
Opinion : US Could Learn A Thing Or Two From Turkey's Soft-Power Diplomacy

By Trudy Rubin
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Turkey Americans who explore the wonders of Istanbul rarely visit Turkey's capital, deep in the plains of Anatolia. Ankara is known mainly for two things: a stunning museum that highlights Turkey's ancient Anatolian past, and the vast hilltop mausoleum of Ataturk, Turkey's founder, whose stern face is visible on huge banners throughout the city.

But Ankara is becoming known for something else that's of great strategic interest to Americans: an active foreign policy that may help resolve conflicts in critical regions where the United States has faltered. That includes the troubled Caucasus region, where Russia just warred with Georgia, and the Middle East.

"If you list the key issues which Turkey and the United States pursue, you'd be amazed by how many parallels there are," Turkey's president, Abdullah Gul, Enhanced Coverage Linking Abdullah Gul, -Search using: Biographies Plus News News, Most Recent 60 Days told a small group of visiting U.S. journalists and think-tank experts in an interview in his office this week.

At the crossroads

Indeed, almost every foreign crisis on the U.S. agenda is also a concern for Gul. Turkey sits at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, bordering not only the European Union, but also Georgia, Iraq, Iran and Syria. It has been adversely affected by growing Mideast chaos since the Iraq war.

Turkey also sits at an energy crossroads. Efforts to build new oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia and the Caucasus pipelines that will circumvent Russia and make Europe less dependent on it all rely on Turkey.

Instability in its environs has prompted Turkey to become more active in conflict resolution. "In regional foreign policy, we had numerous problems with our neighbors," Gul said. "They must be resolved, or there cannot be peace."

Turkey's emphasis has been, for the most part, on soft power and diplomacy. It is the only country with fair to good relations with every country in neighboring regions: close ties to Israel as well as to Arab states; good relations with Iran and carefully managed relations with Russia; and close ties to Georgia.

Two of Turkey's many mediation efforts could have a positive impact on key concerns of the United States. First is Turkey's recent overture to Armenia. The two nations have deep disagreements over how 1 million Armenians were killed in the early 20th century; Armenians call it genocide, while Turkey insists it was the result of warfare.

In September, Gul became the first Turkish president in history to visit Armenia. Gul had sent congratulations to Serge Sargsyan upon his election as Armenia's president, and Gul in turn was invited to attend a soccer match between the Turkish and Armenian teams in Yerevan. Both leaders faced strong domestic opposition to the visit.

"Of course, I didn't just go to watch soccer," Gul said.

Conflict mediation

The goal is to work toward normalizing relations between Armenia and Turkey and opening their border. Turkey also may be able to mediate the poisonous split between Armenia and a third Caucasus country, Azerbaijan.

Progress on resolving these conflicts could have a positive spillover for the Russia-Georgia standoff and prospects for new pipelines.

A second example is Turkey's mediation of peace talks between Syria and Israel. "We've worked hard to bring peace in the region," Gul said. "Recently, that work became more visible."

At a time when the United States preferred to isolate Syria, Turkey worked to get Syria and Israel back to the table. Four rounds of private talks have taken place; they are now on hold as Israel forms a new government.

A Syria-Israel peace would end the current alliance between Syria and Iran and undercut Hezbollah, forcing Tehran to rethink its policies in the region.

The bottom line: The next U.S. president should encourage Turkey's mediation and take a cue from its soft-power efforts. Turkey's diplomacy has opened up new possibilities for its U.S. ally.

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