

Why the West Needs Turkey

By ZALMAV KHALILZAD

The European Union's rejection last week of membership talks with Turkey was a mistake. It risks undermining Ankara's secular and pro-Western orientation. It is likely to weaken those in Turkey who want to become part of the democratic free-market world and to strengthen those who believe that Turkey should turn East and lead an Islamic coalition in opposition to the West. To these latter voices, EU rejection is further evidence that the West does not want Turkey, and that Turkey must stop humiliating itself by running after the West.

Given its size, location and economic and military potential, Turkey's shift away from the West could have dramatic consequences for the balance of power in the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caspian Basin. To preclude Turkish alienation from the West, to advance our own strategic interests and to buy time for bridging the gap between Europe and Turkey, the U.S. should revitalize its relationship with this important ally.

Pivotal Role

During the Cold War, when Turkey was playing a pivotal role in containing the Soviets, the Europeans wanted Turkey to join the EU. That opportunity passed, and meanwhile other issues have become more important, including some with respect to which Turkey is perceived by many Western Europeans to be more of a liability than an asset. In rejecting Turkey, the Europeans emphasized Ankara's treatment of Turkey's Kurdish population and its ongoing squabbles with Greece, a member state. Some European governments appear reluctant to allow a Muslim country to join their Europe. However, the most crucial change in attitude is that of the Germans, who fear that millions more Turks might migrate to their country.

The EU-Turkey estrangement comes at a time when U.S.-Turkish relations are not as strong as they should be. The end of the 1st War and developments

inside Turkey, such as the election of an Islamist-led coalition government on an anti-Western and anti-NATO platform, weakened the bond between Washington and Ankara. For most of the past five years, Congress blocked the sale of major military equipment to Turkey—including some items the Turks had already paid for.

Even growing economic ties did little to improve security cooperation. While agreeing on Bosnia and stronger Turkish-Israeli ties, we have disagreed on a number of regional issues including Iran, Iraq and Syria. Turkey legitimately has been unhappy that the U.S. has not shown an understanding of the costs it has been suf-

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fering because of the United Nations embargo on Iraq and that we have made no effort to encourage the other oil producers, who have benefited from the embargo, to compensate Ankara.

As a result, the Turks have often been less willing to cooperate with the U.S. For example, Ankara made U.S. operations at the Incirlik Air Base more difficult by limiting training for U.S. pilots, by detaining equipment and supplies intended to U.S. forces, by slowing approval of construction and modernization of facilities, and by restricting flights over northern Iraq. The U.S. has become uncertain whether in crises such as another Iraqi aggression, the Turks would allow the U.S. the use of their facilities.

In recent months there have been some improvements in relations, as indicated by the visit of Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz to Washington last week. However, to truly reinvigorate our alliance with Turkey, we need a new strategy. A revitalized alliance should focus on three objectives:

First, the two countries should work together to ensure the security of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin regions. The U.S. already has security commitments in the gulf, an area that is vital to the world's oil supplies. The relative importance of the Caspian region is growing, though, due to its tremendous oil and gas reserves. Turkish military facilities provide an excellent location for projecting power to both the gulf and the Caspian Basin. Much of the world's energy resources are within 1,000 miles of Incirlik. Access to the Turkish bases can reduce the amount of military presence required in some of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Turkey is also a viable

pipeline route for bringing some of the oil and gas from the Caspian to world markets.

Second, the two countries should work together to counter the threat of weapons of mass destruction and missiles in the Middle East. As the Iraq crisis and the Russian-assisted Iranian missile program suggest, the problem of mass-destruction weapons in the Middle East will increase in the coming years. Washington should recognize that Turkey may seek its own mass-destruction weapons if denied U.S. assistance in countering the programs of its neighbors. This, in turn, might fuel an arms race in an already unstable region.

Third, the two countries should cooperate to promote regional stability and democratic values. Turkey is one of the few democratic states in the region, though the Turkish government must make better progress on human rights, particularly with respect to its Kurdish minority. Nevertheless, Ankara can still play a role in arming secular democratic forces in the

nearby Islamic world. In the immediate future, this implies cooperation in organizing, arming and training the anti-Saddam opposition in Iraq and promoting the establishment of a more democratic regime in Baghdad.

All of these goals can be better achieved with Western European cooperation and support. Washington should use its influence with Ankara to discourage Turkish overreaction to the European decision and should persuade the Europeans to revisit the issue. German concerns about unrestrained Turkish immigration could be addressed in a special agreement that prevents such a development even with Turkey inside EU. The Turks are willing to consider such an approach.

Rise to the Occasion

With leadership from Washington, the outlook for a revitalized alliance looks promising. In Turkey, secular political groups, the military, and even some Islamic forces now recognize the importance of a close relationship with the U.S., and the EU decision makes the American link even more vital.

The key question is whether we ourselves can rise to the occasion. The Clinton administration has said the right things on the need for a strong alliance with Turkey. In 1995, Richard Holbrooke, at the time a senior official with responsibility for Europe, stated that Turkey was as important in the new era as West Germany had been during the Cold War.

However, there has been a gap between the administration's statements and its actions. The time has come to close the gap. The administration must persuade Congress of Turkey's geopolitical significance—now focused on energy security, countering weapons of mass destruction and expanding the zone of democracy in the region.

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