
Analysts say tepid response from the West pushed Turkey away

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There is genuine concern in the West, and particularly among US officials, that Turkey is no longer a knee-jerk supporter of the West. Western experts cite the growing clout of Turkey as the basis for the current commotion.

The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, described Turkey on Monday at the Aspen Institute as a long-time, 'critical ally' of the US and said sustaining this relationship is also 'critical.' As Turkey has started to exhibit visible signs of becoming a powerful influence, both in the Middle East and further afield, the US now senses that events are shifting, and not in their favor. In recent years, Turkey has noticeably graduated from being a country struggling to keep itself out regional disagreements to a global player, and this has definitely drawn the ire of the West.

Philip Gordon, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, undiplomatically rebuked Turkey on Saturday, saying that Turkey should demonstrate its commitment to the West. Gordon also said back in February of this year that the US strongly supports Turkey's EU membership.

'The US's position has always been that Turkey's EU accession process is necessary to 'anchor' Turkey to the West,' said Nathalie Tocci, a fellow at the Transatlantic Academy.

Tocci also said the assumption is that without the EU, Turkey might dangerously slide to the 'East.' The US secretary of defense, Robert Gates, accused the EU of not opening a path for Turkey into the 27-nation bloc as a way to retain Turkey as a pro-Western country.

Adam Hug, policy director for the Foreign Policy Center, said while Secretary Gates may be right in saying that the EU's rejection of Turkey played a role in encouraging Turkey's recent strengthening of its historic relationships with countries to its east and south, he added that 'it certainly is not the only factor.'

He said Turkey's increasing self-confidence, cultural shifts and the need for Ankara to find a post-Cold War role have also played their part.

The US has stridently pushed Turkey to cooperate in sanctions against Iran for the past four years -- a big blow to Turkey's prestige in the Middle East if Turkey were to have voted for sanctions and to its trade interests -- and irritated Turkey, with resolutions on Armenian genocide allegations continuously presented to the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs. While Turkey has advanced significantly through political reforms in past years to align its policies with European standards, the EU has criticized Turkey on many unimportant issues as a justification for not opening some of its negotiating chapters. Shift of axis claims are an exaggeration, but the reality is that Turkey has lost its appetite for cooperating with Western nations on a number of issues, particularly concerning the Middle East.

Marina Ottaway from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said Israel's policy in Gaza, the rejection by many EU countries of Turkey's accession and the dismissive US response to the deal with Iran negotiated by Turkey and Brazil have aggravated the situation. She noted that the US is also making things worse by taking the change in Turkish foreign policy as something directed against the United States,

rather than the consequence of the changing international context and of Turkey's transformation from an underdeveloped country to an emerging economic powerhouse.

The US has foolishly sided with its traditional ally, Israel, in the Gaza aid flotilla incident -- one of the most dramatic events for Turkey in international affairs. Similar to the West, Turkey has also expected the US and NATO to show its solidarity with Turkey. 'We have been a member of NATO for six decades; let's see if we will benefit from NATO at least once in history,' one journalist remarked in personal correspondence.

Hug argued that Turkey's relationship with Israel is not in itself directly related to the strain in relations with Brussels. When the aid flotilla incident occurred in late May, it was first Washington and Brussels that Turkey sought support from.

Ottaway discussed the change in the international structure and balance of power, which led to the change of Turkish foreign policy. 'The foreign policy of Turkey was bound to change no matter what,' she added.

Assessing the bluster in the West over 'who lost Turkey,' Tocci said she is diametrically opposed to such views. 'Turkey's policy in the Middle East is largely the product of Turkey's own domestic transformation, which has in turn been inspired and triggered to a significant extent by the EU,' she stated. In many respects, the argument goes, Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East can be characterized as being 'Europeanized'; it is far more Europeanized than in the 1990s, when Turkey's relations with the Middle East were marked by a strategic relationship with Israel and tensions and conflicts with all its southern neighbors. Noting that it remains essential that Turkey realize that the value of its foreign policy in the Middle East continues to hinge on its democratic consolidation, Tocci said this in turn remains inextricably tied with its own EU accession process.

Dennis Sammut, from London-based LINKS, dismissed claims that Turkey is drifting away from the West. 'Turkey remains a candidate country of the European Union,' Sammut noted, 'whilst the accession process is going slower than some had hoped, it continues.'

Noting that Turkey's standoff with Israel after the Gaza incident would have happened even if Turkey was already a member of the EU, Sammut argued that the fact that it happened in the context of the Gaza blockade only further hurt the sensibilities of Turkey's Muslim population.

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