

# HISTORY, POLITICS and FOREIGN POLICY IN TURKEY

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# FROM STRATEGIC TO MODEL PARTNERSHIP: EFFECTS OF TURKEY'S INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY

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## **Introduction**

“MODEL PARTNERSHIP” IS THE VERY NAME of the crisis in Turkish-American relations that resulted from Turkey’s venture to determine its foreign policy as an independent actor. The “strategic partnership” was established against the Soviet threat in the post-1945 period based on an “asymmetry” in favor of the United States. Despite the disappearance of a common enemy with the end of the Cold War, this relationship continued under a Cold War framework. Turkish Parliament’s refusal to allow American troops to invade Iraq through Turkey on March 1, 2003 represented the end of the “strategic partnership.” This was because Turkey’s decision was a clear sign of both the difference in threat perceptions between the two countries and also of the fact that the relationship could no longer sustain its asymmetric character. The signs of improved relations began to emerge only after the Erdogan-Bush summit on November 5, 2007. Following the financial crisis in 2009, the newly elected President Obama tried to capitalize on and consolidate this trend towards better relations under a new framework dubbed the “model partnership.” This effort was not quite successful for several reasons. Both the U.S. and Turkey agreed that there was a need to redefine the relationship and give it a new framework. Turkey viewed the “model partnership” as a political problem and a matter of being recognized as a political actor. The U.S., however, viewed the model partnership

as a framework that can be established by good policy solutions. This mutual misunderstanding as well as differences in certain political issues made 2010 a year of crisis beyond expectations.

This article argues that a model partnership is still possible, and it should be constructed as the new basis of the U.S.-Turkey relationship. The idea of “model partnership” emerged as a result of the common desire for a redefinition of U.S.- Turkey relations. The content of the model partnership remains unknown and is yet to be defined. However, as long as the mutual desire exists, it will continue to be a possibility to be realized. In order to establish a functioning model partnership, the U.S. will have to recognize Turkey as an independent actor. In the absence of this recognition, crises in relations cannot be avoided. Recognition of Turkey as an independent actor will lead to stability in relations and only then policy issues can be addressed. Crises as a result of differences in political interests will be less likely to occur.

### **Strategic Partnership: An Undefined Relationship**

Turkish American relations are undergoing an unprecedented political restructuring. A military-based hierarchical relationship, configured in the form of a strategic partnership after 1945, went through important phases in the last decade, especially after March 1, 2003. The year 2010 signified the crystallization of the need for a fundamental restructuring of the relationship. Today, Turkish-American relations are going through a structural change from a strategic partnership to a model partnership. However, there is very little analysis focusing on this transformation. What does “strategic partnership” mean as a concept? What are some of the implied responsibilities of this partnership on both sides? What are some of the possible consequences if these responsibilities are not met? Under what conditions would a strategic partnership cease to be strategic partnership? Although there are a lot of policy analyses on the concept of “strategic partnership,” there is not a clear conceptual analysis of what it means. Therefore, there is neither enough emphasis on the transition

from a strategic partnership to a model partnership nor is it given serious consideration analytically.<sup>1</sup>

In short, “strategic partnership” refers to two allies’ joint action against a common threat in military, intelligence, and political areas. Such an alliance requires cooperation in numerous areas, mainly against a military threat, or responding to a new strategic realignment in a region, as well as technology and intelligence sharing.

The history of Turkish-American relations starts with the Ottoman sailors’ seizure of American ships for unauthorized trade in the Mediterranean and the agreements signed immediately after the incident between the United States and the Ottoman Empire in 1791, 1795, and 1796. These agreements are some of the first agreements the U.S. signed after the American Revolutionary War as an independent entity. This beginning is significant in demonstrating the evolution of the relationship over the past three centuries and it also helps us understand the current change from a strategic partnership to a model partnership. Since the first agreement, while the U.S. has consistently increased its power and visibility in the world’s political scene, the Ottoman Empire was gradually and continuously weakened and collapsed eventually leaving its place for the new Turkish Republic.

This relationship between a world empire in the Old World and a nascent republic in the New World changed to one between an emerging power and a collapsing empire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the relationship evolved to one between a strong state seeking a global role and a collapsed

1. Unfortunately, there is no conceptual study on the definition of the strategic partnership. These kinds of partnerships are usually debated based on the actual alliances and it is assumed that everyone knows what the substance of the partnership is. For a discussion of the US-India relationship as a case for strategic partnership, see Ashton B. Carter, “America’s New Strategic Partner?,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 4 1 July 2006, pp. 33-44. Another example is Turkey-Israel relations in the 1990s. See Efraim Inbar, “Regional Implications of the Israeli-Turkish Strategic Partnership,” *MERIA*, vol. 5, no. 2, June 2001, pp. 48-65. For Israel-India relations, see P.R. Kumaraswamy, “Strategic Partnership between Israel and India,” *MERIA*, vol. 2, no. 2, May 1998. For Russia-China relations, see Sherman Garnett, “Challenges of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2001, p. 41.

empire. And during the Cold War, the relationship evolved to one between a world hegemon and developing nation-state. Today, however, this relationship is between the world's only global power and a regional power. The actual nature of the strategic partnership, however, has become a world hegemon protecting a nation-state. In other words, the alliance represents an unequal power relationship between two powers, which maintain a common threat perception where one provides protection to the other in exchange for joint action and cooperation.

### The Soviet Threat

One of the first points to be made about the U.S.-Turkey relationship is that the partnership is not a “natural” one.<sup>2</sup> If we look at the time of its establishment, the strategic partnership is based on Turkey's geopolitical decision to side with the Western Bloc for security by collaborating with NATO and the U.S. during the Cold War against the Russian threat to its north.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, Turkey protected itself against possible territorial claims and claims over the Straits by Russia.<sup>4</sup> In return, its relationship with the NATO limited any relations with alternative centers of power, and narrowed Turkey's strategic choices.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. saw Turkey as an important ally against Russia as it did not have to search for other difficult alternatives in Central Europe to position its military bases. By stationing its troops along Turkey's border, it controlled Russian access to the Mediterranean and

2. Ian O. Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion: Rethinking U.S.-Turkish Relations*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2007, p. 11.

3. The Russian/Soviet threat is arguably the biggest threat felt by Turkey over the past two centuries. For the historic proportions of the threat, see Gökhan Çetinsaya, “İki Yüzyılın Hikayesi: Türk Dış ve Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilikler,” *Türk Dış Politikası Yıllığı 2009*, Eds. Burhanettin Duran, Kemal Inat, and Muhittin Ataman, Ankara, SETA, 2011, p. 607.

4. Ahmet Davutoğlu describes Turkey's membership in NATO against the Soviet threat not as a simple choice but a policy to “balance the nearby threat by collaborating with a rising power.” See Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, Küre Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001, p.71.

5. *Ibid.*

blocked Russian expansion. It also was able to monitor Soviet weaponization efforts through its bases in Turkey.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to the fact that Turkey became part of the transatlantic alliance, the Soviets were stopped along the lines of 1921. Limiting Russian influence in this way prevented a Soviet invasion in the Middle East similar to the ones in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

Mutual agreement in 1947 based on geopolitical imperatives within the framework of the Truman Doctrine led to an institutional engagement with NATO. Defense relations between Turkey and the U.S. were developed around the Truman Doctrine and this process resulted in Turkey's admission into NATO in 1952. As a result, the main axis of Turkish-American relations was based on a security and defense alliance. The relationship between the U.S. Department of Defense and the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) represented the most important leg of the bilateral relationship.<sup>8</sup> The growing salience of the TSK during this period is not only due to the defense-based relationship. The TSK members who had access to the latest military information, technology, and innovations through NATO were ahead of other power elites within Turkey in terms of education and strategic thinking.

During the strategic partnership between the two countries, three different military coups took place. Two important factors in the realization of these coups need to be mentioned: 1) the common threat perception between the partners could be jeopardized, hence, such a possibility had to be prevented, 2) military elites strengthened their power at the expense of civilians through the strategic partnership based on defense relations.

Even though Turkey's NATO membership demonstrates its ultimate strategic orientation towards the West during the Cold War,

6. The US pursued two main containment strategies against the Soviet Union during the Cold War: 1) creating unbreakable chains among U.S. allies (Baghdad Pact, CENTO etc.) 2) transforming trusted allies among them into fortified castles (Israel, Iran etc.) among others. See James L. Gelvin, *Modern Middle East: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 263.

7. Dankwart A. Rustow, *Turkey, America's Forgotten Ally*, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1989, pp.110-111.

8. Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion*, p.20.

this did not mean that there were no problems in the relationship. During the Cold War, Turkey and the United States experienced serious crises. The first of these crises was when the U.S. withdrew its previously deployed Jupiter Missiles, which were positioned to protect Turkey against the Soviet threat in 1959. The mutual trust was first damaged then because the withdrawal of the missiles led the Turkish state elites to conclude that Turkey was being seen as a trump card by the United States. With the Johnson Letter that came shortly thereafter, Turkey's confidence in the partnership was completely eroded. Soon after Turkey decided to deploy its soldiers to Cyprus on June 2, 1964, President Johnson's letter to Prime Minister İnönü on June 5, 1964 stated that the U.S. could not guarantee to protect Turkey against the Soviet threat if it moved forward with its decision on Cyprus. Turkey's only true benefit from the strategic alliance with the U.S. and NATO was protection against the Soviet threat. The Johnson Letter led to Turkey's loss of confidence in the U.S. During this time, increased tension with Greece, Turkey's intervention in Cyprus, and the issue of poppy seed cultivation demonstrated that the U.S.-Turkey relations did not always enjoy stability. All these tensions show that the strategic partnership was never a "golden age" as it is often described. On the contrary, crises were not exceptions and relations were, more often than not, based on mutual suspicion rather than trust.<sup>9</sup>

### **Coups in return for the strategic alliance**

Despite all the ups and downs, relations were kept at a stable level. Lack of confidence and mutual mistrust never amounted to a fundamental transformation of or a threat to the basic nature of the relationship. The most important reason for this is that the partners considered the Soviet threat as overriding all others. From the Turkish point of view, the Soviet threat was existential. Thus, when it had to decide between having a stronger voice in the transatlantic alliance as a negotiating power and not endangering its relations with the

9. Ibid. p.1.

Western alliance, Turkey chose the latter. In return, the U.S. behaved in a similar fashion. That is, despite its definition of the transatlantic alliance as “The Free World,” the U.S. overlooked the military coups and threw its support behind state elites whom it saw as the true stakeholders in the Turkish political system.<sup>10</sup>

There were definitely exceptions to this. Turkey's relations with the alliance experienced difficulties whenever Turkey pursued a relatively independent foreign policy. During these times, Turkey's political and economic crises were used as legitimate justification for the military coups. Surely, Turkey could not attain the necessary military, economic, or technological resources to become an independent political actor.<sup>11</sup> The absence of necessary structural conditions, however, did not prevent Turkey from seeking to act as an independent actor. This could be attributed to shortsightedness on the part of Turkey but it should also be considered that Turkey's imperial past (notwithstanding its different interpretations) pushed it to demand a position a few steps ahead of its actual resources and capabilities. Therefore, premature demands to become an independent political actor were consistently hampered by domestic political instability, often-exaggerated domestic and external threat perceptions, and outside pressures.

Sometimes these demands to become an independent political actor appeared as serious possibilities. Other times, domestic instability reached such levels that Turkey's value as a strategy ally as well as the sustainability of the alliance itself could be questioned. In times of such crises, we witness the occurrence of military interventions. Therefore, the U.S.-Turkey relations and Turkey's role in the NATO

10. When we look at the 1960 coup from this perspective, it is not a coincidence that the Prime Minister Adnan Menderes tried to court the Soviet Union during the last days of his government. Philip H. Gordon and Ömer Taspinar, *Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive a Fading Partnership*, Brookings Institution Press, 2008, p. 27. Again, Bernard Lewis also argued that military coups were important to protect stability in Turkey. “Foreword,” *Turkey, America's Forgotten Ally*, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1989, p.ix.
11. Rustow notes that Turkey tried to pursue an independent foreign policy starting in the mid-1970s. He gives Turkey's relations with Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran at the time as examples of this posture. See Rustow, *Turkey: America's Forgotten Ally*, p.9.

alliance should also be considered in the context of Turkey's demand to become an independent actor. The Turkish military became more powerful through its engagement with NATO as it reached international standards. Yet, it was the same military that instituted the military tutelage system in the country and the era of coups followed Turkey's entry into the NATO alliance. This irony also needs to be discussed within Turkey's quest to become an independent actor.<sup>12</sup>

### The Never-Ending Cold War

Immediately after the Cold War, NATO and the transatlantic alliance members Turkey and Greece went through serious security crises. Countries like Turkey and Greece, who felt secure under the umbrella of the NATO alliance, now began to think that they had lost their importance with the waning of a common threat. Therefore, they felt they needed to think of ways to make themselves more relevant. Relief from the Soviet threat was not simply the elimination of a forty-year-old threat but it represented freedom from the two centuries old "hunchback"<sup>13</sup> of the threat lurking from the north. While Greece was proven correct in its fear of losing its strategic importance, Turkey tried to retain its strategic relevance by supporting the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 1990. Arguably, the single most important contribution of the Iraq War was that Turkey increased its knowledge and familiarity with the region for the first time since 1918 as a result of Turkish investors and businesspeople in Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

12. The era of military coups in Turkey started after the transition to the multi-party system following the Truman Doctrine. There was no need for military interventions during the single party era. But in the multi-party era following the entry into the NATO alliance in 1952, various coups were engineered. Democrat Party's (DP) desire to develop relations with the Soviet Union was met with the 1960 coup. Justice Party's (AP) similar move in the late 1960s triggered the 1971 intervention. The improved relations with Arab countries in late 1970s and deteriorating relations with the US in early 1980s were met with the 1980 coup. The D-8 project of the Erbakan government aiming to establish a pact with Muslim countries was met with 1997 post-modern coup.

13. G. Çetinsaya, "İki Yüzyılım Hikayesi: Türk Dış ve Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilikler," p.621.

14. Turkey tried to pursue a more active and "independent" foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War but the conditions did not allow this. Ian O. Lesser and Stephen F. Larrabee, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Rand Publishing, 2003, p.ix.

Turkey's decision caused serious concerns and great controversy among state elites as Turkey was stepping into in the Middle East for the first time after the Cold War. However, it was not acting as an independent actor, but together with the US. For Turkey, this decision meant the continuation of the consequences of the Cold War for another decade. It also marked the political, economic, and military crises of the 1990s. Turkey did not collect the kind of rewards it was hoping to receive from the US. On the contrary, it ended up losing its trade volume with Iraq and came out economically and politically harmed. Even worse, the influx of refugees from Iraq as a result of Saddam's attack on the Iraqi Kurds spiraled Turkey's Kurdish issue out of control and brought the country to the brink of collapse economically and politically.<sup>15</sup>

Turkey experienced a virtual paralysis in its political system during the 1990s. The political environment became highly securitized, differences were perceived as threats, and the state elites' political behavior was driven by internal threat perceptions such as separatism and fundamentalism. Successive fragile coalition governments, a poor economy with high inflation, unresolved killings numbering in the thousands, and state violence became part of daily life. All these tied Turkey in a knot in every possible way.

On February 28, 1997 things exploded in what is called the "post-modern coup" when the military intervention took place. The ensuing military intervention process represented a clear message that there was a limit to how much instability could be tolerated in a country of such strategic importance. During the Cold War, every time Turkey's strategic orientation was deemed in danger, a military intervention ensured that it did not become a serious alternative for the country. Similarly, Turkey, who was not able to escape the dynamics of this equation during the Cold War, now experienced a postmodern coup after the Cold War.

15. Stephen F. Larrabee, "Turkey's New Middle East Activism," in *Evolution of U.S.-Turkish Relations in a Transatlantic Context*, Washington DC, U.S. Army War College, p. 76.

### **The February 28<sup>th</sup> Process**

The February 28<sup>th</sup> process was the product of the bureaucratic tutelary structure in Turkey. It was engineered to shape the country's threat perception based on identity issues as opposed to the former Soviet threat. During this time, the fact that there was a Democratic president in the U.S. affected Turkish-American relations in a different way. Democratic administrations and Democratic Congresses are traditionally known for their sensitivity to human rights issues. Their closer scrutiny over arms sales to countries, like Turkey, with human rights violations resulted in limitations over Turkey's ability to purchase arms from the U.S. Thus, Turkey had become closer to Israel for its hard security needs throughout the 1990s. The U.S.-Turkey strategic partnership, in fact, had become the U.S.-Turkey-Israel strategic relationship. The Turkish-Israeli relationship was an imitation of the U.S.-Turkey strategic alliance forged during the Cold War. However, this time the common threat was "separatism" and "fundamentalism." The pro-Israeli lobby in the U.S. helped Turkey against the Greek and Armenian lobbies while defining the Islamist movements in the region as a common threat for Turkey and Israel. While Israel helped Turkey on the Kurdish issue, Turkey established close relations with Israel, abandoning its traditional criticism of Israel's actions. To overcome its isolation in the region, Israel's strategy was to work together with non-Arab countries like Turkey. The military dimension of this relationship was that Turkey purchased arms from Israel, which it could not buy from the U.S. due to the U.S. Congress's attitude. Israel worked with Turkey through contracts with the TSK to renew and update the Turkish weapons inventory.

In the late 1990s, widespread corruption brought the Turkish economy to the brink of collapse. Crises in the media establishment and in the society at large added to Turkey's economic and political woes. To offer a more realistic assessment of this decade, starting with Iraq's invasion and ending with the February 28<sup>th</sup> intervention and the economic crisis, Turkey witnessed the shrinkage of its power and potential that it had hoped to increase through its transatlantic alliance.

Geopolitically speaking, however, we are faced with a very different framework. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the political crisis, dubbed the “Black Hole” by Brzezinski, Turkey’s options were fully open.<sup>16</sup> Turkey was to take advantage of some of the geopolitical gains in Central Asia and the Caucasus with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. At the time, investments were made in Central Asia in the form of development of working relations with Turkic republics, establishment of the Turkish Development Agency (TIKA), broadcasting projects, and student exchange programs. These efforts were meant to be part of a Eurasian strategy on the part of Turkey. However, Turkey’s efforts were limited by mistakes and a lack of resources. Turkey became too focused on the manipulation of political scenes in these countries. Turkey’s economy was not strong enough and its domestic political scene was too fragmented and unstable. Add to these the fact that both Russians and Iranians were more organized and efficient. Although the possibilities to achieve a strong presence in Central Asia were wide open, Turkey could not take advantage of them. The most important reason for this was the overall political and economic instability. Turkey could not escape its Cold War reflexes, which impeded its ability to be pro-active in its region as an actor in its own right.<sup>17</sup>

Despite all these problems, the 1990s ended for Turkey on a very different note than one would expect. The capture and handing over of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the EU’s acceptance of Turkey as a candidate country, and the start of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline construction represented a turning point for the U.S.-Turkey relationship. These developments could be interpreted as the international system’s support for Turkey struggling with crises and instability. After this first recovery attempt following the February 28<sup>th</sup> period, the crises in the financial and banking systems in 2000 and 2001 led Turkey to the edge of the cliff once again. As a result, the coalition in power at the time came to a point of collapse and in November 2002, the one-year-old AK Party was able to come to power.

16. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1998.

17. Çetinsaya, “İki Yüzyılın Hikayesi: Türk Dış ve Güvenlik Politikasında Süreklilikler,” p.621.

### The End of the Strategic Partnership: The March 1, 2003 Decision

The course of Turkish-American relations under the AK Party changed definitively after the Turkish Parliament's March 1 decision<sup>18</sup> not to allow U.S. troops to invade Iraq via bases in Turkey. When the AK Party came to power, the negotiations on the U.S. request to enter Iraq through Turkey were already in place. The AK Party could not reach a consensus within the party. In addition to the block vote of the opposition party, the CHP, some AK Party members voted "no" on the issue and the necessary two-thirds majority could not be secured.<sup>19</sup>

This was a turning point for both Turkey and Turkish-American relations.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding some of the past disagreements with the U.S., the Turkish Parliament had the final say on the security issue and it acted against the will of the U.S. on a security-related matter.<sup>21</sup> What was worse from the U.S. perspective was that the military elites remained silent and indirectly contributed to the rejection of the measure.<sup>22</sup> This crisis had implications for intra-party dynamics within the AK Party, civil-military relations in Turkey, government-foreign service relations, and relations between the U.S. and Turkish

18. The March 1, 2003 crisis is accepted as the beginning of the downward spiral by Steven A. Cook and Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall. Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall and Steven A. Cook, *Generating Momentum for a New Era in U.S.-Turkey Relations*, New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, June 2006, p.9, [http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/21215/Generating\\_Momentum\\_for\\_a\\_New\\_Era\\_in\\_US-Turkey\\_Relations.pdf](http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/21215/Generating_Momentum_for_a_New_Era_in_US-Turkey_Relations.pdf).
19. Joseph Nye interprets this crisis as the decline in U.S. "soft power" during the George W. Bush years. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: Means To Success In World Politics*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Public Affairs, 2004, p.16.
20. Brzezinski too sees the March 1, 2003, crisis as one of the most important turning points for the U.S. *Second Chance: Presidents and the Crises of American Superpower*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Basic Books, 2007, p.144.
21. This development showed that even back in 2003, the U.S. influence in Turkey was limited. Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion*, p.3.
22. Following the March 1, 2003 crisis, it was not only the government that had problems with the U.S. but the Turkish Armed Forces also. In Sherwood Randall and Steven Cook's words, "Washington can no longer rely on its relations with the Turkish elites including the high level military officials." *Generating Momentum for a New Era in U.S.-Turkey Relations*, p. 4. Larrabee too says the Turkish Armed Forces did not lobby the government on this critical vote. Stephen F. Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership: U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change*, Rand Publishing, 2010, p.13.

militaries. What was clear was that the U.S.-Turkey relations would not be the same.<sup>23</sup>

March 1, 2003, therefore, marked the end of the strategic partnership established on the basis of the common threat perception of the Cold War era. The strategic partnership could no longer be sustained based on the insistence on a common threat that belonged to *status quo ante*. Especially after September 11, 2001 attacks, both partners' threat perceptions changed significantly. For Turkey, terror meant the PKK while it was al-Qaeda (dubbed as "Islamist terror" at times) for the U.S. These threat perceptions, especially when it came to the Middle East, were not only different but they also clashed at times. The U.S. invasion in Afghanistan and plans to invade Iraq caused serious instability in the Middle East,<sup>24</sup> which was potentially detrimental to Turkey's aims in the region. In fact, there was not only the difference in the threat perceptions but also the potential for allies to destabilize each other's standing in the region. Differences in threat perceptions and interests sealed the end of the strategic partnership.

Neither side publicly acknowledged the end of the strategic partnership after the vote on March 1, 2003. Yet, the debates over "who lost Turkey" provide us with clues as to how the U.S. viewed the Turkish rejection of its request. On the Turkish side, there was a reaction to the U.S. side and references to the strategic partnership were virtually non-existent. Neither the U.S. nor Turkey was prepared to discuss an alternative to the strategic partnership at this time when bilateral relations almost came to a halt. The concrete evidence of how negatively the U.S. viewed this downturn in relations was the famous incident on July 4, 2003. Only five months after the vote in the Turkish Parliament, some Turkish Special Forces members were taken into U.S. custody with hoods over their heads, as they were involved in an alleged attempt to assassinate the Governor of Kirkuk. The way this incident reflected in Turkey shows the growth of the

23. Ibid. p.12.

24. Gökhan Çetinsaya, "The New Middle East, Turkey, and the Search for Regional Stability," in *Evolution of U.S. Turkish Relations in a Transatlantic Context*, Washington DC: U.S. Army War College, p.85.

perception that the U.S. supported the PKK. The popular reflection of this sentiment could be gleaned from the popularity of books such as *Metal Storm*, in which the central plot was a possible war between the U.S. and Turkey.

### **Toward a New Partnership?**

It is difficult to argue that there existed a meaningful coordination between the two countries during this period. Unable to contain the Sunni insurgency, the US was drawn into a more difficult situation in Iraq. The result was that the US had to reconsider its policy towards Turkey given the pressing security concerns. Freed from the shackles of the strategic partnership with the U.S., so to speak, Turkey, for the first time since the Cold War, began to develop its relations with the region on its own account and engaged with all groups in Iraq including the insurgent ones. Turkey also began to improve relations with its neighbor Syria after Abdullah Öcalan left Damascus as a result of Turkish pressure on Syria. Turkey began to play an active role in the Palestinian issue, as it supported democratic elections and the political integration of Hamas. As a result of these efforts, Turkey began to increase its regional role by taking advantage of the vacuum created by the U.S. In the meantime, Turkey experimented with developing and sustaining bilateral relations on its own while seeking to strengthen its national interests. Perhaps, the most obvious indication of this change in Turkey's foreign policy was when Ankara hosted Hamas' political leader Khaled Mashal's in February 2006. The U.S. considered Hamas a terrorist organization and Turkey did not feel the need to inform the US about the visit ahead of time.<sup>25</sup> This put another strain on relations, but at the same time, it opened a new way for possible cooperation in different areas. Both countries increased their efforts to find areas of cooperation and Ankara's new relationships in the Middle East could be an asset for an increasingly troubled US presence in the region. Turkey's role as mediator in in-

25. This visit angered both Israel and Washington. Larrabee, "Turkey's New Middle East Activism," p.81 and Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership*, p.43.

direct talks between Israel and Syria, as well as its active involvement in Iraqi Sunni groups' decision to put down arms to participate in the political process helped the US greatly.

As a continuation of this positive atmosphere, on July 5 2006, Turkey's Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul and US Secretary of State Condi Rice signed a document titled, "Shared Vision and Comprehensive Dialogue for the Advancement of Turkish-American Strategic Partnership." This showed the willingness of both parties to restart and keep alive the strategic partnership.<sup>26</sup> However, this rapprochement was not enough to rejuvenate the strategic partnership whose structural foundations had ceased to exist.

This desire to renew the relationship in 2006 grew out of Turkey's growing influence in the region while the U.S.' influence was declining. The 2007 presidential election crisis in Turkey contributed to the failure of the renewal process in bilateral relations. Since the U.S. was not entirely sure about what kind of political scene it would have to deal with in the short term, it did not insist on rebuilding the strategic partnership at the time. The expected renewal of relations took place on November 5, 2007 only after the conclusion of the presidential elections when the question of political leadership was resolved.

### **E-Coup: Is Strategic Partnership Possible without a Coup?**

For the United States, the year 2007 was significant because of the approaching general and presidential elections. Presidential election had always been crucial in the appointment of the state elites in Turkey. The tense political environment and the anxiety about the Turkish leadership were reflected in a Newsweek article on December 5, 2006. In her piece citing Turkish generals, Zeyno Baran predicted that the chances of a military coup in 2007 were fifty-fifty.<sup>27</sup> The murder of the journalist Hrant Dink in early 2007 and the "Republi-

26. For the full text of the "Shared Vision" statement, [http://turkey.usembassy.gov/statement\\_070508.html](http://turkey.usembassy.gov/statement_070508.html).

27. Zeyno Baran, "The Coming Coup D'Etat," December 5, 2006 [http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication\\_details&tid=4349](http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&tid=4349).

can” rallies showed Turkey’s political instability as it prepared for the presidential elections.

On April 27, 2007, an “e-memorandum” published on TSK’s website warned the government on the prospects of election of a president with a so-called Islamis background during the upcoming presidential elections started a new era that would end only on September 12, 2010 with the passage of the constitutional referendum. During this period, the US leadership remained silent about developments in Turkey for about a week, which signified that they would side with the winning side rather than on the side of democracy. The fact that the US administration did not take a categorical stance on the side of democratic process sent the message to the state elites that they were on their own in case of a possible military coup. During the Cold War era, the US had prioritized Turkey’s strategic primacy and its own interest over democracy. Its attitude faced with a prospect of yet another coup in the post-Cold War context made it clear that the US policy had not fundamentally changed its silence in the face of military coups despite all the “democracy” talk. The US attitude during the April 2007 process was a turning point in the transition from the strategic partnership to the model partnership.

Immediately after the “e-memorandum,” Turkish political life virtually accelerated. Instead of agreeing to the military’s will reflected in the “e-memorandum,” Prime Minister Erdogan decided to call for a public referendum through early elections. Start of the Ergenekon case, TSK’s call for cross-border operations in Iraq against PKK camps during the election period, the AK Party’s election victory with 47% of the popular vote, and the Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul’s election as the president were factors that empowered the new state elites in Turkey. These developments made the US realize that the AK Party was there for the long haul and helped restart a process to improve relations, which had been negative for more than four years. As the tension between TSK and the Turkish government dissipated, the Erdogan-Bush summit at the White House on November 5, 2007 aimed to end the bilateral tensions and forge a new framework for the strategic relationship.

### **The November 5<sup>th</sup> Summit: How is the New Relationship to be Defined?**

The November 5<sup>th</sup> summit signaled an end to the negative trend in the relationship after four and a half years. Both sides were able to discuss issues they considered of their own self-interests. Turkey helped the Bush administration by playing an important role in Iraq, especially by encouraging Sunni leaders to take part in the political process. In return, the U.S. agreed to help Turkey control the PKK threat through its real-time intelligence sharing capabilities. Thus, not only was a mutual agreement reached but cooperation and renewal of mutual trust also seemed possible. This summit gave a new quality to the strategic partnership, which had ended on March 1, 2003. The results of this summit satisfied both countries but they also charted a different course in the renewal of the alliance. The US put aside the strategic partnership's straightjacket and sat at the negotiating table focused more on issues that promise cooperation. The US still viewed itself as superior but began to treat Turkey as a real partner. A new framework close to the model partnership was forged at this time but it was not identified as such nor was it given a conceptual framework. One of the reasons for this was domestic political instability in Turkey and its weaker position vis-à-vis the US. Equally important was the Bush administration's foreign policy making style that did not allow for equal partners at the table. Therefore, although the content implied a model partnership, a new name could not be given to this new relationship. Yet, this allowed an environment of openness and served as a process to begin mutual cooperation.

Bilateral relations were relatively softened and balanced during this period as Bush entered his last year in presidency and Turkey's newly elected government began a 4-year term. Turkey continued to establish ties with difficult actors for the US in the region, which made things easier for the U.S. The most important example of this is the benefit gained for the U.S. from the Turkey-Syria relationship. Turkey's mediator role during the Israeli-Syrian indirect negotiations as well as its efforts to bring Syria to the Peace Conference in Annapolis on 27 November 2007 were positive developments for the US-Turkey partnership.

Bush's final year in office was a good year in bilateral relations. Turkey's stable position played an important role as the U.S. entered an election period. The most important crisis in this period was the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. It was clear that the bilateral relationship still lacked a solid framework despite the November 5<sup>th</sup> summit. As the NATO ships were sent to enter the Black Sea, Turkey reminded the allies of the Montreaux agreement preventing the passage of war ships. Turkey would make no exceptions in this time of crisis, which led to the negative reaction in the US capital.

As a result of the 2008 financial crisis, U.S. influence receded in world politics, while Turkey and others least effected by the crisis took on bigger roles. As Turkey began to follow a more pro-active policy in the Middle East, the election of President Obama, who had promised more multilateral diplomacy abandoning the war rhetoric, was a positive development for Turkish foreign policy.

The financial crisis in the US, and in contrast, Turkey's growing economy brought two countries closer. In terms of diplomacy, the renewed multilateralism on the US side and Turkey filling the vacuum in the Middle East created by the US were contributing factors to the closeness in relations. Conditions for a true redefinition of relations were finally in the making after a somewhat rocky six years.

### **Model Partnership or Recognition of Turkey as a Political Subject**

The newly elected President Barack Obama paid his first bilateral overseas visit to Turkey in order to make a fresh start. The "model partnership" was now in both countries' agenda. The positive atmosphere and messages on mutual cooperation indicated that there was consensus on the need for the model partnership. The political will on the redefinition of relations was so strong that the Davos incident between Prime Minister Erdogan and President Peres on January 29, 2009 did not halt positive relations despite efforts of pro-Israeli groups in Washington to the contrary.

The model partnership was to define the new style of the relationship and take the place of the strategic partnership. Yet, the only point both sides agreed upon was this willingness itself. In other words,

both sides agreed on the idea of a partnership model and registered this as an “empty signifier,” however, they continued to understand this framework differently.<sup>28</sup> Turkey understood this as recognition of itself as an actor not a framework to be developed around policy issues. This meant recognition as an independent political entity, and to be seen as an equal partner at the negotiating table, and to base all its relations on this equality. All other policy issues could only be defined on this basis. The U.S. looked at it as a revision of the hierarchical relationship that existed in the strategic partnership. The U.S. sought to address Turkey’s concerns through policy adjustments and arrangements.<sup>29</sup> Turkey’s insistence on its demands to become an equal partner, and American perception of the problem at the level of policy prevented reforming relations even though all necessary conditions were ripe. Therefore, the expected improvements in relations did not come and the year 2010 was a year full of crises.

### **Model Partnership or Crisis?**

Despite all the well-intentioned promises, and willingness to form a model partnership, 2010 began with a crisis in Turkish-American relations. In early March, Turkey recalled its ambassador to the U.S. for consultations after the “Armenian genocide” bill was passed in the House Foreign Relations Committee. Turkey interpreted the bill as contrary to the model partnership, while the U.S. thought that Turkey was overreacting on the issue. The irony of this ambassador crisis became clear during the second half of the year. No U.S. ambassador had been posted to Turkey, as the Senate did not yet confirm the new ambassador.

28. For a detailed discussion of the model partnership as an “empty signifier,” see Nuh Yılmaz, “U.S.-Turkey Relations: Model Partnership as an ‘Empty Signifier,’” *Insight Turkey*, vol.13, No.1, 2011, pp. 19-25.

29. Philip H. Gordon and Omer Taspinar, *Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey can revive a fading partnership*, Brookings Institution Press, 2008; Ian O. Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion: Rethinking U.S.-Turkish Relations*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2007; Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership*. Dr. Frances G. Burwell, *Evolution of U.S.-Turkish Relations in a Transatlantic Context*, Washington DC: U.S. Army War College, 2011.

Following this crisis, relations entered into a downward spiral. Erdogan's visit to Washington to attend the Nuclear Summit in early April was not announced until the last minute. Erdogan met Obama during his visit and the talks were aimed at setting the ground for the Turkey-Iran-Brazil nuclear discussions. When Turkey and Brazil's efforts resulted in the Tehran Declaration of May 17<sup>th</sup>, Washington dismissed the agreement on grounds that it did not answer the fundamental concerns of the international community about Iran's nuclear program. The US announced quickly that it would move forward with sanctions at the UN. Turkey and Brazil continued to defend the agreement stating that the text was written based on Obama's letters to Brazilian and Turkish leaders and had been brokered in coordination with Washington.

US-Turkey relations had become tenser with the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010. Nine civilian activists (eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American) had been killed by Israeli soldiers in international waters in an operation to prevent the international aid convoy from reaching Gaza. Turkey was disillusioned with the US, as it did not get the support it expected from Washington against Israeli aggression. At the same time, pro-Israel groups in Washington started to campaign against Turkey and especially against Erdogan.

In this negative atmosphere and following the Tehran Agreement, fresh sanctions against Iran were imposed by the Security Council. Turkey and Brazil, who were non-permanent members at the UN Security Council voted "no" to sanctions on Iran. They argued that their possible vote to impose sanctions on Iran would simply invalidate the Tehran Agreement. The summer of 2010 witnessed intense debates around themes such as "Turkey axis shift," "Who lost Turkey?," "Turkey's authoritarianism." Virtually all foreign policy focused organizations in Washington explored strategies on how relations with Turkey should go forward. The consensus was that the AK Party government was responsible for deterioration of relations regardless of Israel's actions or Obama's encouraging letter in the case of the Iran nuclear issue. The negative views became so commonplace that Washington seemed to hope for a "no" vote from

the constitutional referendum on September 12, 2010 just because it would be a boon to the ruling AK Party government. The 58% “yes” votes in the referendum once again reminded Washington that the AK Party was not leaving the political arena for a while.

Turkey’s loyalty to its western allies was questioned to the extent that some American politicians openly called for Turkey’s expulsion from the NATO alliance. The Lisbon Summit on 19-20 November 2010 was aimed at discussing NATO’s strategic concept for the next 10 years and it seemed to have functioned as an opportunity for Turkey to demonstrate its commitment to the alliance. The missile shield project was a significant issue at the Lisbon Summit and Ankara did not disclose its attitude ahead of time. Turkey opened discussion on the missile shield project by arguing that it was not merely a voting member but also a decision maker within the alliance. Turkey’s posturing as an equal actor fueled once again the flames of discontent on Turkey’s place in the alliance. However, Ankara’s demand and support for the fulfillment of the missile shield project put an end to these discussions. In early December, release of the Wikileaks cables constituted a serious embarrassment for the U.S. State Department. Some of the prejudices of American diplomats were revealed in these cables and the U.S. side was apologetic towards its allies while trying to contain the political fallout due to the release of these documents. The Wikileaks scandal helped normalize relations between the U.S. and Turkey in the long term. However, the more serious question at this point had to do with the actual possibility of the model partnership after the Flotilla incident and Turkey’s “no” vote at the UN. If both sides support the model partnership, how is it that this relationship experienced so many crises?

### **Model Partnership: A Demand for Recognition as an Independent Actor**

The “Model partnership” was meant to re-define the framework of the strategic partnership. It also refers to the consensus that any future relations must be based on a mutual horizontal basis rather than a hierarchical one. Whereas the U.S. wishes to handle it as a

policy issue, Turkey perceives it as a political problem. Thus, a new framework in relations is yet to be institutionalized. Both countries seek to understand how much they can trust each other and calculate accordingly. It is clear, however, that Turkey seeks recognition as an “independent political actor.” Unless this recognition is achieved and US-Turkey relations are established on equal grounds, Turkey will not be satisfied with the model partnership. The fundamental problem in bilateral relations derives from the fact that the hierarchy of the past sixty years at Turkey’s expense is now being dissolved in Turkey’s interest and the The U.S. is still trying to protect the old relationship and finding it difficult to adjust to the new conditions.

The U.S. does not fully take into account the implications of Turkey’s desire to act as an independent actor and determine its own national interests. Some view this desire as arrogance, acting as a “spoiled child,”<sup>30</sup> or even inexperience. These sort of newly emerging powers create inconvenience to dominant powers and a dismissive attitude from dominant powers can be an indication of the relevance of an emerging power.<sup>31</sup> Perceiving this type of discomfort as “arrogance” is often a tool for the dominant power to keep control over the emerging powers and it constitutes a form of edification. That is why, it is better to view this arrogance analysis as a management technique rather than true analysis based on concrete evidence.

Significance of the arrogance analysis is that it associates the problem with a specific government, not recognizing the central problem of consideration as an independent political actor. Making a distinction between the “long duree” state and the short-term government and attributing crises to the arrogance of the government brings us to the simple solution: change in government. As a favorite solution to foreign policy issues in Washington, this solution resonates with a good portion of foreign policy analysts who assume that they can

30. Ömer Taspınar, “Turkey, the G-20 and Self-Confidence” *Today’s Zaman* 28 June 2010 [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0628\\_g20\\_turkey\\_taspinar.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0628_g20_turkey_taspinar.aspx) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=337> Soner Çagaptay, *Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP*: Washington Institute, January 2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=337>.

31. George Friedman, “Turkey’s Elections and Strained U.S. Relations”, 14 June 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110613-turkeys-elections-and-strained-us-relations>.

effect government change in countries like Turkey in ways that they used to. By getting involved in Turkey's internal affairs in this manner, these circles actually cause further reduction of U.S. influence on Turkey.<sup>32</sup> What needs to be recognized is that although this desire for recognition became apparent and the conditions have ripened under the AK Party government, this is a broader and statewide consensus beyond the current government only.<sup>33</sup>

When we look at analysts who understand the problem of recognition, we find a different picture. Those emphasizing the geopolitical analysis, realists, and long-term strategists understand that the 2008 financial crisis, the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have put the US in a very difficult situation. They argue that cooperation with rising powers such as Turkey is indispensable and the US foreign policy needs to adjust itself accordingly. According to them, Turkey is the Turkey of the Cold War, nor is the U.S. the only superpower of the pre-9/11 era. In this respect, they advocate for the importance of Turkey as an independent actor and argue that the US must increase areas of cooperation with Turkey to make sure that it remains on the same side as the US. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for instance, says that Turkey is a growing independent actor whose role is increasingly important, but from time to time its interests may conflict with those of the US.<sup>34</sup> George Friedman also says that Turkey is an independent actor, and it is very normal for this to reflect on the Turkish-American relations.<sup>35</sup> Ross Wilson sees the problem as Turkey's desire to "sit at the table."<sup>36</sup>

32. Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion*, p.3.

33. Rustow, *Turkey, America's Forgotten Ally*, p. 84-86. See also Ross Wilson, *Turkey's Three Transformations*, Issue Brief, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, March 2011, p.4, [http://www.acus.org/files/publication\\_pdfs/403/030411\\_ACUS\\_Wilson\\_Turkey3Transformations.pdf](http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/030411_ACUS_Wilson_Turkey3Transformations.pdf).

34. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Discussing Geostrategic Trajectories*, Washington DC, 2011, <http://csis.org/multimedia/audio-discussing-geostrategic-trajectories>.

35. G. Friedman, *Turkey's Elections and Strained U.S. Relations*.

36. Graham E. Fuller, *New Turkish Republic: Turkey As a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007. Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion*; Omer Taspinar, "The Rise of Turkish Gaullism: Getting Turkish-American Relations Right," *Insight Turkey* vol. 13, No. 1, 2011, pp. 11-17; Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership*.

One of the most serious problems before the model partnership is the inability to overcome the habits of the past hierarchical relationship. This is often reflected in the US policymakers' expectation that the default position for Turkey is one that is pro-American. As an independent actor watching out for its interests, Turkey's default position or reflex will be a pro-Turkey one. This attitude is often mixed up with "un-Washington" Eurocentric and Orientalist approaches imported through academics such as Bernard Lewis, Niall Ferguson etc. These may continue to impact the future of the model partnership. Already considering itself a genuine actor, Turkey expects the model partnership to be based on this fact. In Brzezinski's words, Turkey is experiencing the pains of transforming itself from a "geostrategic pivot"<sup>37</sup> to a "geostrategic player." The geopolitical pivot country is defined as a country whose destiny is undetermined, and its future will impact its region.<sup>38</sup> They do not derive their power from their own resources but the behavior of other geostrategic countries. In contrast, geostrategic players are countries that can either wield power beyond their borders or possess the ability and national will to influence change in the existing geopolitical relationships.<sup>39</sup> Today, Turkey has gradually grown to be a geostrategic country due to its changing independent foreign policy.

The desired content of the model partnership is very clear. Turkey is saying that it is sitting at the table, it is independent, and it wants recognition as an independent actor. The very basis of the model partnership has to be based on a framework supporting Turkey's independent posture. The US agrees that the relationship should be redefined and given a new framework. Yet, there are problems such as import Orientalism and recognition in addition to a lack of consensus on a strategic perspective and new framework of relations. If Turkey explains its demand for recognition in a clearer and more

37. Lesser and Larrabee, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, p.2; Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion*, p.26 and Fuller, *New Turkish Republic*.

38. Robert S Chase, Emily B Hill, and Paul Kennedy, "Pivotal States and U.S. Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, No.75, 1996, p.34.

39. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, pp. 41-42.

cooperative manner, and if the US accepts the recognition problem and overcomes the Orientalist perspective, political problems and psychological obstacles to the model partnership would be eliminated. Once the US and Turkey overcome this central political question, they can think about what level and depth the relations will be established. Only then will we be able to speak about the institutionalization of the model partnership. Only then will we begin talking about policy issues rather than the fundamental political question. Once a consensus is achieved at the political level, the relations will get to a much better place given the extensive experience of the military and civilian bureaucrats on both sides. If this can be achieved, the model partnership can actually serve as a model, it will bring about new areas of cooperation benefiting both countries.