INJECTING THE IRANIAN FACTOR IN US-TURKISH RELATIONS: A NEW PLAYER IN TOWN?

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Abstract:

The article attempts to bring forward a framework analysis which elaborates on America's shifting foreign and defence policy priorities from the Middle East region to the Asia-Pacific. Pulling of resources for sustaining a US rebalancing strategy to Asia is inextricably linked to successfully coordinate a set of alliances in a far from straightforward regional security environment. In an effort to achieve a functional balance of power in the Greater Middle East, Washington's game-changing for managing regional rivalries and the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war, indicate a necessity for reassessing Middle East's security system by approaching two non-Arab Muslim countries; Shiite Iran and Sunni Turkey. To avoid Iraq's disintegration and above all to preserve a regional balance of power, America's strategy involves engaging Iran in a constructive process of rapprochement with the US, while empowering Turkey to counterbalance its growing leverage in the region.

Keywords: Asia - Pacific, Middle East, Balance of Power, Iraq.

Resumen:

Este artículo presenta un marco de análisis dedicado a las cambiantes prioridades en política exterior y de defensa de los EEUU desde el Medio Oriente hasta el área del Asia-Pacífico. Extraer los recursos necesarios para asegurar la estrategia de los EEUU de reequilibrio hacia Asia está irremediablemente ligado a una coordinación exitosa de su red de aliados en un ambiente de seguridad regional bastante complejo. En un esfuerzo por lograr un equilibrio de poder funcional en el Gran Oriente Medio, el cambio de estrategia de Washington para manejar las rivalidades regionales y los efectos derivados de la guerra civil en Siria muestran la necesidad de revaluar el sistema de seguridad de Oriente Próximo a través de un acercamiento a dos países musulmanes no-árabes: el Irán chií y la Turquía suní. Para evitar la desintegración de Iraq y sobre todo para preservar el equilibrio de poder regional, la estrategia de los EEUU implica involucrar a Irán en un proceso constructivo de acercamiento con los EEUU, mientras se dota a Turquía de poder para reequilibrar su creciente poder en la región.

Palabras clave: *Asia-Pacífico, Oriente Medio, equilibrio de poder, Iraq.*

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http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_UNIS.2013.n34.44830

1.The role of US: Sketching the Terrain in the Greater Middle East and Asia-Pacific

1.1. Rebalance to Asia – Pacific

The issues raised in an international environment of rising economic and security interdependence underline the importance of resisting the temptation to overcome the complexity of the modern world by simply dusting off and adopting old attitudes and unsuccessful modes of action. From 2009 onwards, the US administration acknowledged that the international community should not try to tackle new challenges with old mindsets which might irreversibly traumatize America's core competence and 'imperial flagship' for leaping forward and sustaining its global role, namely its ideological strength of democratic culture. "At a time when fiscal austerity conversely demands a more disciplined and focused grand strategy for the United States"[2], the need for increased policy coordination between the power centers of a multipolar world becomes more than evident.

A pressing reality which involves the desire of emerging regional powers to gain more authority and leadership within the liberal international order where the US will continue to engage itself as the leading power. What is more, upgraded or on an equal footing state-actors "have a different set of cultural, political, and economic experiences"[3] and are still suffering from democracy issues, undecided geopolitical directions and nationalistic tendencies. Taking into consideration ongoing power transitions and its role of a global player – shaper, Washington has decided to preserve the system's security and prosperity through an update of the liberal international order; thereby avoid experiencing a competing transition in the ideas, principles and practices that govern the multipolar balance-of-power system. If the course of action proves to be a successful one, in effect it will be the West (US and Europe which acts as its bridgehead in Eurasia) as the actor establishing principles and setting limits for emerging regional players on how to properly manage their growing power and assist them accordingly.

In this respect, with the dynamics of change taking precedence over the ones of continuity, the role of the US for managing global security and matching shifting regional power relationships in a liberal economic order is increasingly linked to the Asia - Pacific Region[4]. For example, "will a rising China continue to tolerate the US security role in Asia, or will it gradually try to convince other Asian states to distance themselves from Washington?"[5] The need for establishing a closer and more favorable geopolitical understanding -in the context of a strategic alliance- with China over regional security settings that could have global implications is firmly recognized in the United States. Since it could involve some form of power sharing arrangements at least in the Asian context. By reducing its military

[2] Bisley, Nick and Phillips, Andrew: "Rebalance To Where?: US Strategic Geography in Asia", *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 5 (October-November 2013), pp 96-97.
[3] Ikenberry, John G.: "Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011), p. 18.
[4] "Well before the announcement of the Obama administration's 'pivot', the United States had already begun to shift its strategic focus from Europe towards Asia. The process of what has since come to be referred to as 'rebalancing' started to get under way at the turn of the century but was delayed for almost a decade by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. With the winding down of those conflicts, American strategists have begun to lift their eyes from the Middle East and Southwest Asia and to concentrate more intently on East Asia and the Indian Ocean". See Friedberg, Aaron L.: "The Euro Crisis and US Strategy", *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 6 (December 2012-January 2013), p. 20.
[5] Walt, Stephen: "Question Time", *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2013, at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/blog/2072.

presence in Europe and the Middle East, US administration paves the way for pivoting its strategic gaze to Asia with the aim of becoming the central broker in China's external relations[6]. Through this strategy, Washington seeks to maintain its network of key alliances in the region, projects its capacity for military intervention and above all avoids facing unfavorable trends in the Asian balance of power leading to "a less cooperative order built on spheres of influence"[7]. While cementing Beijing's "peaceful rise"[8] through its deeper integration into the international order, the United States maximizes its leverage to ensure effective global cooperation and policy coordination with China being offered the status of regional and not the one of global player.

1.2. The Middle East Strategy

As a result of the gradual process which has been described, America's foreign and defence policy priorities are shifting and the Middle East region progressively scores lower -compared to the past- as a valuable but still peripheral piece in the security puzzle of shaping Washington's grand new equilibrium strategy in Eurasia. However, pulling of resources for unfolding a solid and durable US strategic rebalancing to Asia is inextricably linked to successfully manage Middle East messy relations in a far from straightforward deteriorating security environment where "border conflicts, national ambitions, security fears, ethnic animosities and religious fanaticism[9]" forcefully coexist and persistently clash with each other. All in all, in an effort to achieve and maintain a functional balance of power in the region[10] by managing and stabilizing fragile interrelationships; a development allowing over time the US military presence there be kept to a minimum while the administration will continue leading from behind to defend its strategic interests in the region, which include: a) securing the free flow of oil to global markets, b) ensuring nuclear non-proliferation, c) sustaining counter-terrorism efforts and reducing extremist violence. At that point, giving rise to, as Brzezinski notes, a period when the United States becomes more of a "balancer, influencer, but not direct participant in mainland conflicts[11]".

In this case, to avoid a dangerous escalation of the region's security dilemmas due to intensified competition, America's gradual disengagement from the Middle East goes hand in hand with the establishment of geopolitical arrangements between contrasting interests which the US -via a coordination of alliances- succeeds to neutralize, establishing a so called 'neutral balance'. Thereby, creating a balance among competing interests that serves as a necessary prerequisite to provide room for neutralization of forces and space for allowing Washington's pull back from the region. Needless to say that, the aforementioned strategy will progressively evolve rather than just happen.

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[6] See Niblett, Robert: "A Tough Second Term for Obama on Foreign Policy", *Chatham House*, 7 November 2012, at http://www.chatamhouse.org/print/187059 and Brooks, Stephen; Ikenberry, John G. and Wohlforth, William C.: "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 1 (January-February 2013), p. 77.

[7] Ikenberry, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[9] Brookings Institution: "The West and Turkey: Their Role in Shaping a Wider Global Architecture", Proceedings – The 2012 Sakip Sabanci Discussion with Zbigniew Brzezinski, 2 May 2012, p. 8, at http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/events/2012/5/02%20turkey%20west/20120502_turkey_west.pdf.

[10] Evidently, as Walt points out, "if you are playing the balance of power game, you want to maximize your diplomatic flexibility and avoid becoming overly committed to any particular ally". The same applies to the context of US's 'special relationships' identified with allies including Israel and Saudi Arabia; Walt, Stephen: "Playing Hard to Get in the Middle East", *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2013, at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/blog/2072.

[11] Brookings Institution, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

1.3. The Role of Iran

The United States is restructuring Middle East's balance of power. Searching for one that is compatible with its strategy toward Asia - Pacific. In this course of action Iran's overall power potential can by no means be neglected. Especially if -under certain preconditions and trade-offs in terms of security concerns- it can serve the objectives of a revised US strategy for the region. Although anti-Americanism has been a central ideological pillar of Iran's government, Tehran's pragmatic foreign policy record implies that strategic interests of both countries should supersede ideology, especially when it comes to common areas of geopolitical accord (typical examples include alignment of US and Iranian interests in Central Asia and Caucasus in the direction of containing Russia's regional power broker status). On behalf of the US administration and its overestimation about Iranian anti-Americanism, the road ahead involves abolishing a recurring tendency to demonize Tehran's regime even when aligning interests have been observed. In such polarized environment, influencing the conduct of Iranian foreign policy and initiating cooperative efforts at the bilateral level becomes at least counterproductive. "This has been most tragically evident in the case of Tehran reaching out to Washington in the 1990s, after 9/11, in 2003, and again in 2005, only to be sharply rebuffed each time"[12].

United States' long-term strategic interests in Eurasia (Iran has an immediate outreach to Central Asia and presents itself as a more front-line state compared to Turkey), are better served by assisting Iran to improve its financial situation and restore its faltering economy through its reintegration in the international community; an event which paves the way for initiating Tehran's gentle strategic cooperation with the West. Even more, Iran's return to the global fold "is likely to strengthen the hand of moderate forces there and make Iran less disruptive in other contexts (e.g., Lebanon)"[13]. Are there any empirical findings which shed light on the suggestion that a strategy of 'neutral balancing' might be under way or at least seriously considered? Taking a look at present Middle Eastern shifting dynamics analysis focuses on the diplomatic efforts undertaken by the United States and the ideologically driven regime in Iran for a cautious rapprochement to resolve the nuclear crisis. Albeit his limited capacity to negotiate and finalize an agreement due to Iran's system of multiple power centers, promising progress has been achieved following Hassan Rowhani's June 2013 election in the presidency. The so-called 'Diplomat Sheikh' (a man who can make deals as its nickname refers to[14]), endorses a reformist political approach which favors moderation and encourages transparency. "The achievement of a long-term nuclear deal would further alter Iran's internal political picture, opening the door for more realists and reformers to compete with conservatives and hard-liners, who still dominate Iran's Parliament and judiciary"[15].

Without ignoring a variety of internal and external factors that have contributed to and influenced the US administration towards opening a channel of communication or even trying to establish a working relationship with Tehran, the more than alarming situation in both Iraq

[12] Walt, Stephen: "US Middle East Strategy: Back to Balancing", *Foreign Policy*, 21 November 2013, at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/11/21/us_middle_east_strategy_back_to_balancing.

[13] Walt, Stephen: "What's Really at Stake in the Iranian Nuclear Deal", *Foreign Policy*, 25 November 2013, at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/11/25/iran_the_us_and_the_middle_east_balance_of_power.

[14] The electoral behavior of Iranian voters revealed rejection of government's policies and a pull back from strengthening the 'resistance economy' scenario. "Among other frustrations, Iranians are fed up with their faltering economy, with the international sanctions that are increasingly chocking off trade and with a leadership that has proven incapable of relieving the pressure". See Fitzpatrick, Mark: "Reinforce Rowhani's Mandate for Change", *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 4 (August-September 2013), pp. 32-33.

[15] Unites States Institute of Peace: "Wright, Ignatious Analyze Iran Developments", United States Institute for Peace (USIP), 9 January 2014, at http://www.usip.org/publications/wright-ignatius-analyze-iran-developments.

and Syria seem to have pulled the trigger; alongside the change of guards in Iran where some initial but still credible signals have been observed including politically costly signals from Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei pointed at the hard-liners of his domestic front. A real debate among senior Iranian elites on the country's future course has come to take place in Tehran[16]. Even more in Washington, where, due to increasing pressures and constraints coming from Israel's and Saudi Arabia's vested interests and hardline lobbyist groups, pursuing a step-by-step rapprochement process with Tehran will require more than political willingness and skillful diplomacy on behalf of the US administration to convince its awkward and suspicious partner in Capitol Hill. In light of all the pitfalls involved, following ten years of diplomatic incompetence, key has now been the search for expanding the scope of the limited -interim- agreement that was concluded in Geneva on November 24 between the representatives of the so-called P5+1[17] group of states -China, France, Russia, the U.K., the U.S, Germany- and Iran.

As for Iraq, a Shiite-ruled semi-democratic Arab state, the continuation of exclusionary domestic politics, coupled by complex Arab uprisings and the trajectory of Syria's civil war have reached a stormy situation where three of the starkest and bloodiest lines dividing today's Middle East harshly cross it: "Sunnis (even themselves fragmented) against Shiites, monarchies against would-be democracies, and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council against Iran"[18]. Critically empowering the concept of a multi-level 'torn country' along ethnic and sectarian lines which continues pumping bulks of uncertainty over regional security settings. The result is a flaming polarization that threatens Iraq's already fragile cohesion and strategically needed territorial integrity. A striking reality which becomes greater week by week, thereby continue confirming the legacy of the past and the limitations of US power politics which have been vividly acknowledged in the case of Iraq's strategic failure and course of 'slow death'.

To cut a long story short, one of the key failings and the "principle results of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq was that it released the Shiite genie out of the Middle East bottle[19]" and paved the way for Iran steadily becoming one of the major strategic beneficiaries of the US occupation of Iraq. By reducing Iraq's power and by "allowing the Shia to become the dominant political force in Iraq, the US removed the main country balancing Iran, and helped bring to power a government that has at least some sympathies and links to Iran[20]". What is more, Tehran sieged the day for filling a power vacuum and has wisely exploited an opportunity for asserting its role and expanding its regional influence, including the use of its sectarian card[21]. In addition, with the Syrian civil war providing a great boost for expanding

[16] "The previous government of hardline Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has come under intense criticism for its links to the country's powerful Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and for alleged corruption"; *Ibid.*

[17] P5+1 group includes the five permanent member-states of the United Nations' Security Council (China, France, Russia, the UK, the US) and Germany.

[18] Lynch, Mark: "Iraq's Moment to Rise or Burn", *Foreign Policy*, 18 October 2013, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/18/iraq_s_moment_to_rise_or_burn.

[19] Ifantis, Kostas: *"The US and Turkey in the Fog of Regional Uncertainty"*, Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe, *GreeSE Paper* no. 73 (2013), p. 24.

[20] Walt, Stephen: "Conversations: Ten Years after the Iraq Invasion", *The European*, 20 March 2013, at http://www.theeuropean-magazine.com/stephen-walt--3/6617-ten-years-after-the-iraq-invasion.

[21] Apart from establishing religious connections, Iran's strategy to Iraq includes the promotion of commercial linkages and investment policies. In the broader sense, it should be noted that Iran's main concern is to establish strategic and not sectarian alliances while Tehran's approach entails certain degree of realpolitik and political pragmatism (examples include support for Assad's Baath regime in Syria, Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah or sliding with Armenia over Shi'a Azerbaijan and with Russia over Muslim Chechens). In that sense, religion and ideology are not the ones considered as the primary drivers of Iranian foreign policy.

"subsystemic attempts by each of the region's two main blocs -the US-led Sunni camp, incorporating the Arab Gulf, and the Iranian-led, predominantly Shii, so-called 'rejectionist faction' supported by Iraq and Hezbollah- to improve its position at its rival's expense[22]", Iraq remains politically weak and increasingly fragile in terms of security. More specifically, to hold control over established centrifugal tendencies regarding flourishing Iranian influence on its southern part and the Kurdistan Regional Government's burgeoning autonomy on its north respectively (KRG is nothing less than a de facto independent Kurdish state which only legally remains part of Iraq).

In light of the above, although it recognizes the failure of a policy under which Iraq could stand by itself to pursue a balancing policy among the diverging interests of its immediate neighbors, the United States cannot afford 'losing Baghdad'. Following loss of Egypt's primary role as the anchor of the Arab world and taking into consideration Syria's turbulent and uncertain future course[23], Washington's regrouping and game-changing for managing regional rivalries and the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war[24] indicate a necessity for rebalancing Middle East's security system. Under the present state, US strategic planning involves the approach of two non-Arab Muslim countries which are listed -along with Israel- as the most influential powers in the region to represent the leading strategic schism between Shia and Sunnis, namely Shiite Iran and Sunni Turkey[25].

To avoid Iraq's disintegration and above all to preserve a regional balance of power which will not be disrupted by Iran's exercise of greater influence in the Middle East and its continued rigid approach on Syria and Lebanon amongst others, the US has to examine the case of coordinating a different set of alliances; whereby Ankara and Tehran are being more actively engaged in the region's affairs while the Americans -apart from setting limits and constraints over their contradicting policies for enhanced regional influence- offer their consent for the two countries involved in establishing their distinct spheres of influence over Iraq. At this point, of utmost important will be the search for reaching a mutually beneficial final agreement between E3/EU +3 (France, Germany, UK, China, Russia, USA) and Iran over its nuclear program. The interim agreement which was accomplished during the Geneva talks in November 2013, opens the way for a positive outcome which will unlock Iran's reintegration in the international community and shed light of pragmatism in its foreign policy behavior. Correspondingly, to enable Washington considering the next step in its revised Middle East strategy. By unfolding a dual strategy of both empowerment and containment the US -without direct engagement- will prevent any of the two states becoming too powerful by

[22] Ifantis, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

[23] Ayub, Fatima: "The Gulf and Sectarianism", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 November 2013, at http://ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_gulf_and_sectarianism217.

[24] "One possibility is that Syria could fragment along ethno-religious lines, with the Kurds having large-scale autonomy in the north along the Syrian-Turkish border and the Alawites retreating into a separate enclave in northwest Syria. Such an outcome would be highly unstable and could encourage outside powers, especially Iran, to seek to exploit Syria's internal weaknesses for their own partisan purposes". Larrabee, Stephen F. and Naderp, Alireza (2013): "*Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East*", Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, pp. 35-36.

[25] By reviewing Egypt's present strategic paralysis and Saudi Arabia's fervent path of fueling and propagating sectarianism to sustain the regional status quo (keeping Iran politically alienated and diplomatically crippled), Turkey's soft-power model to present itself as the vanguard of moderate Sunni Islam connects to US's strategic interests in the Greater Middle East. In light of the above, "the fact is for the first time in half a century, Washington lacks a truly consequential Arab partner with whom to cooperate on matters relating to peace and war". See Miller, Aaron D.: "The Shrinking: Why the Middle East is Less and Less Important for the United States", *Foreign Policy*, 17 October 2013, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/17/the_shrinking_does_the_middle_east_matter.

using Iraq's stiff competition arena and the Kurdish issue (involving Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran) for Turkey and Iran to check each other.

2. The Role of Turkey: Opportunities and Threats for Matching US Interests

2.1. The External Front

Under AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/Justice and Development Party*) governance and the special political weight carried by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey's foreign agenda is embodied in a more confident and autonomous policy stance that leverages on the country's upgraded regional economic and geopolitical position. There has been considerable evidence regarding Turkey's regional focus both in economic and foreign policy issues including: a) significant rise in regional trade links and the importance of the country's economy as a major emerging market and recipient of foreign direct investment (FDI), b) Turkey's external geopolitical stance on a number of issues that display a desire for a more autonomous foreign policy, aiming to improve the country's regional geopolitical position as a player in its own right (examples include Turkey's stance on Arab uprisings, and its relations with Israel, Syria, Iran, and Iraq). In this regard, Turkish foreign policy is to be shaped increasingly by the country itself and less through a paternalistic direction from traditional Western power centers. Some of the differences that have arisen with the West may well be attributed to Ankara's resurgent self-confidence, or what one observer termed "Turkish Gaullism - a Turkey that is "more nationalist, self-confident and defiant"[26].

In contrast with Kemalism, AKP rejects the idea that Turkey is an exclusively Western country. The fact that AKP's ideology underlines the uniqueness of the Islamic tradition and advocates Turkey's identification with Muslim societies should not be short-sighted interpreted as a doctrine which sketches the terrain of a zero-sum game taking place between the West and the Islamic world. On the contrary, as a regional player aiming to spread its leverage and improve the capabilities factor in its foreign policy portfolio, Turkey is compelled to follow a balancing strategy between westernization (including differentiated dosages of Americanization and Europeanization) and autonomization. In a geopolitical environment dynamic in character and subject to constant change, combining scenarios in order to formulate and execute policies that serve multiple goals is an integral part of Ankara's smart foreign policy strategy albeit the posing difficulties and challenges that arise in regards to its proper implementation.

During the last decade, sustaining the EU membership drive has become at least problematic for both sides with EU-Turkish relations having run a distance from the so called "golden age of Europeanization in Turkey (2002-5)"[27] up to the "risk of slow death"[28]. As a result of series of intergovernmental competitive bargaining among conflicting national

[26] Cornell, Svante E.: "Changes in Turkey: What drives Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Winter 2012), pp. 17-18.
[27] Larrabee, Stephen F.: "Turkey's New Geopolitics," *Survival*, vol. 52, no. 2 (April-May 2010), p. 173.
[28] Barysh, Katinka: "Can Turkey Combine EU Accession and Regional Leadership?", *Policy Brief - Centre for European Reform*, 25 January 2010, p. 3, at http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/pb_barysch_turkey_25jan10-232.pdf.

interests, the lack of EU member-states' commitment for adopting a coherent European strategy for Turkey on the one hand and Turkish society's -political and institutional- immaturity to adopt the EU's democratization package on the other, do not allow the achievement of sufficient progress to boost Turkey's European card. Likewise, the vacuum is filled by increasing the dosage of autonomization in the conduct of Turkish Middle Eastern Policy. With Turkey's European prospects fading out -at least in the near future- and EU's leverage over Ankara diminishing, Erdoğan 's limited room to maneuver and lack of incentive necessitates a rough and often inexperienced policy shift to further accelerate Turkey's regional opening. In the past few years, Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East has become more assertive, active and even overly proactive in some areas; an outcome which unavoidably brings Ankara closer to Washington and its Middle East strategic project for shaping the region's geopolitics. Extricating from the West should go hand in hand with a pooling of resources for establishing partnerships and pursuing strategic synergies that in the end will make it a more valuable future partner for the Western camp.

Nevertheless, Erdogan's anxiety and Davutoğlu's growing hyperactivity to shortly establish a more than prominent regional role for Turkey, demonstrate that the Turkish government has been expecting an intensification of Washington's political willingness to initiate a process of rapprochement with Iran and started preparing accordingly. More than that, the revised strategy over US policy in the Middle East, involves a policy scenario whereby Washington will elevate Turkey's role to counterweight Iran's regional ambitions[29]. Considering time constraints, Turkey's strategic priority of opening itself to the Arab world becomes more intense including policies of reconnection with its neighbors to close the gap that has been separating them for more than a century. The termination of Ankara's strategic partnership with Tel Aviv and the unavoidable sharp deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations -a fundamental axis of Turkey's revised strategy- provide further boost to AKP's Arab opening. "Prime Minister Erdogan's government has spent enormous diplomatic energy and capital to raise Turkey's political and economic profile in the region with the goal of making it the leading country of the Middle East"[30]. Altogether, enabling Turkey to enlarge its influence in the transformed political landscape of the Middle East and finally -with the support provided by the US- to eventually lead Sunni Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood regimes.

Still, the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt and above all its support for the Syrian opposition, signal two case-studies where Turkey's elevation as a regional player capable of acting as an 'order setting' agent is far from being accomplished. At the same time, an inflated idea and a growing overestimation of its influence in Middle Eastern affairs has been repeatedly observed. A reality reaffirming both Turkey's rising anxiety over the US's next geopolitical move for opening an initial diplomatic path to Iran's cooperation with the West and Ankara's strategic inexperience to dig its heels in the region's 'deep waters'. In particular, Ankara's opposition to the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria has exposed the limits of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy, "including Ankara's ability to shape events on its own. Turkey has been forced to recognize that it has neither the diplomatic capacity nor the military

[29] "For Turkey, a closer relationship with the Americans could help insure that Washington's future policies vis-à-vis Iran better incorporate Turkish interests. An empowered Turkey with the backing of the Unites States, could present itself as a regional leader, with the added benefit, from the Turkish perspective, of decreasing Washington's regional footprint"; Bleek, Philipp C. and Stein, Aaron.: "Turkey and America Face Iran", *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 2 (April-May 2012) pp. 33-34.

[30] Sayari, Sabri.: "New Directions in Turkey–USA Relations", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2013), p. 136.

muscle to drive a peace process in Syria."[31] Side by side, Turkey will continue being at odds with Saudi Arabia (Ankara and Riyadh have already challenged themselves in Egypt with Turkey supporting former President's Morsi Muslim Brotherhood party and the Saudis with General Sisi's government) regarding regional competition over power sharing arrangements and respective influence among Sunni forces in the Arab world[32]. It is imperative that the United States will have to act as broker in the struggle of competing spheres of influence between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. After all, "a U.S.-Iranian entente would also redefine the historic relationship of the United States with the Saudis […] It will put a generally unpopular country, Saudi Arabia -a state that has been accustomed to having its way in Washington- on notice that the United States has other options. For their part, the Saudis have nowhere to go, and they will cling to whatever guarantees the United States provides them in the face of an American-Iranian entente"[33].

In view of the above, behind AKP's foreign policy conduct and its impact over US-Turkish relations, what has been acknowledged is an effort to increase Ankara's constructive role as an agent of stability in a more than troubled region. Turkey perceives that, by engaging itself in the Middle East through the use of its soft power instruments (economic and cultural integration) together by promoting a steady opening to the Arab world with special emphasis on Muslim solidarity, it becomes a more useful regional partner for the United States. An approach which underscores that, in contrast to past experiences when -as a rival to the Arabs- Ankara was serving western/US interests that promoted destabilizing policies in its neighboring countries (Syria, Iran, Iraq), Turkey's new positive start in the Arab world is a genuinely reversed one. It now entails a meaningful approach that gives precedence to Ankara's beneficial role for stability seeking on issues of strategic priority. Through this process, US and Turkish interests are in closer alignment with Ankara being -in principle at least- able to contribute in a range of broader policy objectives set by Washington[34].

All considered, a successful process of rapprochement between the United States and Iran will transform relations and regional power politics between all competing rivals, resulting in considerable shifts of policy on pending issues. With Turkey emerging as a strategic beneficiary to counterbalance Iran's power potential and expanded leverage after the Arab uprisings, Ankara will be compelled to dig even deeper into Middle East's security affairs-including in particular the Kurdish issue- play the Sunni card and signal a temporary withdrawal from its EU accession process[35]. Although in the long term, Turkey's economic

[31] Larrabee, Stephen F.: "Turkey's New Kurdish Opening", *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 5 (October-November 2013), p. 144.

[32] "Being on the same page with Riyadh concerning Assad's demise does not mean, however, that the Syrian policies of Turkey and Saudi Arabia are driven by similar considerations. It is clear that Riyadh's primary concern is to keep Iran at bay, even if this comes at the cost of settling for a failed state ruled by Sunni extremists, rather than an Iran-friendly regime in Syria"; "Erdogan under pressure as Syrian crisis spreads to Iraq", *Al Monitor*, 7 January 2014, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/spreading-syria-crisis-pressures-erdogan.html#ixzz2pnnYlkke.

[33] Friedman, George: "Strategic reversal: The United States, Iran and the Middle East", *Stratfor*, 5 January 2014, at http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/strategic-reversal-united-states-iran-and-middle-east.

[34] American interests "include ensuring that emerging political actors maintain friendly relations with the US and its regional allies, consider Iran, and not Israel, as the main security threat in the region, and subscribe to market liberalisation policies, keeping barriers for trade and investment with the West and the US-led regional alliance at a minimum". See Akkoyunlu, Karabekir; Nicolaïdis, Calypso and Öktem, Kerem (2013): *The Western Condition: Turkey, the US and the EU in the New Middle East*, Oxford, South East European Studies at Oxford (SESSOX), p. 9.

[35] In the event of Iran's turn to a more liberal and credible future partner for the US, Turkey's aspirations for achieving full EU membership will inevitably spring back to life. A successful conclusion of its Middle East strategy will effectively enhance Turkey's leverage and bargaining power to enter Europe. Besides, Ankara will

growth potential[36] and projection of its soft power as a successful embodiment of Islamic democracy most probably give it an advantage over Iran in the Middle East and beyond, Turkish foreign policy will experience short term losses. Starting from its decreasing leverage and its constrained influence in Caucasus and Central Asia where Russia will soon capitalize its contribution as a broker in a process of mediation between Iran and the international community to bring about an interim agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Armenia's (September 2013) and foremost Ukraine's last minute refusal to sign Association Agreements with the EU during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius (November 2013), are indicative examples related with Russia's role and bargaining capacity with the United States over Tehran's reintegration in the international community[37]. Russia's offering of its 'good offices' included, in a form of a trade-off with the US, limiting EU's influence and presence in South Caucasus and keeping Ukraine, firmly, in Moscow's sphere of influence; in the end, securing Russia's dominant role as the regional power broker[38]. Finally, in terms of Turkey's energy security, Russia's upgraded geopolitical status coupled by growing concerns over expanding Iranian domination of Iraq, push Ankara towards increasing its efforts for achieving satisfactory oil and gas independence from expensive[39] natural resources of Russian origin; a development leading to greater energy cooperation with the less costly and politically less risky Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, producing strained relations with the central government in Baghdad and resulting in an unavoidable growing degree of Turkish involvement in the Arab world.

2.2. The Role of Iraq and the Kurdish Issue

The expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq and the openly sectarian policies in favor of Shiite majority followed by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, bring forward Ankara's role as a counterweight to Tehran's leverage over Baghdad. "As long as Iraq remains too weak to play this role, […] both the Americans and the Turks believe that Turkey is best placed to hold the line"[40] and avoid a severe disintegration process of turning a 'torn' country into an uncontrolled battlefield between Sunnis and Shiites, in addition to the thorny Kurdish question. A US-Iran alignment of interests has already been observed for providing political coverage to the central government in Baghdad and against renewed sectarian violence and

need the EU as an anchor of stability to maintain its achievements and continue projecting its soft-power in the region. In addition, due to unexpected crisis evolving in a fluid and fragmented environment, the EU will serve both as an anchor of Turkish political change and as an honest broker for resolving conflicts on the domestic front (e.g. economic volatility, role of political Islam, identity issues).

[36] Foreign direct investments in Turkey will be negatively affected after a temporary withdrawal from its accession process in the EU. The absence of sustaining a foreign investment bonanza next to the experience of competing in the European market will most probably limit Turkey's competitive edge in relation to its neighboring partners and rivalries.

[37] The Eastern Partnership includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Although Georgia initialled an association agreement with the EU that should be signed in 2014, Russia will continue pressure its neighbor and exercise influence on Georgia (as in the case of Armenia) to undermine the agreement.

[38] Even in case of future alignment of interests between Tehran and Washington over Caucasus and Central Asia (with Caucasus being an area of considerable concern for Iran) and the combined leverage that could be exercised by both Iran and Turkey over the region, Russia was quick enough to gain provisions which cement its prominent role and political influence in the region.

[39] One should also consider "Turkey's problematic current account deficit, which has recently ranged between 6.5 and 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product, is roughly comparable to its energy import bill; with its rises and falls relating as much to changes in international oil prices as anything else". "New Pipeline from Kurdistan to Turkey Poses Risk for Relationship with Iraq", *OilPrice.com*, 17 July 2013, at http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Middle-East/New-Pipeline-from-Kurdistan-to-Turkey-Poses-Risk-for-Relationship-with-Iraq.html.

[40] Barkey, Henri J.: "Turkish–Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring", *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 6, (December 2012-January 2013), p. 149.

security threats including the rise of al-Qaeda linked Sunni fighters (the bloodshed has surged to the highest level since 2008 with over 8,000 Iraqi deaths since the beginning of 2013). Likewise, "violence in Iraq has spiked as al-Qaeda-linked militants have now begun targeting the Iraqi government and anyone seen to be supporting it, raising fears of a return to the sectarian conflict of 2006-2007"[41]. After all, "Tehran no doubt recognizes that a wider Sunni-Shi'a civil war on its doorstep would be particularly dangerous because the spillover could easily affect Iran's own fractious minorities and fragile internal politics"[42].

Washington's attempts to rebalance Middle East's security system are linked to Iran's and Turkey's more active engagement in the region's affairs, with the United States setting limits and constraints over their contradicting policies for enhanced regional influence. By both promoting and containing Turkey's efforts to forge multi-layered closer political and commercial ties with the government of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region in north Iraq[43] and by allowing the Kurds to project their power for economic independence against the central government in Baghdad (i.e. through the energy framework agreement that was signed in March 2013[44] and aims to promote Turkey's strategy for establishing itself as the pivotal east-west energy hub), Americans' play of Kurdish card can be used in both directions; to uphold or undermine Iraqi sovereignty. Under present conditions, the aim is to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, contain Iranian influence and exercise pressure to al-Maliki for adopting a more moderate, inclusive and less sectarian approach in treating the Sunni minority and the Kurdish population.

Regarding the role of Turkey in particular, the government follows a double-track policy with internal and external implications. Apart from exercising its soft-power nexus and expanding its zone of political influence in KRG-controlled Iraq with obvious gains for the Turkish economy in the trade-investment-energy realm, Prime Minister Erdoğan has come to strengthen Turk-Kurd ties for its domestic (Kurdish) front as well. Towards this direction, he

[41] Al-Qaeda consists of a common enemy for both Washington and Tehran but also a threat to Turkey. By all means, Iran does not want to become encircled by Salafis. It is not by accident that in early January 2014, "Iran offered to join the US in sending military aid to the Shiite government in Baghdad, in an effort to dislodge militants from Ramadi, the capital city of Iraq's Anbar province and a Sunni stronghold"; "Regional actors dealt new hands as US-Iran ties thaw", *Zaman*, 12 January 2014, at http://www.todayszaman.com/news-336230-regional-actors-dealt-new-hands-as-us-iran-ties-thaw.html.

[42] Pollack, Kenneth M.: "Tehran and Washington: Unlikely Allies in an Unstable Iraq", *Brookings*, 3 June 2013, at http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2013/06/31-iraq-iran-pollack.

[43] Vast improvement of relations with the KRG has become very popular and profitable for Turkey. Regarding trade links in particular "booming trade with the KRG region, has made Iraq Turkey's second-biggest export market after Germany, with US$ 10.8 billion in 2012. More than two thirds of Turkish exports to Iraq go to the KRG area"; Seibert, Thomas: "Turkey Offers Olive Branch to Iraq", *The National*, 10 November 2013, at http://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/turkey-offers-olive-branch-to-iraq.

[44] Power generation for fueling Turkey's growing economy has excessively relied on Russian, Iranian and Azeri imports. KRG's vast reserves provide a cheaper source of energy supply for Turkish authorities. Concerning natural gas in particular "Kurdish gas is attractive to Turkey because the framework agreement between Turkey and the KRG includes specific terms on the price of gas. Turkey thus has leverage over pricing […] KRG supplies could be three times cheaper than Russian and Iranian sources due to this leverage". To avoid gearing up Baghdad's reactions for bypassing the central government, Turkey and the KRG did not sign a bilateral agreement; "instead they turned the KRG energy portfolio over to public and private energy companies; See Tol, Gönül: "Has Energy –Hungry Turkey Finally Solved the Kurdish Problem", *CNN*, 1 November 2013, at http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/01/opinion/turkey-kurdish-energy/; Apart from Turkish companies, the two US most successful major integrated energy companies in the world, ExxonMobil and Chevron have already signed exploration deals with KRG to expand Kurdish drilling (French Total is also increasing its presence in KRG) The fact that ExxonMobil is withdrawing from southern Iraq (increased Iranian leverage) and expands its presence in the northern Kurdish part (increased Turkish leverage) is an indicative example of how the -US leading from behind- balance of power system will work in Iraq.

has made use of Iraqi Kurdish leader and President of KRG Massoud Barzani political capital, influence and leverage over Turkey's Kurds in a course of revitalizing the slow pace of Ankara's Kurdish peace process and sidelining –through a divide and rule policy by the Turkish government- Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) hardliners (including its Syrian extension)[45]. In mid-November 2013, an exceptional example of political communication took place -during a joint meeting between Erdogan and Barzani- in the Kurdish-dominated city of Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey. Even more, as far as the electoral behavior of Kurdish voters is concerned, one should also consider the political gains for AKP's campaign in a highly polarized elections year for Turkey (2014). At this point, just a few months prior to local elections, the Turkish government has little room to maneuver and will choose not to risk alienating and possibly losing the support of nationalists amongst AKP voters. However, "Erdogan appears convinced that he has already made enough concessions to hold onto the Kurds who voted for the AKP at the last election"[46] (i.e. the reforms that were included in September's 2013 'democratization package'). On the whole, evaluating the alliance between Prime Minister Erdogan and President Barzani in a regional setting, it can be viewed as an "inevitable byproduct of a Sunni axis in Mesopotamia and it will seek a solution to the Kurdish issue by sidelining the PKK in Turkey and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria"[47].

As such, the Syrian dimension of the Kurdish issue should also be added in a more than complex regional environment. On this subject, the "Syrian Kurdish challenge is complicated by a power struggle between the PKK and Massoud Barzani, for leadership of the Syrian Kurds. This rivalry is likely to have an important impact on the development of the Kurdish issue in Syria and the region more broadly"[48]. Turkey supports Barzani's efforts for achieving a moderate solution to the Kurdish problem and make use of the country's "strong economic potential to woo the PYD and draw it into a Turkish zone of influence and prosperity, as it has done with the KRG."[49] However, to keep the balance of power in order, in return for Turkey's growing leverage and increased power over northern Iraq, which by no means should it lay the foundations for Iraq's disintegration, Kurdish groups in Syria led by the PYD[50] -approached as Syrian offshoot of PKK- will retain their political autonomy over Barzani, for leadership of the Syrian Kurds and will probably establish their semi-autonomous entity in the Kurdish-majority areas along the Syrian-Turkish borders[51]. With that in mind, the PYD "is

[45] Following a ceasefire called by jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in March 2013, progress has once more stalled. Ankara hopes to use Barzani's influence as a respected figure among Turkey's Kurds to bring them back to the negotiating table. As the Turkish Minister of Energy commented, "if Barzani has any importance in the eyes of our citizens, that importance will make its contribution". See "Erdogan meets Barzani after Syrian Kurds autonomy call", *Al-Alam*, 16 November 2013, at http://en.alalam.ir/news/1534977.

[46] Comment by Istanbul-based analyst Gareth Jenkins. "Turkey's power struggle affects Kurdish issue", *Al-Monitor*, 9 January 2014, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/kurdish-turkey-gulen-power-struggle.html.

[47] "Erdogan-Barzani 'Diyarbakir encounter' milestone", Al-Monitor, 20 November 2013, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/erdogan-barzani-kurdistan-diyarbakir-political-decision.html.

[48] Larrabee, "Turkey's New Kurdish Opening", *op. cit.*, p. 140.

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] "PYD has taken over control of most Kurdish settlements along the 911 kilometers Turkish-Syrian border […] For Ankara, it became a strategic imperative to neutralize the PKK by disengaging it from the Tehran-Damascus alliance"; Ifantis, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 25.

[51] In November 2013, ethnic Syrian Kurds (Kurds comprise around 10% to 15% of the Syrian population and are mostly located in the northeast and northwest of the country, chunked along the borders of Turkey and Iraq) declared an interim autonomous government in the northeast of the country, formed by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). However, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) -an umbrella group which includes a range of Kurdish political parties most of which are closely allied with Barzani's Democratic Party- has not joined the transitional authority.

forming its own alliance, which counters the Turkey-Syrian opposition and pro-Barzani Syrian Kurds alliance"[52]. A more flexible PYD, relatively independent from Barzani's political control and his close links with Ankara, increase "Turkish officials fear that the PYD-controlled areas could act as a base for PKK attacks against Turkish territory and security forces"[53].

Furthermore, Iranian interests are served by trying to sabotage Ankara's recent peace talks with PKK and prevent the conclusion of a lasting peace agreement between the Turkish government and PKK[54]. Tehran has a vital interest to promote a long-lasting continuation of the armed conflict and "to undermine any peace process in Turkey that would simultaneously help Turkey overcome one of its foundational problems, diminish the space for manipulation through third party governments and empower Turkey in its region"[55]. After all, the Kurdish issue is present, apart from Turkey, Syria and Iraq, in Iran as well. In the aftermath of a Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and Syria which is followed by PKK's military withdrawal from Turkey, the Iranian side of the Kurdish issue[56] will pop up as well and offer encouragement to the Kurdish Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) for a more radical stance against Iran and "resume its terrorist attacks against Iranian territory"[57]. Looking at Tehran's pro-Assad but mostly pro-Baath approach, it remains to be seen how Iran's more formal or informal participation at the Geneva II Middle East peace conference[58] for bringing an end to the Syrian civil war (January 22, 2014), will influence political developments in Syria and the future of Syrian Kurds in particular.

In view of the above, US strategy for keeping the balance of power between Turkey and Iran intact and its vision of a more "inclusive post-Assad Syrian government in which the Kurds have a bigger say"[59], further perplexes AKP's efforts to reach a peaceful resolution to Ankara's Kurdish problem and remove a major strategic vulnerability for consolidating Turkey's elevated role in the region. Taking into account the uncertainty hanging over Iraq, it may also be in Turkey's interest to withhold a resolution of the Kurdish issue. What is more, in a policy scenario where the balance of power proves to be a dysfunctional one and the escalating crisis in Iraq leads to a disintegration-collapse process, the Turkish government shall consider all available options; even taking advantage of the Kurdish front for invading northern Iraq and establish access to its rich -of strategic importance for the growing needs of Turkish economy- energy resources. All in all, when it comes to Northern Iraq and Ankara's relations with the central government in Baghdad, the Turkish government seems to combine the two scenarios over Iraq's future (united or divided) in order to formulate and implement policies that serve multiple goals.

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[52] "Turkey must refocus on Kurdish peace process", *Al Monitor*, 25 October 2013, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/10/turkey-kurdish-peace-process-syria.html.

[53] Larrabee, "Turkey's New Kurdish Opening", *op. cit.*, p. 139.

[54] Turkish media have been reporting that "in retaliation to Turkey's stance in Syria, Iranian intelligence has been talking to the PKK leadership in northern Iraq's Qandil Mountains to convince it to abandon the peace process, promising support for Kurdish demands for autonomy in northern Syria in return". Tol, Has Energy - Hungry Turkey Finally Solved the Kurdish Problem, *op. cit.*

[55] Akkoyunlu et al., "The Western Condition: Turkey, the US and the EU in the New Middle East", *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

[56] Around seven to ten million Kurds live in Iran's western provinces.

[57] Larrabee, "Turkey's New Kurdish Opening", *op. cit.*, p. 142.

[58] Although Iran has not been formally invited, US Secretary of State John Kerry paves the way towards this direction, by announcing that "he could envision an Iranian role at the Geneva II conference". Thereby, accepting Iran's role and influence for achieving a political solution to the Syrian conflict. "Regional actors dealt new hands as US-Iran ties thaw", *Zaman*, *op. cit.*

[59] Abramowitz, Morton and Sims, Jessica: "Erdogan's Kurdish issues", *The National Interest*, 28 January 2013, at http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/erdogans-kurdish-issues-8024.

2.3. Implications for US Strategy

"Turkish–American relations since the 1960s have been characterized by recurring tension […]. Yet the relationship has endured because of shared interest in larger strategic 'projects', from the containment of Soviet power to Turkey's EU candidacy"[60]. This is how an alliance management system works. A continuous effort that "involves pursuing both common interests and competitive interests and thus essentially a process of bargaining, either tacit or explicit. The most fundamental common interest is to preserve the alliance . . . "[61]. Nowadays, US larger strategic project in the Middle East is identified with the ultimate goal of preserving a regional balance of power. Iran's overall power potential coupled by a successful gradual reintegration process into the world economy, paves the way for an empowered and more prominent Turkish role to counterweight Tehran's projection of influence in the Greater Middle East. In that sense, "whether within a NATO context, coordinating or acting in parallel with the United States, or as an autonomous actor, Turkey's importance to US strategy will continue to grow"[62] along with a number of risk factors next to Turkey's choice for fulfilling such a challenging and demanding role.

Although it is premature -pending on upcoming developments to negotiate the finalization of a permanent solution between the international community and Iran- to bring forward a SWOT analysis on Turkey's capacity to undertake an influential care role and accomplish such a challenging mission, there are existing concerns which spell out the possibility of a risk factor next to Turkey' choice which might grow to be the weak link in the pursuit of a reassessed US strategy in the Middle East and beyond. Relevant concerns and strategic calculations for stability seeking in major security policy issues, do not involve the domain of bilateral relations between Ankara and Tehran but the harsh constraints at the regional level where Turkey bargains for challenging Iranian ambitions through the pursuit of a more assertive role (i.e. handling relations and crisis management with other members of the so-called rejectionist camp that includes Hezbollah and Hamas and aim at confronting the West or even diverging types of Sunni extremists and terrorist organizations with significant support networks, upgraded operational capacity and sustained strategic depth).

For an increasingly dynamic key middle power in the Greater Middle East, matching ambitions with pressing realities requires strategic patience and forward thinking. Establishing a sphere of regional influence "of the type to which Turkey aspires is a process that takes place gradually and incrementally over decades and not as an immediate result of the hyperactivity"[63] of policy entrepreneurs which include the Turkish Prime Minister or the Minister of Foreign Affairs. On top of that, "there may be good reasons to question the long-term compatibility of Turkey's regional leadership ambitions and the reception of this agenda in the Arab Middle East. To interpret Turkey's regional popularity as an appetite for the emergence of a new hegemon in the region seems problematic, particularly if the potential hegemon in question is not only not Arabic speaking, but also perceived as neo-Ottoman"[64].

[60] Lesser, Ian O.: "The State of US-Turkish Relations: Moving Beyond Geopolitics" in Burwell, Frances G. (ed.) (2008): *The Evolution of US-Turkish Relations in a Transatlantic Context*, Colloquium Report, Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, p. 44.
[61] Altunışık, Meliha B.: "The Middle East in Turkey–USA Relations: Managing the Alliance", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2013), p. 171.
[62] Manning, Robert A.: "US Strategy in a Post-Western World", *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 5 (October-November 2013), p. 128.
[63] Cornell, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
[64] Akkoyunlu et al., "The Western Condition: Turkey, the US and the EU in the New Middle East", *op. cit.*, p. 16.

After all, no state wishing to dominate via soft-power resources can afford the limitations posed by unilateral post-imperial ambitions. These ambitions are mainly extracted from the politics of the identity domain and in fact constitute a conservative approach that primarily derives from the old model of civilizational particularities and its tools of culture and traditionalism.

Turkey's quest for sustaining an upgraded role while achieving concrete results involves capacity building and pooling of resources for establishing alliances and engaging in strategic synergies. It is of paramount importance for Turkey to examine how solid its international openings have been and evaluate the network of alliances designed by Ankara. Ultimately, with soft-power as its main comparative advantage to engage diverse counterparts, sustained economic growth needs to go hand-in-hand with restructuring and upgrading via heavily increased financial instruments, advanced technology, human resources and intellectual capacity in all aspects of Ankara's foreign policy machinery. Implementation of the new Turkish statecraft requires adjustment of Davutoğlu's 'rhythmic diplomacy' to the needs of the region's new geopolitical choreography provided by the US. Soon enough, the United States will be in a position to evaluate Turkish performance and perhaps acknowledge that Ankara was in need for a few years of previous work experience, before meeting the strategic demands of the job description drafted by Washington's foreign policy establishment.

As far as Turkey's domestic front is concerned, Washington will continue providing its political support to the governing party and avoid experimenting with the Kemalist opposition. Notwithstanding, one of the most basic principles of Kemalist foreign policy recognizes the notions of non-interference in the domestic affairs of Middle East countries and non-involvement in the region's conflicts. Such a development would put Ankara and Washington at odds since it conflicts with US strategy over Turkey's more active engagement in the regional balance of power domain. By the same token, a "template that effectively integrates Islam, democracy and vibrant economics"[65] like "the Turkish model of secularism and liberal Islam could, in particular, appeal to Iran's intelligentsia while Turkey's relatively open and dynamic society is an attractive alternative to Iran's stifling and repressive political system. Getting closer to achieving such a promising role, Turkey's status as a role-model for exercising smart-power in the region and beyond, will be completed and socially legitimized by introducing the necessary domestic reforms of power-sharing arrangements in order to pluralize the political arena and avoid direct signs of authoritarian governance and autocratic tendencies which have been pursued by the Turkish Prime Minister during his third term of office. "More dangerously for the Islamic Republic, Turkey's more dynamic and open society and political system could encourage Iran's own restive opposition movements to press harder for domestic political reform, especially if reform movements elsewhere in the Middle East gain greater momentum".[66] In either way, struggling with a more mature, modernized and competitive society might result in facilitating Iran's shift to a more liberal and moderate direction. On top of that, it remains to be seen how the power struggle and stiff competition between the Turkish Prime Minister and the AKP and his former power partner the Gülen-Hizmet movement (led by Turkish Islamic scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen) will spell out in 2014; a year of two critical elections (local government-municipal and presidential).

Foreign policy initiatives have been capitalized as a strategic tool for consolidating and extending AKP's electoral power base domestically alongside paving the way for introducing

[65] Lando, Thomas Jr.: "In Turkey's Example, Some See Map for Egypt," *The New York Times*, 5 February 2011, at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/middleeast/06turkey.html?_r=0.
[66] Larrabee et al., "Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East", *op. cit.*, p.3.

a larger political space around the conservative-democratic identity externally. However, the most serious worry deriving from AKP's strategic rapprochement with the US and the implementation of a regional leadership agenda which embraces Sunni solidarity[67], associates with domestic reactions when it comes to Turkey's long standing resolution of its identity problem, over which the two middle classes -the politically conservative and religious, and the secular Kemalist- clash against. A key issue in this respect is how far, in the event of a 'Sunnification' of Turkish foreign policy in an increasingly conservative society, the more than needed gradual emergence of a new domestic power balance that allows for an institutional evolution that is more democratic and favors a much broader social consensus while encouraging the economic rise and participation of the middle strata, will be harmed or derailed[68]. What is more, is to bring about the establishment of a firm pillar of secured reconciliation between democracy and development along with modernity and religion. Lastly, raising concerns are further complicated by the expected lifted role of the Turkish Armed forces (TSK) for providing a safety net around the conduct of Turkish foreign policy in the region; an issue than might already have been agreed on -at the highest level- between the government and the army.

3. The Role of Energy Security

In a period of profound upheaval, careful navigation of the Turkey-Iraq-Iran nexus in the regional security complex might prove an integral part and -if it turns out to be a successful one- a valuable one for maximizing US influence and leverage over time and steadily pursue its strategic interests in the Middle East and Eurasia. Acting as a global shaper, United States strategic rebalancing to Asia-Pacific entails -amongst others- the implementation of policies which ensure provisions of deeper geopolitical understanding in reference to energy security and diversification of sources in the Greater Middle East. Indeed, "perhaps the most dramatic example of greater South–South economic activity is the growing 'energy nexus' in which two-thirds of Middle Eastern oil is exported to East Asia; China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan receive over 70 percent of their oil imports from Gulf states. This has generated growing commercial and cross-investment interdependence between the two regions, and may increasingly affect their geopolitical calculations. This trend will increasingly affect US influence in the Middle East over time"[69].

At the same time, North America is narrowing the gap between supply and demand enabling the US to continue becoming less reliant and dependable on Middle East energy

[67] In this course of action, Saudi Arabia will remain a main rival due to competing regional interests that derive from the strategic rapprochement between the US and Iran. However, as the Saudis run out of choices, they will have to once more approach the United States as a guarantor of their interests; in effect trying to reach some sort of political accommodation with Turkey.

[68] At present the stakes are high and the 'die hard' Prime Minister Erdogan is approached as part of the problem and not part of the solution. Prominent political figures among AKP also include the President of the Republic Abdullah Gül who is considered as more receptive to democratic credentials, more conciliatory to manage Turkey's identity problem (for both liberals and secularists) and more pro-Western compared to the Prime Minister. Erdogan's continuous autocratic tendencies and oppressive actions for expanding Islamic social engineering have also affected the financial markets and the prospects of Turkish economy. "Having problems finding credit, the negative repercussions will press harder on Turkey's economic growth, which is based on financing the current deficit". See "Five reasons 2014 could be tough year for Erdogan", *Al Monitor*, 5 January 2014, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/erdogan-elections-power-struggle-kurd-gulen-syria.html.

[69] Manning, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

resources. Thereby, enjoying a favorable position compared to its Arab partners in the Persian Gulf. By exploiting an evolution of great strategic significance and at the same time pursuing a rapprochement with Tehran, Washington will steadily capitalize the benefits of its favorable position to increase the leverage of its diplomatic -flexible maneuvers- portfolio toward the old-established preferential treatment of the resource-rich despotic Gulf regimes. However, even in a case of America's energy independence from Arab oil, "the security of the region's vast oil reserves will continue to be a key US interest and reduced energy imports do not mean the United States can or should disengage from the Middle East or the world"[70]. With the US in search of a strategic alliance with China, the observer can't help but notice the example of a country which remains increasingly reliant on energy imports in the medium term to power continued economic growth. Regarding its energy relations with the Middle East in particular (China's largest oil importer), Beijing's dependence on the region's oil is increasing and will continue to grow according to current economic forecasting [in 2011, China imported 2.9 million barrels per day (b/d) of Middle Eastern oil, which accounted for 60 percent of China's oil imports[71]].

Looking at its energy needs where a growing portion of China's imported oil will be obtained from the Middle East, Chinese state-run oil companies are heavily investing in the region and have signed service contracts to develop sizeable upstream projects in several large oil fields in both Iraq and Iran (including al-Ahdab, Halfaya and Rumaila in Iraq and Azadegan and Yadavaran in Iran)[72]. In addition, the projects in Iraq have more efficiently progressed leading to elevated Iraqi-Chinese ties. China is now the largest foreign investor in Iraqi oil while Baghdad has become the second largest oil supplier to Beijing (Saudi Arabia remains China's largest oil supplier)[73]. At present, 60 percent of Iraq's oil exports[74] go to Asia and the numbers will continue to increase in the years ahead as a result of the country's massive oil potential which place it among the top primary drivers of global oil production[75]. "Right now, most of Iraq's oil exports travel south through the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. This gives Tehran leverage over Iraq, as oil provides virtually all of the country's government revenue and is vital to its economy[76]". Cross-border oil pipelines of strategic

[70] Miller, *op. cit*., and Strobel, Warren: "Analysis: Awash in Oil, US Reshapes Middle East Role 40 Years after OPEC Embargo", *Reuters*, 17 October 2013, at http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/17/us-usa-energy-geopolitics-analysis-idUSBRE99G14P20131017.

[71] Downs, Erica S.: "China-Middle East Energy Relations", *Brookings Institution*, 6 June 2013, at http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2013/06/06-china-middle-east-energy-downs.

[72] *Ibid*.

[73] "China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), which moved quickly to develop a foothold in the postwar Iraqi oil industry, is one of the largest foreign companies, in terms of production, operating in Iraq. One of the crown jewels of CNPC's international upstream portfolio is Iraq's Rumaila oil field, which CNPC is developing in partnership with BP. In 2012, Rumaila, the largest producing field in Iraq at present, accounted for more than one third of Iraq's oil output. China's strong participation in Iraq's crude oil exploration and production, (an activity Saudi Arabia forbids to foreign companies), is expected to elevate Iraqi-Chinese ties to a higher level and further enhance Baghdad's oil capabilities". *Ibid*; See also, "The Ever Changing Oil Map", *Al Monitor*, 16 October 2013, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/11/oil-map-us-china-dependence-geopolitics.html.

[74] Iran is traditionally OPEC's second-largest producer behind Saudi Arabia, but it was overtaken by Iraq in 2012 as Western sanctions over Iran's nuclear program restrained Iranian exports.

[75] Iraq's oil potential is massive, with the International Energy Agency's last year report observing that "future production will be rising from 3-m b/d levels today to 4.2 -m b/d by 2015 and 6.1-m b/d by 2020 (IEA's Iraq Energy Outlook, 9 October 2012) though there remain risks to internal security and tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government"; See "Energy 2020: Independence Day - Global Ripple Effects of the North American Energy Revolution", *Citi GPS: Global Perspectives & Solutions*, February 2013, at https://www.citivelocity.com/citigps/ReportSeries.action?recordId=16.

[76] "One of the key failings of the US occupation of Iraq was its failure to repair Saddam's Hussein's 'strategic pipeline', which linked the southern oil fields with the north, enabling and encouraging the export of Iraqi oil to

importance for the West, linking Iraq to Turkey, Syria and Jordan will boost its export capacity and enhance Iraq's position in the global energy market. However, the broader political and security risks in the country continue to seriously affect the energy industry (pipeline security ranks first) joined with much needed -and long delayed- infrastructure improvement and development. These are operational prerequisites in order for Iraq to assume investment confidence and restore its energy capacity.

As far as the KRG is concerned and the long-lasting disputes over power sharing arrangements in Iraq, "Baghdad and Erbil have specific issues with one another over hydrocarbon development strategy, who can sign contracts, and revenue sharing, as well as the future of oil-rich Kirkuk and territories disputes. Iraqi Kurds and others (including Turkey and the United States) find noxious the monopolization of power in Baghdad around al-Maliki, his government's ties with, if not dependence upon Iran […]"[77] The absence of satisfactory progress for addressing pending issues and develop a way forward, has reinforced Iraqi Kurds' interest in implementing separate agreements (i.e. a direct energy trade connection with Turkey which is KRG's only way out for its oil and gas other than Iraq) "both as a way to survive and to pressure the Maliki government to deal with the KRG in a more compromising way"[78]. Nonetheless, taking into consideration the needs of electoral politics, upcoming parliamentary elections in April 2014 bring closer Prime Minister al-Maliki and the Kurdish parties; indicating that there is room for short-term optimism, regarding the completion of negotiations for drafting a new oil agreement between Baghdad and Erbil that resolves issues of energy exports and revenue sharing "allowing the Kurds to export their oil production of about 300,000 barrels a day through existing Iraqi pipelines"[79]. Acting as an interlocutor for sustaining a fragile balance between the three actors involved, US efforts for lobbying over Kurdish oil are also considered beneficial for easing relations between Ankara and Baghdad, following the signing of a heavy energy framework agreement in May 2013 between Turkey and the KRG. The agreement's gloomy legal framework allows Turkey to pursue separate oil arrangements with the Kurdish administration[80], in partnership with US-sponsored ExxonMobil.

In light of the above, Iraq finds itself once more well positioned as a meeting point between: a) the US's quest for pulling of resources to develop a solid and durable rebalancing strategy to Asia, b) the necessity of establishing a balance of power in the Middle East and all that goes with it for allowing America's measured disengagement from the region to take off, c) the choice of two historical and strategic rivals, Iran and Turkey, as the principal agents for assuming elevated roles in the region. In this regional setting, the US, by following a dual strategy of both empowerment and containment that does not entail Washington's direct engagement ensures the strategic significance of maintaining a working balance of power. Taking into account competing interests and geopolitical rivalry among Ankara and Tehran for expanding their regional influence, the US will use Iraq as a field of growing competition

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the north and west rather than the south. The one remaining pipeline to Turkey is seldom used in full capacity. The proposed pipeline to Aqaba (Jordan) is intended to carry one million barrels per day". Serwer, Daniel: "Muddling Through in Iraq, *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 4 (August-September 2013), p. 39.

[77] "New Pipeline from Kurdistan to Turkey Poses Risk for Relationship with Iraq", *op. cit.*

[78] *Ibid.*

[79] "Obama administration uses Anbar crisis to push Maliki on Iraqi oil law", *Al Monitor*, 9 January 2014, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/oil-law-iraq-anbar-maliki-obama.html#ixzz2q6r3WkPT.

[80] "KRG announced on January 8 that the first crude oil has started to flow through the autonomous Iraqi Kourdistan region's new pipeline across Turkey and the first independent exports are expected to begin at the end of January"; "US VP Biden calls Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani to discuss oil conflict", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 10 January 2014, at http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-vp-biden-calls-iraqi-kurdish-leader-barzani-to-discuss-oil-conflict.aspx?pageID=238&nID=60835&NewsCatID=348.

on multiple fronts to both elevate and limit their diverging strategies (with special emphasis placed on the sectarian conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni, the prominent role of energy resources-energy security, vulnerabilities of the Kurdish issue and the interplay between all three). Such a strategy, handles provisions for both Turkey and Iran to regularly check and balance each other while preventing both from becoming too powerful.

With respect to the energy realm, bypassing the Straits of Hormuz to steadily limit oil-market dependency on the Persian Gulf involves one of Washington's high medium-term objectives regarding its strategy on energy security and diversification of sources. Even then, with the issue of security and openness of sea lanes remaining a core US strategic interest, Washington will continue acting as the dominant outside agent of stability for protecting regional allies' and global partners' vital interests. An acknowledgement which further stresses the need for providing security guarantees of regional oil flows to China and maintain its defense commitments in terms of ground and naval forces in the Persian Gulf. Otherwise, in the event that the United States experiments with isolationist trends including a complete disengagement from the Middle East or if "a diminishing appetite for Middle Eastern crudes and budgetary constraints were to prompt Washington to substantially reduce its military presence in the region[81]", energy-hungry China -due to oil security concerns- will be compelled to extend its sphere of strategic influence up to Iran. To alleviate the supply risk of facing a closure of the Straits of Hormuz by Tehran or threats for disrupting the free transit of energy supplies from the Persian Gulf, the possibility of Chinese military presence in the region cannot be excluded. A 'return of geopolitics' scenario which strongly suggests that for the United States, complete withdrawal from the Middle East equals withdrawal from Eurasia, whatever that may entail for both America and the rest of the world.

4. Conclusion

The volatile "threats emanating from the Middle East are becoming too numerous to count, with the greatest one being the complete breakdown of regional order"[82]. As a result of regional power politics and geopolitical rivalries around an explosive mixture of ethnicity, religion, oil, nuclear weapons and non-state actors, an absence of consensus is still maintained between state and political actors when it comes to the necessity of a new Middle East narrative. In a highly unstable region, the preservation of a balanced power system in the fragmented Greater Middle East has come to be acknowledged as the primary US strategic interest for reducing the likelihood of further regional conflict. A necessary prerequisite which ensures gradual disengagement and pulling of resources towards serving the pressing need for capacity building with respect to US's strategic rebalancing to Asia-Pacific; altogether facilitating the pursuit of a closer and more favorable geopolitical understanding with China over regional security settings with global implications.

Engaging Iran in a constructive and mutually beneficial process of rapprochement would result, if successful, "in US recognition of the legitimacy of basic Iranian security concerns in the region and vice versa. This is the core challenge facing all the parties and its resolution will transform relations not only between Iran and the West, but also among

[81] Downs, *op. cit.*

[82] Ikenberry, John G. and Slaughter, Anne-Marie (co-directors) (2006): *Forging a World of Liberty under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century*, The Princeton Project on National Security, Princeton, The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, p. 33.

antagonists throughout the region"[83]. In this endeavour, United States remains the strategic actor which establishes principles and sets limits for emerging regional players on how to properly manage their growing power and assist them accordingly. In the wake of a framework analysis discussed in previous sections, it remains to be seen when and how, in the cases of Iran and Turkey, Washington's dual strategy of empowerment and containment (for ensuring both countries ability to regularly check each other and decrease US's regional footprint), will take off. Parallel to the conclusion of negotiations between Washington and Tehran for recognizing security concerns on either side and finalize respective spheres of influence, it remains uncertain how and through the use of which policy instruments will Iran exercise its degree of influence in the region's Arab countries. In theory, "Iran would enjoy a sphere of influence dependent on its alignment with the United States on other issues, which means not crossing any line that would trigger direct U.S. intervention. Over time, the growth of Iranian power within the limits of such clear understandings would benefit both the United States and Iran"[84]. In the policy domain, achieving a political solution to the conflict in Syria might consist of the first case-study for examining Iran's engagement in regional affairs. On top of that, as far as Turkey weak link of leading Sunni Islam is concerned, speedily closing the capability-expectations gap reveals a major risk factor and a central strategic hurdle for American security-establishment.

Drawing a conclusion, the legacy of the past has to buckle down to American President Barack Obama's pragmatic viewpoint in foreign policy analysis. A recognition that includes a much more measured and detached approach in consideration of intervening in the region's affairs. After all, "following the US withdrawal from Iraq, the partial vacuum left the door open and allowed more room for regional players to assert themselves. Such a prospect means that Washington might need to reassess its overall Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern strategy"[85]. When navigating the new Middle East, Obama chooses the strategic significance of cooperative efforts and broadening of diplomatic links with both allies and non-allies. In an effort to safeguard United States' security and Greater Middle East geopolitical strategy, the process involves the abolishment of polarized misperceptions and the pragmatic recognition of aligning interests through fresh rounds of political bargaining with all stakeholders involved. By reviewing 'special relationships' with pro-status quo state actors (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt) and by restoring channels of cooperation along with providing security guarantees and setting action limits for preserving players' involvement in a re-balanced regional power system (i.e. Iran, Turkey, member-states of Gulf Cooperation Council), the adaptable, flexible and eventually effective form of this working pattern relates to what Jones refers to as "cooperative realism[86]". Above all, it serves the interests of a medium term US strategy for establishing a better ordered and resource-effective Greater Middle East balance of power that leaves the region more -and not less- secure.

On January 12, Iran and the P5+1 group reached an agreement on how to implement their previous (limited) accord over Iran's nuclear program that was signed in November 2013. The six months interim period[87] starts on January 20 and the most serious concern that

[83] Aronson, Geoffrey: "Obama Goes Big in the Middle East", *Al Monitor*, 7 November 2013, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/obama-goes-big-on-mideast-syria-iran-israel-palestinians.html.
[84] Friedman, *op. cit.*
[85] Ifantis, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
[86] Jones, Bruce: "The Coming Clash? Europe and the US Multilateralism under Obama", in Vasconcelos, Álvaro and Zaborowski, Marcin (eds.) (2009): *The Obama Moment: European and American Perspectives*, Paris, EU Institute for Security Studies, p. 69.
[87] "In this interim period, the U.S. will begin easing financial sanctions against Iran while the Islamic Republic grants the United Nations' atomic agency access to its nuclear infrastructure so that it can verify compliance".

emerges relates to political reactions on Capitol Hill: Will the U.S. Congress end up torpedoing the agreement by supporting legislation of additional economic sanctions against Tehran?[88] At present, the stakes are high for the US and the risks are even higher, especially during a period where the sense of urgency can dominate mindsets and cloud judgments. In an environment dynamic in character and subject to constant change, the art of geopolitics involves obeying the rules of a medium-term game strategy. The risk is that the urgent would drive out the important. Responding to Middle East challenges and capitalizing on a historic diplomatic opportunity for gaining further momentum, consists of a core element and a main reason for modifying America's foreign policy approach and establishment's perceptions. There is a close link between, on the one hand, the US's global role, its capacity to deliver on concrete policies, and, on the other hand, its inner strength and ability to take swift decisions in areas that matter. Reforms and new starts are not an end in themselves. The way the United States adapts to the regional realities and the practical geopolitics in the Middle East, will determine how much influence it can exert in the greater region to effectively shape its security order.

Lynch, Colum and Hudson, John: "Iran nuke deal finally reached -just in time for Congress to kill it", *Foreign Policy*, at http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/12/iran_nuke_deal_finally_reached_just_in_time_for_congress_to_kill_it.

[88] *Ibid.*