A Farewell to the West?

Turkey’s Possible Pivot in the Aftermath of the July 2016 Coup Attempt

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Volatility and Friction in the Age of Disintermediation

Introduction

Could Turkey really bid “adieu” to the West in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of 15-16 July 2016? This was one of the questions on the minds of policymakers and pundits around the world as the government in Ankara started consolidating power and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan felt abandoned by his Western allies.

For decades, Turkey has been among the most important strategic partners for the West and also one of the most difficult ones. Sitting at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the strategic sea lanes of the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean and straddling a vast area from the Balkans to the Caucasus to the Middle East, Turkey is one of the most crucial pivot states of the modern age.

In a previous work, HCSS placed Turkey among the top four countries in the world in terms of its strategic importance to the great powers.2 Its support is needed in the fight against ISIS, to solve Europe’s refugee crisis and to end the longstanding Cyprus dispute.

The critical role Turkey plays in international affairs adds to its pivotal status. Whether it is tackling the problem of ISIS, ending the atrocious civil war in Syria, curbing the flow of refugees into Europe, or serving as a conduit for meeting Europe’s energy needs, Turkey is simply too important to ignore for NATO, the United States – and above all the EU. The traumatic coup attempt has turned the question of Turkey’s pivot from a thought exercise into a potential existential game-changer that could alter its foreign policy, as well as those of its Western partners. At the same time, even if Turkey pivots away from the West, the question of its reliability and cooperation will continue to dominate discussions.

Western countries, then, have little interest in pushing Turkey away, but they are also not inclined to accept Erdogan’s apparent lurch towards autocracy without protest. At the same time, Turkey feels it is not wedded to its Western partners. It at times seems to be courting Vladimir Putin’s Russia and also seeks to expand ties with Iran, China and Saudi Arabia, among others. But if Turkey pivots away from the West, which way will it go? Will it re-align with another great power? Will it chart a more independent course? And beyond these possible ‘external’ choices, how will domestic dynamics affect the foreign policy choices of the Turkish political elite?

This study examines the conditions that could lead Turkey to pivot away from the West and change its foreign policy direction in the near future. In discussing Turkey’s potential pivot, the study explores four possibilities:

- Turkey will move toward the “Silk Road” alternative—Russia, Iran, China.
- Turkey will pivot to the Middle East and assume a stronger leadership position in the Arab and Muslim world.

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1. A 2014 study by HCSoS described a “pivot state” as follows: “Pivot states possess military, economic or ideological strategic assets that are coveted by great powers. They are caught in the middle of overlapping spheres of influence of these great powers as measured by associations that consist of ties that tend (military and economic agreements and cultural affinities) and relationships that flow (arms and commodities trade and discourse). A change in the pivot state’s association has important repercussions for regional and global security.” See Swedj et al., Why Are Pivot States So Pivot?, 438.

2. Ibid., 4-2. The great powers were defined as the US, Russia, China and the EU.


8. Lerman-Sagie, “Cold War.”
member in 1952. In 1963, Turkey signed an association agreement with the European Community (EC). In the 1960s and 1970s, much like other U.S. and Soviet allies during the Cold War, Ankara exercised greater autonomy in its foreign affairs and improved its political and economic ties with communist and non-aligned countries. Successive crises in Cyprus from 1963 until 1974 pitted Turkey against NATO ally Greece.

Despite its autonomous leanings, Turkey did not ignore the Occident. During and after the Gulf War in 1991, Ankara supported the U.S.-led coalition against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ankara tried to act as a “big brother” to the newly independent Turkic republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Following its application for full membership to the EC in 1987, Turkey entered into a customs union with the EU in 1995 and became a candidate for full EU membership in 1999. Relations with Israel improved. Turkey also joined international peacekeeping missions in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in the 1990s.

Turkey’s pro-Western autonomy continued at the turn of the 21st century. In 2003, while Turkish troops took part in the U.S.-led international mission in Afghanistan, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM, the parliament) did not allow U.S. troops to invade Iraq from Turkish territory. Ankara carried out comprehensive reforms and initiated accession negotiations with the EU in 2005. Meanwhile, Moscow became one of Ankara’s main commercial partners through expanding trade, tourism and energy ties with Russia. Turkey also began establishing closer political and economic ties with Middle Eastern and North African countries.

How Turkey’s Domestic Dynamics Impact Foreign Policy

Turkey’s domestic developments and foreign policy have reinforced each other for a long time. Military coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997 turned the armed forces into the guardian of Atatürk’s secular legacy and Turkey’s Western-aligned foreign, defense and security policy. As a result, the gap between Turkey’s political system and democratic culture and those of its Western allies widened. Today, Turkish democracy lacks a system of checks and balances, focusing solely on electoral legitimacy. The electoral system itself is unfair: Turkey retains the world’s highest national threshold of 10 percent in general elections, barring minor parties from entering the TBMM.

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, the secular establishment failed to reform Turkey’s sclerotic economy while Istanbul’s secular industrial-commercial class began to lose ground to the dynamic and socially conservative business conglomerates (the so-called “Anatolian tigers”) from the Turkish heartland. The “Anatolian tigers” helped to catapult Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) into power in November 2002.

These developments took Turkey’s foreign relations into uncharted directions. In March 2002, General Tuncer Kılıç, secretary-general of Turkey’s then-powerful National Security Council (MİGK) and a prominent player in the ouster of the Islamist-led coalition in 1997, argued that Turkey should abandon the EU and “search for new initiatives to include Russia and Iran.” Kılıç’s views showed that a strong anti-EU and possibly anti-Western streak had taken hold among Turkey’s formerly pro-Western military.

As Turkey’s secular cadres turned against one of their main Occidental partners, formerly anti-Western Islamists embraced the long march West in part because they saw the EU’s emphasis on democracy and human rights as the best way to undermine their secular opponents. When the AKP came to power, the Erdoğan government passed a series of reforms, such as increasing the representation of civilian leaders in the MİGK, relaxing restrictions on freedom of speech (including the usage of Kurdish in mass media) and abolishing the death penalty.

Under the AKP government took to global prominence because (at least then) it showed that political parties with Islamist roots could embrace liberal democracy, rule of law and a free market economy. Turkey’s “soft power”—its status as an attractive tourist destination and the popularity of its soap operas and other cultural icons—increased. The AKP’s “zero problems with neighbors” slogan improved Ankara’s diplomatic clout. As a result, for the first time since the early 1960s, Turkey became a non-permanent member to the UN Security Council in 2009. Adding to Turkish “soft power,” the UN’s “Alliance of Civilizations” (UNAOC) initiative that Erdoğan co-sponsored with Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero became one of the main forums for fostering global dialogue and combatting xenophobia.

Closer to home, Ankara mediated indirect talks and came very close to forging a peace accord between Israel and Syria on the eve of the Gaza war of 2008-2009. In the Caucasus, the AKP government took bold steps to overcome its troublesome past with Armenia. In the Balkans, it oversaw the reconciliation among Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks. In 2010, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu facilitated Serbian President Boris Tadić’s attendance to the commemoration for the victims of the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica. In this context, Turkish and foreign observers wondered whether Turkey could be a “model” country for its fellow Muslim countries in the MENA region—an idea that people from MENA countries liked.

From 2011 onwards, however, Erdoğan began to fill the AKP’s list with his own loyalists and expanded his rule in the party and the Turkish state. As Erdoğan consolidated his position, he assumed greater say over foreign affairs through Davutoğlu, his former advisor who served as foreign minister from 2009 until 2014 and replaced Erdoğan as prime minister when the latter became president. Davutoğlu, who had coined “zero problems with neighbors” to explain the AKP’s regional and global vision, also bore pan-Islamist and neo-Ottomanist dreams of turning Turkey into a regional hegemon.


15. There are two basic narratives about the AKP and democratization: While some argue that its first term witnessed considerable reforms that improved Turkish democracy, Erdoğan’s subsequent rise as an electoral and political leader turned on his ability to maintain positive growth and slow inflation. See M. Hakan Yavuz, The Emergence of a New Turkey (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.uu.nl/book/41442. The alternative viewpoint is that the AKP slow but steady erosion of Turkey’s hard-earned democratic gains from 1950 onward. See Erik Moxeyson, “The Reversal of What Little Liberal Democracy There Ever Was in Turkey,” Erik Moxeyson, http://erikmoxeyson.com/2016/10/04/the-reversal-of-what-little-liberal-democracy-there-ever-was-in-turkey/.


Once the Arab Spring broke out in 2010-2011, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu’s biases worked against them. At home, Erdoğan played on his supporters’ religious sentiments by emphasizing the Alevi faith18 of CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Abroad, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu underlined the Nusayri-Alawite identity of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom they had called a “brother” before the Arab Spring. Anti-Shia biases also soured the AKP government’s relations with Iraq and Iran. A reconciliation attempt with Armenia foundered on the hard realities of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict with Azerbaijan, a Turkic cousin and close energy partner of Turkey.

Whereas a juggernaut of reforms had led to Turkey’s rise on the international front between 2002 until 2010, after 2011, a feedback loop of diplomatic missteps, crackdowns against domestic opponents, a restive population (as evidenced by the mass protests of June 2013) and the relative slowdown of the economy became the salient features of AKP rule. In the general elections of June 2015, the electorate punished Erdoğan and his party by denying them a majority in the TBMM. But when subsequent PKK and ISIS attacks against civilians and security forces escalated, a fearful public brought the AKP back to power in the “repeat” elections of November 2015.19

Meanwhile, from late 2013 onward, tensions between Erdoğan and his former ally Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric based in Pennsylvania who controls a global network of schools, business and NGOs (as well as a sizable coterie of secret followers within the Turkish state), came out into the open. Many Turks from across the political spectrum believe Gülen and his followers to be the masterminds of the coup attempt of 15-16 July 2016 that resulted in the deaths of more than 300 people.20

At a time when Turkey’s state institutions and political culture lurch to authoritarianism and the West seemingly lacks sympathy for the victims of the failed putch, Turks weigh their foreign policy options. The surge of nationalism, economic and security risks and Erdoğan’s insistence that only a new constitution giving him an executive presidency could protect the country, make a Turkish pivot away from the West more probable. Still, while opportunities for new partnerships elsewhere emerge, a variety of factors mean a hard pivot away from the West is not predetermined.

Four Pivoting Perspectives

Turkish foreign policy today carries multiple objectives. EU membership is still one of them and so is ensuring that “an ever enlarging NATO has much more to do in serving global peace” and that the G-20 gives “new impulse to the quest for [a] more representative and democratic global system.” Despite the row over Gülen’s residency in Pennsylvania and the rise of anti-American sentiments among Turkish people, Ankara maintains dialogue with Washington to address regional and global issues.21

Turkey is also determined to revitalize historical and cultural ties with countries in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia, while diversifying its global options by strengthening its connections to the Caribbean, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and southeast Asia. Closer to home, continuing rapprochement with Russia, as well as ending the civil wars and refugee crises in Iraq and Syria are meant to cement the geopolitical importance of Turkey.22 Despite occasional verbal spats with leaders of the Greek Cypriot-dominated Republic of Cyprus, Ankara still carries hope that “the Cyprus issue would be sorted out.”23

The graph below depicts the influence of global powers over Turkey. It shows that, while U.S. and EU influence over Turkey has decreased in the past 15 years, suggesting that a Turkish pivot away from the West is probable, Ankara’s ties with its Western partners are unlikely to break completely, given the total size of the influence of Western powers.

Figure 3.28 E28, U.S., Chinese and Russian influence exerted vis-à-vis Turkey, 2002-2015

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18. The Alevi, whose adherents constitute between a quarter to one-third of Turkey’s population, hold heterodox beliefs springing from Shia Islam.


22. Ibid.

Pivot to the "Silk Road": Russia, Iran and China

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28.恋恋不爱
32. Barın Kayaoğlu, "How Turkish Energy Giant’s Plans to Light up Iran Could Threaten US-Iran Tensions."
33. Metin Gürcan, "Why US-Educated Turkish Officers Could Soon Be out of Their Jobs."
34. Today, the opposite is the case: not only do Turks worry less about Russian designs on their country, they perceive the EU and especially the United States as a threat. Furthermore, Erdoğan’s dreams of creating an executive presidency are strikingly similar to Putin’s dominant role in Russia. Even Turkey’s once pro-Western military is jumping on the anti-Occident bandwagon.

Turkey actually has been assessing the “Silk Road” alternative for some time. In early 2013, before the apparent lack of U.S. and European support in Ankara’s fight against Fethullah Gülen, Turkey and the Shanghai group’s growing economic and political might. Later that year, Ankara awarded its high-altitude missile defense contract to a Chinese company, although that plan has since been scrapped.

But a hard Turkish pivot toward the "Silk Road" faces considerable limits. Russian leaders have expressed skepticism how an EU candidate and NATO ally could join the SCO. Likewise, amidst all the talk of Turkish-Russian relations turning a new page, General Valeray Gerasimov, chief of general staff of the Russian armed forces, made statements in September 2016 that could be interpreted as a rebuff against Ankara.

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Broader strategic matters, too, are likely to prevent Turkey’s long march to Russia, Iran and China. Putin continues to support Syria’s Assad, whom Erdoğan hates viscerally. Iran’s Shia outlook in the region clashes with Turkey’s Sunni proclivities. China, for its part, is too distant and Turks view the Central Kingdom as too anti-Turkic and anti-Muslim. During Beijing’s brutal crackdown on protests in Xinjiang (which Turks usually refer to as “East Turkestan”) in the summer of 2009, Erdoğan had accused Chinese authorities of committing “genocide.”

Figure 3.29 Turkey influence exerted, 2002-2015

Pivot to the Arab/Muslim World (Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf)

As the graph below shows, Turkey’s overall influence in the MENA region expanded after 2001, even though relations with Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel and Syria declined in the 2010s. A Turkish pivot to the south and east appears more likely than ever. Interestingly, Turkey was actually pivoting toward the MENA region even before the AKP assumed power. After peacefully resolving their 1998 standoff over PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s presence in Syria, Ankara and Damascus began to cooperate in the fields of defense/security, investment, trade and tourism—a dynamic that accelerated under the AKP. As Turkey’s relations with one of the most important Arab countries improved, its trade with the MENA region surpassed $30 billion—a sevenfold increase from 2002 until 2009. In the first decade of the 21st century, Turkey reciprocally lifted travel visas with Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya and Qatar. In the summer of 2010, Ankara began discussions on a free trade zone with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

The popular protests and mass revolutions that toppled the likes of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Qadhafi in Libya in 2011 seemed like an historic opportunity for Turkey. Expecting the
As the Arab Spring descended into chaos, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu consistently bet on the wrong horse. They demanded Morsi be reinstated in Egypt, called for Assad to step down, lashed out at Iraqi and Iranian leaders for their support of the Syrian dictator and exploited their differences with Israel for domestic gains (such as in the Mavi Marmara crisis of 2010). They also berated the Israeli government for its excesses against Palestinian civilians while remaining conspicuously silent on Hamas attacks against Israel. Worse, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu backed unpopular Sunni groups throughout the region.

Although Ankara’s open door policy to shelter more than three million refugees fleeing the fighting in Syria and Iraq was admirable (not to mention its spending billions of dollars to that end), its initial indifference to extremist groups in those conflicts damaged Turkish credibility around the world. Worse, as the MENA region turned into a battleground pitting the “Sunni axis” of Saudi Arabia and Qatar against the “Shia axis” of Iran, Iraq and Syria, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, who had embraced fellow Muslim countries in a non-sectarian fashion under “zero problems with neighbors” in the 2000s, now saw that slogan turn into “zero neighbors without problems.”

But Turkey is yet to give up its quest for regional leadership, as it expands energy and defense ties with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Riyadh is considering purchasing billions of dollars in arms from Ankara. Meanwhile, a Turkish military base commenced operations in Qatar in April 2016—the first of its kind in the region. Two months later, around the time of the rapprochement with Russia, Turkey ended its diplomatic row with Israel.

But these developments do not mean a pivot to the MENA region is a foregone conclusion. For one thing, Turkey’s south and east pivot would work only if it maintains its Western connections. Without serving as a meeting point between east and west, Ankara is not much use to either side. Even the leaders of MENA countries think so. Before Turkey’s relations deteriorated with Iran and...
Turkey's south and east pivot would work only if it maintains its Western connections. Without serving as a meeting point between east and west, Ankara is not much use to either side.

Syria in 2011, both Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Assad would emphasize how Ankara’s EU membership would benefit both Europe and its southern and eastern neighbors.39

The Turks also need to exercise subtlety and humility when dealing with their fellow Middle Easterners, as Erdoğan’s October 2016 spat with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi demonstrated. On the eve of the operation to expel ISIS from Mosul, the Turkish president got into a public row with Abadi and made remarks suggesting that Ankara may have irredecent aims toward the oil-rich areas of northern Iraq.40 Tone deafness and hubris are the most important factors that prevent Turkey from “pivoting” toward the east and playing a useful role in its neighborhood.

Hold, Raise, or Fold: Pivot Away from the West or Stay the Course?

Since the early Cold War, Western countries—especially the United States—have remained consistent in their approach toward Turkey: to deny the Soviet Union—and later Russia—a strong foothold in the eastern Mediterranean and MENA; to that end, to maintain Turkey’s economic growth and social development; and in order to prevent domestic disorder from reversing socioeconomic gains, to support Turkey’s democratic institutions. That security-development-democracy template has remained steady since Turkey’s hard pivot to the West in the late 1940s. Despite crises such as the Cyprus war in 1974, the subsequent U.S. and European arms embargo on Ankara and the TBMM’s refusal to permit U.S. forces passage to invade Iraq through Turkish territory in 2003, the West preferred and managed to keep Ankara on its side.41

But the nearly-seventy-year-old irony is that neither the EU nor the United States have figured out a way to anchor Turkey to the West permanently. In fact, several dynamics today make it probable for Turkey to pivot away from the West. As discussed earlier, these include “pull factors” toward the “Silk Road” axis or the MENA region and “push factors” such as the lack of European and American support for Ankara in its struggle against the Gülen network, limited Western burden-sharing with Ankara to assist Syrian and Iraqi refugees, European and U.S. refusal to consider decisive military options to oust Assad in Syria and Ankara’s stalled negotiations with the EU.

Western countries, too, have legitimate grievances against their Turkish ally. Ankara’s continuous attempts to drive a “hard bargain” with NATO allies to conduct operations in Syria and Iraq through Turkish bases, coupled with Ankara’s threats to derail the West’s complicated alliances with local (especially Kurdish) groups against ISIS frustrate Western partners. As a result, even retired U.S. generals who served in Turkey in the past and have positive memories of the country, are calling for finding alternatives to Turkish bases and downgrading cooperation with Ankara.42

Disagreements between Ankara and NATO over strategic and operational matters could have been manageable (after all, the Alliance’s history is nothing if not a history of disagreements and bickering among members) were it not for Turkey’s troubling internal situation. Erdoğan’s increasing authoritarianism has caused consternation in Western capitals since the Gezi protests rocked Turkey in June 2013. In the aftermath of the failed coup of July 2016, instead of reversing course and improving democratic standards and the rule of law, Erdoğan and the AKP seem bent on crushing their remaining opponents. In October-November 2016, the Turkish government jailed the editor-in-chief and several columnists of the secular/liberal leftist Cumhuriyet newspaper along with nine deputies from the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), including the party’s co-chair, the charismatic Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş. Given the fact that the three-month state of emergency that the TBMM had passed after the failed coup was extended for another three months in October 2016, it is fair to wonder whether Erdoğan is trying to marginalize any serious opposition before he attempts to amend the Turkish constitution to finally attain his dreams for a super-presidency.43

Figure 3.33: A visual account of EU and US interactions with Turkey, 2002-2017

None of this bodes well for the future of Turkish relations with the West. Whereas U.S. and European leaders used to wax lyrical about Turkey’s accomplishments in the 2000s, verbal spats and tugs-of-war have become the norm.

war between Ankara and its Western partners have come to grab headlines. As the graphs below show, Turkey has experienced a slow but steady rise in its verbal and material “conflict” with both the EU and the United States since 2011, peaking at around the time of the July 2016 coup attempt. All of this makes it more likely that Turkey may “pivot away” from the West.

Yet several factors make it unlikely for Turkey to engage in a hard pivot away from the West. Beyond its reliance on the United States, NATO and the EU for its defense and security needs, Ankara also needs its Western partners to grow its economy through trade, investment, tourism and innovation. Turkey receives close to 80 percent of its foreign direct investment (FDI) from the West. On a country-by-country basis, companies from the United States remain Turkey’s top foreign job creator and source of FDI.16 It is not realistic to expect that Russia, even when combined with China and the greater MENA region, could invest that sort of FDI in Turkey.

Thus, although Ankara’s pivot away from the West may seem more likely than ever, the Turkish side has not given up on global institutions where Western countries are heavily represented, such as NATO and G-20. Despite years of complaining about the slow pace of the membership talks with the EU, Erdoğan and the AKP have not abandoned their country’s Western outlook; Turkey’s broader foreign policy objectives still tilt toward its Occidental options. Given issues such as ISIS, postwar reconstruction in Syria and Iraq and the status of millions of refugees in Turkey, whether they like it or not, Turkey and the West still need each other more than ever.

“Self-Pivot”: Turkey as a New Pole in a Multipolar World?

Turkey’s fourth and final alternative in its foreign relations would be to assume a more independent bearing. Under this scenario, Ankara would chart a course that maintains some elements of all the options discussed above; it would nominally remain in NATO and go through the motions of the accession negotiations with Brussels, but it also would downgrade its participation in Western defense and security arrangements while pivoting to the “Silk Road” and Middle East/North Africa/Gulf alternatives.

This “self-pivot” could play out in several ways: Ankara could fuse the Silk Road, MENA and Western alternatives to pursue a sophisticated, balanced and multilateral foreign policy reminiscent of the AKP’s first two terms from 2002 until 2011. Such a diplomatic recalibration would involve a revival of the “peace at home, peace in the world” and “zero problems with neighbors” approaches, as well as dialing down the confrontational rhetoric against other actors. Instead of worsening regional and global conflicts, Ankara could act as an honest broker between conflicting parties or reach out to its adversaries—as it did when it mediated indirect talks between Israel and Syria in 2007-2008 and signed the Zurich Protocols with Armenia in 2009.

But for the prickly Erdoğan to walk back from his personal ambitions and build consensus at home and rebuild bridges abroad (especially with Syria and Iraq) would be something of an earthly miracle. Given Turkey’s relative marginalization by regional and international actors, a “self-pivot,” instead of a genuine attempt at reconciliation with Turkey’s adversaries, would look more like the “precious loneliness” idea that Erdoğan’s press secretary and national security advisor İbrahim Kalin had coined to justify the AKP’s diplomatic missteps after 2011.17 And even if Erdoğan and the AKP make all the right moves in the domestic and international scene, it is far from certain whether Turkey’s neighbors would respond as positively to Turkish overtures today as they did in the 2000s, after holding the Turks responsible for the troubles and turmoil that gripped the MENA region since 2011.

At any rate, if Ankara assumes a more flexible and independent posture abroad, it may not even look like a “self-pivot.” Instead, it could act with autonomy within the Western alliance the way it did in later Cold War years and the 1990s and get the best of all worlds. Because Turkey is unlikely to leave NATO or abandon its membership talks with the EU in the foreseeable future, distinguishing a “self-pivot” from “stay the course with the West” option may be a serious practical challenge.

Conclusion: Whither Turkey?

This report maintains that Turkey’s foreign policy in the next 5 to 10 years will walk a fine line between the third and fourth options discussed above—staying the course with the West and pursuing an independent foreign policy.

This assumption is based on a realistic assessment of Turkish behavior: by maintaining its main Western links—NATO membership and EU candidature—Turkey would be in a much better position to pursue its regional and global interests. Without political and economic connections to the West, Ankara would not be as alluring to its non-Western partners, nor would it assume as many risks in its international affairs as it could as a NATO ally and EU candidate.

But what would the revival of “autonomy within the West” imply? Assuming President Erdoğan keeps his authoritarianism at check and Turkish domestic turmoil does not spout out of control, this scenario would mean a continuation of the transactional relationship between Turkey and the West since 2011. The two sides would haggle over issues such as NATO access to Turkish airspace and Incirlik airbase, U.S. support for Kurdish groups and Turkish support for armed religious groups in Syria, or how much the EU would have to pay for Ankara to keep Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Meanwhile, both the United States and the EU would tone down their objections to Erdoğan’s excesses.

Of course, Turkey’s autonomy within the Western alliance would be neither easy nor pleasant. Ankara will probably not be as stable and reliable a partner as it was in the 1990s and 2000s. There will be shocking incidents such as the downsizing of the Russian plane in November 2015; the July 2016 coup attempt, or worrisome developments such as the Turkish intervention in Syria. The United States and EU countries would need to brace themselves for unpleasant surprises in dealing with their Turkish partner.

And if Turkey were to engage in a hard pivot away from the West, its reliability also would be a concern for its new partners in the “Silk Road” group and/or the MENA region. For one, those countries would be within their right to question the potential headaches that could come from aligning with Turkey, or whether Ankara could pivot back to the West again. As the graph below shows, Turkey’s influence relationships have gone up and down in the past few years; one can only assume that a similar dynamic will be at play for the next 5-10 years. One thing, however is certain: future events will not be easy for the people of Turkey, the West, or the rest of the world.

