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IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME: TURKEY-US RELATIONS AFTER BUSH

Sinan Ülgen

The past eight years witnessed a sharp evolution of the Turkey-US relationship. The polarizing foreign policy approach that alienated so many of Washington's partners around the globe was also instrumental in shaping Washington's relations with Ankara. Issues surrounding Iraq were paramount. The "strategic relationship" was thus dealt a severe blow in March 2003 when the Turkish Parliament refused to adopt a bill that would have allowed the opening of a Northern front against Saddam's armies. The predominance of Iraq in US foreign policy and the proclivity of the first Bush administration to judge its allies on the basis of their contribution to the campaign in Iraq, coupled with the two countries' significantly divergent visions for the future of Iraq, prevented any concrete improvement in bilateral ties in the near term.

Moreover, the US was beginning to be viewed less and less as an ally by many Turks concerned about the regional consequences of the US policy that was perceived to be fueling secessionist tendencies in Northern Iraq. Washington was also blamed for not assisting Turkey in its ongoing fight against the PKK, which had been using the territories of Northern Iraq to launch raids within Turkey. In turn, public opinion polls soon revealed that Turkey had become one of the most anti-American countries in the world.

The change in rhetoric and even substance that was ushered in with the second Bush administration eventually came to the rescue of the Turkish-US relationship. The meeting of Prime Minister Erdogan with President Bush at the White House in November 2007 signaled the dawn of a new era of cooperation between the two countries. The US started to provide actionable intelligence to Turkey on the PKK while also reassuring the Turkish side about its intentions regarding the territorial integrity of Iraq. In return, Turkey decided to adopt a more realistic policy with regard to its southern neighbor and opened new channels of dialogue with the Iraqi leadership. Ankara also assisted US efforts to enhance political stability in Iraq as recently witnessed by Turkish support in getting Iraqi constituencies to accept the Security of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in December 2008.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Sinan Ülgen is the chairman of EDAM (Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies). Previously he worked at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara and Brussels. His research and opinion pieces have been published by the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Center for European Reform (CER), the World Economic Forum, the German Marshall Fund as well as newspapers such as Le Figaro, the Financial Times, the Wall Street Journal and the International Herald Tribune.*

This short introduction outlining the evolution of the Turkish-US relationship during the Bush era is conspicuous in its failure to provide an account of the advancement of a more comprehensive cooperation agenda between the two countries. This failure is a consequence of the hegemonic impact that the conundrum of Iraq had on the Turkish-US relationship. In other words, as a result of the growing crisis of confidence between the two partners, very little substance was accomplished by the joint efforts of Ankara and Washington. Turkey continued to provide support to the ongoing stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, and the US continued to lend its support to Turkey in its fight against PKK terrorism as well as its bid to become an Eurasian energy hub. Yet in many other crucial areas, –Iran, Syria, NATO, EU membership, and Cyprus – the Turkey-US relationship became at best ineffective, and at worst dysfunctional.

The election of Barack Obama as the new US president provides an opportunity for Ankara and Washington to put behind their differences and past grievances decisively and to concentrate on advancing a more ambitious transatlantic agenda. Viewed from that perspective, the issues that may dominate a new era of US-Turkish relations are Afghanistan, Iran, NATO, Cyprus and the EU.

SUCCEEDING IN AFGHANISTAN

During his electoral campaign, President elect Obama highlighted the need to focus greater attention on Afghanistan. It is expected that this region will replace Iraq as the foremost priority of US foreign policy. This also means that the US will request additional assistance from its allies in dealing with the myriad problems besetting this troublesome region. It may well be that the nature of US relations with its individual allies will be determined by the extent to which those countries eventually contribute to the ongoing efforts in Afghanistan.

This observation holds also true for the Turkey-US relationship. In fact, Turkey is in a unique position as regards its actual and potential contributions to this problem. Turkey's relations with Afghanistan date back to the 1930s when Ataturk's Turkey provided assistance to Afghan leaders in their initial state building efforts. Following the US intervention in 2002, Turkey contributed to the security effort by twice assuming the leadership of the ISAF force. Currently, Turkey has seven hundred troops in and around Kabul.

But perhaps more important than the military dimension is Turkey's ongoing commitment to the state building campaign. Turkey assumed in 2006 the management and operation of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the district of Wardak, west of Kabul. The Turkish PRT has focused its efforts on the training of the local police and the provision of health and education services. So far almost one thousand local policemen have been trained and up to eight hundred thousand people have been treated in PRT-run health clinics. In addition, the Turkish PRT was instrumental in the establishment of over a dozen schools, including two girls' schools and two vocational schools; a police education and training center, and a model police station. Furthermore, Turkey recently pledged 200 million USD for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

This engagement is the result of a series of factors. First, the efforts are due to historical links and cultural affinities Turkey enjoys and its good standing within Afghan society. As a result, the 130 strong Turkish PRT acts and operates in a predominantly non-hostile environment, which facilitates the task of dialogue with local constituencies. Since its establishment there has been only a single armed attack against Turkish personnel and no casualties. Also unlike many other PRTs, the Turkish PRT is under civilian control. Therefore its agenda is determined by its civilian component and in relation to local

development needs – not military or security concerns.

The Turkish PRTs efforts are also aided by the availability of a range of Turkish experts -- health and education specialists, police and law enforcement trainers, engineers and agricultural consultants -- who are willing to work in Afghanistan. Another advantage is the presence of Turkish speaking Afghan workers who were educated in the various Turkish schools operating in Afghanistan. Turkey also has ongoing training programs for members of the Afghan public administration and law enforcement officials, in particular. In 2008 alone, more than 50 Afghan law enforcement officials attended drug trafficking prevention seminars at the Turkish Police Academy.

A final element enhancing Turkey's potential in this region is Turkey's ability to bridge the Afghanistan-Pakistan divide. Turkey's privileged relationship with Pakistan allows Ankara to engage in efforts to improve the bilateral ties between Kabul and Islamabad. In December 2008, Ankara was able to host a meeting between the respective Presidents Karzai and Zardari to discuss security and economic cooperation. Similarly, projects such as cross border energy cooperation between the Orakzai region in FATA and the neighboring region in Afghanistan, which seeks to build transboundary economic interdependence, or the organization of tripartite seminars focusing on drug cultivation and trafficking prevention strategies with a view to increase mutual trust among the border agencies have been planned.

It is therefore essentially Turkey's soft power rather than its ability to deliver more fighting troops that should provide the basis for a stronger Turkish commitment to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Turkey has shown that it can provide valuable assistance to the much needed objective of local capacity building – an objective which will become the yardstick for the eventual disengagement of the international community from the region.

Turkey's growing involvement would also be in line with the perceived need to gradually de-westernize the Afghan assistance program.

Turkey can thus be a valuable partner for a new US administration intent on bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. Given the likely focus on Afghanistan and Turkey's ability to provide much needed aid in the social and economic development of this war-torn country, Afghanistan has the potential to comprise a strong pillar in future Turkey-US collaboration, provided that an important condition is fulfilled.

The initial political rift between Turkey and the US on Iraq stemmed from the inability of the US, prior to the military intervention, to explain and sufficiently convince the Turks about its exit strategy from the country and the region. The same mistake should not be repeated with Afghanistan. In other words, the scope of Turkey's contributions to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan will depend on the ability of the US, as the leading actor in the region, to define, articulate and reach a consensus with its partners about the end game in Afghanistan. The new administration should therefore concretely determine its objectives and set out its strategies in order to position itself best to request and receive all the support its allies – and in particular Turkey – could potentially provide for addressing the Afghan problem.

ENGAGING WITH IRAN

Turkey's relations with its Persian neighbor are marked by four centuries of unbroken peace between the two countries. Although the relationship came under stress following the Iranian revolution, at a time when the mullahs were intent on exporting their religious zeal, a *modus vivendi* was eventually reached between Ankara and Tehran. Relations further developed after the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a party tracing its roots to political

Islam, came to power in Turkey in 2002. Currently, Turkish-Iranian relations are at their peak. The two countries are intent on increasing their economic cooperation, particularly in relation to oil and gas exploration and trade, and in August 2008, Turkey hosted the Iranian president Ahmedinejad for a working trip. In short, Turkey does not view Iran as a threat. Ankara is categorically opposed to the nuclear program of Tehran but essentially it fears more the regional repercussions of a nuclear Iran than a nuclear Iran per se.

Turkey therefore has tried to play a constructive role in the nuclear standoff between Iran and the West. Turkish policy makers are well aware that their margin for maneuver is very limited. The international community's demands from Iran are very clear. Ankara has so far strived to impress upon the Iranian leadership the need for achieving transparency and international compliance as regards their nuclear program. As a country perceived to be devoid of a hidden agenda, Turkey enjoys the trust of Iranian leadership and has been successful in painting as clear a picture as possible about the consequences for Iran should they continue their current policy of non-collaboration. Ankara's arguments may eventually help the more realistic and pragmatic constituencies in Tehran gain the upper hand in the internal political struggle over the future direction of its nuclear program. In this particular case, the messenger may be as important as the message. While a strong statement opined from London or Paris could unite Iranian policy makers in defense of their leadership, the same argument, if voiced by trusted Turkish leaders, could actually lead to a constructive internal debate.

The failure of negotiations and the ensuing hardening of international sanctions against Iran would, on the other hand, force Ankara into a very uncomfortable corner. Turkey has recently been elected to the UN Security Council. Thus Ankara cannot stay neutral in a game where the stakes are being raised. Ankara would eventually face the unpalatable

choice between supporting international sanctions and alienating the regime in Tehran or siding with Iran and risking disavowal from the West. At that point, there is no doubt that Ankara would side with its Western allies, but in doing so it will have to sacrifice a long cultivated relationship with a neighboring and important regional power.

For these reasons, the US can count on Ankara's unambiguous support on the issue of Iran. Turkish and US interests and expectations from the regime in Tehran are fully compatible. Depending on the level of (non) progress with the nuclear negotiations, Washington may therefore find it useful to compel Ankara to adopt a more active policy of mediation between Tehran and the West.

RE-INVIGORATING NATO

The global wave of support and optimism brought by the election of Barack Obama is linked to the belief that the new US administration will adopt a more tactful global diplomacy, one characterized by open dialogue and strengthened multilateralism. From this perspective, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) stands out as the ideal platform for the US to effectively demonstrate its new found commitment to multilateralism – at least in relation to issues that are pertinent to transatlantic security.

The objective should therefore be to transform NATO into an effective forum for transatlantic dialogue on strategic issues. NATO should hence move away from being a defense oriented entity and become a political organization underpinning the West's security. It will then be possible to address, under the NATO umbrella, such new and emerging threats as energy infrastructure security, piracy or cyber-wars in addition to more conventional issues such as WMD proliferation or relations with an increasingly assertive Russia.

If successfully achieved, this transformation will greatly facilitate the task of the incoming US administration in promoting and making effective use of multilateralism in the global security domain and in concert with its European partners. This transformation, however, requires a consensus among NATO's American and European members about the future role and responsibilities of the organization.

At present, there is a substantial impediment in this respect. Some NATO members, led by France and Germany, are averse to the idea of enlarging the political role of NATO. They fear that such an expansion would undermine the development of Europe's own role in providing regional security and, in particular, would jeopardize the growth of European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), the EU's security pillar. Despite France's objections, the election of Nicolas Sarkozy, who is as Atlanticist as a French president can be, has nonetheless been viewed as an opportunity to strengthen NATO. Sarkozy was instrumental in leading a debate in France about the country's security strategy. As a result, France is expected to announce its return to the military wing of NATO during the celebrations of the Alliance's 50th anniversary in Strasburg in April 2009. Therefore a rapprochement between France and the US on the future role of NATO and the division of labor between NATO and ESDP is becoming more likely. At the same time, this rapprochement is a necessary but insufficient condition for the desired political transformation of NATO, and the existing problems besetting the NATO-EU relationship must also be addressed.

These problems emerge from the EU membership of Cyprus. Cyprus, a divided island, became a member of the EU in May 2004. As a result, the bilateral problems between Cyprus and Turkey were transferred to the Turkey-EU platform as well as the EU-NATO agenda. The central problem for the EU-NATO relationship can be traced back to the interpretation of the agreement between

NATO and the EU reached at the end of 2002. This agreement basically sealed the decision taken by NATO at the Washington Summit to provide support to the EU under "Berlin Plus" in exchange for certain rights within ESDP for non-EU European allies. The NATO decision excludes non-Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries and those lacking security agreements from activities, including discussions, related to both Berlin Plus and strategic partnership. The EU decision, however, limits the exclusion only to Berlin Plus and does not refer to strategic cooperation. Therefore, under the NATO decision, Cyprus (and Malta) is excluded from participating in anything falling under "strategic cooperation." This is not the case, however, according to the EU decision. Today, the EU seeks to overcome the problems posed by this wording on the basis of the Community solidarity principle. The EU claims that Cyprus cannot be left outside the scope of this arrangement any longer and refuses to engage in dialogue with NATO without all EU members sitting around the table, but Turkey sticks to its position of the strict interpretation of the North Atlantic Council decision of 2002 and blocks the participation of Cyprus in the NATO-EU strategic cooperation. As a result, although there is an agreed mechanism through which to do so, there is practically no meaningful dialogue between NATO and the EU on emerging threats. The EU-NATO strategic cooperation remains blocked.

Another consequence of this state of affairs is the Cyprus veto on the signature of the security agreement between EU and Turkey as well as the administrative arrangements that would enable Turkey to formally cooperate with the European Defence Agency. In addition, this stalemate has the potential to negatively impact performance in the theater of operations. The need for strategic cooperation will become more pressing as the EU and NATO start to co-exist in military operations in places such as Kosovo or Afghanistan. The existing collaboration in the field between the two institutions cannot remedy the lack of cooperation at the policy level in the

headquarters. This predicament will be increasingly visible if and when the situation on the ground, especially in Afghanistan or Kosovo, becomes crisis prone. In short, the uncertainties linked to Turkey's EU accession and the intractable problem of Cyprus have created serious liabilities for a genuine and substantive NATO-EU partnership.

What can the US do to address these challenges?

US diplomacy can and should be active on two fronts. There is no long term and sustainable solution to the NATO-EU problem unless either the uncertainties related to Turkey's EU prospects are settled or the Cyprus problem is solved. In the absence of these conditions, a more realistic objective should be to seek mutually acceptable ad hoc arrangements that would allow the NATO-EU cooperation to proceed. This will require more constructive thinking on the part of some EU member states regarding the institutional provisions linking Turkey to ESDP. The US should first focus on creating the conditions for such a deal.

OVERCOMING THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

A more long term and sustainable solution to NATO-EU problems and by extension to the reinvigoration of NATO as an effective transatlantic strategic platform will require the resolution of the intractable dispute of Cyprus. A unique opportunity was wasted in 2004 when the Greek Cypriots rejected the UN sponsored Annan plan designed to bring a lasting solution. Now there is another window of opportunity. The two leaders of the island, the Greek Cypriot President Christofias and the Turkish Cypriot President Talat, have once again started a new round of negotiations to reach the ever elusive settlement. There is a widespread belief that this will be the final opportunity in the foreseeable future for bringing the two sides of the island together. In

other words, this round is crucially important. The consequences of failing to reach an agreement this time around are obvious:

- The Cyprus problem will continue to poison Turkey's relations with the EU. So much so that the EU may decide to impose new penalties on Turkey by the end of 2009 for failing to apply the EU rules with regards to Cyprus, which in itself could be the last blow to the already struggling process of membership negotiations.
- The contagion effect of the Cyprus problem will remain in force and continue to negatively impact the NATO-EU relationship.
- The opportunity to settle remaining disputes between Turkey and Greece in the Aegean will be foregone.
- As a result, Turkey's EU ambitions may come to an end.

The negotiations are to be concluded in the second half of 2009 under the EU presidency of Sweden. The US remains an important, albeit external, actor and can best contribute to the settlement of the Cyprus dispute in terms of creating the right incentives for the two sides to compromise for a solution. Indeed it is the lack of such an incentive structure that marred the 2004 efforts. Greek Cypriots were assured of EU membership regardless of their attitude during and after the negotiations. Thus it was easy for Papadopoulos, the Greek Cypriot President at the time, to publicly lobby for a "No" vote before the referendum. The claim was that after EU membership, Greek Cypriots would be in a stronger position to negotiate. It is difficult to assert that Papadopoulos' claim was totally unfounded given that very little has been by the international community since then to alleviate the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots who did vote for the Annan plan.

The right lessons need to be drawn from this episode of failure. The international community, the EU and the US should focus on creating the right incentive structure for the negotiating

parties. Otherwise, pushing one side or the other to compromise on sensitive areas which have so far escaped all attempts at compromise will be impossible. Therefore US diplomacy should start to outline alternative scenarios that will set out the costs for the side that will be seen as the culprit of a potential failure. In fact, for the Turkish side, these are already visible. The costs are the continuation of the present state of isolation of the Turkish Cypriots compounded by the considerable difficulties to emerge in the Turkey-EU relationship. The US should therefore focus on how the Turkish Cypriots can be rewarded for their constructive attitude should the Greek Cypriots appear to be the blocking side. This element of coercion is needed for maintaining the right sort of pressure necessary for compromise. It is an indispensable element for the success of the negotiations. In order to play this crucial role, the new US administration may consider appointing a new high level representative for Cyprus.

The resolution of the Cyprus dispute could actually provide the stimulus for the Turkey-EU relationship to move to a new stage. It will also eliminate a mental barrier for the Turkish side which clearly perceives the Cyprus problem as an unavoidable obstacle clouding Turkey's membership prospects.

ADVANCING TURKEY'S EU PROSPECTS

In the 1990s, the US played a very constructive role in furthering the Turkey-EU relationship. US diplomacy was very active, for instance, in convincing European leaders for the need to adopt the EU's Customs Union agreement with Turkey. At the same time, US pressure had a tendency to backfire on occasion, as witnessed by the statements of then French President Chirac. Be that as it may, the US influence on Europe with respect to Turkey declined considerably during the Bush era. The stark divisions between the US and the EU as well as within the EU, provoked by the rhetoric

and implementation of the neo-conservative agenda, sidelined the US as an effective actor in the Turkey-EU relationship.

With the incoming administration, the US may once more regain the ability to positively influence the Turkey-EU relationship.

Ankara stands to benefit from such a valuable and influential partner in its stalled EU membership bid. Although the negotiations were launched more than 3 years ago, only 10 of the 35 chapters that need to be completed for accession have been opened. In contrast, the other negotiating country, Croatia, was able to open 21 chapters in the same period.

This apparent lack of momentum stems from the political uncertainties that continue to cloud Turkey's prospects of accession. The undying rhetoric of European leaders such as Sarkozy who claim that Turkey has no place in the EU has been detrimental to the convergence process. In Turkey, the standstill saps the willingness of government leaders to implement EU linked reforms and also alienates a considerable section of the Turkish population from the EU membership objective. In short, the EU's inability to dispel doubts about the feasibility of eventual Turkish membership has been most responsible for the apparent lack of concrete progress. Initially designed as a panacea for overcoming the internal difficulties of individual EU countries, the residual ambiguity of the outcome in the Turkey-EU relationship has started to become a liability for the entire process.

Right now, the relationship is in a critical stage. As Turkey's European prospects are becoming ever more uncertain, Turkey-EU relations may in the near future face a crisis on account of the EU's review of Turkey's policies towards Cyprus, slated for late 2009, and the apparent lack of progress in the membership negotiations. These conditions encourage the Turkey skeptics in Europe as well as the Euroskeptics in Turkey to raise their voices in asking for an alternative to full membership for Turkey. Euphemistically

called a “privileged partnership”, this option would spell an end for Turkey’s decades-long quest of obtaining full-fledged membership in the European club. This option is categorically rejected by Turkish officials since it entails a total policy dependency framework.

Under such a scenario, Turkey could become a more assertive and rival power to the EU – as opposed to a future member state more inclined to collaborate with the EU and further common areas of interest. Turkey’s policies towards its neighbors would also be affected by such an outcome. Closer cooperation with Russia could be sought to replace the role that had hitherto been reserved for the EU.

Turkey-EU relations are therefore in an apparent need of a new impetus, one that the US may provide with the help of Turkey’s partners within the EU.

The US may be instrumental in convincing EU leaders like Sarkozy to tune down their anti-Turkey rhetoric. This may indeed be an agenda item in the new phase of the US-French relationship. The US should also continue to tactfully support Turkey’s EU accession, including reiterating their support in future meetings between the US President and European leaders.

The US may also take steps to incorporate Turkey in the different spheres of transatlantic dialogue. The present administration, for instance, played a crucial role in maintaining Turkish presence within the G20 at the meeting in mid-November in Washington – despite French pressure to open room for other EU members. The US can thus insist on Turkey’s participation in the planned meeting between the US, the EU and Russia on the Medvedev proposals for a new European security architecture. Similarly, the US can ask to incorporate Turkey in the US-EU talks on the transatlantic economic agenda, especially since Turkey is in a Customs Union with the EU and as such is bound to adopt and follow many of the same commercial and regulatory

policies. To underscore this vision, President Obama may consider a stop in Ankara as part of his first trip to Europe where he is set to visit a number of capitals.

These endeavors will help to create a sense of partnership with Turkey in some of the more recalcitrant states of Europe thus leading to a more favorable political environment for eventual Turkish accession.

GOING FORWARD

The change of the presidency in the US creates a new set of opportunities for enhancing and enriching the scope of Turkish-US cooperation after the Bush years, particularly where this relationship has failed to reach its true potential. It is now critically important for the two sides to realistically assess how they can contribute to each others global and regional objectives. In other words, expectations must be properly managed. For that, priorities should be clearly communicated and a substantive dialogue on the common objectives should be maintained. The last year of the Bush administration witnessed the re-establishment of these mechanisms and improvements in substantive dialogue between Turkey and the US. The change of the administration should not result in the loss of hard won progress in this area, but given the many priorities that the new administration will face, that is not a foregone conclusion. The new administration, therefore, must aim to safeguard and strengthen these mechanisms of dialogue with Turkey during the transition phase and beyond.

For a US committed to a multilateral agenda, Turkey can be a uniquely valuable partner. It is central to many of the foreign policy challenges facing the incoming administration, and a re-invigorated Turkey-US partnership can constitute a significant asset for ensuring the effectiveness of a new era of US multilateralism.

ABOUT CUSE:

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Center on the United States and Europe
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
www.brookings.edu/cuse**