

TURKEY UPDATE

*January 30, 2008***US-TURKISH RELATIONS: ANOTHER HONEYMOON?**

On January 8 President George W. Bush hosted Turkish President Abdullah Gul at the White House. The visit was noteworthy not only because it was the first by a Turkish President in over a decade but also because it circumvented conventional diplomatic procedure by following so closely that of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The trip was clearly designed to underline the closer alignment between the two countries stemming from the policy adjustment by the United States at the November 5 Bush-Erdogan meeting. Much to the chagrin of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government as well as the Turkish public, the Bush Administration had previously failed to respond to sustained Turkish appeals for support in the fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had been escalating terrorist attacks on Turkish targets from its bases in Iraq. However, Bush's public identification of the PKK as "a common enemy" and promise of "actionable intelligence" had cleared the way to Turkish air strikes against PKK camps in northern Iraq and a thaw in relations.

At the same time, the visit was an important component of Gul's plan to continue to play a leading role in Turkish foreign policy. Having been elevated to the presidency from his previous post of deputy prime minister and foreign minister amid considerable controversy in August 2007, Gul clearly regarded the White House meeting as an ideal opportunity to demonstrate his disinclination to be restricted to the mostly ceremonial functions envisioned by the Turkish parliamentary system.

In predictably upbeat remarks to the press, Gul said that there had been "some turmoil in relations" which "had been overcome" leading to "a climate of confidence." Gul claimed that the two countries "shared a common vision and worked together" and had "an impact on the regional and global scale." Bush chose to please his guest by using a term recently used more by Turkish leaders than their American counterparts in twice referring to Turkey as "a strategic partner." He also reaffirmed "the continuing fight against the common enemy, the PKK", while justifying his backing for Turkish entry into the European Union (EU) by characterizing Turkey as "a constructive bridge between Europe and the Islamic world.'

To be sure, the relationship has recovered from the doldrums of a few months ago when apparent indifference to PKK terrorism, combined with the possibility of the passage by the US House of Representatives of a bill 'recognizing the Armenian Genocide', had pushed Turkish support for the United States down to single digits and led to widespread calls for retaliation. However, it is important to note that there was a similar recovery after the March 2003 crisis prompted by the rebuff of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) of the Bush Administration's request to send American troops to attack Saddam Hussein through Turkey.

In fact, both Erdogan and Gul had made numerous trips to Washington during the four years after the TGNA vote and had unfailingly commented on the soundness of the relationship. During one of his earlier visits Erdogan had gone so far as to declare that there was "no need to turn a new page as relations were already excellent." Consequently, it would be prudent to look beyond the current rhetoric and to reserve judgment on whether the alliance, which has its origins in the unique circumstances of the Cold War, has finally reestablished itself on a firm new foundation - as a leading foreign policy adviser to Erdogan and Gul has rashly suggested - or, as seems more

likely, will continue to be characterized by a mutual continuous effort to try to minimize the inevitable divergences in the post Cold War era.

POST COLD WAR ADJUSTMENT: A WORK IN PROGRESS

An examination of current US-Turkish relations must nevertheless include recognition that it is a relatively modern phenomenon without the historically significant lineage of the complex Turkish engagement with Europe. After marching into Europe as unwelcome conquerors six centuries ago, the Ottoman Turks had been grudgingly forced to accept the need to modernize in the European model as they were pushed back to the Bosphorus. The creation of the modern Turkish Republic by Kemal Ataturk out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 was the culmination of that long process. When Ataturk declared that Turkey had to be part of Western civilization, his gaze was not on the United States but on Western Europe. The voluntary Turkish decision to move towards integration with Europe, which is continuing with the current and admittedly difficult effort to join the EU, was buttressed by geographic proximity, cultural interaction and economic interdependence.

In contrast, the Turkish alignment with the United States was spawned by mutual strategic needs only after the Second World War. Following its commitment to the defense of Turkey against its Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, under President Harry Truman, the United States had taken the lead in ensuring Turkish admission into NATO in 1952 after two previous rebuffs and had thus enshrined a bilateral alliance in a multilateral context. Throughout the four subsequent decades of the Cold War, the relationship had rested on the twin pillars of American reliance on access to Turkish territory extending to the soft underbelly of the Soviet Union and Turkish reliance on American military, economic and diplomatic support.

With the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, the *raison d'être* of the alliance had disappeared. However, as the two countries agreed on maintaining their relationship almost without serious review, a new basis was needed for cooperation. The most frequently articulated rationale for the post Cold War partnership, which was initially refashioned during the last year of the George H.W. Bush Administration in 1992 and further modified during the Clinton Administration in 1993-2001, was Turkey's support against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and, in particular, continued use by the United States of the Incirlik airbase. At a broader level, the two sides stressed growing multiregional cooperation, especially in the troubled Balkans, where the Turks had historical links, and the former Soviet Union, where five Turkic states had become independent. In addition, the two countries also focused on Turkey's role in the transportation of oil and gas from the Caspian Sea region to markets and support by the United States for Turkish accession to the EU.

In reality, none of these new areas of cooperation filled the void created by the end of the original alliance in which each country knew what it could expect from the other and what it could give back. The uncertainties, which were deliberately played down by both sides in the first decade of the post Cold War era, came to the surface after the Bush Administration's decision to launch a global war on terror in response to the September 11 attacks.

While Turkey shared the misgivings of most of America's allies about Washington's unilateral approach, it nevertheless backed the military operation in Afghanistan and even sent troops to maintain the peace after the overthrow of the Taliban. However, it had a very different attitude towards the use of force in Iraq. Fearing instability beyond its southern border and the strengthening of the Kurdish position in Iraq, the coalition government led by Bulent Ecevit and its Justice and Development Party (JDP) successor, which came into office after the November 2002 elections, both conveyed serious misgivings about the possible consequences of the overthrow of Saddam to the Bush Administration.

Given these concerns, which reflected the sentiments of the Turkish public, the TGNA vote against allowing American troops to attack Iraq from the north should not have come as a surprise. Nonetheless, the unwillingness of one ally to permit access to its territory to another as it prepared to go to war vividly underlined the extent to which interests could differ in the new geopolitical environment.

Although the relationship predictably plummeted after the vote, it was sustained by the unwillingness of the two sides to accept a withering of their links. In addition to its understandable impulse to maintain a relationship with the only superpower, the JDP government also feared the possibility that its actual or potential opponents in the political arena as well as beyond who were suspicious of its Islamist origins and long-term goals would exploit problems with Washington. Consequently, the JDP deliberately chose to ignore public opinion and pursued a policy of accentuating the positive, underlined by frequent high-level visits to Washington.

The Bush Administration had its own reasons for being receptive to the JDP approach. After overcoming its initial disappointment over the TGNA vote, it focused on the advantages of continued cooperation, not least with respect to the maintenance of the air corridor through Incirlik deemed vital for the military campaign in Iraq. At the same time, the Bush Administration welcomed Turkish backing for its post war drive to bring democracy to the skeptical broader Middle East region. Needless to say, a country led by a party with Islamist origins was seen as a valuable partner in a difficult endeavor.

While the initial support provided to the JDP by the Bush Administration during its serious confrontation with its civilian and military challengers in mid-2007 was lukewarm, the JDP victories in the subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections set the stage for the continuation of the close working relationship between the two governments. However, the problem posed by the presence and activities of the PKK in northern Iraq and the possible recognition of the 'Armenian Genocide' by the US Congress loomed ominously over the second half of the year. While the relationship survived the threats posed by these two issues to witness the bonhomie exhibited during the Erdogan and Gul visits, the two countries seem destined to be engaged in a process of mutual adjustment.

2008 AND BEYOND

Trying to balance interests in the complex quadrilateral relationship between Turkey, the United States, the Iraqi Kurds and the PKK will undoubtedly remain a feature of the US-Turkish alliance. The reality is that the United States is caught between its long-standing Turkish ally and its newer Iraqi Kurdish allies, who are hosting the PKK in the area they are controlling. Although Bush has belatedly tilted towards the Turks after November 5, the US position is much more nuanced than the Turks may wish to acknowledge.

A vital component of the Turkish counterterrorism strategy which defeated the separatist terrorism of the PKK in 1999 after a fifteen year struggle was cross border ground force operations into northern Iraq. These were conducted after 1992 with the support of Iraqi Kurds who were protected from Saddam's wrath by American aircraft operating out of Incirlik in southern Turkey. However, the use of this option was firmly opposed after 2003 not only by the Iraqi Kurds but also by the United States.

Until the escalation of PKK terrorism in October, Washington seemed content to counsel patience and restraint to Ankara while encouraging ineffective cooperation with the central government in Baghdad which had little influence in the north. As casualties rose, the United States was inevitably blamed for its reluctance to use its own forces in Iraq against what it recognized as a terrorist organization as well as for not pushing the Iraqi Kurds to act. Erdogan pointedly criticized the United States for opposing Turkish action beyond its border when it had come thousands of miles to Iraq to confront terrorism. However, once Turkish public opinion forced the Erdogan government to obtain parliamentary authorization for the use of force in northern Iraq against the PKK, the Bush Administration felt obliged to modify its stance.

The policy change was produced by the recognition that continuing failure to provide support to Ankara would further undermine the dangerously low support for the United States in Turkey, make it difficult for Erdogan to maintain cooperation and, most importantly, raise questions over the use of Incirlik.

Nevertheless, Erdogan claimed immediately after the meeting that he had "obtained what he wanted" and following his return to Turkey said that he had asked Bush "to choose between Turkey and [Kurdish leader Massoud] Barzani." However, if the Bush Administration has not in fact made such a choice and its support is limited to the provision of intelligence for air strikes, the Turkish expectation of full backing for a policy of eliminating the PKK will be dashed.

Underlining the importance of retaining the friendship of the Iraqi Kurds, who strongly resent Turkish action against ethnic brethren sheltering in their territory, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed concerns about civilian casualties and a destabilization of northern Iraq during a recent trip to Iraq. Rice also suggested that there should be a cooperative dialogue between its two allies on 'a comprehensive solution.' That is likely to be difficult as long as Turkey, which does not recognize or deal with the Kurdish Regional Government headed by Barzani, perceives the Iraqi Kurds' relationship with the PKK as evidence of Pan-Kurdish sentiments and their desire to incorporate the disputed city of Kirkuk as confirmation of their aspirations for an independent state that might serve as an example to Turkish Kurds.

The problems posed by the Turkish-Kurdish dispute in the US-Turkish relationship were vividly underlined towards the end of Gul's trip to Washington. After an unnamed US official had stated that "a comprehensive solution to the PKK problem, which means not just military action, but also political action, including things within Turkey -- economic, political development, social development in the southeast" had been discussed during the Bush-Gul meeting, Gul reacted angrily by comparing the PKK to Al Qaeda and saying that there were "no political solutions to terrorism coming from outside." For good measure, he added that Turkey did "not need external advice on this issue."

The two allies will also have to bear in mind the fact that the thorny 'Armenian Genocide' issue has not disappeared from their agenda. Although similar resolutions had been introduced previously - most notably in 2000 when a last minute call by President Bill Clinton to Speaker Dennis Hastert had prevented it from being tabled in the House of Representatives - the reality is that the 2007 effort by the Armenian lobby was probably its strongest.

Following the House Foreign Affairs Committee's approval of the non-binding resolution, which had the full support of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Bush Administration had mounted a major campaign to prevent it from being tabled on the House floor. Taking note of the strong reaction to the Committee vote by the Turkish government, media and people along with the possibility raised by Turkish leaders and officials of the curtailing of the use of Incirlik, which Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated was the conduit for 70 percent of the supplies provided to American forces in Iraq, Bush warned that "passage would do great harm to relations with a key ally and to the war on terror."

Although the Bush Administration's efforts, combined with intense Turkish lobbying in Congress, produced numerous defections from among the supporters of the resolution and ultimately led Pelosi to decide against proceeding to a vote, it nevertheless seems certain that the issue will come up again in either the House of Representatives or the Senate on a future occasion. Significantly, most of the Congressmen who were opposed to a floor vote chose to justify their stance with reference to national security considerations rather than to the merits of the issue. Consequently, it has to be asked how future incumbents at the White House might try to prevent the adoption of a resolution with an extremely negative impact on the relationship once the scaling down of the military effort Iraq reduces dependence on Incirlik.

It is also worth noting that there are limits to the US-Turkish cooperation in the Middle East which has been much-touted by the two sides. Beyond the difficulties of reconciling interests and policies in Iraq, the two allies have reason to be concerned about the negative implications of a possible US military strike against Iran. Although the likelihood of an American attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, which the Turkish government and people strongly oppose, appears to have receded in the past few months, Bush's recent tough rhetoric has nonetheless kept it on the agenda.

In any case, the two sides differ on the efficacy of sanctions and isolation. In fact, despite intense US efforts, Turkey is proceeding with a new energy agreement with Iran which will expand its significant trade relationship with its neighbor. Following the expansion of Turkish-Russian energy cooperation, the deal further undercuts the rationale of the East-West energy corridor promoted jointly by Washington and Ankara which was to reduce reliance on Russia while obviating the need for an Iranian role.

Turkey is showing few signs of downgrading relationships with other countries in the Middle East which have earned the ire of the United States. It has been maintaining close contacts with the Baathist regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, who visited Ankara last year, and last week hosted President Omar Bashir of Sudan, which has been accused by President Bush of perpetrating genocide in Darfur. The Erdogan Government, which regards the broadening of its regional links as evidence of Turkey's enhanced international clout, has also not followed Washington's lead in shunning the leadership of Hamas. Consequently, as the Bush Administration quietly downplays its Middle East democracy drive in which Turkey was an eager participant, it can legitimately be asked whether the interests of the two countries really do converge in the region.

While developments in the Middle East are unlikely to shape the future of the bilateral relationship, the same cannot be said about the fate of the Turkish effort to enter the EU. Although the United States has been supporting Turkish accession, unlike with the Turkish effort to join NATO, it cannot make it happen. The opposition to Turkish membership spearheaded by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and, to a lesser extent, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is being reinforced by public opinion throughout the EU. There is a reciprocal apathy on the part of the Erdogan government and growing disillusionment on the part of Turkish public opinion. Consequently, it is now possible to imagine Turkey becoming the first country to begin accession negotiations but ultimately failing to join.

The end of its EU odyssey would have profound consequences for Turkey's definition of itself and its role in the world as well as for Turkish domestic politics and economy. It would necessitate major policy decisions not only in Ankara but also in Washington. While the United States will surely try to maintain Turkey's continued adherence to the West through what some in Washington have suggested would be 'an enhanced strategic partnership', it is far from clear how firm the foundations of such a relationship would be. Not having played a defining role in the process of Turkish westernization, it would be extremely difficult for the United States to try to sustain this effort on its own, particularly as Turkey's rebuff by the Europeans would reinforce the strong anti-Western sentiments on the part of the Turkish public.

Needless to say, the future of the alliance will also be shaped by Turkish and American domestic politics. The JDP easily won a second mandate in July 2007 and enjoys virtually unchallenged domination in the Turkish political scene. However, it still has an uneasy relationship with detractors wary of what they believe to be its 'hidden Islamist agenda.' The JDP's opponents seem likely to be regvanized by the move to lift restrictions on the Islamic headscarf. Although, the United States has no urgent reason to be concerned about the longevity of a Turkish government which has demonstrated its commitment to a close relationship, the coincidence of domestic polarization and a faltering of the economy because of the global economic downturn could conceivably make the JDP more vulnerable.

An unavoidable element of uncertainty will also accompany the election of a new president at the other end of the relationship. There is little reason to believe that the new American president will choose to substantially modify the fundamentals of the alliance. However, Bush's replacement will come in with a different set of priorities and thus usher in the next stage in the ongoing process of post Cold War adjustment.

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