Turkey's Role in the Greater Middle East

By JED C. SNYDER

For much of the last five decades, Turkey has been regarded by many European observers as a strategic ally but not as a front line NATO member. Its status in the Alliance—as a developing Islamic state with a strong Ottoman tradition that is nonetheless linked to the West—tended more often than not to isolate Turkey politically and also raised questions about its identity. What Ankara perceived as its crucial role in Western security and defense matters seemed to many Turks to be discounted. Arguments within the U.S. policy community asserting that Turkey's role as a Western partner was undervalued resonated only rarely in Europe.

This marginalization was reinforced by twin images of Turkey: one of a warlike people that for six centuries ruthlessly ruled an empire which encroached on Europe under a series of despotic Ottoman sultans; the other of a romanticized realm with harems, mosques, and dervishes. Neither depiction provides an insight into the Turkey of today.

After more than seven decades of secularization and modernization, Turkey is a paradox for those who wonder how this politically pluralistic, secular nation can comfortably fit in the Western community while also retaining a mosaic of Middle Eastern, European, and Asian influences.

Like its alliance partners, Turkey moved into the post-Cold War era unprepared for the new world order. It is undergoing a reorientation in an environment characterized by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, conflict in the Balkans (vexed by an historic rivalry with Greece), newly independent states in Central Asia, instability in the Caucasus (Georgia and Azerbaijan) and the North Caucasus (Chechnya), a growing role in the Gulf (complicated by strained relations with Iraq and the Islamic regime in Iran), and Kurdish separatism fueled by a campaign of terror.

As Ankara's external threat perception evolves, its domestic situation has deteriorated under economic stagnation, shifting demographics, the transition from a state-controlled economy, Islam as a political force, sanctions against Iraq, failure to gain membership in the European Union, and declining aid from the United States and Europe. Turkey does not face serious external threats, but several factors contribute to a sense among observers that it could become a security liability rather than an asset because of Cyprus, Greece, Bosnia, radical Islam, and alienation from Europe.

Finally, amidst cross-currents, Turkey must decide what models of cultural, political, and social order to pursue. This dilemma is sharpened by its Ottoman and Kemalist past, the growing weakness of its political parties, and an inability to persuade Europe of its economic credentials.

National Stability and Identity

The legacy of Turkey's Ottoman heritage remains enduring both in Turkey and in Western Europe. Although the Ottoman Empire expired with World War I, many, particularly in Europe, anticipate a newly expansionist Turkey, disenchanted with the West, turning inwards toward its historic roots in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Many have questioned Turkish membership in the European Union (EU) on grounds that its ultimate orientation may be non-European or even anti-European. To Turks as well as some in Western Europe, however, this hostility toward its EU application is fueled by both European unemployment and resentment over the large number of Turkish guest workers, particularly in Germany. This is a symptom of an increasingly rightist approach to immigration, which is most acutely expressed in national, regional, and local elections in France as well as Germany.

Turkey's Spheres of Interest and Influence

Anger over what Turks see as an anti-Islamic bias—reinforced by the West's unwillingness to give Bosnia's Moslems arms—could turn their forceful nationalism in a negative direction. Unrelenting Western criticism of Turkey adds to the rancor and bolsters ultra-nationalist elements and radical Islamic parties, which are gaining greater attention, support, and political legitimacy.

political Islam has stimulated debate over how much pluralism Turkey can withstand

Among the reservations about Turkey's admission to the community of Western nations is doubt over its commitment to liberal democracy. For example, there is concern that intolerance of minorities (particularly the Kurds) and charges of human rights abuses could bar it from EU membership and brand it a renegade. Prime Minister Tansu Ciller shepherded constitutional reforms through parliament to expand political freedom in Turkey, but further action is needed.

The overall fragility of Turkey's political system and its susceptibility to fringe groups raise questions about its inherent stability. Of immediate concern is the potential that support for the secular system may fall under the weight—though limited today—of militant Islamic groups. The role of religion and extent to which it can be used as a political tool should not be dismissed, but neither should it be exaggerated. Resurgent political Islam has advanced by electoral victories of religious parties in two major cities, Ankara and Istanbul. This in turn has stimulated widened debate over how much political pluralism Turkey can withstand.

The Kurds

There is another threat to Turkey's stability, unrelated to radical Islam though affected by it. Civilian authorities and the military continue to fight Kurdish separatism, particularly the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is sworn to use terror in creating an independent state from Kurdish communities in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The total Kurdish population in the area is estimated at 20 million. The community in Turkey is the largest, some 12–14 million.

In the southeast, where most Turkish Kurds live, the PKK objective is to carve out part of Anatolia as a state. Accordingly, Ankara declared an emergency in ten southeastern provinces and mounted local counterinsurgency operations, deploying 150,000 men. The government estimates that there are 15,000 PKK guerrillas with a reserve

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of 45,000, and though the figures vary widely, Ankara is spending $5–7 billion annually on antiterrorist operations. The current defense budget is estimated at $5.1 billion (4.1 percent of GDP).

The PKK threat has opened a debate among Turkish intellectuals and parliamentarians over restrictions on political participation. At issue is whether terrorist restrictions, aimed at separatists, should be relaxed. President Suleyman Demirel, who recognizes the fragility of the political system (having been twice removed as prime minister by military coups in the 1970s and 1980s), voiced concern that if political restrictions on ethnic groups are removed, people who "have lived together would then be unable to keep doing so and Turkey would become ungovernable."

The emerging debate has ramifications beyond constitutional interpretation or civil liberties. Much of southeastern Turkey has been the scene of an 11-year guerrilla war where the military has been unable to quell the separatist movement led by the PKK and its sympathizers. Continued insurrection threatens to destabilize the country and is costing the government dearly, financially and politically. Lifting or modifying the anti-terror laws could lead the PKK to intensify its efforts, possibly forcing military intervention and the declaration of martial law to control the region. This is the worst case scenario but is not implausible.

While PKK terrorism is an immediate internal security threat, longer-term and more serious social and political issues arise from the movement of Kurdish refugees from the southeast to cities (fleeing villages destroyed by the military), and the gradual integration of Kurds into mainstream society. An increasing Kurdish awareness and political agenda have evolved. Urban migration and an assertive Kurdish nationalism have fueled political radicalism, contributing to support for Islamic parties, including the Refah which has increased its following in major cities.

The government must weigh the severity of the PKK threat and the internal challenges of growing Kurdish nationalism against Western sympathy for the Kurds and Europe's insistence that its treatment of oppressed minorities and human rights record must improve if Turkey is to join the European Union or even the Customs Union, the first step toward full membership. Increasingly, many Turks regard this precondition as prohibitively expensive.

The Military Role

Below the surface of political debate is a growing concern that the armed forces—generally regarded as the institutional guardian of Turkish democracy—may feel compelled to intervene if it appears that the country is polarized by radicals or faces chaos. On three occasions (including two coups) the military has stepped in to restore order and then returned to its barracks. Western fears that, under social and economic pressure, Turkey could regress and adopt the despotic ways of its Ottoman past continue to be raised among those who remain uncertain about the military's political proclivities.

Reinforced by a tradition of universal service, the military is the leading vehicle for social mobility and source of expertise for national leadership. Hence, it enjoys great prestige and wide support from the public at large. It earned a reputation for professionalism, nonpartisanship, and respect of civilian control, an image implanted in 1908 when a revolutionary movement of officers which included Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) known as the Young Turks forced the Sultan to restore a constitution that led to the founding of the Republic of Turkey.

Encircled Ally

When the Berlin Wall fell many analysts thought the event would favor the West. Turkey was among the first NATO members to challenge that assessment as premature at best. Seen from Ankara's position at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the security environment is more tenuous now than at any time since World War II.

Turkey feels encircled by "New World Order" conflicts and sees little sympathy by its Western partners for its own position, beginning with its internal situation, which has regional implications.

Insurgents are aided by Iraqi Kurds from camps in Iraq, adjacent to Turkey's southeastern border. The United States, Britain, and France protect this enclave in northern Iraq under Provide Comfort. In Turkish eyes the operation contributes to PKK terrorism by infiltrating guerrillas into the extreme southeastern part of the country, where 4–5 million Kurds dwell. The no-fly zone is maintained by assets deployed at Incirlik Air Base which complicates a difficult accord whereby the Air Force operates under the limited terms of the U.S.-Turkish Bilateral Defense and Cooperation Agreement. If Ankara denied the use of Incirlik, Provide Comfort might come to an abrupt halt with an adverse impact on its relations with Washington. While the Turkish prime minister favors continued access to the base for non-NATO operations, the general staff is believed to be less enthusiastic and to have lobbied against it. Finally, the parliament votes periodically to reapprove the operation, which requires greater American arm-twisting each time the issue comes up.

The breakup of Yugoslavia spawned a string of newly liberated Balkan states whose future is uncertain. This situation affects Turkey directly, as part of its population is Bosnian by origin. For 500 years Bosnia and Hercegovina were provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Also, many Turks identify with Balkan Moslems who number an estimated 10 million. Furthermore, Turkey was the principal architect of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Zone, founded in Istanbul in 1992 with an important Balkan component. In many ways, the success of this initiative rests on settling the present crisis. Ankara has favored lifting the U.N. arms embargo on the Bosnian Moslems and is reportedly funneling aid to Bosnia.

To the northeast, there is a low-level war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Another northeastern neighbor, Georgia, continues to simmer after a series of civil insurrections which brought Russian intervention. Competing paramilitary groups support strong regional rivalries, which may yet result in Georgia's fragmentation.

Combat Camera Imagery (Kathy Bradley)

Tankers and AWACS aircraft at Incirlik.

Combat Camera Imagery (Mary Lynchard)

Turkish airmen participating in Deny Flight.

Russian military interest in Georgia, which has strong historic roots, has been rekindled. Moscow, in many respects retaining its Cold War hostility toward Turkey, has signed a deal with Tbilisi to base large numbers of Russian forces in the country, including areas close to Turkey's border. Further, in an effort to bolster its military presence in the aftermath of the Georgian and Chechnyan campaigns, the Russian high command has signaled its intent to abandon the limitations placed on deploying forces on its flanks under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, thus altering the regional military balance in the Caucasus in a manner that the Turks find threatening. While Moscow's military incompetence in Chechnya could be considered reassuring in Ankara, the long history of Russo-Turkish military rivalry has left a strong impression.

relations between Greece and Turkey have soured over maritime and air boundaries

To the west, relations between Greece and Turkey have again soured to such an extent that NATO finds it almost impossible to hold useful exercises in the Aegean because of disagreements over maritime and air jurisdiction boundaries. To the south, the age-old dispute between Greek and Turkish Cypriots endures, while Turkey, which backs a self-declared Turkish republic in northern Cyprus, is under renewed pressure from Europe to withdraw military forces from the island after more than two decades. To the east, across the Caspian Sea, the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia, which because of cultural and linguistic affinity with Turkey held out the promise of close relations with Ankara, have spurned Turkish advances.

In sum, Turkey has seen its neighborhood decline substantially over the last five years as Western doubts regarding the country's acceptability for EU membership have grown. To Turks, however, its credentials as a modern economy are not the obstacle to membership or acceptance in the Western community. Ankara believes that delays in considering its application for the Customs Union are attributable in part to Europe's determination to punish Turkey for its incursion into northern Iraq in March 1995 to strike at PKK camps from which cross-border terrorist acts were being mounted. The operation—the country's largest in fifty years—involved 35,000 troops and was

designed to stop PKK infiltration. The general staff had claimed that 2,500–3,000 guerrillas operated from northern Iraq, which shares a 220-kilometer border with Turkey.

While Turkish relations with the United States have been warmer than with Europe, Ankara has on occasion found Washington less than sympathetic. Turkey expected a political and financial windfall from its role in the Gulf War. Its bases, particularly Incirlik, provided vital support to coalition forces. But this expectation was thwarted when Congress restructured foreign military financing in FY93, eliminating grants and converting military aid for both Turkey and Greece from grants to concessional loans, and reducing total aid to Turkey by 10 percent. Subsequently loans were adjusted to market rather than concessional rates and cut again. In addition, some of this aid has been withheld for various reasons, including concern over human rights abuses, Cyprus, and the blockade of Armenia. Finally, Turkey balks at the congressional practice of enforcing a 7:10 ratio in military aid for Greece and Turkey.

Combined, these measures have constrained military modernization and Turkey still fields some equipment of Korean War vintage. The accumulated resentment of the officer corps (which plays an influential role in politics) and political leaders is likely to complicate U.S. efforts to renew bilateral defense arrangements which are the bedrock of the U.S.-Turkish military relationship.

Geopolitical Orientation

Despite occasional periods of strained relations with its partners, NATO membership has been a major source of Turkish pride. Political and military leaders are quick to remind American and European analysts that at the height of the Cold War, Turkey's contributions to NATO dwarfed those of most members (including the United States) when measured as a percentage of GNP devoted to defense or in terms of ground forces committed to the Alliance.

Harbor river border between Turkey and Iraq.

Combat Camera Imagery (Efrain Gonzalez)

While Turkey is among NATO's greatest boosters, it views the debate over whether and how to expand the Alliance with some dismay. Ankara is concerned that expansion eastward to include former Warsaw Pact nations will dilute the NATO article 5 guarantee—an attack against one will be regarded as an attack against all members—and by extension would reduce the credibility of the NATO umbrella. Also, many Turks remain unconvinced that Russian policy has been transformed from its Soviet antecedent. Turkey is suspicious of Russian motives in the Caucasus and Balkans, where there is strong mutual enmity. Russian suspicions of Turkey's motivations in Central Asia and Azerbaijan (opposing Moscow's ally, Armenia) are earnestly felt as well.

It seems clear that the NATO center of gravity is shifting from Central Europe toward the Mediterranean. Western concerns over German security, the nucleus of NATO defensive strategy, have been reduced since the Cold War. Ground and air forces deployed in Central and Northern Europe are down by half from the early 1980s. Yet the Turks see little evidence that the Alliance has adjusted its strategy to reflect a larger role for its southern allies, whose focus on the Soviet threat was always less immediate than that which preoccupied Germany and the Nordic nations.

Turks have long argued that among their contributions to NATO was a unique ability to act as a bridge to the Middle East as epitomized by its membership in the Baghdad Pact and the Central Treaty Organization. Ankara has traditionally argued that Turkey can protect NATO interests in a region normally regarded as alien and distant to the West. Yet when Turkey has offered assistance, as in the Gulf War, it has sometimes alienated its Arab cousins.

Much is made of Turkey's potential role in Central Asia. While the Turks have explored opportunities there, Central Asian states will be most attracted to nations that can offer large capital investment projects and longer-term alternatives to dependence on Russian largesse. Investment along Russia's southwestern flank which includes Azerbaijan is expanding, but it is relatively low, in large part because of Turkey's unfortunate economy (which shrank by 5–6 percent last year as inflation reached 150 percent), and because of internal difficulties that have distracted politicians.

In the long run, Turkey's role in the Caucasus may actually be greater than in Central Asia, since it can resolve the issue of transporting oil from the Caspian Sea region to markets in

Europe and Asia. Here, Ankara is likely to compete with Tehran, which has aggressively pursued Central Asia's leaders, particularly in Turkmenistan, in aid of reaching long-term arrangements for oil exports. While Turkey offers an attractive option to those who fear Iran's ideological course and political meddling abroad, the long-term economic benefits of dealing with Iran may be more promising.

Turkey's potential transit route for Caspian oil is likely to revive animosities between Turks and Russians. In 500 years they have fought more than a dozen conflicts, many over the straits linking the Mediterranean and Black Seas. The Turkish Straits, dividing Europe and Asia, have been a source of friction since the Montreux Convention of 1936 which governs transit through the straits. Moscow found it hard to acquiesce in Turkish sovereignty over the Bosporus and Dardanelles and has never accepted wartime control of this vital passage by Ankara. Moscow has often challenged Turkey's jurisdiction, most dramatically by sending the carrier *Kiev* through the straits.

Moscow found it hard to acquiesce over the Bosporus and Dardanelles

More recently, Ankara and Moscow found themselves on opposing sides of an increasingly vital issue, the volume of tanker traffic through the straits. More than 40,000 ships annually make it one of the most clogged routes in the world. Half of the foreign flagged vessels are Russian, carrying some 20 billion gallons of oil. Turkey fears oil spills or explosions from the 200,000-ton supertankers, which would endanger the 11 million residents of nearby Istanbul.

While Russia acknowledges that environmental dangers are real, it suspects that Turkey's true concern centers on its plan to build a pipeline from the fields of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus to Turkish ports on the Mediterranean. Moscow perceives Ankara as a competitor in this potentially lucrative market. The Russian preference is to ship oil from the Russian terminals at Novorossiysk on the Black Sea, which would require greater access for Russian tankers to the Turkish Straits.

Competition over Caspian oil also has a political dimension which infuriates Ankara. For several years, Turkey had been negotiating an oil agreement with Azerbaijan. Before it could be signed, however, the pro-Turkish Azeri President Abulfez Elchibey was ousted and replaced by a Soviet-era KGB official. Turkey suspects Russian complicity in toppling Elchibey, whose views were decidedly anti-Russian and who occasionally incited the Azeris of Iran to break with Tehran. Moscow was not eager to address the potential consequences of Iran's break-up, which threatened to trigger similar disturbances among Moslem populations on Russia's periphery.

Besides competition with Moscow, Tehran has signed agreements with Turkmenistan which could erode Ankara's leverage with other potentially oil-rich states in the region. Tehran has also announced support for the Novorossiysk option and may back a Russian plan to build pipelines. This fuels Ankara's concern that a Moscow-Tehran entente could doom prospects for Ankara to profit from Caspian oil trade. Moreover, Tehran's covert programs to develop weapons of mass destruction with Russian assistance only reinforce Turkey's sense of encirclement.

If Turkey prevails in limiting traffic through the straits, Moscow's influence in both Central Asia and the Caucasus would diminish as hard currency from oil transit agreements was lost. This would come in the wake of Russia's failure to triumph in a confrontation with a ragtag Chechnyan army and to prevail in its struggle with Georgia.

Russia is the only great power in the region and thus Turkey must ultimately accommodate Moscow or stay clear of those issues that might bring the two into conflict.

Turkey's discomfort with the post-Cold War security order is shared with virtually all of its Western and non-Western neighbors. This transition from the period of global bipolar competition presents opportunities and risks. Turks understand that many opportunities in a multipolar world could place them in conflict with nations that are also seeking greater security. Turkey's dilemma differs from most, however, in that the Cold War's end has further clouded rather than clarified its identity among Western and non-Western nations.

During the Cold War, Western allies (including Turkey) could accept the ambiguities of the alliance because of coalition imperatives. But these ambiguities have become a source of tension, loosening alliance cohesion. Turkey's search for a new center of gravity and a distinct regional role is frustrated by its estrangement from Europe, which may create a greater dependency on the United States at a time when Washington is disinclined to encourage it.

The unique status of Turkey in NATO and close relationship with the United States can be seen as an asset, but it also complicates its relations with nations outside the Western Alliance. Further, estrangement from its more traditional Arab and Islamic friends could isolate it from the Middle East and in the process reduce its effectiveness as a bridge to increasingly vital regions on NATO's periphery. Few of the security choices faced by Turkey are mutually exclusive. The challenge will be to navigate a course to broaden its relations with Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and Asia, while retaining the ability to move between Western security partners and those outside that system. Turkey must weigh its choices carefully. **JFQ**