁸ “Güneydoğudaki Güvenlik Sorunu,” *Vatan*, September 1, 2005.

“Kurdish question,” that “in the past big mistakes had been made,” and the government was willing to find a solution “with more democracy, more civil rights and more prosperity.”³⁹ The Kurds themselves, on the other hand, also seem undecided. While some Kurds have distanced themselves from the PKK, others have been unwilling to do so.⁴⁰

Other than defining the nature of the Kurdish problem, there should be two additional things on Turkey’s checklist for the resolution of it: real application of the EU-led reforms in minority rights, and approaching all of Eastern Turkey through a “human security” framework. First, though symbolic, Kurds, as a result of EU reforms in Turkey, finally got the right to teach and broadcast in their language. This may be extended in a way that will enable their voices be heard through democratic means, such as the lowering of the threshold for the parliamentary elections.⁴¹ Second, fulfilling “human security,” i.e. resolving the region’s poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment and political violence problems might provide some of the solutions that Turkey is looking for. Overall, although the roots of and the solutions for the PKK and Kurdish questions are partially located abroad, it will be the internal dynamics of Turkey that will be decisive in ending the problem. The Turkish state’s conduct in this matter will either cause Turkey to be commended or condemned in the international arena, especially affecting its engagement with the EU.

Along with the PKK question, the Cyprus question and engagement with Iran and Syria will become litmus tests for US-Turkey relations in the near future. The Turkish expectation for Cyprus is that American diplomatic pressure should translate into concrete policies that will end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots.⁴² In the case of Iran, Turkey has declared that a nuclear Iran will create “discomfort” for Turkey, yet like the EU, it wishes to solve the problem through diplomacy-- unlike the US that wants to take stronger measures.⁴³ Regarding Syria, Turkey has stated that its policy is very similar to the rest of the international community and has recently advised Syria to cooperate with the UN in the Hariri assassination.⁴⁴ At the same time, through

³⁹ “Kürt Sorunu Demokrasi İle Çözülür,” *Radikal*, August 11, 2005; “Meydanlar Boş Kaldı,” *Milliyet*, August 13, 2005.

⁴⁰ Karl Vick, “As Turkey Reaches Out, Kurdish Politicians Look Back,” *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2005; Neşe Düzel, “Derin Devletle Apo’nun Çıkarları Aynı,” *Radikal*, August 22, 2005.

⁴¹ This was also on Osman Baydemir’s list. “AB’ye Kartlarını Açtı,” *Milliyet*, September 10, 2005.

⁴² Ali Tuygan, “The Present and Future of Turkish-American Relations: Ankara’s Perspective,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol.7, No.1, (January-March 2005), pp. 22-29.

⁴³ “Alpogan’dan İran Uyarısı,” *Sabah*, January 23, 2006.

⁴⁴ “Sonunuz Irak Gibi Olmasın,” *Milliyet*, November 17, 2005.

high-level visits, Turkey maintained ties with Syria, which was not quite liked by the Americans.⁴⁵ Apart from the fact that Syria and Iran are Turkey's neighbors and Turkey would not like to see any more turmoil in its immediate neighborhood, there are two other reasons why Turkey is taking this "soft power" approach. First, Turkey wants to align its foreign policy with the EU, which, as argued by Graham Fuller, might increase the tension between the US and Turkey, if the "Transatlantic gap" gets larger.⁴⁶ Second, Turkey wants to play a "benign power"⁴⁷ or a "facilitator"⁴⁸ role in the Middle East, and has shown its intention not only in the case of Syria and Iran, but also when it brought Pakistan and Israel together as well as the Sunni groups of Iraq.⁴⁹ Although this is a good public relations move, it is more a matter of capability than intention. Because Turkey's foreign policy alignment will probably be with the EU, what is left for Turkey and the US is finding common ground (rather than a realignment) on the issues discussed above. If no common ground is found, Turkey's ability to conduct an independent foreign policy in the Middle East will likely be limited, since Turkey will be facing the hegemon of the world—the United States—in the Middle East.

Yet Turkey and US can let hope, which got trapped in the first place, out of 'Pandora's Box.' This is not the first period of high tension in US-Turkey relations. Since ties were established between the two countries in the aftermath of World War II, there were two other periods, in the 1960s and in the 1970s,⁵⁰ when the two countries were at loggerheads. But the existence of common interests and the possibility of cooperation got the US-Turkey relationship back on track. More importantly, even during the crisis caused by the Iraq War, the US and Turkey continued to help each other. Turkey, for example, gave its *mea culpa* by letting the US

⁴⁵ "Sezer: Suriye Gezisi Gerçekleşecek," *Milliyet*, March 16, 2005.

⁴⁶ Graham E. Fuller, "Turkey's Strategic Model: Myths and Realities," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3, (Summer 2004), p. 59. See also Soner Çağaptay, "Where Goes the US-Turkish Relationship?" *Middle East Quarterly*, (Fall 2004), available at <http://www.meforum.org/article/657>.

⁴⁷ Ziya Öniş and Sühnaz Yılmaz, "The Turkey-EU-US Triangle in Perspective: Transformation or Continuity?" *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 59 No. 2, (2005) pp. 265-284.

⁴⁸ Abdullah Gül, "Turkey's Role in a Changing Middle East Environment," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No.1, (Winter 2004), pp. 1-7.

⁴⁹ "Pakistan İle İsrail İstanbul'da Buluştu," *Milliyet*, September 2, 2005; "Sünni Araplarla İstanbul Uzlaşısı," *Radikal*, December 6, 2005.

⁵⁰ Robbins, *Suits and Uniforms*, pp. 129-135.

use İncirlik as a “strategic base.”⁵¹ Though at times it backfired, the US support for Turkey’s EU membership was crucial.⁵² Overall, a realignment of US-Turkish interests seems unlikely, yet finding common ground in the issues mentioned above is still possible. And this would not only be politics *par excellence*, but would also show that there is still hope for US-Turkey ties.

Conclusion: Metaphors in Turkey

The examination of Turkey’s recent foreign policy towards three regions, namely the post-Soviet space, Europe and the Middle East, shows that the nature of the ties that Turkey has established with these three different regions are all different from one other. This means that clichéd metaphors (Turkey being a “bridge,” a country at the “crossroads,” a “buffer zone”) developed during the Cold War to explain and to guide Turkish foreign policy, which assumed uniformity and passiveness, are no longer useful.

The post-Soviet space, for example, with the exception of Armenia, became the region in which business ties came to dominate Turkish foreign policy making. Though, some of these very corrupt business ties need to be curbed, the domination of business in foreign policy making is likely to remain. But a deepening military cooperation with Russia might alter this, infusing politics into the equation. Turkey’s ties with Europe have become more than an ideal, turning into a strategic game. The conduct of Middle Eastern politics, on the other hand, will determine the degree of improvement of US-Turkey ties as well as Turkey’s possible broker role in this region.

What is common in the analysis of Turkey’s international relations with these three regions is the domestic-international linkage. That is, Turkey’s international relations are not only influencing the domestic level variables, but domestic level variables are determining the level of Turkey’s engagement, and thus the opportunities and challenges that Turkey is facing. For instance, in the post-Soviet space, powerful Turkish business conglomerates have become the driving force in Turkey’s ties to this region. The possible establishment of ties with Armenia, as might be proposed by the EU, can lead to a fluctuation in the level of support for the pro-EU AKP government. Similarly, the Kurdish and Cyprus questions will be decisive in Turkey’s relations with the EU and the US. But, to a large degree, it will be the internal dynamics of

⁵¹ “Ziyaret Öncesi İncirlik Jesti,” *Radikal*, June 6, 2005.

⁵² “Teşekkürler Sam Amca,” *Milliyet*, October 6, 2005.

Turkey that will play an important role in the resolution of these issues. While the attitude of the Turkish military will be critical in the Kurdish and Cyprus questions, the firm application of the EU-led reforms and the alleviation of the underdevelopment in Eastern Turkey might provide a possible solution to the Kurdish question. Finding a solution to these questions, or the lack thereof, again might, in turn, determine the level of support for the pro-EU AKP government and thus the smoothness of Turkey's EU process. In closing, Turkey's opportunity and challenge is not bridging or buffering different regions of the world because it is a country at the crossroads in geographical sense. Rather, Turkey's challenge as well as opportunity for a smooth engagement at the international level will be bridging and buffering various domestic factors.