

TURKEY'S NEW GEOPOLITICAL AGENDA

Turkey's multilateral and independent policies vis-à-vis its neighbors represent the key component to a new strategy for dealing with its own internal and external regional change. The deepening of relations through greater economic cooperation, regional assistance, and promotion of democratic institutions throughout the Middle East, Black Sea, and in the Turkic republics of Central Asia demonstrate a newfound confidence in Turkey's role in the world as a versatile multiregional actor. No longer confined to being simply a Western geostrategic "bridge" or "barrier," Turkey represents an exemplary model of a Muslim-majority, secular, and democratic nation within this new geopolitical environment.

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No country since the end of the Cold War has seen its position and role as quickly transformed as the Republic of Turkey has in the last two decades. While Turkey's geography has not changed during this time, the importance that the international community has placed on this area of the world has undoubtedly been shaped by the events that have occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union. Most recently, the events of 9/11 have dramatically affected Turkey both internally and externally in the regions that matter most to Turkish foreign policymakers. The changes that have occurred both within Turkey and in its immediate neighborhood require thoughtful reconsideration both for how Ankara's new geopolitical environment now influences its opportunities and challenges, and how neighboring actors view Turkey. Turkey's future path and progress is particularly instructive for the regions of which it finds itself a part, because Turkey's own struggles with democracy, secularism, Islamic fundamentalism, and ethnic minorities represent a microcosm of the challenges facing its entire neighborhood.

This essay articulates Turkey's need for a new strategy for dealing with the dynamic neighborhoods in which it co-exists. This paper will argue that while Turkey's pre-Cold War and pre-9/11 goals of belonging to the West (and in particular of being a part of Europe) are still very much in place, a new strategy of foreign engagement and multilateral cooperation must be sought to fully harness the positive effects of Turkey's dynamic change. Turkey no longer solely represents a geographic barrier against communism, but rather is transforming itself to meet the various threats emerging from its new geopolitical environment. In this context, Turkey's global role has shifted from a Western geo-strategic military deterrent to an exemplary model of a Muslim-majority, secular, and democratic nation. By broadening its horizons and seeing the positive role that it has to play in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Turkey will realize its full potential as a versatile multiregional and increasingly powerful international actor.

Historical Context

Throughout its history Turkey has served as a focal point for the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. As the heart of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey controlled lands stretching from the Balkans down into the Middle East and through North Africa.¹ As a result of its location in the Balkans bordering Hungary and Russia, and its Islamic roots, the Ottoman Empire soon began to generate tension with its Great Power neighbors, the Austrian and the Russian Empires. Thus, the borders of the so-called Western and Islamic civilizations were created.²

¹ The Ottoman Empire lasted from the decline of the Byzantine Empire in the 14th century until the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Present-day Turkey sits at the heart of the old Ottoman Empire, whose imperial capital was also located in Istanbul. The empire grew as the lands of Byzantium and beyond were conquered, eventually including the countries of the Balkan Peninsula; the islands of the eastern Mediterranean; parts of Hungary and Russia; Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, Palestine, Egypt; parts of Arabia; and North Africa through to Algeria. For more on the Ottoman Empire and its relevance to Turkey see Bernard Lewis' *The Emergence of Modern Turkey 3rd Edition*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Samuel Huntington references these borders in his article "Clash of Civilizations" published in *Foreign Affairs* Summer 1993.

Turkey's unquestioned Cold War strategy of westward orientation and close alignment with U.S. security policies in its region was launched by Turkey's *Kemalist*³ establishment. This group, which has traditionally been guided by the military and political secular elites, sees itself as Turkey's internal moral compass. Turkey's "deep state," a shadowy network of ruling elites, has continually been re-enforced by the military, which has intervened in 1960, 1971, and 1980 in three different military coups and most recently in 1997 with a "post-modern" coup to neutralize any threat⁴ to Atatürk's vision of a unitary, secular, and democratic Turkey. As a result, Turks have come to look at their own strategy as being consistent with outside Western actors and ultimately dictated by the Kemalist establishment. With the exception of Cyprus and a few minor regional disputes,⁵ Turkey has rarely established a truly independent national strategy to deal with its neighbors. However with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the forceful U.S. response in the form of its self-declared "War on Terror," Turkey has found itself having to choose among its own perceptions of terrorism, its European vocation, and U.S. security guarantees.

Today, Turkey continues to be a focal point for many of the world's most important civilizations, religions, and geographies. However as opposed to being simply a geographic barrier against the spread of Communism in the Middle East and a frontline North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) state in the Cold-War, Turkey is seen as an intrinsic and exemplary model for the co-existence of a democratic and secular state within a Muslim-majority population. Turkey now finds itself simultaneously on the frontline of the democratization process in the Middle East, while standing at the doorstep of the European Union (EU). Thus laden with its recent history as part of the Ottoman Empire and the Cold War alliance against the Soviet Union, Turkey has been forced to formulate a new strategy for a post-9/11 world that has shifted the emphasis from Turkey's geography to its democratic institutions.

Turkey's Internal Dimensions

The formulation of Turkish grand strategy has traditionally fallen to the Turkish military because of its historic and trusted role as Kemalist defender. However, as a result of Turkey's EU ambitions, the military has been forced to play a less prominent and independent role in Turkey's foreign policy making. The EU has continually encouraged the subordination of military power to civilian actors, which has in turn led to a series of ambitious reform packages that have been passed by the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). Coupled with the national election results of November 2002 in which the newly established Justice

³ Ideology espoused by Turkey's modern founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk which situated modernization and civilization within a European model of development along with a particularly strict interpretation of Turkey as a secular state.

⁴ Traditionally these threats to the Kemalist establishment have come in the form of Islamist parties seeking to alter Turkey's secular character.

⁵ These disputes have included the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) being based and striking from the Middle East, hostilities in the Aegean, and border disputes in the Caucasus, to name but a few.

and Development Party (AKP) assumed power, the traditional balance of power between military and civilian affairs has been fundamentally shifted. The AKP government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been quick to convert its parliamentary power into real political power by implementing changes to Turkey's National Security Council. By limiting the number of military members to this body, Prime Minister Erdoğan has signaled his intentions to keep military power in the hands of civilians. In a way that would have been unthinkable even less than ten years ago, the highly unusual election outcome of 2002⁶ has given the current Turkish government unprecedented influence in formulating Turkey's grand strategy in dealing with the key issues confronting the nation today.

Led by Erdoğan, the AKP have championed what they have termed "Islamic Conservatism," which they claim to be akin to Europe's various Christian Democratic parties' social conservatism.⁷ As a new party formed from previously popular, but now banned Islamist parties, the AKP has enjoyed popular support for most its term. This popularity is fueled by the fact that the AKP is seen as being untainted from the corruption and cronyism of Turkey's secular parties. Meanwhile, Turkey's Kemalist establishment has been warily following Erdoğan's policies for any signs of Islamist tendencies, such as its recent dealings with Hamas and the proposed ban on adultery.⁸ These institutions are only able to impede and slow such policies which might run counter to the Turkish constitution, but they have little power to implement and formulate new policies in Turkey. Therefore, the true levers of power in Turkey, no matter how unruly they may be to operate, are currently held by the Prime Minister and his party.

Erdoğan's vision of Turkey as an active participant in an enlarged Europe has been the principal guiding forces for the AKP government, but equally important has been his vision of "strategic depth"⁹ in which multiple alliances and actors must be courted to maintain the balance of power around Turkey. In the following sections, Turkey's relations with key regions and polities will be examined from the perspective of furthering Turkey's own development and progress, while also seeking to examine Turkey's emerging role as a multiregional power in the international state system.

⁶ Given Turkey's election system in which parties must first cross a ten percent threshold to obtain any seats within the TGNP, only two parties were eligible for representation in the government. Therefore, despite the fact that the AKP received less than one-third of the popular vote, they ultimately received over two-thirds of the TGNP seats which allowed for the formation of a stable one-party government.

⁷ This unlikely grouping of religiously-inspired conservatism is but one example of the linguistic aerobatics that Erdoğan has employed to disarm his European detractors. The term "Islamic Conservative" has been a continual theme in the Turkish press as the AK party has sought to balance its Islamist tendencies by committing itself to Turkey's strict secular constitution while simultaneously being guided by its Islamic faith.

⁸ In addition to strong reactions elicited from the Turkish military and the presidency, women's NGOs were instrumental in curbing this proposed legislation.

⁹ Prime Minister Erdoğan's primary foreign policy advisor Professor Ahmet Davutoglu has espoused this vision most clearly articulated in his Turkish language book: *Strategic Depth* (2001).

Turkey's Relations with the European Union

Turkey's preoccupation with Europe and its subsequent quest for a European identity can be explained on many levels. Historically, Europe represents "modern civilization" in the words of Turkey's founding father Atatürk. Economically, Turkey's strong ties to Europe represent over half of the country's foreign investment and the bulk of lucrative foreign trade is conducted with European Union member states. Geopolitically, Turkey has always insisted on being part of every European organization based not only on its three percent geographic claim but also with its perceived shared history, values, and past promises from Europe.¹⁰ However, despite the arguments made by many Atlanticist quarters in Europe who favor Turkey's geostrategic value within the framework of the EU, most Europeans have remained skeptical about Turkish membership. European fears about Turkey's growing population and economic stability, have tended to solidify the popular sentiment which views Turks as "outsiders" to Europe. As a result, the EU has kept Turkey waiting at its doorstep for over four decades. Still, for Turkey, the single most important external factor in its domestic agenda today remains the EU, and the changes that have occurred as a result of this often tenuous relationship have been among the most significant in Turkish history.

With the recent opening of negotiations for Turkey's EU accession in Luxembourg on 4 October 2005, a new phase has begun in the EU-Turkey relationship. Now as a clearly defined candidate country, Turkey has entered official EU negotiation talks which have traditionally resulted in EU membership offers. Thus, Turkey finally seems to have a real chance at becoming part of a club that had previously avoided the question of Turkey's European credentials. The start of EU negotiations has allowed Erdoğan to keep the Kemalist establishment at bay while continuing to push for further domestic reforms centered around greater economic liberalization and democratization. While Erdoğan's AKP has claimed the EU's Copenhagen Criteria as their own so-called "Ankara Criteria," Turkish popular support for the reform packages continue to rest upon the promise of full EU membership and not solely on the merits of the reforms themselves.

Turkey's European transformation will only be complete when the hard internal questions are asked about minorities, democratization, and civilian control of the military. Only Turkey can answer these difficult questions but the EU negotiation process offers the perfect framework in which to tackle these reforms and should not be discounted as an outside force pushing for unnecessary change. By accepting the inherent asymmetry of negotiating power between the EU and Turkey, Erdoğan can prepare Turkey for the long and hard road ahead. As part of this process, Erdoğan needs to decouple promises of EU membership from the vital domestic reforms that the TGNA has yet to push through. In other words, Turkey needs the domestic and political reforms that the EU is asking for regardless of eventual membership. Thus while these reforms can hardly be decoupled from the prospect

¹⁴ Specifically promises from the EU's predecessor the European Community to Turkey in the 1960s.

of eventual EU membership, they need to be driven by internal desire as opposed to constant external pressure from the EU. These reforms will need to include greater levels of individual freedom, space for religious and ethnic identities, and a commitment to deal with Turkey's problems through civilian means as opposed to resorting to the default of the military. In fostering a parallel process of EU membership negotiations and internal reforms, Erdoğan has the chance to forcefully promote Turkey in the next fifteen years to a European audience, while maintaining the positive trends in Turkey's domestic democratization and economic transformation.

Turkey's Relations with America

The close strategic partnership of the Cold War between the U.S. and Turkey has come under increasing strain during Erdoğan's time for a series of reasons. While Washington's Post-9/11 "War on Terror" initially appealed to a Turkish audience all too familiar with the PKK terrorist activities of the 1990s, America's increasingly unilateral tone in its execution of the war drew strong popular opposition in Turkey. The quick military success in Afghanistan coupled with the strong international support for rebuilding this country seemed to allay initial Turkish fears; however, with the buildup to the second war in Iraq these fears would once again resurface.

The close security ties between the U.S. and Turkey have always been a driving force in the relationship. Military and intelligence services have been effectively integrated through a common NATO framework, but U.S.-Turkish security relations have always been exceptionally close because of shared common threats and a continued U.S. military presence in Turkey. However, with the emergence of Erdoğan and the strong establishment of civilian control over military initiatives, these security links were not sufficient for convincing the TGNA to allow U.S. forces access through Turkish territory to attack Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Perhaps more than any other recent event, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has shaped the tone of the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

Turkish sensitivities to having U.S. and coalition forces occupying its southern neighbor have been evident throughout the past two years. Turkey's long held demand that Iraq's territorial unity must not be compromised flows from its own fear of a Kurdish homeland and what this could mean for Turkey's 25 million Kurds.¹¹ As a result, Erdoğan, along with the Turkish military, have been quick to place a series of red lines for Iraq and have continually cautioned about Turkish intervention should these lines be crossed. While Turkey was not a part of the U.S.'s "coalition of the willing," it has been an active participant in the subsequent rebuilding effort in Iraq. Supplying the lion's share of construction and food materials, Turkish businesses and truck drivers have become an integral part of

¹¹ While this figure is highly contested, this number was taken from Philip Robins' *Suits and Uniforms* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003).

the reconstruction in Iraq. Additionally, Turkey has been providing a variety of diplomatic and training services to the fledgling Iraqi government. Through supporting the efforts of Iraqi Prime Minister Jaffari, whose first official visit outside of Iraq was paid to Turkey, Erdoğan has been quick to capitalize on bilateral relations. However improved Turkish-Iraqi relations have not directly translated into better U.S.-Turkish relations.

Washington's concerns of rising anti-Americanism in Turkey have been met with flat denials by Erdoğan's government. Nationalist elements within Turkey routinely exploit popular sentiments of Muslim solidarity with Iraq and widespread resentment against American imperial ambitions in the region, while Erdoğan's government has sought to distance itself from U.S. Middle Eastern initiatives. While Erdoğan openly supports a strong U.S.-Turkish relationship, he bases these ties on shared common values and tempers his support for U.S. initiatives in the region with caution. Erdoğan's internal struggles with the Kemalist establishment have on occasion directly impacted relations with the U.S., but for the most part the day-to-day relations remain strong as a result of continued close military-to-military relations with the US.

President Bush has actively encouraged the promotion of Turkey as being a beacon of democracy for the Middle East region and has actively worked to include Turkey in various U.S.-led regional and multilateral forums.¹² The U.S.led Broader Middle East Initiative, unveiled by President Bush in 2004 and endorsed by Erdoğan, included the promotion of political freedom, equality for women, access to education, the creation of free trade zones in the region, new financing for small businesses, and help overseeing elections.¹³ Accordingly, Turkey's role as a secular, Muslim democracy has increasingly become the most important factor for the U.S. despite Turkey's own hesitation with being offered as a model.

In encouraging Turkey's European identity and accession to EU membership, Washington has already ingratiated itself to Turkey with its behind the scenes maneuvering which culminated in the EU's commencement of accession negotiations with Turkey on October, 2005. Additionally, recent U.S. overtures to the Turkish Northern Cypriots have been well received in Ankara. With this type of momentum, many of the more entrenched challenges that face the U.S.-Turkish relationship, such as PKK activity in Northern Iraq, can be now faced. By building on this opening in U.S.-Turkish relations, Erdoğan has the chance to help shape a future common agenda for the U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership. Seeking to build on this positive trend, Erdoğan's most recent visit to Washington in the summer of 2005 sought to find common interests between the U.S. and Turkey. By focusing on these common interests such as Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Middle East, and most recently Pakistani earthquake relief efforts, the U.S.-

¹² As evidenced by President Bush's Istanbul Speech on 29 June 2004.

¹³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Wrong Way to Sell Democracy to the Arab World," *The New York Times*, 8 March 2004.

Turkish relationship looks to be at its strongest since Erdoğan has been in office. No longer simply a geographic partner of convenience, Turkey finds itself in a privileged place in U.S. strategic thinking about the Broader Middle East.

Turkey and the Middle East

Traditionally Turkey has been labeled as either a “bridge” or a “barrier” between the Middle East and West; now it finds itself playing the role of a catalyst.¹⁴ Turkey is seeking to bring the principal actors of the region together to transform the Middle East in the same way that U.S. involvement helped transform Europe from “a hotbed of continental and world wars into geography of peace.”¹⁵ In fact, Turkey could play a similar role in the Middle East to Germany’s “front line” position towards the Central European states during the Cold War.¹⁶ However, many in the region are wary of Turkey being nothing more than an agent or functionary of the United States, thus it must build its assets as a “bridge” of trust for both sides.

Given the U.S.’s recent appetite for nation-building in the Middle East and Turkey’s divergent views on the second Iraq War with its historic ally, Turkey is uniquely posed to capitalize on its less intrusive offers of assistance and diplomatic help to its Middle Eastern neighbors. Erdoğan has thus far been able to play a positive role in pushing forward Turkey’s European credentials, while embracing the positive aspects of Turkey’s Middle Eastern cultural and religious connections in addition to offering economic conduits to Europe. The tight-rope that Erdoğan has been walking with the U.S. administration over policy vis-à-vis Iraq has allowed the AKP government to strengthen its pragmatic relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors, while continuing its support for various U.S. initiatives in its neighborhood.

However, by linking itself too closely with the U.S. in the Broader Middle East, Turkey runs the risk of alienating itself from its neighbors. For this reason, Turkey’s bilateral ties with Iran and diplomatic overtures to Syria, both acts which the U.S. has strongly criticized, have been interpreted as being part of Erdoğan’s strategy of maintaining pragmatic and positive relations with Turkey’s neighbors. Given Turkey’s historic neglect of the Middle East, recent Turkish foreign policy initiatives such as those mentioned and Erdoğan’s repeated offers of Turkish assistance in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process come at a particularly interesting point in time.

In the current context of the Middle East it is productive to highlight Turkey as

¹⁴ For more on this concept see Joshua Walker “Turkey’s Role in the Middle East” *International Affairs Review* Vol.14, No.1 (2005) pp. 119-36.

¹⁵ Alvin Powell, “Erdoğan calls for cooperation,” *Harvard Gazette*, 5 Feb. 2004.

<<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/02.05/03-turkey.html>> (18 Feb. 2005).

¹⁶ Huseyin Bagci, “Turkey Plays Greater Role in Middle East Than Many Think,” *World Security Network News Letter*, Feb. 2002.

one example of a functioning democracy within a predominantly Muslim society; however it is equally important to recognize the many cultural and historical differences within this region. As evidenced by previous ill-fated attempts to convince the Turkic Central Asian republics to follow the “Turkish model” after the fall of the Soviet Union, in a post-Cold War environment there is no appeal for adopting any singular model of development. While semantically averse to the idea of following any “model,” Turkey’s neighbors can undoubtedly learn from a fellow Muslim-majority nation’s experiences. Thus by offering functional help in the form of economic and diplomatic assistance, Turkey has a unique role to play in the Muslim world as a bridge between the region and the West. As a shining example of how being Muslim and being democratic are not mutually exclusive, Turkey demonstrates the possibilities for many of its Muslim neighbors who are struggling with popular calls for greater democratization and greater religiosity at the same time.

The Middle East and its current realities represent the most malleable and exciting frontiers for Turkish foreign policy. Although Turkey has had difficulties developing a comprehensive and consistent policy that would serve both its national interests and its interests in the region, a new approach is possible and necessary. This new Turkish Middle Eastern policy will have to include the preservation of national integrity, modernization along Western standards, and non-involvement in the domestic issues of neighboring countries. Turkey seems ready to shed its former policies of disengagement and become an active participant in the region. Engaged Turkish behavior in its immediate neighborhood represents a key to success for the Middle East. As both a uniquely Western and Muslim actor, Turkey has the potential to create new opportunities for pragmatic deal making in the region. These opportunities could contribute to the creation of a more stable neighborhood based on mutual cooperation rather than mutual destruction. As such, Turkey represents the only country versatile enough to play both the role of mediator and bridge for a regional framework of democratization.

Turkey and Russia

Turkey and Russia have always found themselves on the opposite sides of history, yet on the same side of Europe. Starting as far back as 500 years ago, the Ottoman Empire and the Muscovites fundamentally altered the eastern edges of Europe. Despite its decline even in the late 19th century when the Russian tsar coined his famous phrase “the sick man of Europe” for the dying Ottoman Empire, Turkey was still considered to be part of the European state system. As the principal antagonists in the European state system, these peripheral powers now once again find themselves on the “other” side of Europe.

For Turkey, the Cold War followed the historical trend of antagonistic relations between the descendents of the Romanov and Ottoman Empires. Within a clear-cut, bipolar world, Turkey simply followed the lead of its Western allies in isolating and containing Russian interests in its region. With the dissolution of the Soviet

Union, Turkey has begun to transform its relationship with the Russian Federation from enemy state to rival regional power. While Turkey and Russia have worked to maintain normal and pragmatic relations, their competing interests in the mutually shared areas of their near-abroad have led to often tense relations.¹⁷

As two of the most important peripheral states in Europe, Russia and Turkey have continually competed to increase their standing within Europe at the expense of the other. While the great power statuses and approaches of each country have been widely divergent, these competing interests have soured the many opportunities that exist for cooperation between Russia and Turkey. Initial assessments of a rapprochement between Turkey and Russia were facilitated by the pro-Western elites of President Yeltsin's government; however sticky geopolitical realities and challenges quickly bred distrust and accusations from both sides. With the emergence of President Putin in Russia and his skepticism of the West, Turkey has been able to improve bilateral relations through close economic and security cooperation, while continuing to compete with Russia over energy issues such as the Ceyhan-Tbilisi-Baku pipeline and simultaneously cooperating on other energy issues such as the blue stream and other various new deals.

The AKP led by Erdoğan has been quick to capitalize on President Putin's skepticism and offer itself as a strong regional partner. Building on Turkey's need for "strategic depth," when dealing with the EU, Erdoğan's foreign policy advisors seem to see Russia as a natural ally in Eurasia and an effective counterbalance to the EU. Given historical perceptions of Europe being defined in opposition to the two great Eurasian powers in the East represented by the Turks and the Russians, these two European periphery nations now find themselves feeling similarly isolated from the EU. While Russia has not expressed any interest in EU membership, it clearly wants to be considered part of Europe and has proposed a special relationship with the EU similar to the one that it now enjoys with NATO. Thus, both Russia and Turkey seem to have common grievances with Europe as it is understood today through the EU.

As a result, the eastern peripheries of Europe have increasingly begun to look towards each other and their shared neighborhood for partners. The antagonistic tones of historic Turkish-Russian relations have been replaced by pragmatic dealings between the two countries. A personal relationship seems to have been formed between Erdoğan and Putin which has been the source of much public discussion.¹⁸

¹⁷ For a full discussion of this important relationship see Joshua Walker "Turkey and the Post-Soviet States: A New Way Forward" *Insight Turkey* Vol.7, No.4 (Oct-Dec 2005) pp. 13-20.

¹⁸ The most dramatic manifestation of this relationship came on 5 and 6 Dec. 2004 when President Putin made the first official visit in 30 years of a Russian head of state to Turkey. For a full account of this trip see Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Lebedev's account of the trip "Some observations on the Russian Federation President's Visit to Turkey" *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy & International Relations*; 2005, Vol. 51 No.2, pp1-8.

The post-9/11 environment that Erdoğan and Putin have inherited forces the two leaders to focus on points of common strategic interest, while quietly negotiating their existing points of contention. Both nations have been quick to stress the importance of states' sovereignty and have committed to cooperating in creating a new multi-polar order in Eurasia. Given both Turkey and Russia's continued fight against internal separatist movements, the emphasis placed on fighting terrorism has allowed a convergence of interests. Despite the difference in scale of the current operations in Chechnya and Southeastern Anatolia, neither country has criticized the other in its handling of the ongoing military operations despite external European pressures.

The improved atmosphere between Moscow and Ankara reflect the personalities and friendship of Putin and Erdoğan, while the common threat from Islamic fundamentalism within both countries has caused a convergence of interests. While this connection does not immediately eliminate the Russian-Turkish economic and political rivalry for influence in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia or the Caucasus, it offers a prescriptive way forward for future relations. As Russia and Turkey watch the developments in neighboring Ukraine and Georgia, each seems to be on the opposite side of the democratization trends in their neighborhoods. However, as Turkey has demonstrated through its improved relations with neighbors such as Syria, Iran, and Azerbaijan, shared perceptions of democracy need not be the only way forward towards pragmatic relations.

Given the current levels of official economic trade, and the thriving black-market trading, between the two countries, Erdoğan sees the potential for closer relations with Russia. By emphasizing common interests and positive convergences, Erdoğan has already laid the framework for improved Russia-Turkey relations. In staying with Erdoğan's vision of a flexible and multiregional Turkish foreign policy, Russia is a key regional actor for Turkey to court.

Turkey and the Black Sea

The Black Sea region has consistently served as a regional point of tension between both Russia and Turkey and their predecessor empires. As the so-called "backyard" of successive Byzantine, Ottoman, Russian, and Soviet empires this area has been effectively closed to the outside world for much of its recorded history. During the Cold War the Soviet Union and its satellites surrounded the Black Sea region, thereby effectively creating a de-facto border between Turkey and its Black Sea neighbors.¹⁹ Thus while this area was geographically situated within Turkey's orbit of influence the Black Sea region was off limits to Turkish foreign policy until the collapse of communism.

The strategic location of the Black Sea, between Europe and Asia, and its outlet

¹⁹ For more on this see Mustafa Aydin article "Europe's New Region: The Black Sea in the Wider Europe Neighborhood" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* Vol.5 , No.2 (May 2005) pp257-83.

to the Mediterranean Sea through the Turkish straits have made this region among the most attractive for Turkish foreign policymakers in a post-Cold War environment. Turkey's own geographic location and control of the Bosphorus have always led its leaders to believe that it is the natural leader of the Black Sea region despite Russia's military and economic dominance in recent history. In line with this belief the late Turkish president Turgut Özal conceived of a regional intergovernmental organization that would include not only all of the Black Sea littoral nations but also be inclusive of other nations within the wider Black Sea region. Thus on 25 June 1992, soon after the collapse of communism and the former Soviet Union upon the initiative of Turkey, eleven countries (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine) signed in Istanbul the Summit Declaration and the Bosphorus Statement that gave birth to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).²⁰

According to its charter the BSEC, "...came into existence as a unique and promising model of multilateral political and economic initiative aimed at fostering interaction and harmony among the Member States, as well as to ensure peace, stability and prosperity encouraging friendly and good-neighborly relations in the Black Sea region."²¹ However despite its high-minded rhetoric the BSEC has had to confront a variety of problems. The opposing geopolitical agendas of its two main Member States, Turkey and Russia, in addition to the variety of regional, economic, and cultural conflicts represented in the Black Sea region make this a particularly difficult area of cooperation. The wider Black Sea region has increasingly come under focus both from the EU and the United States through NATO, thus Turkey's potential leadership of the region through the BSEC remains a priority for Turkish foreign policy.

However the realities of Russia's sensitivities to having non-Black Sea powers like the U.S. or the EU involved in its "near abroad" has created a space for Turkish involvement through multilateral organizations and arrangements. Aware of their limitations in the Black Sea region, Turkish foreign policymakers realize that they will not be able to resolve all of the historic issues in region on its own. Thus, Turkey has spearheaded and been the principle force behind multilateral security arrangements in the Caucasus and the Black Sea. A perfect example of these types of arrangements would be the creation of the Black Sea Force (BLACKSEAFOR). In 1999 under the leadership of former Turkish president Süleyman Demirel, the defence ministers of the six littoral Black Sea states (Turkey, Georgia, Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine, and Romania) signed an agreement to form a Black Sea naval cooperation task group, in order to jointly ensure environmental protection, search and rescue operations, safe navigation, and to combat smuggling in and around the Black sea.²² Thus when BSEC and

²⁰ For more on the organization see the BSEC's website at: <http://www.bsec-organization.org>.

²¹ http://www.bsec-organization.org/main.aspx?ID=About_BSEC.

²² See Ali Murat Koknar's chapter "Turkey and the Caucasus: Security and Military Challenges" in Michael Radu ed. *Dangerous Neighborhood* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

BLACKSEAFOR are viewed in combination as a newly active post-Cold War Turkish prioritization of the Black Sea region, Turkey does appear to have the momentum and institutional capability to guide the direction of future multilateral discussions on the future of the region.

However despite this optimistic view of Turkey's role in the Black Sea area, this region still does not represent a homogenous whole for Turkish foreign policy to deal with. Rather it represents the divided history of the collapsed Soviet Union. As evidenced by Romania's attempt to establish a rival to the BSEC, the Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Dialogue, the region is far from united in its preference for Turkish leadership of the region. Thus Turkey must continue to solidify the preeminence of the BSEC institutionally within the Black Sea area and work with its Euro-Atlantic allies towards greater regional stability without alienating Russia in the process. From the Turkish perspective it is clear that in matters of Black Sea cooperation and regional frozen conflicts (such as the Turkish-Armenian border dispute), it first needs the support of Russia. Thus Turkey's Black Sea leadership rests on convincing Russia to support Turkey's efforts in the region through the BSEC, BLACKSEAFOR, and other multilateral regional initiatives.

Turkey's Northeastern Peripheries

As has been discussed earlier, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey's relations with the post-USSR states have been dictated by cultural and historical bonds. With the emergence of post-Soviet Turkic states that shared linguistic and ethnic ties with Turkey, many Turks optimistically pointed towards a new sphere of influence in Central Asia. However, Turkey quickly discovered that competing regional powers such as Russia and Iran were increasing the stakes of the great-powers game being played out in Central Asia. Backed by U.S. support for the "Turkish model," Turkey fostered fledgling economic and cultural unions among its fellow Turkic-states, but ultimately discovered that these states did not want to be dependent upon any single regional power. In fact, most of the post-Soviet Central Asian states preferred to deal directly with all the regional actors independently and saw no need for a particular model.

Despite these facts, Turkey's role in this region has been extensively considered, not only within Turkey but also in the West. The underlying reason for this attention stems from a fear that radical Islam might fill the power vacuum that occurred in the region with the demise of the Soviet Union, which has led to strong encouragement from the West to the newly independent states to adopt a "Turkish model" of secular democracy, combined with a liberal economy.²³ In particular, in a post-9/11 world in which U.S. strategic interests have shifted to

²³ To read more about this "Turkish Model" please see Mustafa Aydin's chapter "Between Euphoria and Realpolitik: Turkish Policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus" in *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*. (London: Ashgate 2003).

discouraging radical Islamic regimes that might foster future extremist terrorists, Turkey's role has been cited as an important one in the region given its strong historical, cultural, ethnic and linguistic bonds with the newly independent states of Central Asia (plus Azerbaijan).

The emergence of eight independent states to Turkey's northeast at the end of the Cold War, arguably enlarged Turkey's role in the world and made Turkey deeply aware of a vast territory inhabited largely by fellow Muslim, Turkic speakers. The effects of 9/11 have re-emphasized both to Turkey and to the West the importance of encouraging positive examples of secular democracies in Muslim-majority nations like Turkey. As evidenced by Turkey's increasing presence both economically and diplomatically in the newly independent states of Central Asia, Turkey seems poised to capitalize on the momentum and Western support post-9/11. While Erdoğan's Turkey has been quick to rhetorically assume the role of an "elder brother" to its northeastern neighbors, only time will tell what tangible results this might entail. With the recent examples of unrest in Uzbekistan and irregular elections in Azerbaijan, the U.S. has continued to look towards Turkey to play a leading role, which Erdoğan seems willing to accept.

While Turkey has traditionally been looked upon as an exceptional case of a Muslim-majority democracy lying at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, Turkey's challenge is to prove that its own experiences can be applied and generalized to its wider neighborhood. As Turkish-Russian relations improve, the suspicion of Turkish activities in Central Asia and the Caucasus can give way to an understanding that Turkey's appeal to its neighbors comes not from its imperial claims of pan-Turkism, but from a sense of shared common identity and destiny. Turkey and Russia's influences in this region need not become a zero-sum game, but rather should focus on strengthening their bilateral relations with their common neighbors to help strengthen their own common interests.

As Russia struggles with its own democratization process and free market reforms, Turkey offers an instructive example. Given the emerging level of bilateral relations, Turkey is well placed to help Russia understand its role in Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Whereas in the past Turkey represented a geographic barrier against Russian influence, now Turkey represents a vital partner with a shared goal of stability for the region. While Ankara and Moscow have a common set of goals throughout much of their shared near-abroad, Turkey must continually emphasize the value of greater democratization and economic freedom in winning the "hearts and minds" of the Muslim, Turkic people. Additionally, Turkey's historic role as bridge is vital for helping link Russia and its former Soviet states to the West.

Conclusion

With Turkey's new geopolitical environment which has been shaken dramatically by both the end of the Cold War and the events of 9/11, the nation has seen its traditional geographical role in its neighborhood change dramatically. As demonstrated, Turkey is no longer simply a dependent appendage of the West, but a partner offering an important example of how a secular democracy can function in a Muslim-majority nation with a liberal economy. Equally important in this transformation has been Turkey's own dynamic change, which has ushered in Prime Minister Erdoğan's vision of an actively engaged Turkish foreign policy based on pragmatic bilateral relations with its neighbors and the balancing of Turkey's own internal and external national interests. Turkey's continued march toward the European Union, balanced by Erdoğan's desire to play a greater role in Eurasia through its foreign policies in the Middle East, Black Sea, and Central Asia as a historically and culturally linked regional actor, represent new challenges and opportunities for Turkey.

Turkey stands at the threshold of all major trends within its neighborhood and is actively seeking to harness the assets that its geography and historical experiences afford it. Turkey's multilateral and independent policies vis-à-vis their neighbors represent the key component to a new strategy for dealing with its own internal and external regional change. The deepening of relations through greater economic cooperation and regional assistance, in addition to Turkey's promotion of democratic institutions throughout the Middle East, Black Sea, and in the Turkic republics of Central Asia demonstrate a newfound confidence in Turkey's role in the world. No longer confined to being simply a Western geo-strategic "bridge" or "barrier," Turkey represents an exemplary model of a Muslim-majority, secular, and democratic nation within this new geopolitical environment. Turkey's broadened awareness and appreciation for the positive role that it can play in Europe, the Middle East, the Black Sea, and Central Asia has caused Turkish leaders to realize the full potential that it has for being a versatile multiregional and increasingly powerful international actor.

As a multiregional actor, Turkey has prioritized its relationship with Europe; however the attractiveness of Turkish membership in the EU is undoubtedly linked to the constructive role it can play in its own near-abroad. Therefore, as Prime Minister Erdoğan continues to cultivate these relationships and Western policymakers continue to examine Turkey's actions throughout the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia, Turkey must not simply be seen as a means to an end for these foreign policy initiatives. Indeed, Turkey has the potential to be either the problem or the solution to some of the most intractable social, economic, and political problems facing Eurasia today. As Prime Minister Erdoğan's own policies of tying internal transformations to a wider agenda of regional democratization and liberal economic reforms have shown, Turkey's foreign policy can not merely be a reflection of outside actors. Turkey's new strategy must reflect the post-9/11 emphasis on Turkey's experiences with democratic institutions and rely less heavily on the historical and geostrategic roots of Turkey's previous foreign policy endeavors.