



BULLETIN

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Editors: Jacek Foks (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień,
Łukasz Kulesa, Marek Madej, Beata Wojna, Ernest Wyciszekiewicz

Changes in Turkish Foreign Policy

by Adam Szymański

Rapprochement with Russia and the Middle East countries, deteriorating relations with Israel and differences in relations with the U.S.—these are the features of Turkey's new foreign policy, seeking to balance all of the country's external vectors and act as a regional power. In the longer term, the policy change in Turkey may bring about an improvement in relations with the EU, but for the new policy to succeed the country must put its relations with the U.S. and Israel on a new footing.

During the Cold War, Turkey's foreign policy was founded on relations with the United States, and the country remained a strategic partner for the U.S. also in a changed climate of the 1990s, reflecting its importance in the region. That period saw conciliation with Israel, a priority assigned to EU accession—but also early signs of a push for diversification in external relations. The country began developing economic contacts with Russia and the Middle East, even if mutual relations were impacted by a number of political problems, especially with the Middle East partners, seen by Turkey as security threats.

The recent years have been a time of a tightening of relations with Russia, Iran and the Arab countries, a breakdown of the partnership with Israel, and differences in relations with the U.S. In May, a number of agreements with Russia were signed in Ankara, tightening two-way energy cooperation and waiving the visa requirement for up-to-a-month visits. Following an Israeli commando attack on a Gaza-bound Turkish vessel with humanitarian aid towards the end of May, the Turkish ambassador to Israel was recalled for consultations, and cooperation in the military and economic fields was scaled down. In early June, Turkey, a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, joined Brazil in voting against successive U.S.-backed sanctions against Iran. A few days later, during a Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum, a new mechanism to deepen Middle Eastern economic integration was set up, involving Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and providing for the formation of free trade zones and appointment of a joint cooperation council.

New Policy Line. The tendencies seen in Turkey's international relations reflect its new foreign policy concept, developed under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has Islamic roots and which has been running the country since 2002. The new policy, however, is not about building an alliance with Russia or Middle Eastern neighbors as an alternative to the waning post-Iraq relations with the U.S. or the heavily problem-laden relations with the EU. Through a customs union with the EU and NATO membership, Turkey is too strongly linked with Western partners economically, politically and in security terms, for such a scenario to stand any chance of implementation. And the country's relations with Russia and Iran are not problem-free either, including large trade deficits and a different perception of many international issues, such as Kosovo or the conflicts in the South Caucasus in the case of Russia, or relations with Armenia and nuclear armaments in the case of Iran. Besides, Iran is hardly a trusted partner, e.g. as a gas supplier, and it is a theocracy. As for Russia, it has always competed with Turkey in the post-Soviet area.

Turkey's new policy seeks to pursue—in a multi-polar world—a more balanced multi-vector line, while taking advantage of the country's geopolitical position. This means Turkey no longer focuses, and is no longer dependent, on one region or one state, as was the case for a long time in relations with the U.S. Instead, the country wants to give similar treatment to all major directions, while pursuing an independent policy. This also holds for the Middle Eastern neighbors, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Turkey regards them as partners with whom to develop relations and solve bilateral problems—not

as a security threat. Consequently, the differences with Israel and the U.S. over Middle Eastern policy have been growing, resulting in cyclical tensions in mutual relations.

Security, the main objective of Turkish foreign policy, is now perceived in much broader terms than at the time of the Cold War, when the notion was largely confined to the military field. With the country's demand for energy on the rise, the security of energy supplies has become equally important, and hence the expansion of cooperation with its main suppliers of oil and gas, Russia and Iran. And Turkey has learned that security may be attained not only by means of hard power but also through increased economic contacts and diplomacy. It has, therefore, sought to boost trade with its neighbors, close and more distant (including Arab countries), and it aspires to a position where it can mediate between parties to regional conflicts. The Iran sanctions contravene these tenets of Turkey's foreign policy by damaging its economic interests and hurting prospects for a diplomatic solution to the problem of the Iranian nuclear programme (e.g. by implementing the Turkish-Brazilian-Iranian declaration, signed in Tehran on 17 May, on the exchange on Turkish territory of low-enriched uranium into more refined nuclear fuel for an Iranian research reactor).

Prospects. Given the differences in the policies towards the Middle East pursued by Turkey and by the U.S. and Israel, tensions in bilateral relations cannot be ruled out. If they are to be eliminated, relations with those countries have to be adjusted to the current set of regional determinants and to Turkey's international aspirations. The United States still finds it hard to accept that Turkey, an influential country in neighboring regions, is seeking to play the role of a regional power. Turkey also has broader ambitions to pursue a global policy, as reflected in the country's activities in international organizations and developing relations with countries in Africa and South America. But as far as relations with the U.S. are concerned, the process of identifying discrepancies and common interests (especially in the Middle East, Afghanistan and South Caucasus) has already begun, so there is a chance for these relations to be adjusted to the new situation.

An effective transformation of Turkish-Israeli relations is rendered more difficult by an unfavorable impact of internal factors, although here too their restoration is not inconceivable, based on shared economic and military interests. The AKP government often resorts to harsh rhetoric towards Israel and happens to overemphasize its warm attitude towards Hamas. Usually this is motivated by the prospect of increased electoral support, playing on the Turkish people's sympathy for Palestine, resentment against Israel, or religious sentiments. In the short term, this may tarnish Turkey's international image by strengthening Western societies' fears of the country's Islamization, and stirring doubts about its capacity to play an honest-broker role in Middle Eastern conflicts (Turkey now takes a firm stand on the side of one party).

No similar tensions are generated by the new foreign policy line in Turkey's relations with the EU. But if all Turkish motives are to be understood by the European partners, the country should improve its communications, drawing on public diplomacy. In the long term, Turkey's vigorous international activity, using soft power, offers a chance for improvement in relations with the EU, with the latter beginning to realize that by tapping Turkey's potential it may get closer to regions and countries of importance to EU foreign policy. This factor will be playing an increasing role in any discussion about the EU's enlargement to take in Turkey.