Turkey's Engagement with Modernity
Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century

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The modern state of Turkey is the successor to what was once a great power. At its zenith, the Ottoman Empire commanded large armies and territory and had an important say in European power politics. In the Middle East, it had no real rival. In his classic *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz identifies the Ottoman Empire as a Great Power in 1700—but by 1800 it had ceased to occupy this status (Waltz, 1979, p. 132). The Ottoman Empire was not the only state to lose this coveted position: by the 1800s, Sweden, the Netherlands and Spain were no longer considered Great Powers either. By the end of the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had ceased to exist. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the international system was transformed from a multipolar to a bipolar and, finally, to the current almost unipolar state.

The Ottoman Empire had reached its status like all other empires, through conquest. Its end came about as others encroached on its conquered territories and the people it had subjugated rebelled and exacted their revenge on the Sublime Porte. For most of its dying decades the empire had to contend with dramatic changes in the international system and its immediate neighbourhood without the ability to fashion these developments. Its successor, the Republic of Turkey, also had to devise strategies to survive the uncertainty and insecurity engendered by dramatic shifts in the international system.

This chapter explores how the late Ottoman Empire and Turkey adapted to changing international realities and constraints. It looks at Turkey’s relations with the Great Powers. The combination of domestic strengths and external vulnerabilities varied a great deal during the last 200 years of contact with the Great Powers. From an Empire teetering on the verge of collapse to an underdeveloped and poor state on the edge of a global war, to a developing country bordering one of the great expansionist powers of the twentieth century, and now to a middle income and Europe-bound state neighbouring one of the most volatile regions of the world, Turkey has found itself facing these different challenges with equally diverse attributes and resources.
The realist viewpoint, which has been the dominant paradigm in international relations for most of this past century, argues that in the anarchic international system Great Powers pursue power and compete with each other. For realists, this power struggle is a matter of survival. The paradigm expects that mid-level powers such as Turkey will behave similarly and face the same general set of insecurities. As a result, they need to join alliances or associate themselves with other powers to balance possible hostile states. In fact, Turkey often perceiving threats, has done exactly that and constructed or joined alliances to ensure its survival. The most important such case is the NATO alliance, which pitted Western states against the Warsaw Pact and its dominant partner, the Soviet Union.

During its long engagement with the Great Powers, Turkey suffered from its relative political, economic, and military weakness. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire, having largely fallen on the defensive, watched almost helplessly as territories it had conquered a few centuries earlier were liberated from its rule. Atatürk's Turkish Republic was born out of the ashes of an Empire devastated by war and economic mismanagement and neglect. It not only had to face the challenges at home attributable to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, its poor infrastructure, absence of an economic base, and its religious and ethnic tensions, but had to also negotiate a new course for itself while positioned at the vortex of the great power struggles.

What made Turkey different from the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Austria, or Italy, to name a few states that lost their so-called great power status, was its strategic location. The major struggles of the last two centuries swirled around the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was the object of great power rivalry as the Russian Empire encroached from the north, trying to acquire as much territory from the Ottomans as possible in its own quest to compete with the other European powers. What prevented the Ottoman Empire from collapsing earlier than it did was Britain's desire to contain Russian advances and deny Moscow access to Constantinople and the Mediterranean (Narizny, 2007, pp. 242-44).

Similarly, in the twentieth century, Turkey stood in the way of German and Soviet expansionism, and was adjacent to areas of considerable importance to the Great Powers, such as the oil-rich Middle East. Throughout this period, Turkey was considered an important piece in the global chessboard.

If a strategic location makes a state important to others, it also brings about an element of vulnerability. For Turkey, attention came with a deep sense of insecurity, a belief that other powers coveted Turkish territory or resources, even when this may not have been true. The demise of the Ottoman state and division of its territory has had an indelible impact on modern Turkish perceptions. Although the Ottomans had built their empire through conquest, Turks today perceive its demise to be the result of unfair and nefarious plots conjured up by Great Powers and their client states.
Sevres treaty, the post-First World War treaty that called for the dismantling of the Empire, has been transformed into a political malaise or syndrome of sorts. In a continuing demonstration of the country’s vulnerability, it is often invoked in contemporary Turkey as proof of the ill intentions of outside powers. In effect, the Sevres Treaty has become one of the foundational myths of the republic strategically deployed by opponents of improved relations with Western countries (Jung, 2001).

On the other hand, strategic location and importance allow countries to collect ‘strategic rents’. Great powers are more likely to disburse funds and other resources, such as military material, to countries they deem critical to their own interests. Such rents, or gains, would not otherwise accrue to a country if it were devoid of any strategic value. These rents are not unlike oil-derived rents and as the rent-seeking literature informs us, countries with access to rents not only seek to maximise them but also end up misallocating them. Since the end of the Second World War, Turkey benefited immensely from strategic rents. It had access to the NATO alliance and more importantly to US aid, both financial and military. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Iran’s Islamic revolution further amplified the importance of Ankara in Washington’s eyes. The end of the Cold War has been equally kind to Ankara. Many other countries that were no longer front-line states in the struggle against communism found that they occupied a lower place in the priorities of the US. Unrest in the Balkans, the growing importance of Central Asia, the turbulence in the Middle East, and above all Saddam Hussein’s ability to survive in Baghdad at a time when the US was adamant in its desire to contain him, all proved beneficial to Turkey.

Turkey emerged from these experiences as a status quo power par excellence. During the Cold War, responding to Soviet threats, Turkey aligned itself with NATO and the US and later joined the Baghdad Pact (and remained within the Regional Cooperation and Development organisation, RCD, that replaced it). As part of the containment policy against the Soviet Union, it kept its distance from against revisionist states in its immediate region. However, for a relatively industrialised country, well-endowed with natural resources and population, strategically well-located, and possessing a powerful military establishment, it has not had any significant influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood. In Turkey two concerns – an ingrained sense of vulnerability and a strong desire for regime survival, as distinct from state survival in the classical sense – account for a lacklustre foreign policy performance. A strong desire for regime survival is not a concern unique to Turkey. Most states in the developing world share this unease. What is distinct about Turkey is the continued resilience of fears regarding the durability of the regime well after the initial transition to democratic rule in 1950.

Turkey’s past foreign policy can best be characterised as tactical, defensive and unimaginative. With few exceptions, it has opposed change at home and abroad. When change has come, it has been mainly because of external
threats or pressures. One of Turkey's veteran columnists, Mehmet Ali Birand, challenged his readers to find an example of a Turkish leader initiating an important reform or change in policy without foreign pressure. During the Ottoman Empire, battlefield losses forced change, and in modern times, shifting international political circumstances and the pressure of great powers have caused Turkey to alter its course significantly. Today, it is broadly speaking the EU accession process that drives Turkey's economic and political transformation. With the exception of Kemal Atatürk's reforms and Turgut Özal's economic measures, major policy change has almost never been indigenous, but has instead been forced or inspired from abroad.

The current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, however, is intent on altering this fundamental equation. Erdogan has increasingly charted what appears to be a foreign policy independent of traditional constraints and encumbrances. It is designed to make Turkey a player not just in its immediate region but also globally. This said, it remains to be seen how successful it will be and whether this represents a permanent and fundamental change or an opportunistic attempt at capitalising on the vacuum created by the Bush administration.

Development of foreign policy from the Empire to the Republic

With its imperial heyday a thing of the past, and the threats posed by modern and powerful states encroaching on its territories, the Ottoman Empire reluctantly began to reform itself in the early nineteenth century. War has perhaps been the most important source of political change in history, so it is not surprising that even before the famous 1839 Gülhane edict, the Ottoman Empire introduced a series of reforms starting with its military institutions. Though the reforms managed to delay the eventual collapse of the Empire, they could not stave off this fate forever. Interestingly, what enabled the Empire to survive as long as it did may have had less to do with the military than with a shrewd foreign policy that made the most of the divisions and rivalries among the Great Powers of the day. In effect, the Empire managed to turn its weakness into an asset of sorts, allowing it to manipulate its challengers.

The post-1923 Turkish Republic also sought a foreign policy that would ensure its stability and protection. After suffering through years of war and partial occupation, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk assumed the leadership of a population badly in need of respite. Having learned the lessons of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, he tried to distance his new regime as much as possible from its recent past. While inheriting a territory much more homogenous than the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, modern Turkey nonetheless contained a variety of ethnic groups and would be saddled with refugees, as well as newcomers displaced by the population exchanges with Greece. Creating a nation state out of these disparate groups and fashioning a coherent political
entity to succeed the Empire was a Herculean task. Atatürk aimed not only to replace religion with Turkish national identity as the main societal bond, but also to marry this new identity with the ‘contemporary’ civilisational norms of the time. To achieve them he launched into a wholesale transformation of society by imposing a strict version of secularism and trying to affect the everyday life of the citizens by regulating such things as dress codes. As modernist as they may have been, Atatürk’s reforms were imposed from above and the one-party state he created was, as Erik Zürcher argued, ‘a monolithic system ... [that] left little room for ventilation’ (Zürcher, 1993, p. 185).

The Kemalist republic was, in Heinz Kramer’s words, ‘run by the state bureaucracy and military-turned-civilian politicians led by a caste of urban intellectuals with European-influenced education who entertained an organic understanding of state and society’ (Kramer, 2000, p. 8). In the process it institutionalised itself to the extent that its reforms and orientation became an ideology. Upon Atatürk’s death, his ideology got sanctified. As Bernard Lewis argues, ‘in the hands of lesser men than himself, his authoritarian and paternalist mode of government degenerated into something nearer to dictatorship as the word is commonly understood’ (Lewis, 1961, pp. 297–8). This viewpoint informed both domestic and foreign policy. At home, the regime battled both Kurdish demands for recognition and the power of piety in society. The transformation that Atatürk had begun would take much longer than anticipated, partly due to the limited resources at the disposal of an impoverished society. In retrospect, his often-quoted maxim ‘peace at home, peace abroad’, which has often been interpreted as a type of Turkish isolationism, appears to have had more to do with fear of domestic challenges than with challenges posed by external sources. When faced with a domestic Kurdish insurrection, Atatürk desisted from incorporating Kurdish-inhabited northern Iraqi territory that Turkey had claimed as its own. By contrast, without a domestic challenge, the Kemalist government had no compunction about acquiring Alexandretta away from Syria.

The recognition of Turkey’s vulnerability in uncertain times came to the fore during the Second World War. Unlike the First World War, when Enver Pasha’s decision to abandon the risk averse and cautious foreign policy by siding with the Germans ultimately brought down the Empire once and for all (Hale, 2000, p. 35), during the Second World War Turkey’s leader Ismet İnönü followed a very cautious policy ostensibly intended to preserve the republic. Although historians argue about the very essence of the policy, Turkish neutrality during the war may have prevented it from getting dragged into a conflict it was unprepared for but neither did it help Ankara make many friends. When Turkey finally declared war on the Axis powers
in the waning days of the conflict, the Soviets, for one, were unenthusiastic about Turkish participation. Moscow was far more interested in extending its spoils of war to its immediate south, perhaps to the strategic Turkish straits. With the Soviet Union and the Western Alliance emerging as the two poles of the new international system, Turkey found that it had nowhere to go but with the West.

Yet the defeat of Germany, as Hale has argued, was more than a reestablishment of a European balance of power system. The Second World War had been a total war, a war against evil (Hale, 2000, pp. 104–5). Turkey, with its authoritarian system, state controls on the economy and wartime measures against religious minorities, appeared anachronistic as a would-be Western ally. In response to the pressures of the post-war context, President İnönü engineered the transformation of Turkey from a one-party state into a multi-party pluralistic system. He allowed an opposition party, the Democratic Party, to participate in the 1946 elections. These elections were rigged to favour the ruling Republican People’s Party, (RPP), which Atatürk had founded and İnönü had taken over. However, ensuing Soviet pressure to incorporate eastern Turkish provinces into its territory made alignment with the West more pressing (Kuniholm, 1980). The pronouncement of the 1947 Truman Doctrine signified the beginning of Turkey’s engagement with the US as Washington drew a line against Soviet ambitions in Greece and Turkey. In 1950, the İnönü regime allowed genuinely free elections to take place, and the opposition Democrats swept to power, defeating the party that governed modern Turkey almost since its inception. The Democratic Party, compared with the RPP, was far more private sector oriented and unafraid to offend the West.

Uneasy relations with the Great Powers

Although Turkey has been firmly implanted in Cold War and post-Cold War Western alliance systems, the irony of modern Turkish foreign policy is the uneasiness that dominates public and government perceptions of Turkey’s allies, the US and Europe. This is despite the rhetoric from Ankara regarding its fundamental Western orientation, not just within a security alliance but also philosophically and 'culturally'. Atatürk’s admonishment to jettison ‘contemporary civilization’ has been the mantra of successive Turkish governments and of generations of schoolchildren and adults alike. Yet, from the 1950s onwards, the apprehension with which Turkish leaders have approached their allies has been surprising. Disputes aside, the Turkish view of Europe and the US has been saturated with deep suspicion. After 50 years of alliance, one could still find former and experienced prime minister Bulent Ecevit, easily articulating the darkest fears of many Turks: that the Turks and the Europeans were only interested in carving up Turkey. At a similar level, Kenan Evren, the 1980 coup leader and then president of Turkey, up
relinquishing his office in 1989 expressed the general view that 'Turkey has very few friends, and this is why we have to be powerful' (Gönlübol, 1990, p. 614). Paradoxically, both Ecevit and Evren represent facets of the Kemalist vanguard of Turkish society.

What then explains the absence of trust in the West among members of the Kemalist elite? As Ekavi Athanassopoulou convincingly demonstrates, the Turks did not find it easy to gain acceptance as a member of the Western alliance (Athanassopoulou, 1999). Turkey's participation in the Korean War became a primary means to improve its standing with the US and become a member of NATO in 1952 after having previously been rebuffed on a number of occasions. Turks feel that from the NATO membership to the European Union accession negotiations, Turkish interest in membership has always faced unnecessary questioning, prejudice and delay.

Occasionally, classical security issues would become the objects of dispute. The first serious incident was when the US negotiated away the presence of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey during the Cuban Missile Crisis without consulting the authorities in Ankara. This was followed by the infamous 1964 Johnson letter that warned Turkey against intervening militarily in Cyprus.

The reluctance of European countries to come to the defence of Turkey on the eve of the 1991 Gulf war as Turks feared that Saddam Hussein would launch non-conventional missiles against Turkish targets did not help improve the standing of the allies. The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy is another issue of contention, because while the Europeans are asking for access to NATO assets, Turkey is kept out of this initiative because it is not yet an EU member state even though its security interests are affected.

During the Cold War, Turkey tended to shy away from active participation in the international system and with the exception of the Cyprus issue proved to be conflict averse. Turkey rarely behaved in a way that was commensurate with its power, given its close and extensive relations with Western powers, from which it derived much of its strength, and certainly its own economic, political and military capabilities. Compared to Egypt or Yugoslavia, which assumed positions of international leadership through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Turkey with its superior capabilities failed to make much of a mark in international politics. This is not to argue that Turkey ought to have joined the NAM (although some in Turkey wanted it to do so) but rather that it could have assumed a more visible position in international institutions, put forward new initiatives and even launched meditative missions abroad. Its efforts to serve on the UN Security Council were for the most part stymied after the 1950s. In the more than 60 years of United Nations history, Turkey has only served on the Council in 1951-2, and 1954-5 and shared a seat with Poland in 1961. It is only after a concerted and wide-ranging diplomatic offensive by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that Ankara finally managed to secure a seat for the 2009-11 term.
During the course of the Cold War, Turkey also benefited from US military and economic aid. Between 1950 and 1989, the US provided military assistance valued at $8 billion, of which some $4.7 billion were in the form of grants and $3.3 billion were concessional loans (Defence Security Cooperation Agency, 1999). More importantly, the US, sometimes with the help of allies, came to Turkey’s rescue at times of deep economic crisis by ensuring that international financial institutions advanced the necessary loans. This was the case in the summer of 1979, when the IMF signed a stand-by agreement with Ankara that enabled an Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) consortium aid package of $1 billion (Krueger and Aktan, 1992, pp. 38–9). The 1979 aid package followed a summit in Guadeloupe earlier that year, at which Presidents Jimmy Carter and Valery Giscard D’Estaing and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt discussed Turkey’s difficulties and committed themselves to come to its aid. The summit had coincided with the alarming developments in Iran and Afghanistan. Also, the IMF stand-by package came with the understanding that the government, then led by Ecevit, which was facing a dire foreign exchange shortage crisis, would institute deep structural reforms. His reforms, however, proved to be too moderate and failed to achieve the desired objectives. These were followed by far more radical ones in 1980 implemented by a new government, which included Özal as its economic czar. Despite the promising economic picture, the new government fell victim to a military coup, but the ruling generals kept Özal in his position. Whereas Ecevit symbolised the defensive and status quo-oriented approach, Özal, by contrast, represented a new, opportunistic and assertive vision for Turkey. Turkish exports mushroomed in response to the new economic adjustment programme; Turkish businesses, and especially new ones in the Anatolian hinterland, began to open up to the international market. Özal, who had assumed the premiership with the return to democracy in 1983, further strengthened the reforms and by the end of the decade when the Berlin Wall came down Turkey was ready to play a more important economic role in its immediate region and beyond.

As far as official Turkey was concerned, there never was any doubt after 1947 that the country belonged in the Western alliance. Politicians and opposition members would often speculate on the benefits of greater autonomy or a more balanced position between the superpowers, but in reality, despite its mixed feelings about being a secondary actor, Ankara proved to be an erstwhile ally during the Cold War. The potential loss of this privileged, if not completely satisfying, relationship made Turkey fear the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s demise. In fact, as Philip Robins argues, Turkey did not experience any of ‘the normative euphoria which swept through Europe’ at the conclusion of the Cold War (Robins, 2003, p. 13). For Robins, this juncture was not just a lost opportunity, but also an affirmation of how comfortable Turkey felt in its position in the Cold War security architecture. This comfort was not, however, a vote of confidence in the US, but rather
in the bipolar system. As a profoundly status quo power, Turkey regretted the end of this system.

The collapse of the USSR sent shock waves through Turkey. At first, it appeared as if the bulwark against Soviet expansionism had lost its most important asset: its strategic location. Turkey quickly tried to refashion itself as a gateway to Central Asia. In reality, Ankara’s strategic importance to the sole superpower was about to increase as America shifted focus from the USSR to Iraq and to the rest of the Middle East. Although Iraq did not constitute the same kind of danger to the international system as had the USSR, for over a decade the relationship with Ankara was a critical component of the US Iraq policy. Starting with the first Gulf War in 1990–1, Turkey provided diplomatic and then logistical support to the US in the region. Washington’s containment of the Saddam Hussein regime would become significantly dependent on Ankara’s cooperation.

### Domestic challenges and transformation of foreign Policy

With the end of the Cold War Turkey no longer faced a colossus armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, but instead a series of neighbouring states, some of which were potentially hostile to its interests. None of these states represented a strategic threat that required the assistance of a great power. Although this change derived in large part from evolving conditions exogenous to Turkey, the fact remains that some 50 years of alliance membership had transformed Turkey into a more robust and somewhat more self-assured military power.

The question of Iraq best encapsulates the transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Foreign policy decision-making became a function of domestic rather than foreign insecurities or concerns. With the end of the Cold War, Turkey faced two new challenges as old societal fissures re-emerged. Kurdish nationalism and Islamic reaction kept at bay or dormant during most of the century resurfaced, almost with a vengeance. These were purely domestic in character — though the spillover from Iraq did affect the Kurdish issue — and had a lot more to do with the way in which the Turkish state had been constructed in the first place. At the onset of the republic, Turkish leaders had expended considerable efforts to eradicate Kurdish identity and independent religious orders and forms of expression. The Kemalist republic succeeded in creating a more coherent and developed state where many others such as Egypt or Pakistan failed. Still its hope that ‘Westernisation’ and modernisation would render issues relating to religion and ethnicity to the dustbin of Turkish history did not materialise.

The domestic challenges, especially the Kurdish one that starting in the mid 1980s mutated with the emergence of formidable insurgent force, the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Marcus, 2007), compelled Turkish officials to revert to a foreign policy action programme that was primarily
defensive, inward-looking and status-quo oriented. Domestic considerations, in other words, completely dominated its relations with friend and foe. Ironically, this shift also coincided with a new American approach to the Middle East whereby Washington increasingly saw democratic, secular and pro-Western Turkey as a possible model for the Arab world, despite the fact that most Arabs expressed little sympathy or admiration for the Turks.

Starting with the Kuwait crisis in 1990-1, Ankara had terrible misgivings about the US Iraq policy. The containment of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the creation of the no-fly zones, especially the one protecting Iraqi Kurds over northern Iraq, were received with great trepidation in Ankara. Turkish leaders feared the demonstration effect of the growing Kurdish autonomous entity in Iraq on Turkish Kurds and, with the exception of then President Özal (who died in 1993), would have preferred a return to the status quo ante. Whereas Özal perceived active collaboration with the allies in 1991 as a means of validating Ankara’s role in the Western alliance, many of his country’s elite, including the powerful military establishment, perceived a re-engagement with the Middle East after seven decades of distancing as betrayal of the Kemalist worldview. Nonetheless Ankara had little choice, with some 500,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees amassed on its borders it provided facilities for US and British airplanes to patrol the Northern no-fly zone in Iraq and enable the refugees to return home.

Özal would have opted for a closer partnership over Iraq with the US had the Turkish Parliament and military, not to mention the public, been more accommodating. He sought a fundamental change in foreign orientation, providing Turkey with a bigger footprint in world politics, in line with President George Bush’s much-heralded ‘new world order’. In fact, he wanted to open a second front against Iraq and even send Turkish troops into northern Iraq, but this was seen as a serious departure from the traditional status quo-oriented Turkish foreign policy (Uzgel, 2001, p. 256). As far as Özal was concerned, Turkey had everything to gain from active participation with the US-led coalition. He was reputed to have said, ‘we will invert one and receive three in return’ (Uzgel, 2001, p. 254). In an unprecedented series of moves, the foreign and defence ministers as well as the chief of staff of the Turkish General Staff resigned to protest Özal’s foreign policy management style and ambitions. The clash between Özal and the Turkish establishment over Iraq ended with the president’s defeat and to the closing of the debate on the restructuring of foreign policy.

With Özal’s demise in 1993, Turkish foreign policy returned once again to reflect domestic worries. The principal issue was the Kurdish question, reflecting the gravity of the PKK challenge at home and Iraq’s Kurdish enclave. But the 1995 elections resulted in the formation of a coalition led by the Islamist Welfare party that had hitherto eschewed many of the secular Kemalist republic’s ideals, and this brought home to the elite the ‘danger’ posed by voters from the Anatolian hinterland where people were far more
pious and conservative. The rise of the Islamists was actually a response to the ineffectiveness of both centre-right and centre-left parties, which were mired in corruption and lacked political ideas and imagination. It was also an indirect result of the economic changes introduced by Özal that had empowered the Anatolian-based private sector which began to export on its own, bypassing the traditional centres of economic dominance in Turkey, Istanbul and Izmir.

In the post-Özal period, Turkey’s relations with its European and American allies came to be dominated by the response to the PKK and the danger it posed to Turkish unity. With more than two million Turks, which include as many as half a million Kurds of Kurdish origin, the Kurdish problem spilled over into the European Union. The PKK found willing adherents and even some political support there, to the great distress of Ankara, which continuously lobbied European governments to clamp down on the organisation’s activities. As Turkey opted for tough counter-insurgency tactics and policies that resulted in large numbers of human rights violations and mystery killings and a general onslaught on the freedom of expression, it found its relations with both the US and Europe came under strain. Similarly, the Turkish secular establishment also opted to quash the budding Islamist movement that found expression in the anti-Western Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan. The Constitutional Court’s decision to ban the party and its successor from politics was roundly criticised in Washington. In the juxtaposition of the state’s ideology with the resurgence of Islamic reaction and Kurdish nationalism, what emerged was a new set of vulnerabilities that profoundly affected Turkey’s relations with other states and especially the Great Power(s). Ankara interpreted and judged every action of friend or foe through its own narrow prism of Islamic reaction and Kurdish separatism.

At the same time, Turkey continued to pursue its quest for membership of the European Union. In the post-Cold War era, the European Union replaced NATO as the most important international organisation for Turkey. It did not immediately provide security, but instead it opened the door for future prosperity. For Turkish elites, that promised prosperity loomed as an even more important goal, because it offered the prospect of dealing with the twin challenges facing the country. A Europeanised Turkey would become more modern and richer and hence be better placed to handle Islamic reaction and Kurdish nationalism, since both movements had their roots in relative economic deprivation. For elements of the elite, certainly for segments of the business class and intelligentsia, the prospect of Europe was also a route to increased democratisation, whose absence they blamed for the resurgence of both of these problems. Ironically, both Kurds and Islamists would also be won over to the European project, precisely because it promised to bring about greater democratisation and thus political space for the articulation of their platforms. Even the Turkish military – or at least elements of it – perceive accession to the EU as an antidote to the country’s
Kurdish problem, according to a recent article (Aydinli, Özcan and Akyaz, 2006, pp. 77-90). Although the US, as the primary champion of Turkey's bid to join the EU, and many Europeans engaged in a discourse that emphasised the importance of solidifying Turkey's place in the Western alliance system, the fact of the matter is that Turks pursued EU membership for reasons that were far more domestic in origin.

As Ankara's post-Cold War foreign policy became an extension of its domestic insecurities, Turkish policy did assume a decidedly frustrating quality, especially when it came to coordination over Iraq with Washington (Barkey, 2003). The one surprising move was the 1998 Turkish military's uncharacteristic move to threaten Damascus with war if it did not expel the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who had taken up residence there in the early 1980s. Still, this threat, which surprisingly compelled President Hafez al-Assad of Syria to expel Öcalan, did not amount to a new coherent foreign policy. The move had been initiated by the military command without political approval and was possibly even a bluff considering that few Turkish forces were positioned on the Syrian border at the time. As Heinz Kramer points out, there was no Turkish 'grand strategy' for its role after the demise of the Soviet Union. Instead, decision-making was quite ad hoc, often rigid and one-dimensional. Ankara combined its inflexibility in what it believed was 'its rightful and legitimate position' with the tactic of 'open or disguised military threat' (Kramer, 2000, pp. 204-12).

Ironically, Ankara's one major and mould-breaking initiative, the rapprochement with Israel in the 1990s, has to also be seen in this light. It was designed as a means to not only put pressure on Syria – a tactic that clearly worked well, as Damascus and Arab capitals were concerned of a possible joint anti-Syrian operation with Israel – but also to solidify its relationship with Washington. The Israeli connection also provided Turkey with access to weapons systems. However, the Turkish leadership never envisaged it as a major realignment, but rather as a medium-term and tactical liaison.

From an American point of view, the expectation of a possible new role for Turkey in the world in the post-Cold War era, as the much-heralded Turkish opening to Central Asia failed to materialise – partly for reasons out of Ankara's control – did not amount to much. For the US, Turkey was a critical player because of its importance to the US aim of containing Iraq. At the same time, the Turkish domestic insecurities outlined above came to worry Washington. As one former US ambassador to Ankara kept repeating, the US mission was to 'help the Turks help themselves'. The US also became vested in Turkish stability, since Turkish failure threatened disastrous consequences for the region as a whole. These factors explain the zeal with which the US pressured the EU to give a fair chance to the Turkish accession application.

Yet its allies' insistence on improving domestic conditions, especially in the areas of human rights and freedom of speech, have tended to mar Turkish perceptions of the US and Europe. Turkish politicians often accuse
these allies of being insufficiently sensitive to the country's domestic challenges and equate foreign intrusions with the infamous Sevres Treaty. The Sevres syndrome has come to dominate much of the discourse on the nationalist right and left of the political spectrum reinforcing the distrustful approach to allies.

Even on the question of the Turkish minority on the island of Cyprus, Ankara has operated with domestic considerations in mind. By and large, with the exception of Özal – again – all Turkish prime ministers have given complete support to the veteran Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash and his maximalist demands (Wilkinson, 2003, p. 193). Denktash could command a formidable bloc of support in the Turkish public and parliament. On this issue, he could dominate Ankara's preferences by reserving the right to go above the head of Turkish politicians. Although the prospect of EU membership for the whole island of Cyprus entailed very significant gains for the Turkish Cypriots, neither Ankara nor Denktash could reconcile themselves to the European guarantees. Change only came when the Turkish Cypriots decided to part company with their leader on the issue of a UN-sponsored unification plan.

Into the future: The advent of the AK Party and the new foreign policy

The Justice and Development Party came to power following a resounding victory at the polls in November 2002. For the first time since the 1980s, one party dominated parliament and could form a government without coalition allies. The AKP's advent heralded not only the emergence of a majority government, but also new thinking in foreign policy. The AKP leadership owed its intellectual roots to Erbakan's Islamist movements, such as the Welfare and Virtue parties, which had been banned by the state courts in the 1990s. Having broken with Erbakan, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gül, the two architects of the AKP, also distanced themselves from the more militant aspects of their former mentor's ideological approach. Gone from their discourse was any anti-US or anti-European Union rhetoric. On the contrary, the AKP made a point of speeding up the EU accession process by introducing a series of previously stalled reforms. Far more significant, though, was a new underlying foreign policy approach. When Gül was Erbakan's right hand foreign policy person in the mid 1990s, he had helped engineer an opening to the Muslim world, including the creation of a new organisation, the D-8 or Developing Eight, which had brought together economically significant Muslim countries (Robins, 1997). Though motivated by a sense of Islamist thinking and solidarity, this opening stemmed from a desire to become more relevant in the world of diplomacy.

The AKP has taken this process one step further. It does not only aim to increase its influence in the Muslim world, but to take advantage of Turkey's strategic location in order to make it a far more important player in general
(Erdogan, 2006). As such, it has a coherent goal. Here, the success in starting negotiations with the EU has given Ankara an important boost: Turkey can now legitimately claim to be on the way to becoming a member of the world’s most economically advanced club. Undoubtedly, Erdogan and Gül’s most influential foreign policy advisor, Ahmet Davutoğlu, articulated this more encapsulating vision before joining the Turkish foreign ministry. He argued that Turkey's challenging environment entailed a great number of risks as well as opportunities. However, in his view, the correct approach to these challenges required Turkey to be proactive rather than reactive. Turkey has the obligation to influence its immediate region and beyond in order to improve its security situation (Davutoğlu, 2001). Davutoğlu also believes that it would be a mistake for Turkey to rely solely on the EU; a Turkey that does not solidify its position in Asia cannot aspire to being anything more than a minor player in Europe (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 562).

The new AKP government, for no fault of its own, got off to a rocky start: as soon as it took power, it was confronted with the US decision to invade Iraq. Washington wanted to deploy a significant force in northern Iraq that would have first had to traverse through Turkish territory. In some respects, the situation appeared to be a repeat of 1990–1, when Özal had been willing, mostly on his own initiative, to engage with the US in Iraq. This time, mindful of the possible economic dislocations that a war in Iraq would entail, Ankara, agreed to go along with the US request to open a second front only after protracted negotiations in which Washington promised a significant economic compensation package.

The package deal was met with a great deal of ambivalence in Turkey. Public sentiment was overwhelmingly opposed to the war in Iraq, and the military and the government each tried to shift the responsibility for an unpopular decision on to the other. The memorandum of understanding signed with the US had envisaged a large contingent of Turkish troops entering northern Iraq with the explicit purpose of managing any refugee flow that could result from the war. Turkey was anxious to have a presence in the north because it feared the consequences of the war on Iraq’s Kurdish population specifically its desire to secede from Baghdad’s domination.

When the measure to authorise the stationing of American troops on Turkish soil came to a vote in the Turkish parliament, on 1 March, it failed by the smallest of margins. This was an embarrassing defeat for the government, which had been confident of passage. ⁶ In reality, the AKP leadership, just as like other segments of society, was deeply troubled and ambivalent about supporting the US military campaign. In view of the disastrous 2001 economic crisis and Turkey’s relative economic weakness, the new government believed it could not take any chances with a Bush administration determined to go to war. Moreover, the AKP feared Kurdish separatist tendencies in northern Iraq and did not want to be accused of standing by. Here again, a foreign policy decision was solely determined by Turkey’s vulnerabilities.
The vote on 1 March, however, would turn out to be a watershed event in the evolution of Turkish foreign policy. For the AKP it proved to be a liberating vote; the government had pushed for the measure but its failure to pass was due to inexperience rather than volition. The leadership had failed to anticipate the defections in its own ranks, but given public opposition, and especially opposition among the AKP rank and file, it was not unhappy with the final outcome. The vote did set Turkey on a separate course from the US; events since the vote, such as the round up of Turkish special forces personnel by US troops in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Suleymaniyah on suspicion of plotting the murder of the Kirkuk governor, confirmed suspicions in Turkey that the US would exact a price for Turkish uncooperativeness in the Iraq war. In reality, the US was anxious to maintain a significant level of cooperation with Ankara on Iraq. Although the large economic package offered in exchange for the troop deployment was withdrawn, the Bush administration succeeded in getting a sceptical Congress to pass a much smaller aid package designed to cushion the blows of the Iraq war.

With Turkish economic conditions visibly improving despite the war, the AKP government found more room to manoeuvre in foreign policy. It discovered that with inflation under relative control and a growing economy, Turkey was no longer as vulnerable to external shocks as it had been in the past. It could even afford to turn down the US aid offer when the US Congress attached conditions to the aid package deemed unacceptable to Turks.

The turnabout on Cyprus policy engineered by Erdogan and Gül was the first serious demonstration of the AKP leadership's willingness to take risks in order to free itself from the static and defensive policies of the past and improve its chances at EU membership. There is no doubt that the AKP's new Cyprus posture was critical in getting the EU to agree to start membership negotiations with Turkey in December 2004. AKP was not alone in this. A referendum on the Turkish side of the island resulted in an overwhelming vote of approval for the UN process while the Greek Cypriot side rejected the UN deal with almost equal vehemence. Equally significant was Denktash's exit from the political scene and his replacement by Mehmet Ali Talat, a new leader far more willing to compromise with his Greek Cypriot neighbours.

The AKP government has fervently tried to inject itself into the Arab-Israeli conflict and US-Syrian disputes by proposing that Turkey become an intermediary. Claiming to have a special relationship with the countries and peoples of the region, the AKP government first injected itself into the Lebanese-Syrian dispute by engaging Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at a time when the UN, the US and the French were attempting to isolate him. Erdogan even claimed credit for Assad's decision to remove Syrian troops from Lebanon, a claim that was not well received in Washington. Similarly, following the Palestinian elections Turkey became the first country outside the Arab world to invite the Damascus-based hard-line leader of the victorious Palestinian movement Hamas to visit. In the absence of any Turkish leverage
on Hamas, it was an act of supreme self-confidence as the AKP tried to demonstrate – despite the chorus of criticism from Israel, the US and Europe – that it could moderate the harsh views of this group. The AKP’s Hamas opening was significant because it showed a new modus operandi: the belief that through ambitious and unconventional diplomatic efforts it could gain credence and a role in international politics. The AKP would ultimately refer to this as the soft power foundations of Turkey’s new foreign policy. Turkey aimed at having good relations with all its neighbours and its clout in the Middle East was anchored in the fact that it was the one country that had good relations with Arabs and Israelis.

But how different was this from that of Özal’s earlier initiatives? While both were efforts at making Turkey a pivotal country, Özal was more interested in doing so in conjunction with the US. Despite his very devout upbringing, he was comfortable in European and American company and envisaged Turkey’s eventual ascendancy in the world as grounded on a combination of laissez faire-based economic prosperity and alliance with the US and Europe. He too tried to change Cyprus policy and made progress in putting together a domestic scheme aimed at winning internal peace, especially with the Kurds. His, however, was a policy anchored in the West and Western values. By contrast, the AKP leadership, despite its pro-European stance, has set its sights in anchoring itself in a non-first world axis. This vision is as much anti-status quo as it is anti-Özalian. Unlike those of previous generations, the new Turkish government has little attachment to NATO and the other institutions and remnants of the Cold War and, therefore, feels no particular closeness to the US.7

The 2007 parliamentary elections resulted in an even more impressive victory for the AKP as it won a greater share of the popular vote (47 per cent versus 34 per cent in 2002) despite threats of a military coup. Erdogan and the AKP felt vindicated at home and abroad. This did not stop the judiciary from trying to ban the AKP and banish its leaders. The AKP avoided this gantlet as well. These successes enabled the AKP to also change Turkey’s traditional approach to northern Iraq; instead of approaching the Kurdistan Regional Government with suspicion, the AKP, much to the consternation of nationalist elements in the military and society, adopted some of the policies Özal had advocated.8 It slowly improved relations with the Kurds and began to discuss policy options that would lead to the dismantling of the PKK infrastructure in northern Iraq.

Turkey benefited from the decline of US influence in the world and in the Middle East in particular, as well as from the vacuum created by the Bush administration’s policies in the region. The Erdogan government arranged for secret negotiations between Syria and Israel, an effort that drew praise in Europe and the US. Although it was always clear to all participants in these negotiations that ultimately a final deal would require the presence of the US, Turkey had earned a seat at the table.
When the Georgia crisis erupted, Erdogan was one of the first to jump into the fray to talk to all the parties involved. The notable aspect of this endeavour was that he did not seem to have consulted his allies in Brussels and Washington before engaging the parties in what would turn out to be an unsuccessful effort. Even with Europe, the Erdogan government has been flexing its muscles on issues such as the proposed gas pipeline project, Nabucco, which is presumed, if built, to carry Azeri gas to Europe. At a time when Europeans are concerned over their over-reliance on Russian gas, Turks have been stalling on Nabucco to build, among other things, ‘diplomatic leverage with respect to the European Union’ (Socor, 2009). The 2009 Gaza crisis saw Erdogan capturing world headlines as he walked off stage at a Davos meeting after virulently criticising the Israeli president Shimon Peres. He became an instant celebrity in much of the Middle East as he continued to lambaste Israel for its use of excessive force. This said, he also provided the unmistakable impression that he was siding with Hamas. He made a case for Europe and the US to stop considering Hamas a terrorist organisation and suggested that Turkey would represent Hamas’ positions at the UN Security Council (Ulsever, 2009). These positions represented a departure, not just from the past policies of the Turkish republic but also from the consensus stances of its alliance partners.

It remains to be seen whether the AKP’s policy changes and activism will win the respect of its Great Power allies. Pragmatism in northern Iraq and Cyprus has been welcomed in both Brussels and Washington. On the other hand, Turkey’s credibility and room to manoeuvre would be severely diminished were Erdogan and the AKP to overreach. The US under President Barack Obama is likely to refill the vacuum that had been created by his predecessor. The return of the US to the Middle East in particular is bound to come at the expense of Ankara. In the meantime, the global economic crisis will not only make it all the more difficult for the Europeans to contemplate an expansion of the EU but it is also likely to reduce Turkey’s attraction to them. Finally, the domestic problems in Turkey have not receded; the Kurdish question, despite some important reforms, remains a festering sore. How the AKP confronts this challenge may be of greater consequence to its relations with the Great Powers than any new foreign policy initiative. It was Atatürk, whose motto ‘peace at home, peace abroad’ adopted and banded about by the Turkish elite without ever achieving peace at home, might prove to be most prescient.

Notes

1. Zürcher argues that Kemalism was flexible enough that people of different persuasions could take up the mantle. Nonetheless he acknowledges the indoctrination in schools and the military and its assumption of cult-like characteristics, see Zürcher (1993, pp. 189-90).
2. Hale argues that Turkey played the classic game of pitting one power against another to cover up for its military weaknesses, see Hale (2000, p. 103). By contrast, Frank Weber is far more critical of Turkey’s role, arguing that it should have lived up to its commitments to Britain and entered the war. Nevertheless he thinks that Turkey’s neutrality inadvertently helped keep the Germans out of the Middle East, see Weber (1978). Finally, Selim Deringil argues that Turkish leaders were not only resourceful but also very far-sighted with respect to post-war developments. See Deringil (1998).

3. Some authors claim that external events cannot explain the decision to transition to a multi-party system, see Koçak (1996, p. 561). Hale argues that while the West did not make any demands on İnönü, he was sensitive to the fact that democratic countries had emerged victorious; see Hale (2000, p. 111). Ekaví Athanassopouloú, on the other hand, points to the increasing frustration in Turkey with the European refusal to bring Ankara into their security arrangements and argues that the liberalisation of politics had a great deal to do with the pressure emanating from the opposition Democrats. See, Athanassopouloú (1999, p. 145).

4. To be sure, not all of the elite harbours deep suspicions of the West. Many in the business community have been at the forefront of improved ties and the accession to the European Union. On the other hand, traditionally it has been the anti-Kemalist groups who have carried the mantle of anti-Westernism. The pro-Islamist groups fundamentally object to the alliance and economic relationship on cultural grounds, although they may often articulate their views in more political terms.

5. Turkey did not have the wherewithal to conduct an amphibious landing on the island and the Johnson letter most probably saved the Turkish government from an embarrassing political or military failure.

6. On the morning of the vote, the AKP conducted a straw poll in which its own parliamentarians voted largely in favour of the measure and, therefore, assured the leadership that it would succeed. However, a number of deputies not only changed their minds and voted against the measure a few hours later, but under Turkish law, the votes of those who abstained but remained in the chamber were recorded as negative, thereby doom the measure. More than 100 of the over 360 deputies in the governing party, including cabinet members, voted against the resolution.

7. There is some irony here in that Washington was quite forceful in criticising the Turkish authorities for jailing the then mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

8. For a discussion of Turkish diplomatic and military moves in northern Iraq, see Barkey (2009).

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