

Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South Asia

Turkey's Role

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A Background Paper of the
CSIS Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation

January 2014

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South Asia: Turkey's Role

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This background paper was prepared as part of a study of U.S. strategic concerns in South Asia and the regional dynamics and priorities that are likely to influence U.S. policy there between 2014 and 2026. It is one of 10 such papers covering the relevant internal dynamics, trends, relationships, and scenarios in China, Iran, the Gulf States, Central Asia, Russia, Turkey, Europe, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The final report, South Asia Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns: A Framework for U.S. Policy and Strategy in South Asia, 2014–2026, by Robert D. Lamb, Sadika Hameed, and Kathryn Mixon, is available at <http://c3.csis.org> and includes a framework on which the United States may base the development of policies and strategy in South Asia over the next 12 years.

Turkey's Relations with the United States

The United States and Turkey have been allies since Turkey's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 with the support of the United States. Cooperation on defense issues against a common enemy in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact defined the partnership throughout the Cold War and highlighted the United States' role as Turkey's most important ally.

For over two decades since the end of the Cold War, the two allies have searched for new areas of cooperation in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and to a lesser extent South Asia. This includes coordination in the 'war on terror' through NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The United States has also looked to Turkey to be an example for countries experiencing transformation in the Middle East and North Africa, evident most recently through efforts by President Barack Obama to construct a 'model partnership.'

While the relationship over the past decade since the disagreement on the Iraq War in 2003 has been generally good, recently U.S. and Turkish priorities have begun to diverge. With this in mind, the U.S.-Turkey partnership has the potential for both improvement but also serious deterioration between 2014 and 2026. Ultimately the relationship that emerges will be a product of how existing areas of divergence are managed, how the United States repositions itself in the world, and the extent to which Turkey pursues policies that deviate from, as opposed to converge with, U.S. interests.

Internal Trends and Dynamics

The following internal factors are likely to affect Turkey's influence and interest in South Asia between 2014 and 2026:

- Turkey's growing involvement in South Asia since 2001 has largely been a function of its relationship with the United States, and outside of Turkey's participation in Afghanistan through ISAF, South Asian issues are of limited interest to Turkey. Turkish leaders as well as the Turkish public have shown a much greater level of interests in developments in neighboring Middle Eastern countries and North Africa, particularly since the Arab uprisings began in 2011,

and given this increased level of interest and attention it is unclear the extent to which Turkey will prioritize continuing to play an active role in South Asia after 2014.

- Economic progress and political stability have been key elements of Turkey's domestic development and ability to pursue a more active foreign policy in the last decade, but the continuation of both is uncertain. As economic growth has slowed and polarization has led Turkey to become less stable, domestic unrest as a result could potentially force Turkey to turn its attention inwards, which would affect its ability to exert influence abroad and pursue interests on its periphery, including those in South Asia.
- Since coming to power in 2002, the current Turkish government has placed special emphasis on using religious, cultural, and historical ties in its foreign policy to expand influence beyond its borders, including in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. The degree to which future Turkish leaders will continue to discern value in fostering these types of soft power ties in South Asia remains to be seen.

Key Influencers

The Justice and Development Party (JDP) has been the ruling party in Turkey since the 2002 elections. The JDP promotes Islamic values domestically and through religious, cultural and historical links has fostered deeper ties with fellow Muslim states and Islamic groups abroad, including in South Asia. If the party continues to remain in power, it will likely maintain these ties, particularly with Afghanistan and Pakistan, but if it is replaced these ties may be reduced.

The party is led by one of its founders, Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has been Prime Minister since 2003. His highly centralized leadership style and limited checks on his position allow him to increasingly control decision-making in Turkey, rendering him the key source of policy. While Prime Minister Erdogan prefers a stable South Asia, he has not expressed particular interest in the region and has rather focused his attention on Turkey's immediate neighbors; especially in the Middle East. Prime Minister Erdogan has expressed his intention to govern Turkey until the centennial of the Republic in 2023, but JDP parliamentary term limits currently prevent him from continuing as Prime Minister for another term. These party rules will have to be amended or he will have to run for the office of President if he is to remain in power.

Abdullah Gul is another founding member of the JDP and has been the President of Turkey since 2007. President Gul has shown more interest in South Asia than Prime Minister Erdogan and promoted the Istanbul Forum, a tripartite summit on South Asian security between Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. After Prime Minister Erdogan, President Gul is the individual most likely to play a leading role in Turkey.

Ahmet Davutoglu has been the foreign minister of Turkey since 2009. He has promoted a zero problems with neighbors policy, which despite early success has stumbled badly, and has focused on the expansion of Turkey's interests abroad, particularly in the Middle East. His interest in mediating conflict has led to direct involvement in South Asia, especially between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Turkish Armed Forces have been active in South Asia since 2001 as part of ISAF operations. A legacy of the founder of Turkey, Ataturk, the military was historically the power center of the secular republic and undertook 4 coups between 1960 and 1997.

In the last decade however the military has been gradually brought under greater civilian control, fundamentally transforming civil-military relations in Turkey.

As part of their global expansion, the Turkish Business Community has growing interests in South Asia. The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) has been instrumental in organizing regional dialogue that promotes stability in South Asia such as the Istanbul Forum, and the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON) has played an active role in expanding Turkish business networks globally, including in South Asia.

The Gulen Movement is led by prominent and influential Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen. Through the opening of schools and community organizations across the globe, the movement has sought to gain influence in developing Islamic communities, including in South Asia, which is home to 24 percent of the world's Muslim population.

Regional Relations

Turkey's Relations with Afghanistan

Turkey's primary interest in Afghanistan is to use its participation in ISAF to confirm and strengthen its relationship with the United States and NATO. Secondary strategic interests for Turkey include containing internal instability and building soft power ties. As a top Turkish military official visiting CSIS candidly explained, "Turkey is in Afghanistan only because of its relationship with the United States, and outside of that, has no real strategic interests in Afghanistan."¹

As of August 2013 The Turkish military currently contributes 1,306 troops to ISAF, but their role is limited to non-combat operations. Their work largely involves the training of Afghan security and police forces at facilities both in Afghanistan and in Turkey. Turkish commitment to ISAF has fostered stronger bilateral dialogue and—assisted by historical ties, religious and cultural affinity and a favorable view of Turks amongst Afghans—has helped to create and expand socioeconomic partnerships in construction and education. Since 2001, Afghan-Turkish schools, many inspired by the Gulen Movement, have graduated over 3000 students, and special programs allow Afghan students to travel to Turkey for education.

Despite current President Hamid Karzai's desire to build a long-term partnership with Turkey, which is in a position to play a significant role in Afghanistan, the depth of the current relationship will be significantly reduced as NATO-led operations wind down and major troop withdrawals take place.

Turkey's Relations with Pakistan

Turkey and Pakistan share a fraternal relationship stemming from the two countries' historical and religious links. The founding leader of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, cited Ataturk as a guiding figure for Pakistan, and both states were members of the Baghdad Pact and its successor the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). Pakistan has supported Turkey on the Cyprus issue and Turkey has supported Pakistan in Kashmir.

Maintaining the current level of ties is of interest to both countries. The Turkish military currently provides assistance to Pakistan, including the training of pilots and other military personnel. Pakistan also participates in the Istanbul Forum, a trilateral

¹ Anonymous Turkish official, personal communication, CSIS.

dialogue between Turkey Afghanistan and Pakistan on military and intelligence concerns in South Asia such as terrorism.

In the commerce sector, both countries have a desire to expand people to people interaction, and Turkey has invested in infrastructure projects in Pakistan such as highways, canals and pipelines, including a passenger rail service between Istanbul and Islamabad.

President Abdullah Gul and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's close relationship with their Pakistani counterparts also positions Turkey as an alternative conduit for dialogue between Pakistan and the West, which has been suspicious of Pakistan's commitment to the struggle against terrorist groups.

While Turkey shares a close relationship with Pakistan, it is unclear the extent to which their interests and goals in South Asia will continue to run parallel moving forward, especially in Afghanistan. While Turkey has worked alongside the central government to train Afghan police and security forces, Pakistan has maintained ties with the Taliban leadership and the potential for interests to clash remains.

Turkey's Relations with India

Turkey's backing of Pakistan in its historic dispute with India has resulted in limited cooperation between the two countries despite sharing similar interests on many global and regional issues.

Turkey's desire to play a more prominent role in the Islamic world and support for Islamic groups abroad is also a cause of concern for India, which is home to a relatively marginalized but rapidly expanding population of 177 million Muslims, the third largest in the world and representing 15 percent of India's total population.

Despite these issues, India is Turkey's largest trading partner in South Asia and fostering trade is of interest to both countries. In 2012, imports from India represented 2.5 percent of Turkey's total imports and exports to India represented 0.5 percent of Turkey's total exports, which while small in scale, far outweighs Turkey's trade with Afghanistan and Pakistan, which combined represented only 0.23 percent of imports and 0.37 percent of exports in 2012.

Other Relationships

Turkey-NATO

Turkey's involvement in South Asia is largely a function of its membership in NATO and its relationship with the United States as the leader of the Western Alliance. Where developments in South Asia, particularly the outcome of the struggle in Afghanistan, will likely have little effect on Turkey's interests or involvement in the region, the reduction/increase of NATO involvement is likely to have a measurable effect on Turkey's engagement in South Asia.

Turkey-Russia

Russia is the largest trading partner for Turkey and the supplier of 58 percent of its natural gas. Given the level of energy dependency, Turkey recognizes the need to choose policies that limit friction with Russia, but as evidenced through open disagreement on the Syrian civil war, the extent to which Russia is willing to use this leverage is unclear. Turkey also has to balance its relationship with Russia with its close relationship with the United States. As Prime Minister Erdogan stated during the Georgia crisis in 2008, "We do

not want to choose between our main ally in the United States and our main trading partner in Russia.”

Turkey-Iran

Iran is a regional rival for Turkey and the two share some competing interests in South Asia, but strategic priorities have not emerged that have challenged the relationship. As a neighboring country and the supplier of 41 percent of its oil, Turkey has avoided major crises with Iran while at the same time balancing its relationship with the United States.

Turkey-Uzbekistan

Of all of the Central Asian states, Turkey’s relationship with Uzbekistan is the most relevant with respect to South Asia. Turkey and Uzbekistan sit at opposite ends of some Northern Distribution Network supply chains that deliver cargo to Afghanistan, and both share a relationship with the prominent Afghan-Uzbek leader Abdel Rashid Dostum. Despite disagreements between Prime Minister Erdogan and President Islam Karimov, and Uzbekistan’s suspicion of Turkish Islamism emanating from Turkey, the two countries have cooperated to some extent to promote stability in Afghanistan.

Turkey-China

China and Turkey have a parallel level of interest in South Asia and compete in some trade and commerce areas, but coordinate very little. China is also suspicious of Turkish support for the Turkic ethnic Uyghur separatist movement in China.

Conflict Scenarios

Scenario: Afghanistan Stability

Turkey will remain active in its non-combat role in Afghanistan as part of ISAF’s mission until 2014, and in the event that the Afghan civil war does not get any worse following the withdrawal of ISAF forces Turkey is positioned to be a leading outside factor in development, albeit at a mostly bilateral level.

Turkey’s preferred outcome in Afghanistan is stability, and Turkey would not be against expanding its diplomatic, economic and cultural engagement with Afghanistan, building on existing nonmilitary ties and partnerships. It is unlikely however that, beyond training, the Turkish government would provide direct military assistance to the Afghan central government for operations if the conflict against the Taliban continues.

Turkish companies operating in Afghanistan would remain active outside conflict zones, and continue to compete for infrastructure contracts, but commercial activity in Afghanistan would continue to hinge on safety and security. Turkey would also continue to promote educational programs and may look for opportunities to expand these further.

However even under ideal conditions, the overall level of Turkish interests in Afghanistan is limited, and continuation of even the current level of violence presents a dangerous work environment and risky investment atmosphere for Turkey.

Scenario: Afghanistan Instability

Turkey will remain active in its non-combat role in Afghanistan as part of ISAF’s mission until 2014, and in the event that the Afghan civil war worsens following the withdrawal of ISAF forces Turkey would likely further reduce its already limited level of interest to engage inside Afghanistan.

Growing violence would likely drive away Turkish investment and reduce the attractiveness of the Afghan market for the private sector. Turkish interest may completely dissolve in the case of direct violence against Turkish individuals or companies operating in Afghanistan, however attacks by the Taliban have generally not targeted Turkish soldiers, schools or companies. Absent direct violence, some of these establishments may continue to operate at their current level.

Turkey may seek to mediate between the Taliban and the Afghan central government, but without a vested interest in a specific outcome or strategic priorities in Afghanistan, Turkey would likely limit its overall involvement in the conflict, but might cooperate as part of a peaceful multi-lateral engagement process.

Scenario: India-Pakistan Instability

Significant cross-border violence between India and Pakistan would likely result in some pressure from the Turkish public to support Pakistan; however Turkey is unlikely to involve itself in a conflict directly.

With little strategic interest in Pakistan and India, and very limited influence or ability to determine an outcome, Turkey would seek to remain on the sidelines militarily and coordinate with international organizations such as the United Nations and the Conference of Islamic States, as well as the United States, to isolate and manage the conflict while urging for a peaceful solution.

Despite falling under the NATO nuclear umbrella, the use of nuclear weapons could also trigger greater Turkish interest to develop its own nuclear weapons.

Conclusions

As the United States and NATO have placed greater importance on South Asia as part of the global 'war on terror,' Turkey has coordinated with them primarily through ISAF, and its relationship with Afghanistan and Pakistan has expanded parallel to this. This growth however does not reflect a higher level of Turkish interest in South Asia or represent meaningful strategic gains for Turkey.

Turkey prefers a stable South Asia, but has coped with regional instability in the past. Instead of attempting to intervene or exert influence when conflicts have escalated and major changes in leadership have occurred in South Asia, Turkey has generally opted to simply adapt to the outcome and manage its relationships accordingly.

Unless new opportunities for coordination with the United States or direct strategic challenges present themselves in South Asia between 2014 and 2026, this trend is likely to continue, and while Turkey will maintain its engagement with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its trade with India, it is unlikely that the level of Turkish influence and interest in the region will change.

About the Author

Craig Bonfield is a research associate with the CSIS Turkey Project. He specializes in Turkish foreign policy, U.S.-Turkey relations and civil-military dynamics in Turkey.