

# Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey's New Foreign Policy Doctrine\*

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*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. As a staunch ally of the United States which has traditionally privileged its “strategic partnership,” Turkey’s global role has shifted from being a Western geo-strategic military deterrent to an exemplary model of a Muslim-majority, secular, and democratic nation. This article offers an introduction to Turkey’s new foreign policy doctrine known as “strategic depth” and then seeks to examine its implications for Turkey’s emerging role in Europe, the Middle East, Russia, and Central Asia. In the following sections, this article will outline how Turkey is beginning to realize its full potential as a versatile multiregional and increasingly powerful international actor.*

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Turkish foreign policy rarely makes global headlines, nor has it traditionally been an important factor in international politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the American-led War on Terror, Second Gulf War, and the most recent domestic political turmoil have refocused world attention on Turkey’s future path and progress. The nation’s history and experience with democracy, secularism, Islamic fundamentalism, and ethnic minorities present a microcosm of the challenges facing its entire neighborhood. For the last several decades, Turkey, with its strict adherence to maintaining stability and the status quo in its region, has been trying to adjust to a world where conditions for traditional foreign policy making have been undergoing a radical change. Today 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 in its foreign and national security policy.

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This article first considers the incredible transformation that Turkish foreign policy has undergone since the national elections in 2002 and analyzes the new government's chief foreign policy advisor's doctrine of "strategic depth." The implications of the "strategic depth" doctrine are manifest in all aspects of Turkey's national security and foreign policy decisions, while its mere mention can cause counter-balancing weights within Turkey's own domestic structures. Despite its tremendous importance and far-ranging implications, the "strategic depth" doctrine has received little scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> This article endeavors to contribute to the debate by offering perspective on "strategic depth" as a viable Turkish grand strategy. In the following sections, Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine will be examined from the perspective of furthering Turkey's own development and progress, while taking into account and examining Turkey's emerging role as a multiregional power in the international state system.

Finally, by surveying the key implications and regions advocated by "strategic depth," this paper will argue that while Turkey's pre-Cold War and pre-9/11 goal of belonging to the West (and in particular of being a part of Europe) is still in place, analysts can no longer take Turkish foreign policy for granted. 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 is beginning to realize its full potential as a versatile multiregional and increasingly powerful international actor.

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## What is Strategic Depth?

The concept of "Strategic Depth" in Turkish foreign policy refers to the academic work of Professor Ahmet Davutoglu, who published his Turkish international relations book of the same title in 2001. The main thesis of Davutoglu's book is that a nation's value in world politics is predicated on its geo-strategic location and historical depth. Following the logic of Davutoglu's proclaimed theory, Turkey is uniquely endowed both because of its location in geopolitical areas of influence, particularly its control of the Bosphorus, and its historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>2</sup> While traditional measures of Turkey's national power tend to overlook the cultural links fostered by a shared common history, Davutoglu emphasizes Turkey's connections to the Balkans, the Middle East, and even Central Asia. In the same vein, Davutoglu argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire

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that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a Muslim regional power. Beyond the academic discussions surrounding Turkey's potential and place in the world, *Strategic Depth* advocates seeking to counterbalance Turkey's dependencies on the West by courting multiple alliances to maintain the balance of power in its region. The premise of this argument is that Turkey should not be dependent upon any one actor and should actively seek ways to balance its relationships and alliances so that it can maintain optimal independence and leverage on the global and regional stage.

While Davutoglu and his book were largely ignored in 2001 as representing little more than the musings of an academic with a pro-Islamic background, the national election results of November 3, 2002 quickly changed everything. In that election, the newly established Justice and Development Party (AKP), was voted into power, and, for the first time, a party with explicitly Islamist roots had an overwhelming majority in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA).<sup>3</sup> Given the AKP's lack of foreign policy experience and Davutoglu's stellar credentials as a devout Muslim and an influential international relations scholar, the AKP party leader and now prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan quickly asked Davutoglu to be his chief foreign policy advisor. From this perch, Davutoglu has largely been given a free hand to shape Turkey's foreign policy in light of his own strategic depth doctrine for the past five years. Of course, given the tenuous nature of civil-military relations in Turkey, foreign policy making is still very much a joint venture. However, the popularity of the AKP government and Turkey's European Union (EU) accession process has given the AKP an unprecedented influence on the direction of Turkey's new foreign policy initiatives in a post-9/11 environment. Exaggerating Davutoglu's influence and seeing "strategic depth" in every Turkish foreign policy decision is problematic; however, seeing the quiet influence of the ideas and theories guiding Davutoglu are a key to understanding the AKP's foreign policy orientation. Therefore rather than arguing that the "strategic depth" doctrine is the sole guiding force in Turkish foreign policymaking, the remainder of this article will examine Turkey's newfound activism in its regional neighborhood in comparison to its traditional Western-orientation. As will be demonstrated in these interactions and maneuverings, the imprint of Davutoglu's influential doctrine on Turkey's foreign policy is unmistakably clear.

### Turkey's Traditional Western Allies

For the past 60 years, Turkey has prioritized its relationship with the West as is manifest in its membership in almost every Western multilateral organization. Casting its lot with the West during the Cold War was made particularly easy given Stalin's aggressive moves

on the Turkish straits and Eastern Anatolia. As a result, Turkey's Cold War relationship with the U.S. was indicative of most bilateral alliances during the period, representing a two-way street of convergent national interests in containing the influence of the Soviet Union. With the Truman Doctrine, the United States publicly committed itself to protecting Turkey and Greece, thereby linking these two nations with Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> On July 12, 1947, four and a half years before Turkey gained admission into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United States and Turkey signed a military assistance agreement that went beyond their common interest to deter the Soviet Union from annexing strategic territory along the Bosphorus, and committed each country to active cooperation and mutual defense. Weaponry and other military equipment was supplied by Washington, together with the personnel for instruction. Programs of road and harbor construction and the establishment of strategic installations of various sorts were prepared with the help of American advice and implemented through the financial aid offered by the United States. Besides military assistance, economic assistance was also provided under the Marshall Plan while Turkey's participation in the Korean War deepened her friendship with its Western comrade-in-arms.<sup>5</sup>

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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; the bulk of its lucrative foreign trade is conducted with European Union member states. Geo-politically, Turkey has always insisted on being part of every European organization based on its three percent geographic claim to Europe. However, despite the arguments made by many Atlanticist quarters in Europe who favor Turkey's geo-strategic value within the framework of the EU, most Europeans have remained skeptical about Turkish membership. As a result of this popular European sentiment, the EU has kept Turkey waiting at its doorstep for a variety of reasons for over four decades. Still, for Turkey, the single most important external factor on its domestic agenda today remains the EU. As will be outlined below, the domestic changes that have occurred as a result of this often tenuous relationship have been among the most significant in Turkish history.

### Turkey's Depth in Europe

With the opening of negotiations for Turkey's EU accession in Luxemburg on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005, a new chapter was added to the EU-Turkey relationship. Having become a clearly defined candidate country, Turkey has entered official EU negotiation talks that have traditionally resulted in EU membership offers. 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 the ruling AKP to keep the *Kemalist* establishment at bay while continuing to push for further domestic reforms centered around greater economic liberalization and democratization. While Prime Minister Erdogan's AKP have claimed the EU's Copenhagen criteria as their own as the 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, Erdogan can prepare Turkey for the long and hard road ahead. As part of this process, Erdogan needs to decouple promises of EU membership from the vital domestic reforms that the TGNA has yet to push through. In fostering a parallel process of EU membership negotiations and internal reforms, Erdogan 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.

Given the highly symbolic nature of a Muslim-majority secular democracy like Turkey waiting at the doorway of Europe, the larger member states of the EU cannot ignore the global ramifications of Turkey's accession negotiations. From a European perspective, the most important question to analyze is the strategic impact of Turkish accession.

An EU which stops at the Bosphorus will be a very different type of strategic actor than one which pushes into Central Asia and embraces the Middle East. This question of Turkish accession, which is only now beginning to be considered by policy-makers in the EU, will have massive ramifications and makes Turkish accession the predominant strategic issue for the EU, particularly in regards to a common European Security and Defense Policy. Britain's prominent role in these discussions and strong views in support of an "ever expanding wide union" versus France's "ever deepening union" is critical to understanding the future direction of EU enlargement and Turkey's own strategic thinking.

As part of Turkey "strategic depth" doctrine, Erdogan echoes Davutoglu when he emphasizes the need for Turkish policies that take the EU into account, but he does not see the EU as the only alternative. Given the changing nature

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of the Turkish-EU relationship, with the EU recently partly halting negotiations and the new Portuguese presidency of the EU seemingly unwilling to seriously engage the question of Turkish accession, maintaining strategic depth flows logically and even seems like a national imperative. American efforts to convince its European allies of the importance of anchoring Turkey in the West through the EU have often fallen on deaf ears. A spurned Turkey guided by its policy of “strategic depth” will not follow the typical *Kemalist* prescription of isolation, but could just as easily reach out to other important regional actors such as Iran and Russia to form a loose alignment.<sup>6</sup> In this regard there is a paradoxical convergence between advocates of “strategic depth” and those who want to assert a neo-*Kemalist* strategic vision of Turkey as a pivotal actor in Eurasian affairs through closer engagement with both Iran and Russia. As a result, the traditional triangle of U.S.-Turkish-EU relations must be closely watched while acknowledging the changed international environment in which Turkish foreign policy is being made.

### Strategic Depth in the Middle East

Traditionally Turkey has been labeled as either a “bridge” or a “barrier” between the Middle East and the West; now it finds itself playing the role of a catalyst.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, Turkey could play a role in the Middle East similar to the one Germany played with its “front line” position towards the Central European states during the Cold War.<sup>9</sup> However, many in the region are wary of Turkey being anything 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. Erdogan has thus far been able to play a positive role in pushing forward Turkey’s European credentials, offering economic conduits to Europe, while at the same time embracing the positive aspects of Turkey’s strategic depth in terms of Middle Eastern cultural and religious connections. The tightrope that Erdogan 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 Erdogan’s “strategic depth” program of maintaining pragmatic and positive relations with Turkey’s neighbors. Given Turkey’s historic neglect

of the Middle East, recent Turkish foreign policy initiatives and Erdogan's repeated offers of Turkish assistance in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process have all been part of Ankara's attempts to develop good ties with its neighbors comparable to those it shares with the West. The most dramatic shifts in Turkish foreign policy have been witnessed within the Middle East, where the historically close relationship with Israel has been de-emphasized while former enemies such as Iran and Syria have been openly courted.

One of the most significant departures from previous Turkish foreign policies was committed by Davutoglu in his role as chief foreign advisor when he extended an invitation to Khaled Mashal, the official representative of Hamas in Damascus following Hamas's victory in the Palestinian legislative elections. The Turkish Foreign Ministry and official organs of the state had declined to extend an invitation to Mashal, but the AKP government acted on its own to receive the Hamas leader so that it could mediate between Hamas and Israel. However, this unsolicited attempt at mediation was seen as hostile and deleterious to Turkish-Israeli relations. The backlash from this *faux pas* has continued to taint Turkish-Israeli relations, which were once considered to be among the most solid in the region.

In contrast to the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations, the relationship between Turkey and Syria has drastically improved over the last few years. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Turkey in January 2004 was returned later in the year by Turkish President Sezer, the first presidential exchange of its type in Syrian-Turkish history. These events prompted a negative U.S. response in which former U.S. ambassador to Turkey Eric Edelman called on Turkey to join the international consensus on Syria which was being pressured at the time to remove its troops from Lebanon. In response to U.S. pressure, the Turkish government emphasized that it was appealing directly to the Syrians, while

the Syrian President Bashar Assad welcomed the visit as, "...evidence that NATO member Turkey is ready to stand up to the United States on issues of national interest."<sup>10</sup>

During this same set of visits, President al-Assad emphasized that Syria could be a bridge for Turkey to the Arab world, and that Turkey was a doorway into Europe for Syria. The two countries signed a significant number of bilateral agreements which comprised the Sixth Turkish-Syrian Protocol, covering the economic sphere, duty-free trade, tourism and educational exchange. In addition, the war in Iraq served to further relations by leading to the creation of a "common plan" for the territorial integrity of a united Iraq.<sup>11</sup> The constructive direction of recent Turkish-Syrian relations has been seen as an affirmation of Turkey's strategic depth in the Middle East, particularly if it leads to the development of a genuine ally in the region. Meanwhile in Washington, the improvement of Turkish-Syrian relations has been an unwelcome

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development in America's attempt to isolate Syria internationally. America has reacted particularly coolly to the "common plan" because of its lack of Iraqi participation and the tensions between these neighbors over unresolved claims by their respective Kurdish communities. This type of divergence between Ankara and Washington over relations and approaches to Damascus would have been unthinkable even less than five years ago; however, in the era of "strategic depth" Turkey has put a premium on cultivating better relations with its former Cold War enemy and formerly important Ottoman province.

The positive direction of Syrian-Turkish relations have been emulated with Turkey's historic antagonist and fellow non-Arab regional power, Iran. In PM Erdogan's July 2004 visit to Tehran, the two countries signed a multi-dimensional cooperation scheme that included a series of economic agreements, and a joint commitment to security cooperation with Iran in the struggle against the PKK. Perhaps most shockingly, given previous Iranian-Turkish hostility during the Cold War, Turkey initially defended Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program despite the international crisis regarding the violations by Iran of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. However, as a result of American and EU pressure, the Erdogan government began to change its attitude towards the Iranian nuclear program. Having received calls from the U.S. Secretary of State and the foreign ministers from the EU troika of Britain, France, and Germany which all emphasized the destabilizing effects of a nuclear-armed Iran, Erdogan clarified his earlier position. "The continuation of Iran's nuclear program for peaceful ends is a natural right, but it is impossible to support it if it concerns the development of weapons of mass destruction."<sup>12</sup> In a January 2006 press conference in Ankara, the Turkish prime minister exerted diplomatic pressure on Iran. Erdogan called for adoption of a moderate and amenable approach in the diplomatic negotiations over its nuclear program. Iran responded with assurances to the Turkish government that it sought nothing more than a peaceful nuclear program.

The turnabout in Iranian-Turkish relations has been particularly astounding when viewed against the backdrop of less than ten years ago when Turkey would frequently accuse Iran of supporting the PKK and Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups operating within Turkey. The pragmatic relationship that Ankara and Tehran have formed has allowed a series of important cultural and economic contacts to flourish. Previous regional tensions between Turkey and Iran have been resolved as evidenced by their joint statements in search of a solution for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Perhaps most importantly, Iranian oil and gas exports to Turkey have allowed the AKP to claim an important economic victory. Turkey has tried to maintain a delicate balance between not openly contradicting U.S. policy towards Iran, and seeking to actively maintain economic and political connections with its largest and most powerful Middle Eastern neighbor. The AKP has increasingly emphasized the need for Turkey to have good relations with Iran and downplayed

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international concern over a nuclear Iran, which has frustrated Washington in its attempt to exert international pressure on Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions.

In both of these cases, the policy of “strategic depth” makes sense in theory, but it fails in the real world by assuming reciprocal goodwill on the part of Syria and Iran. Both Damascus and Tehran have acted with historically consistent ill intent toward Ankara, supporting terrorist groups – the PKK in the case of Syria, and the PKK and Islamist cells in the case of Iran – to undermine Turkey’s secular democratic system and deter its pro-Western foreign policy orientation. Both countries have taken advantage of the AKP’s “strategic depth” policy to approach Ankara. Neither has changed its mind about

Turkey’s secular democratic regime, but both see reason to win Ankara to their side. Syria, which is surrounded by U.S.-occupied Iraq, U.S.-friendly Jordan, and Israel, sees Turkey as the only neighbor that can ease its isolation. Iran likewise faces U.S. military presence in Iraq to the west and Afghanistan to the east, and hopes that a sympathetic regime in Turkey can help it circumvent America’s grip. In the words of one commentator, “...what is ‘strategic depth’ for Ankara is ‘strategic opportunity’ for Damascus and Tehran.”<sup>13</sup>

The Middle East and its current realities represent the most malleable and exciting frontiers for Turkish foreign policy, but also the area in which Washington and Ankara will continue to have the most trouble seeing eye-to-eye. Turkey has had difficulties developing a comprehensive and consistent policy that would serve both its national interests and its interests in the region through strategic depth alone. In many ways the AKP’s attempts to reach out to the Middle East can be seen through the prism of domestic politics as a signal of the independence of civilian Turkish foreign policymaking outside the realm of the Turkish military. Maintaining good relations with Washington while at the same time that attempting to reach out to Damascus and Tehran will be an incredibly difficult tightrope for Erdogan and the AKP to walk; however, it also gives Ankara some much needed leverage in an otherwise asymmetric relationship with Washington.

Engaged Turkish behavior in its immediate neighborhood represents a key to success for the Middle East. Therefore, Washington must continue to work to understand Turkey’s unique position. As both a 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. Turkey represents the only country versatile enough to play both the role of mediator and bridge for a regional framework of stability, and should be encouraged by Washington both in these efforts and in the maintenance of a positive relationship with the West.

## Turkey and Russia

Turkey and Russia have always found themselves in opposition to each other, 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 czar 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 perpetuated 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 develop and maintain normal and pragmatic relations in recent years, their competing interests in the mutually shared areas of their environs have led to often tense relations.<sup>14</sup>

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 could 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 sparked 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 recently completed Ceyhan-Tbilisi-Baku pipeline.

The AKP led by Erdogan has been quick to capitalize on President Putin’s skepticism of the West and to offer itself as a strong regional partner. Building on Turkey’s need for “strategic depth,” when dealing with the EU, Davutoglu sees Russia as a natural ally in Eurasia and an effective counterbalance to the EU. Given historical perceptions of Europe as 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.

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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. Further, a personal relationship seems to have been formed between Erdogan and Putin which has been the source of much public discussion.<sup>15</sup>

The post-9/11 environment that Erdogan 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 for 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. Russia no longer represents the strategic threat it posed during the Cold War. However, the continued tension between Moscow and its Muslim minorities does not bode well for the stability of the entire region. Given Washington and Ankara's convergent interests in maintaining constructive relations with Moscow and containing the spread of Islamic extremism, developing parallel common policies towards Russia and its environs would seem to be relatively easy.

The improved atmosphere between Moscow and Ankara reflect the personalities and friendship of Putin and Erdogan, 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 means of progress towards pragmatic relations.

Given the current levels of official economic commerce and the thriving black-market trading between the two countries, Erdogan sees the potential for closer relations with Russia. By emphasizing common interests and positive convergences, Erdogan has already laid the framework for improved Russia-Turkey relations. In

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## Turkey's Northeastern Peripheries

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey's relations with the post-USSR states have been dictated largely by cultural and historical bonds. With the emergence of post-Soviet Turkic states that share 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 setting 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, a fear 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.<sup>16</sup> In particular, in a post-9/11 world in which Western strategic interests have shifted to 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 Turkic-speaking Muslims. 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 on post-9/11 Western support. While Erdogan's Turkey has been quick to rhetorically assume the role of an "el-

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der brother” to its northeastern neighbors, only time will tell what tangible results this approach might entail. With the recent examples of unrest in Uzbekistan and irregular elections in Azerbaijan and Krygstan, the U.S. has increasingly looked towards Turkey to play a leading role, which fits well into Erdogan ‘s vision of “strategic depth.”

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 further 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 functioned as a geographic barrier against Russian influence, now Turkey represents a vital partner with a shared goal of stability for the entire 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.

## Policy Implications

No longer confined to being simply an American geo-strategic “barrier,” “bridge,” or “bulwark,” Turkey represents an exemplary model of a Muslim-majority, secular, and democratic nation within this new geopolitical environment. The nation’s broadened awareness and appreciation for the positive role that it can play in Europe, the Middle East, Russia, and Central Asia has caused Turkish leaders to realize the full potential that Turkey has for being a versatile multiregional and increasingly powerful international actor. This newfound activism and confidence in Turkey’s own regional policies has directly affected the U.S.-Turkish relationship and has significant implications for policymakers dealing with these regions of the world.

The “strategic depth” doctrine calls for an active engagement with all regional systems in Turkey’s neighborhood, while being sensitive to American and European interests in these regions. Various AKP officials have echoed the concept of “strategic depth” in their arguments that Turkey needs to rediscover its historic and geographic identity and reassess its own position vis-à-vis regional and global issues while distancing itself from

solely being labeled a Western power. As foreign policy advisor, Davutoglu has promoted Turkey’s re-engagement with the Middle Eastern region, particularly with Iran and Syria, an effort which has been facilitated by the American misadventure in Iraq and its subsequent aftermath. In view of the transatlantic rift evident in the wake of the American-led second Gulf War, the architect of Erdogan’s foreign policy advised developing a balanced approach towards all global and regional actors, which has led to noticeably improved relations with Russia and Central Asia. Davutoglu has also emphasized the importance of economic interdependency in the globalizing world and the need to build strong economic linkages with all regional states for Turkey regardless of former Cold War mentalities or hostile American policies towards these neighbors. In the final analysis, “strategic depth” envisions a Turkey that would transform itself into a global actor rather than a regional or junior partner to the United States.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for both Ankara and Washington will be the balancing of their historically close “strategic alliance” with the realities of a newly assertive Turkey. If Washington treats Ankara like a junior partner and not an important regional power, U.S. foreign policymakers will increasingly come to see Turkey’s “strategic depth” doctrine in a negative light. However, this direction is not predetermined.

The U.S. should actively seek to engage Turkey in efforts to stabilize Iraq and work towards a more democratic Middle East. Trying to bully Turkey into cutting off relations with Syria or Iran will only generate backlash against America. Therefore, Washington must be sensitive to Turkey’s position in the Middle East. Emphasizing common interests and playing down divergent policies must be the main thrust of U.S. diplomacy in Ankara. The recent row over the U.S. Congress considering House Resolution 106, which would condemn the events of 1915 as a genocide, has sparked in Turkey a new interest in balancing its strategic options vis-a-vis the U.S. As demonstrated by the TGNA’s passage of a resolution authorizing cross-border military operations in Iraq, Turkey is not afraid of using its military might independently to accomplish its security objectives. Therefore while the “strategic depth” doctrine would highlight the more peaceful exertion of Turkey’s “soft power,” the very real national security threat emanating from northern Iraq has superceded this effort.

While the AKP will continually look towards its Muslim roots to gain domestic support, Turkey’s future internationally lies with Europe. Erdogan is a pragmatic politician who has exploited the weakness of the U.S.’s Middle East policy, but ultimately realizes the

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importance of the U.S.-Turkish alliance for the success of AKP's other foreign policy objectives. Inherent in the conceptualization of Turkey's "strategic depth," then, is the need to have good relations with all the major poles of world and regional power. Given the preponderance of U.S. power at both a global and a regional level, Turkey cannot simply pursue its regional policies without working with Washington.

Western leaders must first recognize the change that has occurred in Turkish foreign policymaking and calibrate their own policies towards Turkey accordingly. Working towards securing Turkey's place in a European framework, preferably through EU membership, must be a policy priority for these leaders and not simply a rhetorical trick to gain Turkish appreciation. Given the tension in Turkish-EU and transatlantic relations generally, this will require political capital that has rarely been expended on behalf of Turkey. However, it is necessary. A Turkey that is not anchored to the West will look towards its other options, which, as I have outlined, include stronger relations through touting its Muslim identity in the Middle East and its periphery, and balancing with Russia against the EU. Given Turkey's potential as both an energy corridor and an economic hub for Central Asia, Ankara has many options for seeking new poles of influence. As demonstrated, the AKP's new foreign policy doctrine of "strategic depth" no longer posits Turkey as being a dependent appendage of the West and, as a result, has ushered in a newfound assertiveness that the international community must acknowledge.

## Conclusion

Turkey has seen its traditional geographical role in its neighborhood change dramatically with the end of the Cold War. The coherent implementation of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine of "strategic depth" is still far from complete, but its important implications for the future of Turkish relations both within its neighborhood and beyond have already begun to manifest themselves. Equally important in this transformation has been Turkey's own dynamic change, which ushered in Prime Minister Erdogan'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 EU, informed by Erdogan's desire to play a greater role in Eurasia through Turkey's foreign policies in the Middle East, Russia, and Central Asia as a historically and culturally linked regional actor, represent new challenges and opportunities for Turkey.

As has been outlined, 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. Turkey has historically 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 Erdogan and the AKP continue 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. Ultimately, Turkey has the potential to be either part of the problem or the solution to some of the most intractable social, economic, and political problems facing its neighborhood today. Recognizing Turkey's potential and understanding its "strategic depth" will allow international policymakers to help Turkey continue to be a part of the many solutions needed in its troubled neighborhood.

### Endnotes:

1. The lone exception in English-language has been Alexander Murinson's "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy" *Middle Eastern Studies*, November 2006 (Vol.42, No.6), 945-964.
2. See Ahmet Davutoğlu (unfortunately there is no English translation available at this time) *Stratejik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position) İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001.
3. Given Turkey's election system in which parties must first cross a 10% threshold to obtain any seats within the TGNA, 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 TGNA seats, which allowed for the formation of a stable one-party government.
4. For more on this see forthcoming chapter by Joshua Walker "The Forming of the U.S.-Turkish Special Relationship" eds. Bilge Criss, Bruce Kuniholm, and Selcuk Esenbel, *The History of American Turkish Relations: 1833-1989* (İstanbul, Turkey: Bogazici University Press, 2007).
5. For one of the best accounts of this experience see Ferenc Vali's *Bridge across the Bosphorus*. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1971).
6. Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has argued that a Turkish-Russian-Iran alliance is the most likely outcome of the EU rejecting Turkey's membership. Interview with author October 23, 2006.
7. For more on this concept see Joshua Walker "Turkey's Role in the Middle East" *International Affairs Review* 14.1(2005): 119-136.
8. Alvin Powell, "Erdogan calls for cooperation," *Harvard Gazette*, 5 February 2004. <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/02.05/03-turkey.html>> (18 February 2005).
9. Huseyin Bagci, "Turkey Plays Greater Role in Middle East Than Many Think," *World Security Network News Letter*, February 2002.
10. "U.S.-Turkish Relations Go Wobbly Now Over Syria," <http://www.Turks.us> 23March 2005 and in Murinson, 956.
11. "Syrian President: Common Interests Of Turkey And Syria Can Turn Into A Significant Brotherhood," *Turkish Press*, 3 March 2004 <<http://www.turkishpress.com/turkishpress/news.asp?ID=18083>> (18 February 2005).
12. Schleifer, "Caught in the Fray: Turkey Enters Debate on Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 2006.
13. See comments by Soner Cagaptay in Washington Institute for Near East Policy *Policy Watch # 1081*.
14. For a full discussion of this important relationship see Joshua Walker "Turkey and the Post-Soviet States: A New Way Forward" *Insight Turkey* 4(2005): 13-20.
15. The most dramatic manifestation of this relationship came on December 5 and 6, 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 please see Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Lebedev's account in *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy & International Relations*; 2005, Vol. 51 Issue 2, p1-8.
16. To read more about this "Turkish Model" please see Mustafa Aydın's chapter "Between Euphoria and Realpolitik: Turkish Policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus" in *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (London: Ashgate 2003)