

The Rise of Turkish Gaullism: Getting Turkish-American Relations Right

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ABSTRACT

Turkey is becoming more independent and self-confident. Yet, the current analysis on Turkey in most American circles tirelessly refers to the tension between secularism and Islam or Eastern versus Western proclivities. Such focus often comes at the expense of the most powerful force driving Turkish foreign policy: nationalism and self-interest. Turkish-American relations are witnessing a paradigm shift that can be best defined as the rise of Turkish Gaullism. A Gaullist Turkey may in the long run decide to no longer pursue an elusive EU membership. It may even question its military alliance with the United States. Burdened by a sense that it never gets the respect it deserves, Turkey may increasingly act on its own in search of full independence, full sovereignty, strategic leverage and, most importantly, Turkish glory and grandeur.

2010 proved to be a difficult year in Turkish-American relations. The Gaza flotilla incident and Turkey's "no" vote to a new round of sanctions against Iran at the United Nations Security Council, once again, triggered a heated debate about the "Islamization" of Ankara's Middle East policy. The cliché question of "who lost Turkey?" maintained its relevance for most of the year. In the meantime, the looming threat of an Armenian genocide resolution continued to sporadically dominate the bilateral agenda.

Overall, American official circles that follow Turkey closely tend to display a sense of doom and gloom. The perception of an Islamist "axis shift" is real. Popular columnists, such as Tom Friedman from the New York Times, have now joined the cohort of those who share such pessimism. Yet, interestingly such pessimism tends to dissipate in the higher echelons of American foreign policy. There seems to be a less alarmist approach to Turkey at the level of the National

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Security Advisor, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and certainly the President of the United States. Part of this interesting phenomenon is related to the simple fact that everything is relative.

American officials who focus on Turkey are often experts on Western Europe, NATO, Russia, the EU, and the Mediterranean. With high expectations and habits established during the Cold War, they tend to look at Turkey exclusively as a member of the transatlantic alliance and a Western state. Their level of disappointment is, therefore, much stronger when Turkey acts in defiance of transatlantic and western norms. Similarly, there is a tendency to see any deviation from transatlantic norms as Islamization.

In the eyes of strategist and high level policy makers with global outlook and portfolios, however, Turkey is doing rather well. Turkey is a success story compared to the rest of the Islamic world. It has a growing economy, a functioning democracy, and a strong government that can provide relatively good governance. It is a Muslim country, with a secular, democratic, and capitalist system. And despite its recent popularity in the Islamic world, it is still firmly anchored in the transatlantic alliance represented by NATO. In short, compared to all the major problems and multiple crises facing U.S. foreign policy, Turkey is a country that doesn't pose serious problems for Washington. Yet, one still needs to explain why Turkish and American national interests no longer always converge in order to understand the pessimism among US officials who closely monitor Turkey.

Diverging Agendas and Diverging Perceptions

There are two fundamental problems that have exacerbated relations since the demise of the Soviet Union. First and foremost is the absence of a common enemy. In the post-Soviet regional and global order, Turkey and the United States no longer share an existential threat perception. Despite the identification of "terrorism" as a common threat, terrorism is too generic of a concept. Anti-terrorism doesn't provide a sense of urgency, direction and discipline for a genuinely "strategic partnership" anchored around the need to contain, deter, and defeat a common enemy that threatened both Washington and Ankara with nuclear weapons during the Cold War.

Second, as a byproduct of the post-Soviet order, the center of gravity of the Turkish-American bilateral relationship shifted from Eurasia to the Middle East. Turkey's relevance for America has increasingly become its connections with the

Middle East and larger Islamic world. At the same time, America's new threat perception became "rogue states" such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria, which all happened to share borders with Turkey. Yet, as Ambassador Mark Parris has previously argued there is a structural problem in the way American bureaucracy thinks of Turkey.

"For reasons of self-definition and Cold War logic, Turkey is considered a European nation. It is therefore assigned, for purposes of policy development and implementation, to the subdivisions responsible for Europe: the European Bureau (EUR) at the State Department; the European Command (EUCOM) at the Pentagon; the Directorate for Europe at the NSC, etc. Since the end of the Cold War, however, and progressively since the 1990-91 Gulf War and 9/11, the most serious issues in U.S.-Turkish relations – and virtually all of the controversial ones – have arisen in areas outside "Europe." The majority, in fact, stem from developments in areas which in Washington are the responsibility of offices dealing with the Middle East: the Bureau for Near East Affairs (NEA) at State; Central Command (CENTCOM) at the Pentagon; the Near East and South Asia Directorate at NSC."¹

During the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Turkish-American partnership survived the test in great part thanks to Turgut Özal. Yet, even then, the Turkish military proved very reluctant to fully back the American war effort. The clash between Özal and then-Chief of General Staff Gen. Necip Torumtay ended up with the resignation of the latter. In 2003, 12 years after the first potential crisis in Turkish-American relations was averted thanks to Özal's leadership, the second Gulf War proved much more consequential for the future of Turkish-American relations. The big picture was clear: America was increasingly involved in fighting wars in Turkey's immediate neighborhood. Turkey did not share America's threat perception. In the first Gulf War, it was Turgut Özal that averted the crisis. In the second Gulf War of 2003 Turkey simply decided to stay out. Similar dynamics are in play today, as Washington is asking for Turkey's support against Iran. Turkey doesn't want to destabilize Iran because it doesn't share America's threat perception. To be sure, Iran is a rival of Turkey, and Ankara doesn't want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. But there is no shared sense of urgency with Washington or Tel Aviv. In fact, Turkey believes the only way to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear military capacity is to engage it more effectively on the economic and diplomatic fronts. Washington, on the other hand, wants to isolate Iran. This is exactly what happens when two countries no longer share the same threat perception. In the eyes of Turkish decision makers and public opinion, neither Iraq under Saddam Hussein, nor Iran under the Islamic regime and certainly not the close ally of today, Syria, posed an existential threat necessitating a war effort.

If current trends continue, Washington might witness the emergence in Turkey of not necessarily an Islamist foreign policy but a much more nationalist, independent, self-confident and defiant strategic orientation

Making things worse is the fact that Turkey developed a much different threat perception since the end of the Cold War: Kurdish separatism. At a time when Washington wanted to prioritize Iraq, Iran and Syria as regional threats, Turkey remained a status quo power reluctant to destabilize the region. In fact, Turkey needed the support, stability and partnership of its Middle Eastern neigh-

bors more than ever. Ankara wanted to contain, deter and defeat its new existential threat, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). To do so required a regional security partnership with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. All of these neighbors have significant Kurdish minorities and are as determined as Turkey to block Kurdish nationalist aspirations for independence.

After 1991, the US appeared to be on the wrong side of this regional equation. The no-fly zone enforced in northern Iraq by the US Air Force created conspiracy theories about American support for Kurdish separatism and independent statehood. In the eyes of Ankara, Baghdad, Tehran and Damascus, Washington had become the protector patron of the Kurds. This perception went from bad to worse as Kurds became America's best friend in post-Saddam Iraq and began to pursue a maximalist territorial agenda with claims over Kirkuk.

All this proved too much to digest for a Turkish public opinion that had always maintained a heavy dose of fear of disintegration – the Sèvres Syndrome – due to Western support for Kurdish and Armenian nationalism. Of course, it did not help that Turkey's own repressive anti-Kurdish military policies in the early 1980s had triggered a regional Kurdish backlash. By the mid-1990s a major part of the Turkish army was fighting a Kurdish insurgency in southeastern Anatolia. Therefore, in this post-Cold War context, Ankara and Washington not only failed to share a common threat perception; in the eyes of most Turks, America itself had become the main supporter of the local and regional enemy, Kurdish separatism. It was hardly surprising that a radical paradigmatic shift was taking place in Turkish-American relation as far as the Turkish public opinion's growing distrust of the United States was concerned.

Perhaps most troubling is the state of Turkish public opinion vis-a-vis the United States. During the Cold War, resentment against the United States was mainly a leftwing phenomenon. Today, however, anti-Americanism has become the com-

mon denominator of the vast majority of Turks. Bashing the United States and blaming Washington for every domestic issue – from the Kurdish conflict to the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) – has become a national hobby. Most secularist and Kemalist believe that there is an American agenda to promote “moderate Islam” in Turkey and a “Turkish model” for the Islamic world. In addition to President Bush praising Turkey as a model of for the Islamic world, in 2004, then US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s reference to Turkey as an “Islamic Republic” strengthened the secularist paranoia and provoked widespread conspiracy theories and criticism in Turkey. Many within the secularist establishment thought that America was pushing Turkey to play the role of the “good Muslims” against the bad ones in the Arab world, a role that would situate Turkey firmly in the Islamic Middle East rather than secular Europe. Then President Ahmet Necdet Sezer reacted to such alleged American plans by stating that “Turkey is neither an Islamic republic, nor an example of moderate Islam.” The fact that Fetullah Gulen resides in the United States and the perception of AKP as America’s favorite political party in Turkey are important factors. As previously mentioned, similar negative dynamics are in play on the Kurdish front. The majority of Turks also believe that there is an American agenda supporting Kurdish independence. When you have a domestic public opinion that is so resentful of American foreign policy and a prime minister who really cares about what the “Turkish street” thinks, there emerges a combustible mix. In that sense, what we are witnessing in Turkey is not the emergence of an Islamist foreign policy but rather the rise of a populist and quite nationalistic government.

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The Rise of Turkish Gaullism

Another reason why US officials who closely monitor Turkey differ in their analysis of the country from those with global portfolios is because of the exaggerated importance attached to Islam. The current analysis on Turkey in most American circles constantly refers to the tension between “secularism and Islam” or “Eastern versus Western” proclivities. Such focus often comes at the expense of the most powerful force driving Turkish foreign policy: nationalism and self-interest. Such nationalism is driven by a perception that Turkey’s self-interests are not necessarily aligned with the interests of the West. One should not underestimate the emergence of nationalist and self-confident Turkey that transcends the

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Turkey of not necessarily an Islamist foreign policy but a much more nationalist, independent, self-confident and defiant strategic orientation – in short, a Turkish variant of “Gaullism.” Turkish Gaullism is primarily about rising Turkish self-confidence and independence vis-à-vis the West. A Gaullist Turkey may in the long run decide to no longer pursue an elusive EU membership. It may even question its military alliance with the United States. Burdened by a sense that it never gets the respect it deserves, Turkey may increasingly act on its own in search of “full independence, full sovereignty,” strategic leverage and, most importantly, “Turkish glory and grandeur.” As France did under Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, Turkey may opt for its own “force de frappe” – a nuclear deterrent – and its own “Realpolitik” with countries such as China, India, and Russia. It could even contemplate leaving, as France under de Gaulle did, the military structure of NATO, while maintaining its political membership in the organization.

To understand Turkish Gaullism one needs to look at Turkey's impressive economic performance. Today's Turkey offers a considerably different picture than Turkey in the 1990s. During the “lost decade” of the 1990s, the Turkish economy was plagued by recessions, an average inflation rate of 70 percent, structural budget deficits, chronic financial crisis and constant political instability. In addition to such dismal economic performance, the fight against the PKK, had caused 30,000 deaths during that decade alone.

Turkey managed to surprise most analysts with its remarkable economic recovery and political stability in the last 10 years. Shortly after the lost decade culminated with the worse financial crisis in Turkish history in early 2001, Turkey began structural economic reforms and cleaned up its financial and banking system under the stewardship of Finance Minister Kemal Dervis. Economic and political reforms continued after the AKP came to power in 2002. In the last 8 years, the Turkish economy managed to grow by an average of 6.5 percent. Turkey is now the sixteenth largest economy in the world, and in the last decade, Turkish per capita income has nearly doubled from \$ 5500 to \$10,500.

over-emphasized Islamic-secular divide. After all, both the Turkish military's Kemalism and the AKP neo-Ottomanism – the ideal of regional influence – share a similar vision of Turkish independence and nationalism.

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Such economic performance, coupled with political stability, fuels an unprecedented sense of self-confidence and pride in Turkey. The AKP, under the charismatic and mercurial leadership of Prime Minister Erdogan personifies this sense of Turkish “hubris.” Much has been said about the Islamist character of the AKP and the “Islamic shift” in Turkish foreign policy. Yet, one should not forget that Turkey’s newfound sense of confidence and grandeur is taking place in a context where most Turks feel they are not getting the respect they deserve from the West, particularly from Europe and the United States.

The rise of Turkish Gaullism need not come fully at the expense of America and Europe. But Turks are already looking for economic and strategic opportunities in Russia, India, China and, of course, the Middle East and Africa

Should the West pay attention to Turkish Gaullism? The answer is yes. The recent referendum results on Turkish constitutional reforms clearly show that the AKP is doing well. Barring aside a sudden change in the AKP’s policies or a new pro-Western sentiment within the CHP under its newly elected leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, Turkish Gaullism will increasingly define Ankara’s foreign policy. In the past, Americans and Europeans would often ask whether Turkey had any realistic geopolitical alternatives and complacently reassure themselves that it did not. But today such alternatives are starting to look more realistic to many Turks. The rise of Turkish Gaullism need not come fully at the expense of America and Europe. But Turks are already looking for economic and strategic opportunities in Russia, India, China and, of course, the Middle East and Africa. If the strategic relationship between Ankara and Washington continues to erode and prospects for joining the EU continue to recede, Turkey will certainly go its own way. Americans and Europeans who do not take the risk of such a development seriously underestimate the degree of resentment of the West that has been building up in the country. It is high time for analysts to pay more attention to what unites the secularist and Islamists camps in Turkey: Turkish nationalism. Gaullism may be the real future for Turkey in the 21st century.

Endnotes

1. Mark Parris, “Toward a Successful Turkey Policy: Suggestions for the Next Administration,” Unpublished paper, 2008.