
Troubled Partnership: US-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change

By Stephen F. Larrabee

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The relationship between Turkey and the United States has been the subject of many books and articles. Although bilateral relations can be traced back to even the Ottoman period, the two countries upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership right after the Second World War and the start of the Cold War. Although this relationship had its ups and downs, during the Cold War Turkey was protected and supported by the West and served Western interests in that it helped prevent the expansion of Communism. In the post-Cold War era the relationship between the US and Turkey got even stronger, while relations between Turkey and Europe lost momentum, as Turkey came to fulfil another role, that of the “bridge” between the West and the East. Example of this new “identity” was the Gulf War against Iraq and the assistance that Turkey provided to the US Army. This partnership, however, reached its lowest level in March, 2003 when US-led NATO forces asked for permission to launch attacks against Iraq through Turkey soil and the Turkish parliament voted against it.

The strategic partnership has had serious strains ever since, and Stephen F.

Larrabee’s book highlights these strains and focuses on this troubled partnership so that he can warn Washington that, if not handled with extra caution, Turkey “could be lost”. The purpose of the book, as the author writes, is to explore the sources of these strains and their future implications on relations. There are nine chapters in the book, with a tenth that serves as a conclusion.

In the introduction Larrabee talks about the origins of the partnership between the US and Turkey, which started at the end of the Second World War, and was made stronger in 1952, the year that Turkey joined NATO. In the second chapter, the author talks about the transition of the US-Turkish partnership from Turkey as “barrier” to Communism to it being a “bridge” between the West and the East. The end of the Cold War did not lead to a loosening but rather to a strengthening of bilateral ties. Turkey became even more important for the US. Washington saw Turkey as a “stabilising force” as it was a Muslim country in an unbalanced and volatile Middle East and Central Asia. Special focus is given here on the American base in Incirlik (in southern Turkey) and

its role in providing logistical support from/to Iraq and Afghanistan. In such an unpredictable environment, the US and Turkey need each other. In Chapter 3, Larrabee explains how the relations of US and Turkey deteriorated due to the parliamentary vote that did not allow US forces access through Turkey to launch attacks on Iraq. The Iraq war that led to the ousting of Saddam Hussein also brought up some new dangers and threats for Turkey, such as sectarian violence and Kurdish nationalism. The author states that Turkey was “one of the biggest losers of the US invasion of Iraq”. Both the US and Turkey started losing faith and trust in each other due to this war.

In Chapter 4, the author talks about Turkey’s efforts in diversifying its foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, and the growing independence in its diplomacy. It describes briefly Turkey’s relations with its neighbours in the Middle East. Special focus is given to Syria and Iran but since the book was written right before the Arab Awakening it is quite outdated. In Chapter 5, the author describes relations between Russia and Turkey. He starts by saying that in the post-Cold War era the Turkic former republics of USSR were seen by then-Turkey’s President Turgut Özal as a new frontier for expanding Turkish interests, but soon this dream collapsed as this region was still within the Russian sphere of influence. He focuses on the fear in the West (especially the US) that Turkey may start seeing Russia as a

security alternative to NATO, but that was highly unlikely due to the mistrust that is embedded in Turkish historical consciousness and most importantly because such a move would be a blow to the traditional Kemalist policy of Westernisation. Larrabee believes that such an alliance would be “anathema” for the Turkish military as well.

In Chapter 6, the author talks about the chronically problematic relations between Europe and Turkey, and the fact that Turkey is still viewed by many in Europe as the “other”. In moments of deterioration of Euro-Turkish relations, Turkey has always turned to the US for support but now this is more difficult because of the troubled partnership. So again he is expressing his fears that if the EU permanently closes the door to Ankara, then Turkey could abandon the West and seek alternative options. In Chapter 7, Larrabee focuses on defence cooperation and argues that the US should get engaged in a broad strategic dialogue with Ankara about the future use of military bases in Turkey, especially the Incirlik base. He fears that due to the currently strained relationship Ankara will be highly sensitive about allowing full access to the US military for the Middle Eastern contingencies. According to the author, Incirlik should be kept as it is one of the most important bases in the whole region. In Chapter 8, the focus is turned to Turkey’s domestic affairs and Ankara’s efforts to fully democratise the country. When the ruling Justice and

Development Party took over in 2002, a wave of reforms started, but in recent years the democratisation process has slowed down. The US should encourage Turkey to revitalise the whole process. In Chapter 9, the author makes some predictions about Turkey's future, and he describes four possible future scenarios: a pro-Western Turkey fully integrated into the EU, an "Islamised" Turkey, a nationalist Turkey and a possible military intervention. Finally, in Chapter 10, Larrabee concludes that given the geopolitical changes that are taking place today in Turkey's surrounding regions, it is vital that the two countries remain close allies. Revitalising the US-Turkish partnership should be considered a top US policy priority; Obama's visit in 2009 right after he took office shows exactly this. But the author believes that actions are needed more than words and official visits.

The purpose of this book may have been to highlight the strains in the partnership between US and Turkey and offer

suggestions of how to overcome them but we should not neglect the fact that the book was published by the RAND Corporation, which is a think tank that gets financing from the US government. Stephen F. Larrabee is the Distinguished Chair in European Security at the RAND Corporation. The real aim of this book is to warn Washington that such a strategic ally should not be lost or should not be driven to look for other security alternatives in that such a probability would harm the American interests in the area. Keeping Turkey as a close ally, Larrabee suggests, should be made US policy because of the interests that are at stake. I recommend this book to both students and practitioners of international relations who are interested in this region, as it will show that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the US needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the US.

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The Fall of the US Empire: Global Fault-Lines and the Shifting Imperial Order

By Vassilis K. Fouskas and Bülent Gökay

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The debate on the United States (US) as a declining power has been around since the late 1960s. It was reinvigorated in the 2000s, mainly due to the rise of

China, and gained pace with the US led global financial crisis. Among those scholarly works, it is worth paying attention to *The Fall of the US Empire:*