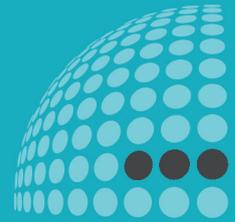


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The Obama Presidency: A View from Turkey

SETA Foundation



ABSTRACT

The Obama administration needs to plan extensive modifications and introduce substantial changes to the way US foreign policy is conducted around the world. Despite periods of turbulence and uncertainty over the last sixty years, US-Turkish relations have always maintained their strategic significance. US-Turkish relations are closely intertwined with developments in several regions and the new US foreign policy towards those regions will have a direct impact on relations between the two countries. New administration should build upon the good will and strategic partnership between the two countries.



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THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY: A VIEW FROM TURKEY

Barack Obama's election as the 44th president of the United States of America is a watershed event in the social and political history of that country. Basing his campaign on change and promising that "Yes, We Can," President Obama has been able to project a new vision and a new future for the American people and the world. As the first black president, Obama also has the chance to change the course of racial relations in the US. Mr. Obama's pledge to open up new lines of communication with the world has the potential to present a different notion of American power and to repair the deeply polarizing nature of the current global power structure. As the reckless policies and misadventures of the Bush administration come to an end, Barack Obama's success should be seen within the larger context of a global quest for new leadership in the US and around the world. The Obama administration will carry not only a political but a moral obligation to rally his country and the world around the principles of peace, justice and equality.

President Obama is inheriting a long list of intractable problems. His transition team has already dealt with several pressing issues including the US financial crisis, before Obama has even been sworn in. Once in office, effective January 20, 2009, how Barack Obama will conceptualize his presidency and formulate his policies is a challenge that will determine the nature of his term in office. As a young and transformative leader, Obama has been able to capture the imagination of millions of people around the world – so much so that on his victory day a group of villagers in the eastern Turkish city of Van sacrificed forty-four sheep in his honor as the 44th president of the United States! Very few leaders in modern history have enjoyed such a warm reception and show of trust. The danger of setting the standard so high is that President Obama may try to do things too hastily, seeking to get quick results in order to meet the expectations.

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The Obama presidency presents a unique opportunity not only for the American people but also for the Middle East and the larger Muslim world. The deep damage caused by the Bush administration's policies following the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan will take a long time to repair, and the Obama administration should fully know that it will be facing numerous challenges in the most volatile region of the world. So much mistrust has been built, and so many wounds have been created, it will take enormous amounts of time, courage, patience and political capital to mend and improve the relations between the United States and the Muslim world. It is obvious that the US will have to do more than just put out a new public relations campaign to win the minds and hearts of the Muslim world. Closing Guantanamo Bay will be a good step but should be only the first of many more substantial policies. The Obama administration needs to plan extensive modifications and introduce substantial changes to the way US foreign policy is conducted around the world.

The "war on terror" as defined and executed by the Neo-conservative cronies of the Bush administration has come to symbolize the imperialistic designs of a group of American intellectuals, strategists and politicians driven by power and greed. Since 2002, the United States has invaded two Muslim countries, caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the wounding of millions, arrested thousands, and spent hundreds of billions of dollars in the process. The human and political consequences of the failed Bush policies are too obvious and numerous to be repeated here. It suffices to remember, besides the deplorable situation and loss of life in Afghanistan, the death of close to a million Iraqis and the catastrophes of Abu Ghurayb and Guantanamo Bay. Bush's war on terror has not eliminated the threat of al-Qaeda terrorism. To the contrary, it has given al-Qaeda and its likes a *carte blanche* to play on the grievances of Muslim societies and expand their recruitment grounds.

The war on terror has alienated the US from the rest of the world and created suspicion, anger and resentment. The world that stood with the American people on the horrific day of 9/11 has quickly distanced itself from the policies of the Bush camp. As the Obama administration prepares to take over, it has to do away with Bush's war on terror and chart a new course in fighting terrorism in all of its forms and manifestations. To have a clean break with the Bush legacy, a move the whole world expects from the new administration, President Obama will need to turn a new page

in US foreign policy not in words but in deeds. President Obama is bound to throw a large canvass of political wisdom and global justice to reduce the costs of ill-advised expansionist adventures and contain the follies of empire.

US-Turkish Relations: Developing a Regional Perspective

Despite periods of turbulence and uncertainty over the last sixty years, US-Turkish relations have always maintained their strategic significance. The main reason for this is the fact that the relations between two countries go beyond bi-lateral relations and extend to key regional issues in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Turkey has a unique geo-political position at the interface of several continents and civilizational fault lines. As an heir to the rich legacy of the Ottoman Empire and as a dynamic modern Republic, Turkey occupies a special place between East and West, Europe and the Middle East, the Muslim world and the West. From the Caucasus to Middle East politics and energy security, US-Turkish relations are essential for regional stability and the global balance of power. The Obama presidency should build upon the good will and strategic partnership between the two countries. A new beginning in US foreign policy towards the Middle East and the larger region, including the Caucasus, will mean Turkey's further involvement in key regional issues. Charting a better course in US-Turkish relations requires developing a regional perspective and deeper sense of partnership.

US-Turkish relations are closely intertwined with developments in several regions and the new US foreign policy towards those regions will have a direct impact on relations between the two countries. A US-Turkish partnership based on a shared regional vision and sense of global politics involves the coordination of various policy elements, from strengthening bilateral relations to dealing with pressing issues in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. As evidenced by the unilateralist and polarizing policies of the Bush administration, it is impossible for the US to maintain good relations with Turkey (or any other country for that matter) without agreeing on some fundamental principles of policy and engaging the other countries in the region. Turkey's security concerns regarding PKK terrorism, for instance, cannot be addressed in isolation from other policy issues in Turkey's immediate neighborhood. Given Turkey's energy dependence on Iran and Russia, a belligerent policy of isolation

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and unilateralism towards these two countries will not only raise tensions throughout the region but also affect US-Turkish relations. A similar situation exists concerning the future of post-American Iraq, Lebanon and the Middle East peace process more broadly.

The key to a successful multilateral policy is to engage regional actors without preconditions. Instead of forcing countries to fulfill certain conditions before talking to them, one needs to include them in the talks to deal with the issues comprehensively. Turkey's increasing involvement in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Lebanon and Palestine proves that talking without preconditions works, and that a carefully crafted diplomacy can deliver – a theme President Obama emphasized during his campaign. Turkey insists on engaging Syria and Iran as well as other non-state actors to establish stability in the region. As a result of these efforts alone, Turkey has broken new ground in the Syrian-Israeli talks. The significance of this accomplishment should not be diminished by the fact that these talks have been suspended for the time being because of Israel's brutal war on Gaza. By talking to Iran, Turkey has avoided isolating Iran and dispensed with provocative and polarizing policies in the region. Turkey has taken a similar stance by choosing a middle path during and after the Russian-Georgian war; this policy line helped contain the tensions between a defiant Russia and a surprised and largely confused EU and US. In short, the success of bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States depends on formulating a shared regional vision and coordinating efforts on key policy issues.

Fighting PKK Terrorism

For over two decades, one of the most contested issues between Ankara and Washington has been the lack of cooperation in fighting PKK terrorism. Rumors of secret or implicit US support for the PKK have fueled anti-American sentiments in Turkey. Since the first Gulf War of 1991-1992, US policies in Iraq and the surrounding region have been seen as failing to support Turkey in its struggle to stop PKK terrorist activities. Given the fact that the European countries did not have any better record, Turkish officials and the public have felt that their security concerns have not been attended to by Turkey's traditional allies. While the onus of finding a long-term solution to the Kurdish problem remains on the shoulders of Turkey as a sovereign country, international cooperation is a sine qua non for fighting PKK terrorism which

has increasingly become an international issue. As PKK terrorists have found shelter in various parts of the world, much of the anti-American and anti-European sentiment in Turkey has come about as a result of the West's failure to address Turkey's security concerns.

The meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Erdoğan at the White House on October 5, 2007 marked an important turning point in strengthening US-Turkish relations on the PKK issue. The agreement between the two on instant intelligence sharing and further cooperation and President Bush's declaration of the PKK as a terrorist organization was hailed as a serious commitment and appreciated as such by the Turkish public. While the extent and success of intelligence sharing on PKK activities in Northern Iraq has been debated, it did provide a new boost for US-Turkish relations which had turned sour in March 2003, when the Turkish Parliament rejected a motion to allow US troops to use Turkish soil for the invasion of Iraq.

Today, in spite of this boost, Turkey is fighting a revitalized PKK. The steps taken to address the root causes of PKK terrorism have been very slow in coming and insufficient in execution. Yet even now, there are new opportunities to find a lasting solution to the Kurdish issue through a national consensus in Turkey. The launching of TRT 6 broadcasting in the Kurdish language is a step in the right direction. Yet neither the AK Party government nor other Turkish actors, including the military and civilian forces, can afford to take bold steps when large-scale fighting continues and security concerns take precedence over democratic rights and economic development. Given the long record of this issue in the US Congress and the White House, the Obama administration will be in a position to appreciate its urgency for Turkey. President Obama and his team need to give priority to combating PKK terrorism as a critical component of US-Turkish relations. To that effect, the new administration should urge Iraq's Kurdish leaders to help Turkey root out PKK installments in Northern Iraq and prevent the PKK from poisoning relations between Ankara and Arbil on the one hand, and Ankara and Washington on the other.

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The Armenian Issue and Relations between Turkey and Armenia

US-Turkish relations are too important to be reduced to the Armenian genocide claims. Moreover, a contested issue of history cannot be resolved under pressure from lobbying groups and diaspora communities. The virulently anti-Turkish attitude of Armenian

lobby groups in the US and in Europe has not brought Turks and Armenians closer to one another. While the Armenian lobby acts with a sense of *fiat accompli* and refuses any reconciliatory measures, Turkey has made several goodwill gestures to start a process of talks, proposing to form a committee of historians to look into the events of 1915-16. While a historical reconciliation needs to be sought, keeping in mind the terrible loss of life on both sides in the First World War, the first glimpses of a new page in relations between Turkey and Armenia should be fully supported.

Any attempt to bring the Armenian genocide issue back to the center of the political process will surely poison relations between Turkey and the new Obama administration.

Turks and Armenians share a long history of peaceful co-existence and creative partnership, from music and architecture to politics and diplomacy. Today, geo-political realities and regional imperatives rather than misplaced emotions and oppositional identities should be the guiding principles of Turkish-Armenian relations. The process which started with the visit of Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Yerevan in September 2008, the first of its kind, presents a unique opportunity to change the current deadlock from contested history to shared future. So far, the trilateral talks between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia have made considerable progress in easing tensions between these three neighboring countries. Any attempt to bring the Armenian genocide issue back to the center of the political process will surely poison relations between Turkey and the new Obama administration and thwart the process of reconciliation between Ankara and Yerevan. From a geo-political point of view, it is in the interest of all parties to help improve relations between Turkey and Armenia and prevent the narrow agenda of genocide claims from dominating the political landscape. Priority should be given to Ankara and Yerevan to sort out the issues between the two countries.

Diversifying US-Turkish Relations

Despite their strategic significance, US-Turkish relations suffer from the absence of diversification. US interests in the region usually determine the shape and extent of relations, leaving little room for other areas to claim any prominence. A century of predominantly good relations between the two countries has not led to major cooperation and partnership in such areas as trade, education and culture. In his last visit to Washington for the G-20 meeting in November 2008, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan complained about the small volume of US-Turkish trade and made a call to

expand it. While there are many Turkish students studying at American institutions of higher education, the current level of cooperation does not reflect the countries' true partnership potential. Despite calls by numerous American officials and private citizens who follow Turkey closely, a similar state of affairs exists in the field of cultural exchange. Diversifying US-Turkish relations and generating enough social capital in areas other than foreign policy are crucial steps needed to maintain a sustainable relationship at times of crisis.

Energy Cooperation

A rather underdeveloped area of partnership in Eurasia at large is the energy sector. Turkey is an energy-dependent country, but it straddles world energy corridors from Central Asia and the Middle East to Europe. There are already important energy routes that go through Turkey, and more routes are expected to be constructed. For instance, NABUCCO is expected to go over Turkish land, bringing gas from the Caspian basin and Central Asia to points west. Once completed, it will be the largest energy pipeline of the world, and will increase energy supply security, both for the EU countries and for Turkey. NABUCCO will strengthen Turkey's strategic position as well.

Iranian gas is another potential area for international collaboration. After Russia, Iran has the largest natural gas reserves in the world. Possession of such reserves is probably the most valuable leverage Iran could use to affect a rapprochement with the West in general, and with the EU countries in particular.

The Obama administration is expected to pursue a more active Eurasian energy policy. The new administration is expected to collaborate more enthusiastically with friendly countries in the region to help them become more energy independent, while encouraging diversification. The Turkish idea of transporting Turkmen and Iraqi gas to Europe via Turkey was supported by the Bush administration; this position is expected to be maintained by the Obama administration. The proposed transportation plan would further Turkey's goal of becoming an energy hub for transporting rich energy reserves from neighboring regions to world markets.

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The US should support efforts to end the isolation of Turkish Cypriots as a constructive step towards reconciliation between the two nations on the island.

The Cyprus Peace Process

The Obama administration should support the talks currently underway between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. One should not anticipate a partial and one-sided US approach because of Joe Biden's past record on the issue. As Vice President, Biden is likely to adopt a realist policy of maintaining good relations with both Turkey and Greece. The new administration should note that Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots fully supported the Annan Plan in 2004 to create a united island in Cyprus. The US should support efforts to end the isolation of Turkish Cypriots as a constructive step towards reconciliation between the two nations on the island.

A Post-American Iraq and Turkey

Before and during his election campaign, President Obama opposed the war in Iraq and pledged to withdraw US troops within the first sixteen months of his presidency. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed between Iraq and the US before the end of 2008 assumes the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq by 2011. While committing oneself to a tight time-table involves certain risks, US withdrawal is an eventual necessity in order to let Iraqis rule themselves and rebuild their country with the help of the international community. While the details of Obama's withdrawal plan are yet to be worked out, it will need to have three main pillars. The first is to prepare Iraqi military and policy forces to take over the security situation in Iraq. The necessary training of these forces and the improvement of their condition will be provided in collaboration with NATO. Although US calls for further NATO involvement did not receive a warm response from the European allies, Obama is confident that NATO and the international community will extend their support once the US plan for withdrawal is put in motion.

The second pillar of the American exit strategy will be to strengthen the central government in Baghdad and create a functioning political and economic system to prevent internal fighting and chaos in the post-US phase. It is necessary to set up a political framework for the central government that will represent all segments of Iraqi society, prepare the regional governments of Iraq to take care of the security situation, and improve state efficiency in social services in order to normalize Iraqi lives. This process must also include measures to accommodate differences among the diverse ethnic, religious and sectarian groups that make up Iraqi society.

The third pillar is to seek support from neighboring countries and the international community to establish the stability and security of Iraq after the US withdrawal. In tandem with the indication that Obama will put an end to US unilateral policies, he should bring all countries in the region on board in dealing with Iraq's pressing problems, from security to the economy. Since its launching, Turkey's Iraqi Neighboring Countries Initiative has provided a valuable platform for regional cooperation and should be supported and strengthened to help post-American Iraq. An important component of this process is to ensure that the US troops that will remain in Iraq, whose extent is not known, will not pose threats to Iraq's neighbors including Iran and Turkey. A large American military presence in Northern Iraq, for instance, will be a source of concern and tension for Turkey.

Afghanistan: Avoiding the Graveyard of Empires

The Obama campaign favored the idea of increasing the number of soldiers in Afghanistan and seeking more support from NATO and its allies to deal with the situation in that country. Obama is likely to increase the number of US troops in Afghanistan. NATO-ISAF forces will receive more support and Obama will lobby in the capitals of Europe for active involvement to stabilize Afghanistan. Turkey has already some troops in Afghanistan, helping the local communities to cope with the difficulties of occupation, warlords and a weak government. Prioritizing Afghanistan is a step in the right direction. But the new Obama administration needs to start a new process of national reconciliation to bring together all parties, including the Taliban. Those elements of the Taliban and other fighting groups that are willing to be part of the political process should be allowed to do so. In a traditional society like Afghanistan where the mere presence of foreign troops is a major source of social unrest and mistrust, a comprehensive agenda of rebuilding Afghanistan with all Afghani groups involved must be set in place. Turkey's good credentials with the Afghan people can be a valuable asset in this process. In addition, the Obama administration will need the close cooperation of Pakistan and Iran to establish order in Afghanistan and formulate a reasonable exit strategy.

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Given Turkey's long-standing experience with Iran as a neighboring country, the Obama White House should give more room to Turkey to address Iranian concerns.

Going Beyond the Nuclear Issue in Iran

President Obama made it clear that the idea of Iran having nuclear weaponry is unacceptable. Together with other countries in the region, Turkey shares the same point of view, but supports Iran in developing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. During his campaign, Mr. Obama talked about the possibility of direct and unconditional dialogue with Tehran. This is an important possibility and should be given a chance in order to counteract the sense of isolation and insecurity which the Iranians have been experiencing for a number of years. The current state of Turkish-Iranian relations is a valuable capital that could be used to steer Iran away from pursuing nuclear weapons, and to contribute to peace and stability in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Palestine. Just before coming to the G-20 meeting, Turkish PM Erdoğan stated that Turkey is willing to facilitate talks between Tehran and Washington. Turkey would not make such a proposal unless it had received a green light from Iran. This opportunity should be seized in good faith and a process of direct and indirect talks should begin. Given Turkey's long-standing experience with Iran as a neighboring country, the Obama White House should give more room to Turkey to address Iranian concerns. Now that Turkey has started its tenure in the UN Security Council, it is all the more pertinent to handle the Iranian nuclear dossier with an inclusive and constructive approach.

Pakistan

Pakistan occupied the center of Obama's campaign as an outstanding foreign policy issue. Obama considers Pakistan a source of international terror and blames Pakistani groups for spoiling the US operations in Afghanistan. Obama considers the situation in Pakistan dangerous for regional and international politics. Pakistan has a fragile and polarized political system, and the internal situation could easily turn to an intra-societal conflict; this fragility poses serious threats to regional stability due to rogue elements in the uncontrollable zones on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. This situation also poses a serious threat to international security due to concerns over the Pakistani administration's ability to control Pakistani nukes. The deplorable Mumbai killings on November 26 have made the situation much more explosive and dangerous. Given Turkey's good relations and historical ties with Pakistan, a comprehensive policy agenda can be developed by including Turkey in the process

in order to ease tensions between Pakistan and India on the one hand, and Pakistan and Afghanistan on the other. The second round of trilateral talks between Turkish President Abdullah Gül, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari took place in Turkey on December 6th 2008. Increased Turkish involvement in Pakistani-Afghani relations has been welcomed by all sides, and by the US administration. Mr. Obama can and should benefit from Turkey's good relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Dealing with a Resurgent Russia in the 21st Century

While the full extent and details of Obama's future policy towards Russia have not yet been made public, Obama has criticized the so-called realist policy towards Russia. Instead, he said during his campaign, he would follow a value-based policy. It is clear from the Russian-Georgian war of last year that Russia will remain largely defiant in the face of what it perceives as a Western policy of encirclement. Russia is a significant player in Turkey's immediate neighborhood; it is also one of Turkey's top trading partners. The regional perspective discussed above can provide a framework of trust, partnership and effective diplomacy not only for Turkish-Russian relations but also for relations between Russia and the US. In the wake of the Georgia-Russia crisis, Turkey proposed a Caucasian Stability Platform to start a dialogue between three Caucasian states, Russia, and Turkey to prevent future crises in the region. So far, Turkey's efforts have been helpful in containing a larger conflict in the Caucasus. Turkey's good relations with Russia and other countries in the region should be seen as an asset by the new US administration.

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The Middle East Peace Process

The Obama administration is likely to recognize that all of the problems in the Middle East are interconnected. The Arab-Israeli peace process cannot progress without taking into consideration the isolation of Iran and the fragile dynamics in Iraq. The art of diplomacy is to bring together all parties concerned in an effort to identify common interests and challenges. This is why, under the Obama administration, the Middle East peace process will need a jump start with an international conference, similar to the

Madrid Summit of 1991. A major mistake in Madrid was the exclusion of Iran. This time, this new international summit should embrace all major actors in the region, including Iran and Turkey, in addition to the Middle East Quartet comprised of the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States.

Istanbul provides the best venue for such a summit. Turkish diplomacy has already made substantial inroads in terms of mediating between Israel and Syria. The Turkish government has also expressed willingness to mediate between Iran and the United States. Just as the 1990s were characterized by the “Oslo Peace Process,” the next era of diplomacy and cooperation in the Middle East can be launched with a summit in Istanbul under the name of the “Istanbul Peace Process.” Such an effort would not only amount to a paradigmatic change in Turkish-American relations – bringing much needed credibility to the strategic partnership – but it would also demonstrate the Obama administration’s willingness to adopt a genuinely multilateral platform for peace in the Middle East.

Mr. Obama has indicated that he will give priority to the Middle East peace process. It is clear that there will be no lasting peace between the US and the Muslim world unless the Palestinian issue is resolved. While this is the right approach, it carries certain risks at the level of domestic American politics. The Israeli lobby will continue to approach the peace process from a narrow and distorted point view, divide the Palestinians, and present Arabs as unwilling or unable to make peace with Israel. Obama’s appointment of pro-Israeli figures to his team has raised questions about the even-handedness of his approach towards the Palestinian issue. Mr. Obama should give a new start to the Middle East Peace process and avoid President Bush’s deadly mistakes. The Obama presidency should take the Arab Peace Initiative seriously and start a process of integrating Hamas into its negotiations. Unless Hamas is made part of the solution, there will be no solution in Palestine. As a country close to the region, Turkey has recognized this fact and developed good relations with all parties in Palestine. The key points of the Palestinian conflict which include the 1967 borders, the Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem should be addressed in a regional framework, and the Arab countries as well as Iran and Turkey should be invited to be part of the process. The Obama administration should also support the process of integrating Syria into the regional political process. Turkey’s efforts in this regard have been considerable and should be supported by the US and the Europeans.

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Mr. Obama's silence over the Israeli war on Gaza has shaken people's hopes in his ability and willingness to bring a fresh point of view to the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Israel's suicidal war on Gaza has taken more than 1,300 lives, most of them civilians, women and children, and wounded over 5,000 Palestinians. Currently, Israel is undermining all possibilities for a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue. By defying the UN, neighboring countries and the rest of the international community, Israel has proven itself unwilling to make peace with anyone in the region. While this attitude will certainly further isolate Israel, it will also jeopardize the safety and welfare of Israeli citizens in the long run. President Obama must follow an even-handed policy towards the Palestinian conflict with a sense of justice and determination. Decades of neglect and unjustified pro-Israeli policies have worsened the situation on the ground and poisoned US-Muslim world relations. The Obama presidency should provide a new framework for the Palestinian issue and support the two-state solution on the principles of justice and equality.

The Obama administration needs to plan extensive modifications and introduce substantial changes to the way US foreign policy is conducted around the world. Despite periods of turbulence and uncertainty over the last sixty years, US-Turkish relations have always maintained their strategic significance. US-Turkish relations are closely intertwined with developments in several regions and the new US foreign policy towards those regions will have a direct impact on relations between the two countries. New administration should build upon the good will and strategic partnership between the two countries.

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