



FPRI Turkey's Continuing Role as a Pivotal Ally in a Rapidly Changing Region

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By Arthur I. Cyr

Arthur I. Cyr is the A.W. and Mary Margaret Clausen Distinguished Professor of Political Economy and World Business, and Director of the Clausen Center for World Business, at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Abstract: Turkey's recent history has placed it at odds with Europe and the United States, leading some to suggest that Ankara has become an unreliable ally. Such a view is short-sighted. Turkey remains geostrategically important for a variety of reasons arising from both its pivotal location and its history. This article seeks to take the long view, placing recent developments in their historical context. Turkey's distinctive and long history is key to both analysis of the current situation, and evaluation of appropriate foreign policies toward Europe, the Middle East, the United States and the wider international system.



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Since the end of the Cold War, developments in the Middle East and beyond have expanded significantly Turkey's strategic roles, yet an accurate understanding of this shift is unusually challenging. Turkey—along with other major nations in the contemporary world—combines significant economic and military capabilities. However, Turkey's historical legacy of weakness and decline, uncertainty about democracy, and occasional military interference in domestic politics, has contributed to a persistent perception of the country as unreliable, a distinctive “sick man of Europe.” The decades-long conflict over Cyprus between Turkey and Greece has distracted attention from the wider range of the former's roles. The election of an Islamic religious party to governing power has added anxiety as well as further uncertainty to sustained insightful, realistic analysis. The authoritarian and at times erratic actions of former Prime Minister, now President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, compounded by recent allegations of corruption, have provided a distraction which reinforces short-term and often superficial analysis. Nonetheless, the strategic and geographic roles of Turkey remain essentially unchanged, their importance increased by modern economic development.



Secretary of State John Kerry, right, and Vice President Joseph Biden, left, listen to then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Department of State in Washington, D.C., on May 16, 2013 (State Dept. Image).

A national history, which viewed over the long-term can actually be reassuring, instead has been the reverse for many, due to relatively short-term perspectives and the uncertainties just noted. Turkey's reforms and remarkable economic growth in recent years is often overshadowed by its earlier lack of economic development, and the ongoing frustrations involved in seeking full membership in the European Union (EU). The narrative of the Ottoman Empire's decline over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries further contributes to an

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