

The Spirit of the Truman Doctrine: 65 Years of Strategic Partnership between the United States and Turkey

by *Joshua W. Walker*

Relations between Turkey and the United States have not been immune to regional developments and domestic politics in both Ankara and Washington. The two countries' militaries, which were highly integrated in the context of a common NATO platform, were always the traditional bedrock of the U.S.-Turkey alliance. Even after sixty-five years, despite the winds of change in strategic international environment both for Ankara and Washington through the "Arab Spring" and "Eurozone Crisis" the security alliance remains the bedrock relationship. However it is important to realize the increasingly strategic role that Turkey has played and continues to play in a critical region, not to mention the degree to which American and Turkish interests converge more than they diverge. At a moment in which the concept of Western leadership is being questioned, a proactive assessment of Turkey's newfound emergence as a responsible global partner in regional stability and long-term democratization has never been more necessary. Washington has to stop looking at Ankara merely in terms of alignment or drift on specific tactical issues and focus on the long-term vision that originally guided the partnership between the two countries as part of the original founding principles in the Truman Doctrine of 1947. Sharing mutual friendship, history, and interests is important in international relations, but revitalizing a six decades old alliance that has primarily relied on converged geostrategic realities into a partnership of mutual visions and shared values is the preferred outcome in U.S.-Turkey relations.

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The Truman Doctrine of 1947 set the course for a proactive and progressive US foreign policy that was motivated by a vision of an America that led from a position of unwavering strength with strategic allies across the globe. Unlike empires of old that relied solely on military power, the United States would lead with a combination of hard and soft power that the Soviet Union could never replicate. Starting in Europe with the Marshall Plan, and quickly spreading to Asia and the Middle East, America chose to partner with key countries by empowering them to integrate into an American-led world order through a web of formal and informal alliances. Defeated enemies such as Germany and Japan became critical pillars in this new foreign policy vision that was anchored by President Truman's announcement that Greece and the Republic of Turkey would also be included as key allies against communism.

During the Cold War, the strategic threat posed by the Soviet Union bound the two countries together. Yet, relations between Turkey and the United States have not been immune to the regional developments and domestic politics in both capitals. The two countries' militaries, which highly integrated in the context of a common North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) platform,

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were always the traditional bedrock of the U.S. - Turkey alliance. Even after sixty-five years, NATO remains the key security alliance for both sides as well as other members of the transatlantic community despite the wind of change in strategic international environment both for Ankara and Washington through the “Arab Spring” and “Eurozone Crisis”.

In these turbulent times, the Truman Doctrine’s original recipient Turkey’s potential as a U.S. ally has never been more significant. As the Middle East’s largest and Europe’s fastest growing economy, Turkey is uniquely situated to play a decisive role in the future evolution of its critical neighborhood. Spanning two continents, Turkey bridges the gap between East and West with volatile borders with Iran, Syria, and Iraq that remain critical to American interests in the region. As a G-20 founding member, European Union aspirant, NATO ally, and head of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), Turkey has become an active participant in all of these forums. Over the last decade, Ankara has shed its former policies of disengagement in its neighborhood. Given its close geographic proximities to the global “hotspots” it has now become a central player. As a result, Ankara has transformed first into a regional and now a global player in a way not seen since the days of the Ottoman Empire.

Current Context for Turkey

Turkey’s emergence in the twenty-first century as a regional power has been in the making for the last century, but has progressed most significantly during the last decade. However Ankara’s emergence as a regional power has only been fully crystallized in the wake of the Arab Spring and the activism displayed by its government. Unlike regional powers such as Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia that actively supported counter-protest movements to deflect attention away from their own domestic shortcomings, Turkey’s vibrant civil society nudged the government onto the side of the Arab street, even at the expense of investments made with previous regimes. Given Turkey’s recent economic success and democratic character in a Muslim context, Ankara’s courtship of the newly emerging democracies and regimes in its neighborhood has shown great promise. Yet Turkey’s potential still exceeds its capabilities.¹ Ankara has found itself surrounded, if not overwhelmed, with more and more challenges; casting a long shadow on the actual fulfillment of its regional ambitions moving forward.

The Arab Spring and the European Fall that toppled governments on both sides of the Mediterranean has reinforced the fluidity and diversity of Turkey’s complicated neighborhood. Turkey’s rise and strong performance in recent years could lead some to think that a resurgent Ankara could take on an ever-larger share of the responsibility for the vast and variegated expanse of lands that it once ruled. The so-called “neo-Ottoman” dream of Turkey

...serving its rising regional political and economic ambitions throughout its former imperial domain while relieving Western countries at a time of weakness among developed economies (including declining US strategic focus on the Middle East) is misguided. If anything, recent developments have only further reinforced that a Turkey-centered vision of the post-Ottoman space is undesirable and impractical, besides being problematic for reasons of historical antagonism.² Turkey indeed has huge potential as a regional leader with deep strategic reach but it needs U.S. support more now than ever, that too at a time when the reverse is also true for Washington.

In the current context, getting irksome neighbors like Iraq and Syria “right” is critical for Turkey; yet this is almost entirely beyond its own control. As Ankara continues to cautiously weigh its options, Assad’s ongoing onslaught on his own people and Maliki’s sectarian purges may force Turkey into implementing some type of concrete action that goes beyond the current rhetoric. Having already entered into private discussions with Washington about contingency planning and humanitarian relief, Turkey’s leaders know that they cannot sit idle while their neighbor disintegrates into civil war, nor can they afford to intervene unilaterally. Regardless of whether Ankara keeps its strategic options open by seeking to preserve the status quo, events on the ground in Iraq and Syria could rapidly force Ankara into moving beyond rhetoric and intervening in either a limited humanitarian or full-scale manner. Having called for Assad’s removal and Maliki’s restraint, the status-quo is untenable due to the fact that decisions in Baghdad and Damascus directly affect Turkey’s credibility and interests as regional leader.³

“New” Turkey, Old Alliance

The “new” Turkey of the twenty-first century has far more tools at its disposal than any previous generation to push forward its agenda as a leading regional power. The tremendous success of Turkey’s private sector evidenced by the tripling of the nation’s GDP in the last decade has opened a world of economic opportunities not known to any previous generation of Turks. The spread of Turkish businesses, construction projects, hospitals, hotels, and schools throughout its neighborhood is part and parcel of its regional leverage. Having sought the role of regional mediator over the last decade, Turkey’s litmus test of leadership comes in its own neighborhood, beginning with how Ankara deals with authoritarian regimes like Assad’s that still enjoys support from Beijing, Moscow, and most critically Tehran. Ankara is not alone however, since Washington shares most of Turkey’s long-term strategic interests in the region.

Yet, there is a subtext emerging in Western capitals about Ankara’s moment in the international spotlight and its recent rise. The refrain that has been quietly circulating about Turkey’s leadership is that they are rapidly crossing the line of self-confidence. The argument goes that while Turkey’s abilities and

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capabilities have increased and are certainly unique and non-negligible, they are also not overwhelming or infinite. Modesty goes a long way in international relations and particularly in an alliance as complicated as the US-Turkish one.⁴

While Washington whispers about Turkish arrogance, Ankara whispers about America's decline.⁵ Ironically, Washington has itself partially to blame for Turkish leaders' pride and self-confidence. Starting with the neo-conservative championing of Turkey as a model for "moderate Islam" in the wake of 9/11, Washington has consistently misread the mood in Ankara. From the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 where a failed motion in the Turkish parliament strained relations to the infamous Iranian sanctions vote in which Turkey voted against the permanent five of the United Nations Security Council, there has been a lack of appreciation for the domestic politics that now drives Turkish foreign policy. Frustration from Washington over Ankara's vote on the Iranian sanctions led to a frank and reportedly heated conversation on the side lines of the second G20 summit in Toronto where President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan solidified their close working relationship. While there have been few American and Turkish administrations that have gotten along better than today, Washington has done itself little service by enabling Turkish attitudes of omnipotence. Turkish claims about its importance in Washington have been met either with benign neglect or short-term tactical silence. These are both unhealthy for the long-term national partnerships that require going administrations.

Despite the current honeymoon in US-Turkey relations that was brought about by a convergence of interests after the Arab Spring, the fundamentals of the alliance are neither solid nor structural. While the Obama administration has proved to be Turkey's greatest advocate in Washington, any other administration and the US Congress remains far more skeptical of Erdoğan and his ultimate goals.⁶ Along with many of the traditional bureaucratic bedrocks of the relationship, Washington is not as uniformly enamored with Ankara as is often portrayed by the current administration that has made Turkey the centerpiece of its foreign policy approach. Turbulence in U.S.-Turkey relations should be expected and is ignored only at each nation's peril. The fact that the Armenia issue has not derailed relations yet does not mean that increased pressure leading to the 100-year anniversary of the events of 1915 is still not beyond the realm of possibility.⁷ Additionally, while Washington is focused on some key strategic issues for Ankara such as events in Baghdad, Damascus, and Tehran; others that are equally important for Turkey and regional stability such as the Kurdish issue or Cyprus seem to be perennially low on American policymakers' priority list. Having already decoupled bilateral relations after the breach in relations following the *Mavi-Marmara* incident in which nine Turkish citizens were killed by Israeli commandos enforcing the Gaza blockade, Washington has been unable to repair the previous trilateral consensus with Israel. That arrangement is only tenable as long as other regional develop-

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ments (such as energy discoveries) don't draw further populist reactions from Ankara or Jerusalem. In this context, any future military engagement against Iran would create new tensions with Ankara that might prove untenable. The current high-level U.S.-Turkey dialogue may be undermined under a new administration that might place a different level of emphasis on democracy-related issues and internal political developments in Turkey.

Having said this however, it would be equally foolish to ignore the important strategic role that Turkey has played and continues to play in a critical region, not to mention the degree to which American and Turkish interests converge more than they diverge. At a moment in which the concept of Western leadership is being questioned, a proactive assessment of Turkey's newfound emergence as a responsible global partner in regional stability and long-term democratization has never been more necessary. Washington has to stop looking at Ankara merely in terms of alignment or drift on specific tactical issues and focus on the long-term vision that originally guided the partnership between the two countries as part of the Truman Doctrine. Sharing mutual friendship, history, and interests is important in international relations, but revitalizing a six decades old alliance that has primarily relied on converged geostrategic realities into a partnership of mutual visions and shared values is a preferred outcome.

Moving Forward to the Future in Ankara and Washington

Turkey has enjoyed its decade-long regional rise as a pragmatic and active actor in the Middle East while Arab states have failed their populations. Yet, the discussion of the "Turkish model" is still a work in progress. The time is ripe for the Turkish government, with its mandate for constitutional reform, to carry Turkey across the threshold of full-fledged liberal democracy. Only by deepening and projecting its "democratic depth" can it have a lasting impact at home, representing the best and serving as a leader in its neighborhood.⁸ Unfortunately, Turkey's own championing of democracy and regional reform is still as fragile as its own democratization process which is evident in the lack of progress on the new constitution or the perennial Kurdish problem. Turkey's stalled EU accession has only added to the difficulty for democratically elected and populist leaders. Whether Turkey will develop into a more liberal type of democracy should be more important to the future of U.S.-Turkey than joint dialogues, speeches or initiatives on the regional and world stage.

Turkish policies and principles can complement the West if framed within a broader universal perspective of the Middle East that transcends sectarian divides in favor of pragmatism. Erdoğan has been showcasing Turkey's attitude to sectarian conflict by inserting himself frequently as a mediator in the region's many quarrels. His participation in *Ashura* Allevi ceremonies in Turkey on December 2010 and his visit to the Shia tomb of Caliph Ali

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in Nejed on March 2011, both firsts for a Turkish leader, were intended to underline Turkey’s chosen role as a mediator between the Sunni and Shi’ite world. To do so effectively, Turkey must convey a measured tone with a universal message. Turkish policymakers such as Foreign Minister Davutoğlu have long been sensitive to sectarianism and have attempted to bridge differences. Unfortunately, while Ankara seeks to promote an air of proactive confidence and of being above the region’s sectarianism, realities on the ground point to the limitations of Turkey’s strategy. Having promoted a proactive approach and template for regional order that attempts to bridge sectarian differences, the Turkish leadership has now been caught off-guard by a confluence of factors: first by Assad’s unwillingness to listen to their advice; second by Tehran’s intransigence in the face of hardening international positions; and finally by Maliki’s visceral reaction.

At a moment in which American leadership is being questioned and sectarian tensions continue in the Middle East, the timing has never been more opportune to re-focus on the core principles and universal values that have led to the best period of US-Turkish relations this century. Coordination and policy on Turkey continues to affect vital interests throughout Washington that ideally must go beyond the administration to the Hill and society at large even if there is short-term turbulence. Despite record levels of communication and travel between top leaders in Ankara and Washington, the societal and institutional connections are still in need of revitalization and strengthening. Senior Turkish officials continue to boast about the amount of time their leaders spend on the phone with top US officials including President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton.⁹ As a result, Ankara has grown accustomed to listening only to the administration which is particularly unhelpful in a Washington that is highly polarized and split along partisan lines. Yet this is precisely why a more responsible Turkey that shows the right dose and tone of self-confidence should be engaging in all aspects of the US partnership not just in the White House.

Re-Affirming Turkey’s Western Credentials

Double standards and contradictions, motivated by domestic, economic or geopolitical interests nonetheless remain in the foreign policies of America and Turkey. These issues should be discussed honestly with a view to overcoming them through joint efforts. To the extent that the West is defined as a set of principles and democracy, the very challenge with Turkey is applying these standards consistently and universally. This will ensure the construction of a viable partnership that is consequential, flexible, and mutually beneficial. Rather than seeing Turkey’s growing international role as a challenge or mere hubris, it should be taken as an opportunity to reinforce its Western credentials, including its EU aspiration, which makes it a unique interlocutor to all its neighbors.

Reinvigorating Turkey's relations with the West continues to represent the best guarantee that the country's domestic transformation will culminate in a standard of democracy that will make it a guiding light in the Middle East. The Transatlantic anchor provided through NATO, for example, can inject the Turkish military with the necessary confidence to embark upon reforms.¹⁰ Internationally recognizing the extraordinary efforts of and leadership of the Turkish Armed Forces on behalf of NATO would go a long way to revitalizing a badly demoralized domestic constituency. Given the number of ongoing trials against generals in Turkey and the continued tensions within society over the military's historical role, recasting a vision for a professional force that Ankara can employ multilaterally as part of its broader strategic concept is critical.

Likewise, in order to fulfill its Middle Eastern promise, Turkey's EU process must not be allowed to expire. It is not that in the absence of an EU anchor Turkey will morph into the Islamic Republic of Iran. Turkey's historical and contemporary experiences and specificity, as well as economic, social, and religious make-up and set-up, mean such fears are profoundly misplaced. However, as in many of its neighbors—and among more than a few of its EU counterparts—the lure of populism and streaks of intolerance are strong.

As highlighted by a high-level Council on Foreign Relations working group on Turkey chaired by Madeline Albright and Stephen Hadley, Washington has strong incentives to institutionalize its close working relationship with Ankara. As stated earlier, involving Turkey in a formalized high-level structure would reinforce the critical nature of the bilateral relationship as one of common values that goes well beyond the Cold War era strategic interests. While supporting democratic transitions in the Arab world and calling for the respect of human rights in Muslim societies, both Ankara and Washington will have to live up to high democratic standards at home. Only that will guarantee credibility at home and abroad. This nexus of credibility is particularly important for Turkey's domestic environment as the country consolidates its own constitution and democratic system. A formalized bilateral strategic dialogue such as that modeled by US-UK, US-Israel, or US-Japan levels would help promote the Turkish model in a dynamic way by drawing links between what Turkey can accomplish domestically to the image, credibility, and influence that it can exercise regionally and internationally.

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1. USAK Reports, No. 4: “Turkey's Power Capacity in the Middle East: Limits of the Possible.”

2. The lingering narratives of “Arab backstabbing” during World War One and the “Ottoman yoke” in Turkish and Arab curriculum only reinforce the differences at the expense of common heritage and religion being emphasis today.

3. Joshua W. Walker, Staying Above the Middle Eastern Fray: Turkey's Sectarian Temptations. http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/walker_middleeasternfray_mar12.pdf.

4. Joshua W. Walker, U.S.-Turkish Relations: Modesty and Revitalization. <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/u-s-turkish-relations-modesty-and-revitalization>.

5. Boasts by visiting Turkish delegations about the fact that Washington needs Ankara far more than the other way around were much more common in 2011, but can still be heard particularly in regards to American foreign policy in the Middle East. Author interview February 12, 2012.

6. The composition of Romney's foreign policy team that includes former Ambassador Eric Edelman who has well-known negative views about Erdoğan and various letters written by Congressional leaders affirm this observation. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/01/wikileaks-turkish-prime-m_n_790449.html.

7. Armenians recognize the events of 1915 as the "Armenian genocide" and have sought international recognition for their claim successfully in most Western nations including most recently Canada and France. Turkey have never officially acknowledged these claims and instead focus on the killings of Muslim citizens of the Ottoman Empire dur-

ing its disintegration. A Congressional resolution or White House statement acknowledging the "Armenian genocide" has therefore become the primary international battlefield for Armenians and Turks on this issue.

8. Nora Fisher Onar, "Democratic Depth: The Missing Ingredient in Turkey's Domestic/Foreign Policy Nexus?" in Kerem Öktem, Ayşe Kadioğlu and Mehmet Karlı (eds.) *Another Empire? A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party*, Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2002.

9. Author interview February 12, 2012.

10. For more on this, see Kemal Kirişçi, Nathalie Tocci, and Joshua Walker, "Neighborhood Rediscovered: Turkey's Transatlantic Value in the Middle East." Brussels Forum Paper Series, March 2010.

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