

Analysis

November 23, 2010

Summary: The Lisbon Summit outcomes are good news for Turkey. The Alliance is finally turning to strategic challenges more relevant to Turkey's neighborhood. Even on the hotly-debated question of missile defense, the agreed approach enhances Turkish security and improves the outlook for cooperation with Russia. Above all, the Lisbon experience suggests that some aspects of Turkish foreign policy remain cautious and traditional, and the NATO connection still matters when it comes to working with Ankara. Putting all of this into practice will not be easy. But getting it right could help reverse the sharp slide in Turkish public attitudes toward NATO — if political leaders are willing to take up the challenge.

Turkey, the NATO Summit, and After

by *Dr. Ian O. Lesser*

The outcome of last week's NATO summit in Lisbon is good news for Turkey and transatlantic relations. Those expecting bold, visionary content from the new NATO Strategic Concept may be disappointed, but that was a never a very likely prospect. Instead, observers were presented with a good example of what the Alliance does best — consensus-building on collective defense, transcending national and bilateral differences. Turkey was at the center of concern before the summit, and Turkey should be a leading beneficiary of the post Lisbon environment. Turkish agreement on key aspects of the Lisbon agenda — especially the new approach to missile defense — will not end American and European worries about Turkey's foreign policy direction. Yet, Lisbon points the way to a Turkish posture that is more complex, more nuanced, and less revolutionary than many have claimed. It also shows why the NATO connection retains its importance for Turkish policymakers.

Showing Turkey's Traditional Side

First, Lisbon shows what can be accomplished when relations with Ankara are placed in a multilateral frame. For decades, it has been clear

that security cooperation with Turkey has been much easier in a NATO rather than a bilateral context. Incirlik air base — where NATO uses of the facility have generally been less contentious in negotiation and smoother in practice than their purely bilateral counterparts — offers an example. It is difficult to imagine a bilateral agreement between the United States and Turkey on missile defense architecture along the lines agreed at Lisbon. The link to a broader system of deterrence and reassurance, and the perception of equality within the Alliance, makes all the difference. In light of the flux and activism in Turkey's international strategy, it is striking that Ankara retains an essentially conservative, status quo approach to NATO policy. From questions of enlargement to questions of nuclear posture, and on the balance of new versus traditional missions, Turkey is arguably the least revolutionary member of the Alliance. Turkey, along with others, is exposed to a range of nontraditional security risks. But its approach to NATO strategy is resolutely traditional, emphasizing core Article V commitments, deterrence against low probability, high consequence threats, and reassurance against new political cleavages. Similarly, Ankara



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has always taken a cautious approach to issues of enlargement and extended security. There is nothing in the new Strategic Concept to undermine these preferences. Indeed, the reassertion of traditional guarantees with an admixture of less traditional missions — crisis management, counter-terrorism, energy security, and environmental security, among others — is highly relevant to Turkish concerns. It also has the net effect of refocusing NATO attention on challenges prevalent in Turkey's neighborhood. With Turkish public support for NATO among the weakest in the Alliance, the relevance factor should matter.¹

Living with Russia

Second, Turkey is a leading beneficiary of a more positive climate in relations with Russia, and of the prospect of renewed NATO-Russia cooperation in the wake of the Lisbon summit. The emergence of a more competitive, even confrontational relationship between Russia and the West would pose grave risks for Turkish security and long-term strategic interests. Trouble with Russia would once again put hard security issues at the center around the Black Sea, and complicate Turkey's political and commercial activism from the Levant and the Balkans to Central Asia. The prospect of Turkey emerging as a front line state in a new era of containment vis-à-vis Moscow would confront Ankara with an ongoing series of uncomfortable choices, and some stark security challenges.

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¹ According to the latest GMF *Transatlantic Trends* survey, only 30 percent of Turks still see NATO as essential compared to roughly 60 percent in Europe and the United States. See *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2010* (Washington: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2010). www.transatlantictrends.org

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To the extent that this scenario recedes, Turkey will be free to pursue the northern dimension of a “zero-problems” foreign policy without having to address the reality of Russian power in its neighborhood — or at least not directly. If improved relations with Russia also improve the prospects for nuclear arms reductions, both strategic and tactical, this might serve Turkey's stated interest in a nuclear-free neighborhood. In the meantime, Ankara is in no hurry to tinker with NATO's own nuclear posture. The consequences for Turkey's Iran strategy are less clear. If Ankara continues to pursue an engagement-only policy vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear program, this could put the country at odds with Moscow as well as Western partners, despite growing convergence on the question of missile defense.

Missile Defense Conundrums

Third, the approach to ballistic missile defense architecture, agreed in principle in Lisbon, suits Turkish security interests to a surprising degree. Turkey's close political and commercial relations with Tehran, and Ankara's “no” vote on UN Security Council sanctions, contributed to an atmosphere of friction with Western partners on Iran policy. Yet, beneath the differences on Iran diplomacy, Turkey shares — or should share — some concerns about Iran's nuclear and missile programs. In a technical sense, Turkey is the most exposed member of the alliance when it comes to the growing reach of ballistic missile systems deployed or under development in the Middle East. Ankara may wish to keep an open line with Tehran, but the defense of Turkish territory, including key population centers, still matters. Turkey's



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relations with Syria are much improved over the near-war situation of the late 1990s, but Syria, too, remains a leading proliferation risk and possesses missiles capable of targeting Turkish cities.

The Lisbon summit statements on missile defense avoided naming specific adversaries. Turkey had been insistent on this point, but in the end, this was not a very contentious issue. Other members of the Alliance shared Turkey's perspective, and even for those most "hawkish" on the Iran problem, namely the United States and France, citing Iran — or Syria — would add little to the initiative. On questions of command and control, Turkey's point was presumably to maintain control over the use of Turkish assets, or assets deployed on Turkish territory. This is nothing new, and a perspective shared by others within NATO, including the United States. This is clearly an area in which much work remains to be done. The question of command and control for the operation of an integrated, multinational system tasked with the defense of population centers spread over a wide region, while not exactly new, will present formidable challenges. It will also raise some political-military issues of a kind the Alliance has not had to face since the height of the Cold War. The defense of London, Rome, Ankara, or Bucharest may be equivalent in treaty terms, but maintaining this equivalence in practice is not easy. Just as nuclear strategists debated the question of whether American leaders would be willing to "trade New York for Frankfurt," future strategists may need to reckon with the real-time challenge of interpreting and responding to

simultaneous missile threats to Adana and Naples, Madrid or Athens.

The pursuit of the Obama Administration's "Phased Adaptive Approach" alongside an expanded version of the current NATO theater missile defense architecture should enhance Turkish security by shifting the center of gravity southward, where the leading missile threats are to be found. It will also place key assets afloat in the Mediterranean; a more flexible approach with a smaller political footprint. Turkey will probably host some key radar sites, with the actual interceptors based at sea, and eventually in Romania and Poland. All of this will be accompanied by new national air defense investments, including systems Turkey already plans to acquire. Ankara will have a stake in assuring that all of these elements, including its own, are integrated in the most effective (and cost-effective) fashion. In the post-Lisbon environment, the notion that Turkey might purchase advanced Chinese or Russian surface-to-air missiles, rather than systems from the United States or Europe, seems to make little sense from an operational or political standpoint. The whole point is to reinforce the commitment of transatlantic partners to defense in and around Turkey's region, not to provoke Allied concerns over interoperability, intelligence sharing, and defense-industrial cooperation. For Turkey, the possibility of NATO-Russia cooperation on missile defense (the extent of this is yet to be determined) should prove welcome.

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What Next?

Finally, it is worth asking what effect Turkey's posture in Lisbon is likely to have on the overall course of Turkish foreign policy and the way this is perceived by transatlantic partners. The tempting answer is "not much." This is too simple. The dynamics in Lisbon do not reverse recent trends in Turkish strategy, nor are they irrelevant to future prospects. For the United States and Europe, the Lisbon summit underscores the reality that Turkey's foreign and

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security policy is increasingly diverse, in character as well as direction. Ankara may play controversial new roles in the Middle East and Eurasia, while taking a far less revolutionary approach when it comes to relations with the West, above all in security terms. The symbolism of Turkey acting within the NATO consensus matters (what would the pundits have said if Turkey blocked agreement on missile defense?). NATO's post-Lisbon direction is a good deal for Turkey. The challenge now will be to assure that agreements in principle are pursued in practice. An improvement in Turkey's notably weak level of public support for NATO would also be welcome — a challenge Turkey's increasingly self-confident government could take on, if it wished. The logic is clear.

Dr. Ian O. Lesser, Senior Transatlantic Fellow, GMF

As a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington, DC, Ian Lesser leads GMF's work on the Mediterranean, Turkish, and wider-Atlantic security issues. Prior to joining GMF, Dr. Lesser was a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and vice president and director of Studies at the Pacific Council on International Policy (the western partner of the Council on Foreign Relations). He came to the Pacific Council from RAND, where he spent over a decade as a senior analyst and research manager specializing in strategic studies. From 1994-1995, he was a member of the Secretary's Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. Department of State, responsible for Turkey, Southern Europe, North Africa, and the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process. He is also currently a senior advisor to the Luso-American Foundation in Lisbon, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Atlantic Council, and the Pacific Council on International Policy.

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