

Turkey's Neo-Ottomanism: Engaging The Pivotal Middle-Power

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I. Background

On August 10th, 2014, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Justice Party and Development Party (AK) made history by winning Turkey's first-ever direct election for President¹. The victory capped off a tumultuous third term as Prime Minister which saw Erdogan feud with the judiciary, accuse top military brass of treason, and preside over the violent suppression of peaceful protests².

Erdogan's election as President signals a dramatic shift in Turkish politics away from *Kemalism's* emphasis on secularism. Erdogan has stressed the soft power of cultural and economic connections in what has been dubbed *neo-Ottomanism*, which has allowed Turkey to reintegrate itself into affairs abroad.³ Turkey's renewed assertiveness on the world stage will present both challenges and opportunities for the West in the coming years.

II. Turkey's Evolving Political Landscape

Turkey, founded in 1923 as a parliamentary

¹ BBC, August 10, 2014. [[Link](#)]

² The Economist, April 16, 2014. [[Link](#)]

³ Yanik, L 2011, 'Constructing Turkish "exceptionalism": Discourses of liminality and hybridity in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy', *Political Geography*, vol. 30, no. 2 pp.80-89

democracy, is located on one of the most traditionally strategic and coveted pieces of territory in the world. Its geographical position makes it a Balkan, Mediterranean, Caspian, and Middle Eastern country - all at the same time. Although not one of the great powers of the twentieth century, Turkey's geopolitical location gives it the opportunity to play relatively larger role than other middle powers.⁴ Turkey's historical and contemporary ties have allowed it to become a hub for foreign investment, which has in turn created economic and political partnerships in many non-traditional markets.

Turkish Democratic Islamism

When the Turkish Republic was founded in 1921 – in part on the basis of secularism – it deviated substantially from the Turkish people's traditional comfort with political Islam. During Ottoman times Turks had been at the head of the Muslim civilization, and Erdogan's staying power signals a shift towards a renewed acceptance of Islamist leaders.⁵

This shift has not been without setbacks, and has resulted in partnerships with countries and groups that put it directly at odds with Western policy – such as its support of Hamas along with Qatar, and its nuclear enrichment agreement with

⁴ Aydin, M. 1999, 'Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Historical Framework and Traditional Inputs', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 35, no.4 152-86

⁵ Kaplin, R 2012, *The revenge of geography*, Random House, Inc., New York, pp. 287-292

Iran⁶.

There has long been an assumption that Turkey would emerge as a model for Islamist democracies. Indeed, in the wake of the Arab Spring protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Turkish model – instead of the more authoritarian Iranian one – has been adopted in places such as Tunisia. However, the Arabian Peninsula and much of the region remains dominated by undemocratic governments which makes outright calls for democratization difficult for Turkey to make if it wishes to remain in good standing with its neighbours. Nonetheless, in a region of political extremes and instability, Turkey is an example of a state with a modern and diverse economy being successfully managed by an Islamist party.

The Kurdish Issue

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire the Kurdish people – who after Sykes-Picot were scattered in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran – have fought for an independent state. The Kurds remained one of Turkey's greatest security threats until 2013, when Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party's (PKK, Partia Kerkoran Kurdistan), the largest Kurdish separatist group in Turkey, called for a ceasefire⁷. The armed conflict has claimed over 40,000 lives, and the secession of hostilities has

been a priority for Erdogan since becoming PM⁸.

Despite decades of armed conflict, much progress has been made in Turkish-Kurdish relations in recent years. In late 2013, then-PM Erdogan announced that a set of reforms that would make it easier for smaller Kurdish political parties to enter Turkish politics, broadened Kurdish education, and loosened language restrictions.⁹

In the run-up to the Presidential election, Erdogan promised that he would “stop at nothing” to fix the Kurdish problem¹⁰. If in fact Erdogan is able to find a permanent solution to the dispute, the Kurds as a Turkish security issue could indeed make a complete turnaround. An independent Kurdistan – in some form – could act as a buffer between Turkey and Iraq while simultaneously granting Turkey a protectorate and benefactor at the heart of the Middle East. With Erdogan's olive branch to the Kurds during the recent Presidential campaign, Turkish-Kurdish relations appear to ameliorating – a relationship that Turkey would be wise to strengthen as the Kurds in Iraq and Syria strengthen their own claims for autonomy and independence.

Taksim Gezi Protests

After it was announced that Taksim Gezi Park,

⁶ Reuters, July 18, 2014. [[Link](#)]

⁷ New York Times, March 22, 2013. [[Link](#)]

⁸ Mutlu, S, Ethnic 1996, 'Kurds in Turkey: A Demographic Study', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 517-541

⁹ BBC, September 30, 2013. [[Link](#)]

¹⁰ The Economist, July 3, 2014. [[Link](#)]

one of the last green spaces in Istanbul, would be turned into a shopping mall, thousands of Turks protested in one of the seminal moments of 2013¹¹. Erdogan's uncompromising stance and a heavy-handed police crackdown that saw protesters evicted and tear-gassed led to the protests quickly spreading all over Turkey. The police reaction turned what was initially an environmental and anti-gentrification movement into a multi-stakeholder revolt against Erdogan's increased authoritarianism. Over 8,000 people were injured and the Turkish stock market plunged it what became one of the greatest threats to Prime Minister Erdogan's 12 year rule¹².

While Erdogan and the AK have been able to consolidate political power since 2002, there remains a vibrant and active opposition in Turkey. The protests in Gezi brought to light Erdogan's stance and views on access to social media, which again brought him into conflict with the judiciary. As the military has been pushed to the side in Turkish politics, civil society has taken up the cause of acting as a check on executive power in the country.

Civilian-Military-Judicial Relations

Though Turkey possesses the second largest army in NATO, it suffers from what has been dubbed an 'insecurity complex'. It is a highly securitized country, where 'security' and stability

override most other social and political issues¹³. The emphasis on security, and how to ensure it, is a constant in Turkish political discourse – and it has been no different under PM Erdogan, though Turkey's definition of security has liberalized to include a wider range of threats.

The recent successes of the Justice and Development party is a new development in the Turkish republic, where a strict interpretation of secularism has been imposed and upheld by the military and the judicial establishments¹⁴. In recent years, the biggest foes of Erdogan were Turkey's generals and the judges, who accused the Prime Ministers of steering the country towards Islamic rule. The army was tamed through a series of court cases against high ranking officers, and Erdogan overhauled the judiciary after constitutional reforms were approved in a referendum in 2010¹⁵.

As democracy has rooted itself in Turkish culture, the Turkish military has become more effective at blocking rather than initiating policy. Although the military continues to play a significant part in foreign and security policymaking, its role has limits and has diminished gradually.¹⁶The shift

¹¹ The Guardian, May29, 2014. [[Link](#)]

¹² BBC, June 6, 2013. [[Link](#)]

¹³ Aydin, M 2003 'Securitization of History and Geography: Understanding of Security in Turkey', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 3:2, 164

¹⁴ Narli, N. 2000, 'Civil-Military Relations in Turkey', *Turkish Studies* Vol. 1 no.1, p.108

¹⁵ The Economist, April 16, 2014. [[Link](#)]

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Karaosmangoglu, A. , 2000, The Evolution of the National security Culture and the Military in Turkey, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.54, no.1; pp 199-200

towards civilian-led foreign policy has made Turkey a less predictable ally for the West, though an independent-minded Turkey will not necessarily be at odds with Western policy.

III. Turkey in the 21st Century Global Order

The evolution of Turkish politics under Erdogan's Justice and Development party has resulted in Turkey increasingly asserting itself in global affairs – at times to the benefit and at times to detriment of western policy. Turkey will be active in multiple regions in twenty-first century as its cultural *and* economic ties allow it to move beyond its traditional sphere of influence.

Turkey and the Middle East

Under Erdogan, Turkish foreign policy has gradually begun to move past its Ottoman history with its Middle Eastern neighbours. Erdogan and his party have embarked on several projects to achieve 'limitless cooperation' with near-by countries based on its foreign policy principle of 'zero-problems with neighbours'¹⁷. However, this principle will be increasingly difficult to adhere to as conflicts spread throughout the region. As power dynamics in the region continue change, Turkey will emerge as a key stakeholder in the future stability in the MENA.

Perhaps the greatest geopolitical development for Turkey in relation to the MENA is its dam system.

¹⁷ Kaplin, R 2012, *The revenge of geography*, Random House, Inc., New York, pp. 287-292

Turkey controls the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and possesses the dam infrastructure that could cut off the supply of water to Iraq and Syria – and indeed it has done so¹⁸. This advantage over its neighbour will only increase in the twenty-first century as growing and rebuilding Arab states will require increasingly more water. Turkey's Euphrates dam system has the capacity to pump water as far as the arid West Bank, and, partnered with Turkey's growing oil and gas pipeline infrastructure, will make Turkey a greater Middle East power in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth.

While Turkey has pursued a path of reconciliation and partnership in the MENA under Erdogan, this has been easier for Turkey to do knowing that it has a resource that the Arab states need. Turkey's heightened political profile in the Middle East – most recently in an attempt to broker a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel – should be seen in the context of this new geopolitical reality¹⁹.

Many in the West have called on Turkey to assert itself more in the Middle East, but relations for Turkey in the region are fraught with geopolitical risk. Undoubtedly, there are historical grievances that must be addressed before Turkey can ever be *fully* integrated in the Middle East's power structure, but as the region democratizes and its economies liberalize Turkey will find it increasingly less difficult to make inroads. Turkey

¹⁸ New York Times, July 14, 2009. [[Link](#)]

¹⁹ Kaplin, R 2012, *The revenge of geography*, Random House, Inc., New York, pp. 285-288

has industrial capabilities that will be required in a MENA that is rebuilding and growing, and as states continue to democratize it will be a centrally located economic and political partner in many projects.

Turkey and the Emerging Middle-Powers

As Turkey has increasingly pursued an independent foreign policy, it has sought collaboration with other emerging powers; perhaps most notably when it – along with Brazil – agreed to enrich uranium for Iran²⁰. These types of manoeuvres could very well become more common as Turkey, Brazil, and other middle-powers assert themselves in the global order. The Justice and Development Party states that it sees “inevitable changes in the current global political and economic system [and] the UN structure of governance”²¹. Turkey wants to play a leading role in global affairs, and we will likely see a Turkey that is more active at the United Nations and other multilateral organizations.

In contrast with the oil-based economies of its Middle Eastern neighbours, Turkey's economy has developed into a vibrant and diverse economy. This has made it an appealing destination for foreign investment, and Turkey now finds itself in the MINT group of rising national economies along with Mexico, Indonesia,

and Nigeria²². This renewed economic might has led Turkey in recent years to leverage its geographic location and growing economy into clout in the international arena. As non-western international institutions become more commonplace – such as the BRIC's development bank – Turkey could find itself many new political and economic partners.

Turkey and the West

Turkey, one of Huntington's chief examples of a ‘torn country’ – that is, *attempting* to join the West – has been in a process of Westernisation dating back to Ottoman times. This process has accelerated greatly after Ataturk took power as President of the Turkish Republic in 1923; and since then it has joined NATO and has long been in negotiations to join the European Union²³. Despite these long ties, Turkey's relationship with the West will be different moving forward than it has been since 1921. This evolving relationship will present many challenges *and* opportunities for the West. To ensure that Turkey remains a strong Western ally and partner, Western policy-makers should continue to build strong economic ties with Turkey, further integrate Turkey into the NATO framework, and explore options that will allow Turkey – and other emerging powers – to play a greater role in international institutions and decision making bodies.

²⁰ BBC News, May 17, 2010. [[Link](#)]

²¹ Freedom and Justice Party, Political Vision of AK Party 2023: *Politics, Society and the World*, September 30, 2012, p.56

²² BBC, January 5, 2014. [[Link](#)]

²³ Huntington, S, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Touchstone, pp.139-155

Turkey's renewed assertiveness internationally has understandably given some concern to Western security partners. Trends in the greater Middle East, in Turkish security policies, and within Turkish society itself appear to be eroding the commonality of interests that Turkey has with the West. While Turkey will continue to want good ties with the West, it is likely to be drawn more heavily into the MENA by the Kurdish issue, Iran's nuclear and political ambitions, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and the fallout from the crisis' in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

Given its growing equities in the region, Turkey will play a greater role there in the in the twenty-first century. Turkey's geography gives it greater immediate security concerns than its Western allies, and it therefore must be acknowledged that Turkish policy will at times deviate from that of its NATO allies.²⁴ However, while some of Turkey's security partnerships may be problematic for Western policy-makers, Turkey remains a NATO member and can still be a moderating political and cultural force in the MENA.

Though the security relationship with the West in the MENA will be more complicated under an Islamist-leaning Turkey, its economic ties with the West show no sign of subsiding. International commerce will continue to bring Turkey into the Western sphere as Turkish businesses continue their partnerships around the globe. Turkey is a G20 nation and it has no intention of losing that

²⁴ Larrabee, F. 2007, Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No., p. 103-114

status.

Turkey's increasingly broad understanding of security will ensure that Turkey pursues policies that promote stability and growth not only in the MENA, but around the world. The economic and political ties that Turkey has fostered throughout the developing world will prove crucial to its success in the 21st century. As the US 'pivots' East and the resource-rich developing world gradually stabilizes, the relationships that Turkey has forged in non-traditional markets will become increasingly valuable for the West.

IV. Conclusion

Turkey has long been poised to once-again play a leading role across a vast area extending from eastern Europe to western China, though its colonial history with the Middle East and hesitant relationship with Europe have thus far hindered its ability to do so. As Turkey becomes increasingly willing and able to play an assertive role in the management of security and economic affairs on the world stage, it may at times have divergent interests from the West – though this should not be perceived as outright rejection, but evolving Realpolitik.

Turkey's geographical advantages – as great as they may be – also makes Turkey susceptible to regional developments and, thus, greatly sensitive to changes in the regional geopolitical status-quo. In the medium-run, Turkey will present challenges *and* opportunities for Western policy-

makers The economic, political, and cultural ties that Turkey is building around the world can be its most valuable asset for the West. While Turkey maintains ties with groups and countries that are often at odds with the West, it remains a democratic beacon in a largely undemocratic region.

Increasing ties in the MENA and the developing world will allow Turkey to play a role in international arena and make it a continued destination for foreign investment. The Turkish-Western relationship should be strengthened, as we are likely to see more – not less – cooperation among developing states. There is a historical and geographical logic for Turkey to seek greater power in the MENA as it will gain Turkey leverage with the West.²⁵

Turkey will not be the only middle-power to assert itself in the coming years, but it is one that has deep ties and connections to the West. Individual situations may force Turkey to diverge from Western policy, but its medium and long-term goals of ‘peace, stability and partnership’ are still aligned with the Western values²⁶.

If the West wishes for Turkey to be a valuable partner in the international arena then it must continue to build strong economic ties with Turkey, should further integrate Turkey into the

NATO hierarchy, and explore options that will allow Turkey – and other emerging powers – to play a greater role in international institutions and decision making bodies.

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²⁵ Kaplin, R 2012, *The revenge of geography*, Random House, Inc., New York, pp. 287-292

²⁶ Freedom and Justice Party, Political Vision of AK Party 2023: *Politics, Society and the World*, September 30, 2012, p.56