

---

# The United States and Turkey: A Model of Sustained Engagement

W. ROBERT PEARSON

---

The attacks of September 11 and the subsequent campaign to combat terrorism have changed the world and Turkey's role in it. Americans and Turks are looking anew at basic assumptions about international relations and security tasks in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. President Bush has underscored the importance of eliminating the threat of international terrorism. The United Nations, with an historic Security Council resolution, has made dealing with international terrorism the top priority for the world community, and NATO declared that the September 11 attack was an attack on all Alliance members. This global effort will be long and complicated, difficult and costly. Changes we cannot imagine now are certain to follow. The United States by necessity and choice must lead the coalition of states to eliminate terrorism. We could have no better friend and ally than Turkey in that effort. Because of its geographic location, its visibility as a secular democracy with a largely Muslim population, its economic promise, and the capabilities of its armed forces, Turkey has an indispensable role to play.

## THE SETTING: A NEW COALITION

Immediately following the devastating "Day of 9-11," the President made clear that our relations with a country will be measured by new standards: be with us or with the terrorists. Uprooting and destroying international terror networks

---

*W. Robert Pearson is U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and a career member of the Senior Foreign Service. Prior to his confirmation on July 9, 2000, he served as Deputy Chief of Mission for the U.S. Embassy to France (1997 to 2000). His previous positions include Deputy Permanent Representative to the U.S. Mission to NATO (1993 to 1997) and Deputy Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (1985 to 1987).*

---

will require strong action by the international community through a multi-faceted coalition. This global mobilization of resources will lead to dramatic changes and new approaches to dealing with shadowy and elusive enemies. Along the way, all of us are going to have to define more precisely what terrorism is and tighten national and international measures against it. We must achieve a global consensus that the deliberate targeting of innocent victims for political purposes

*The United States by necessity and choice must lead the coalition of states to eliminate terrorism.*

is a crime against all humankind, no matter what the motive happens to be. There will be three key objectives in this international effort. First, the coalition must strengthen and maintain global political will for the long haul. Second, the international community must commit the military, intelligence, economic, and law enforcement resources necessary for victory. Third, we must convince people outside our borders, especially those in the region, that this is a fight to bring them a better future, not a war against Islam or the Afghan people. I am absolutely certain that Turkey will play an important role in each of these areas. We ought to listen carefully to Turkish perspectives on the new future our two countries will help shape as partners.

There is one policy, however, that requires no fundamental adjustment: our long-term approach to Turkey. Turkey's rapid and unqualified support for the international coalition against terrorism came as no surprise. For 17 years, Turkey fought an anti-terror campaign against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>1</sup> Turks, like all the citizens of the world, reacted with horror to the massacre of innocents on September 11 and expressed solidarity with the United States. Americans living in Turkey will never forget the warm, sincere expressions of sympathy from Turks, by both government leaders and people on the street. Turks quickly related the events to their own battles with terrorism and threats posed by "anachronistic" regimes, such as the Taliban, to their secular democracy.<sup>2</sup> Opening of airspace and facilities, strongly supporting NATO and other international bodies, and closing consultations on issues such as the Afghan opposition accompanied this emotional outpouring.

Turkey's geographic position, surrounded by areas of strife and serving as a critical passageway for the flow of trade and ideas between Europe and Asia, has always made it key to our foreign policy. As the current crisis shows, its importance transcends its location. Its highly professional military, both bilaterally and through NATO, provides crucial logistical support. Insights and input from Turkish leaders, diplomats, and soldiers help to shape our approach to a region—Central and South Asia—where U.S. involvement is, by historical standards, relatively recent.

Equally important is Turkey's status as the Muslim world's leading secular democracy and the only NATO ally with a predominantly Muslim population. As such, Turkey rebuts the theory that the struggle against terrorism masks a war on Islam or the Islamic world.

Rapid Turkish support was also the result of a policy of sustained, close engagement with an ally following the Cold War. The U.S., which had viewed Turkey primarily through the prism of Cold War security relationships, developed a more mature relationship with Turkey across economic, trade, and regional issues. This not only fostered cooperation in new areas, but also kept debates on disagreements and thorny issues within the larger context.

### THE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Security cooperation has been the hallmark of U.S. policy toward Turkey since the USS Missouri sailed into Istanbul's harbor in 1946 and the announcement of the Truman doctrine the following year. Turks and Americans fought together in Korea, and NATO membership kept Turkey firmly in the West throughout the Cold War. Military and economic assistance buttressed a key ally that held NATO's southern flank despite three military interventions, the turmoil of the 1970s, and the arms embargo following Turkey's action in Cyprus.

The end of the Cold War brought new security challenges to the relationship. Throughout the 1990s, Turkey's participation in the Gulf War, UN operations in Somalia, and NATO operations in the Balkans showed that it shared broad security concerns with the United States. These actions, in fact, enhanced Turkey's role in transatlantic security. For Americans, it moved from a bulwark against Soviet expansion to a stabilizing force in the "Bermuda Triangle" formed by the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East.

Economic issues began to come to the forefront of bilateral relations in this period with the opening of Turkey's economy and the beginnings of a process now dubbed "globalization." Recognizing the enormous potential, the U.S. Commerce Department proclaimed Turkey one of the ten "big emerging markets" for U.S. business. Trade more than doubled, but this expansion brought new challenges such as protecting intellectual property rights, contending textile quotas, and reducing barriers to investment to the top of our agenda.<sup>3</sup> Each of these issues has its own dynamic, but the trend is clear: more opportunities for

---

*We must achieve a global consensus that the deliberate targeting of innocent victims for political purposes is a crime against all humankind, no matter what the motive happens to be.*

---

expanded trade and investment for both countries. Travel for business, education, and tourism exploded at the same time and fostered unprecedented levels of personal contact.<sup>4</sup>

New strategic issues also brought us together. The development of an East-West energy corridor from the Caspian to market via Turkey is the hallmark of U.S.-Turkish cooperation. It married our common desire to reinforce regional stability and expand economic opportunities in Turkey and elsewhere. In realizing this shared vision, it allowed unprecedented cooperation at many levels between the two governments.

The Middle East provides another example of our regional cooperation. Turkey has developed a strong relationship with Israel, yet maintains solid ties with the Palestinians and with Arab governments. Beginning with the Oslo peace process, the U.S. and Turkey have remained in close contact about efforts to achieve a lasting peace. Turkish insights and participation—based on a long history and privileged status with the parties—complement and inform U.S. efforts. Former Turkish President Suleyman Demirel was one of five members of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee chaired by former Senator George Mitchell. The “Mitchell Plan” is the world’s guide for achieving a just settlement

---

*Turkey’s geographic position, surrounded by areas of strife and serving as a critical passageway for the flow of trade and ideas between Europe and Asia, has always made it key to our foreign policy.*

---

to the Middle East conflict. Our renewed efforts in this region will only succeed with Turkish support.

Few issues in U.S. foreign policy do not impact our relations with Turkey. Recognizing the importance of this, the United States government began in November 1999 to give the relationship a new title: “strategic partnership.” This phrase represented a broad, bipartisan recognition of the importance of Turkey to the United States. It also recognized that the United States has a significant stake in

Turkey’s ability to integrate into the global economy, move closer to Europe, and stabilize a troubled region.

This partnership includes a realistic vision of Turkey and its potential. Istanbul is Europe’s largest city. Turkey’s economy is a potential powerhouse on the edge of the Middle East, with a gross national product (GNP) half that of Russia. Turks, 60 percent of whom are under the age of 35, hunger for education, health care, economic prosperity, more respect for human rights, and a vibrant democracy. In a very real sense, the relationship matches American interests with Turkish aspirations.

---

---

**KEEPING IT RIGHT**

Keeping the strategic partnership vital and helping Turks realize their aspirations require the United States' sustained engagement.

Encouraging economic reform represents the first challenge. Turkey launched an ambitious economic reform program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in December 1999 and achieved initial successes in reducing chronically high inflation. But the twin shocks of economic earthquakes in November 2000 and February 2001 forced Turkey to float the lira and implement even more vigorous banking reforms, tighten budget discipline, and accelerate privatization. More broadly, this program brings global standards and values to the economy—increased transparency, reduced political interference, and less opportunity for corruption. The U.S., along with its partners in the G-7, worked with the IMF and World Bank to provide Turkey with approximately \$35 billion for the reform program that began in December 1999.

Turkey's economic reform program has achieved marked successes in the face of opposition accustomed to avoiding genuine

reform for too many years. First, the government has adopted a competitive and flexible exchange rate, which will help Turkish businesses to export. This commitment to a float will price the lira competitively and augurs well over the medium-to-long term for export-led growth. The second achievement has been the strong fiscal and aggressive public debt management policies over the past year. In 2002, for a second straight year, the government is committed to maintaining a fiscally responsible primary surplus target of 6.5 percent of GNP and adopted in January 2002 many of the measures to meet this target. By issuing new debt to state banks it has also paid for prior years' extravagant subsidies and eliminated future subsidies. The third achievement is a healthier banking sector. Under new bank regulators, Turkey addressed problems in the four state banks that have dominated the banking industry in the past. It closed one of them, is in the process of privatizing a second, and is downsizing the other two while preparing them for eventual privatization. It has also taken decisive action to eliminate abuses among the private banks. The end result for the banking sector will be consolidation, infusions of foreign equity, and more prudent lending practices.

As important as these reforms are for Turkey's economic future, the program's overall success is not assured. September 11 dealt a blow to Turkey's economy as well. Turkey's hard-working people, already suffering from the worst

---

*Turkey's hard-working people, already suffering from the worst economic period in decades, now must bear the weight of a new burden produced by international terrorists.*

---

---

economic period in decades, now must bear the weight of a new burden produced by international terrorists. The social impact of a falling lira, business closures, and unemployment threaten the courageous determination of Turks and their leaders to stick with the program. Without even factoring in the impact of the September 11 attacks, Turkey faces a very large debt burden, the servicing of

---

*Fifty years of Fulbright exchanges and timely support for private partnerships between universities have fostered the human infrastructure we need for increased communication.*

---

which will require the vast majority of its budget. In 2001, 81 percent of all Turkish government revenue went to debt service; that percentage may continue into 2002, regardless of the impact of September 11. All other Turkish government expenditures will come either from the remaining 19 percent of revenue or from new loans, which would simply increase Turkey's debt burden in the future.

IMF, the World Bank, the G-7, and the private sector to deliver the right kind of support on time, to boost confidence, and to encourage investment. Turks want a brighter future and will make sacrifices to achieve one. As we and others do our part, Turkey must avoid repeating the failures of yesterday, which include falling prey to high inflation and increasing debt. Turkey is the last major economy intoxicated by high inflation; if other societies have overcome this addiction, so can Turkey. For the sake of its young generation, it has no other choice.

The U.S. intends to remain fully engaged in Turkey's economic reform program. This means working closely with the

The United States will maintain its support for a more open, democratic political system. Turks deserve such a society and overwhelmingly desire a stronger democracy. Turkey wants to open membership negotiations with the European Union as quickly as possible; adopting the needed measures should be an immediate priority. Turkey has begun that effort in earnest. A good example is the recently enacted passage of 33 constitutional amendments, the most sweeping political liberalization since 1982, and arguably since 1960. Stalled ever since the EU's recognition of Turkey's status as a candidate country in 1999, the package took shape quietly in an inter-party parliamentary committee in June 2001. Over the course of the summer, it moved on for broader debate, both in the public and within the government. The eventual amendments represented a strong, broad consensus with support from political parties, employers, unions, and civil society organizations. Businesses, in particular, heralded the package as a symbol of the government's commitment to transparency and reform.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S.—indeed any country—should encourage the effort, remind Turks of the stakes, discuss any shortcomings honestly, and provide practical, timely support.

---

Policymakers recognize that real change usually comes slowly, whether in the U.S. or in Turkey. Here the trend over the last decade is encouraging. The recently passed amendments cap real, long-term progress in increasing freedom of expression, decreasing the use of torture, opening the political system, and encouraging civil society. The progress is not just in the law books. Five years ago, how many people would have thought Turkey's Ministry of Culture would financially support a feature film that included significant dialogue in Kurdish?<sup>6</sup>

Strategic partnership is not just a product of joint declarations and government-to-government agreements. It is no accident that non-official partnerships, whether in business or education, and increased contact between Turks and Americans have accompanied the growth of the relationship. Fifty years of Fulbright exchanges and timely support for private partnerships between universities have fostered the human infrastructure we need for increased communication. Americans and Turks who have studied or done research in the other's country make for informed citizens who can explain American and Turkish motivations to those who have doubts. As in encouraging trade and investment, the U.S. government has and must continue to lay the foundation for educational exchange and contact. The 12,000 Turks studying in the U.S. and the increasing numbers of Americans coming to Turkey bode well for the future. Both sides recognize the strategic interest in maintaining this contact. Recently, the governments supported an innovative program between the State University of New York and the Higher Educational Council, using the Internet to bring multi-campus, multi-disciplinary education in both countries.

---

*Maintaining a partnership requires Turkey and the United States to recognize our disagreements, talk about them, and place them in a proper context.*

---

### THORNY ISSUES

Maintaining a partnership requires Turkey and the United States to recognize challenges, talk about them, and place them in a proper context. Cyprus, Turkey's relations with Europe and with Armenia, and Iraq are such issues. Here, our response to the September 11 attacks offers some opportunities.

Iraq is one example. Despite daily press reports claiming that Turkey and the U.S. diverge on details of Iraq policy, Turks and Americans need to remember how much we both agree on basic issues. Saddam Hussein's regime threatens the people of Iraq and its neighbors, supports terrorism, and pursues chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. Turkey and the U.S. both strongly support the territorial integrity of Iraq. Turks and Americans have worked successfully to contain

Iraq's threat, most visibly in Operation Northern Watch, but less visibly in the UN and other fora. The attacks of September 11 require that we, and the other members of the coalition, commit to following the evidence wherever it leads and acting decisively on that evidence. Regional security, especially in Turkey's tough neighborhood, is rarely built on compromises that ignore facts. Ankara and Washington naturally have their own individual perspectives on Iraq. Tactical approaches, however, should not obscure strategic views. Continued close consultations and shared assessments of the dangers will help us to resolve such differences without threatening interests.

September 11 highlighted the need—and the opportunity—to address regional issues. The U.S. has the broadest of visions for Cyprus, and we need to work hard at resolving regional disputes. The U.S. supports the UN Security Council principle that a solution must be based on a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. The U.S. and others recognize full well that returning to the pre-1974 security situation, where the Turkish minority suffered greatly, is not an option. Finally, the U.S. knows that Cyprus's EU accession process can be an incentive to the comprehensive solution. The United States welcomes the December 2001

---

*The September 11 attacks, however, remind Europe of Turkey's crucial role not just in guarding NATO's southern flank, but also of its enhanced role in facing the threats of the twenty-first century.*

---

renewal of talks between the two sides. Now that talks are underway, creativity will be essential. The commitment of the actual parties, however, will be indispensable. The stakes are high, and leadership will be needed to pay the premium on a settlement.

The "new era" also brings new possibilities to Turkey's relationship with Europe. The U.S. has long supported Turkey's EU candidacy. Since 1999, many EU members have expressed disappointment with Turkey's progress. The September 11 attacks, however, remind Europe of Turkey's

crucial role not just in guarding NATO's southern flank, but also of its enhanced role in facing the threats of the twenty-first century. Turkey has asked for increased European cooperation in combating terrorist groups targeting Turkey and operating in Europe. The U.S. will be supportive. During and after this crisis, we want to see Europe and Turkey working more closely and cooperatively.

Following September 11, the EU member states individually and collectively began to implement tough new measures against international terrorism. Thus, this new security environment should encourage greater dialogue between Europe and Turkey, cause all parties to recognize their common security interests, and increase trust by dealing with sensitive issues. Increased trust can and will strengthen key efforts, such as the EU's defense and security policy and common

---



---

anti-terrorism measures. The importance of this new mission underlines the need for NATO and the EU to work hand in hand and never in competition regarding European security. Members of NATO and the EU can no longer afford to quibble over how NATO-EU cooperation will work, but must consolidate our partnerships to counter mutual threats. The new environment puts a premium on action over philosophical discussion.

Regarding Turkish-Armenian relations, both countries have taken steps in recent months to enhance dialogue. Both have a vital interest in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and in moving toward more normal relations, particularly in trade. The United States supports vigorously efforts on both of these fronts.

### THINKING AHEAD

The U.S. interests in Turkey are long-standing, deep, and broad. Fortunately, as I have noted, they coincide with Turkish aspirations. Thinking a few years ahead, it is worth noting how this engagement can pay off.

Under its economic reform program, Turkey can be a model for other struggling emerging markets, proof that others can follow this same model and prosper in the globalized economy of the twenty-first century. Its political system, enhanced by recent constitutional amendments, is proof that a predominantly Muslim nation with the full range of traditional cultural values has a place at the table with the most developed and democratic states. I have no doubt that if Turkey continues down the road it has chosen, it will have the opportunity to become a full EU member.

I can think of few more powerful tools in the fight against international terrorism than a successful Turkey. Turkey's increased influence from Central Europe to Central Asia and the Middle East is a powerful adjunct to American efforts. U.S. foreign policy has a new focus on combating terrorists and rooting out their networks. Our success in this struggle and in the unforeseen challenges in the century ahead depends on a strategic partnership with Turkey maintained through active engagement. ■

### NOTES

- 1 The U.S. government considers the Kurdistan Workers' Party, better known by its acronym PKK, as a foreign terrorist organization. Secretary Colin Powell re-certified this designation in October 2001. See *Fact Sheet* released by the Department of State on October 5, 2001. For more on the PKK, its aims, and methods, see the Department of State's annual *Global Patterns of Terrorism* report.
- 2 Turkish officials often refer to Islamic regimes as *cagdisi*, meaning "anachronistic." See "Ecevit: Turkey can provide Military Training to Afghan Opposition Groups," interview, CNN-Turk, trans. FBIS, September 21, 2001.
- 3 According to Turkish State Institute of Statistics, total bilateral trade in 1990 was \$3.2 billion in 1990 and \$6.9 billion in 2000.

4 According to the Institute of International Education's "Open Doors," the number of Turkish students in the U.S. increased from 4,978 in 1992 to 10,100 in 2000. According to Turkish Tourism Ministry, the number of Americans visiting Turkey increased from 205,000 in 1990 to 505,000 in 2000; the number of Turks visiting the U.S. increased from 33,000 in 1994 to 78,000 in 1998.

5 See statement issued by TUSIAD, "*Anayasa deęisiklikleri, demokratiklikme ve AB uyelięi yolunda onemli bir adimidir*," also reported in "Turkish Businessmen Welcome Adoption of Constitutional Amendments," Anatolian Agency, October 4, 2001.

6 "*Kurtce filme Bakanlık Destegi*," *Hurriyet*, October 4, 2001, 2.