



The Changing Nature of Turkey's International Policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Turkey's defensive, status quo foreign policy used to have a strong Western orientation that neglected the developing world. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Turkey's political and economic interests diversified, but gaining membership of the European Union (EU) was its top priority. Turkey is a leading member of various regional economic forums. Recently, Islam is being used as a framework for domestic and international politics, and Turkey is placing more emphasis on being an independent state rather than a traditional bridge between Western and Eastern powers. An agenda based on compassion and development co-operation is an important element of Turkey's relations with developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

As is the case with other emerging middle powers, Turkey's global presence and visibility have increased since the Cold War. What started out as a series of economic liberalisation measures in 1980 opened the door for Turkey, leading to its new-found status as a global trading nation. The diplomatic ramifications of economic diversification were put into sharp relief and bolstered with the break-up of the Soviet Union. Turkey's economic and political presence then extended to a wider area than at any time since the foundation of the Turkish

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Republic in 1923. It became more active and self-confident in developing economic and political links with the former Soviet Union states, especially those in central Asia and applied for full membership of the EU. This marked the beginning of a break from its defensive, status quo-oriented foreign policy. This activism was deeply rooted in a Western orientation.

TURKEY AS AN INDEPENDENT POWER

The negotiation process for EU membership dominated Turkey's foreign policy until about 2010. Many domestic reforms were implemented during that period. More recently, the importance attached to economic development has continued but the country's policy approach has assumed a more sectarian character – evident in increasing references to Islam and the fact Turkey has taken sides in regional conflicts.

Turkey places much greater emphasis today on being at the centre of events as an independent power, as opposed to its traditional role, where it was seen as acting as a bridge between the West and the East. This independence sometimes leads to inconsistencies. Turkey adopts different policy approaches with different countries, depending on its domestic political priorities. Its relations with the EU are also subject to fluctuations originating both in Turkey and the EU. Turkey's relations with the US are also very important, particularly in matters relating to security. Arguably, its relations with the US are more stable and less affected by domestic political considerations than its relations with other countries.

ECONOMY AND TRADE

Turkey's world economic ranking, measured by gross domestic product (GDP) in current dollars, has been hovering around 18th since the late 1990s.¹ It has not experienced an exceptionally successful economic performance, even though the government makes a point of presenting it as such. The country managed to come through the financial crisis of 2008/09 fairly unscathed owing to its resilient financial sector and it terminated its successive stand-by agreements with the International Monetary Fund.

A large current-account deficit, however, means that Turkey's economy is fragile. Its Customs Union with the EU has helped it gain some competitiveness in the EU markets, but this has not led to a significant surge in trade. Turkey's exports in particular are smaller than one would expect from its GDP. However, Turkey is becoming an increasingly important trading partner with some of its regional neighbours, such as Iraq and Russia. Its position as a hub for the energy trade also gives it a strategic advantage, with volumes of oil and gas passing through Turkey set to rise. For example, Russia has abandoned the Southern Stream pipeline project through Bulgaria in favour of pipelines that run through Turkish territory. The dispute between the Kurdish region and

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the Iraqi government about distribution of oil revenues from exports through Turkey has also been resolved.

Foreign direct investment by Turkish firms in developed countries and developing regions, including Africa, is increasing and this has led to the formation of major international trade partnerships. Small and medium-sized enterprises (and some large corporations) in the Anatolian economic heartland are the major drivers of Turkey's economic activity, much more so than they have ever been, both inside and outside Turkey. Private business associations have exerted some pressure over the government in its conduct of foreign economic policy. Which group has more influence varies over time. Recently, views that are not in line with those of the president have been harshly repudiated.

Turkey's membership of the G-20 grouping bestows upon it a privileged status and provides a platform for expressing its views in an influential international setting. The country is also a member, and in most cases a founding member, of certain regional groupings, including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, the Cooperation Council of Turkish-speaking States, the Economic Cooperation Organization and the D-8 (a global economic group of eight developing Islamic countries) – through which it can exercise some leadership. Economic and cultural considerations dominate the background and activities of these groupings. Turkey is also associated with several intergovernmental organisations outside the region, including MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Turkey and Australia), a grouping of countries of similar economic size. Although this bloc holds considerable promise given the relative similarity and the potential for solidarity among its members, it has not yet become a major forum and has not yet made an impression in the Turkish media or academic circles.

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ISLAM AND FOREIGN POLICY

Identity-based relations with religious, historic and linguistic references have always been a part of Turkey's foreign policy, but these are much more prevalent in the current government. The recent use of Islam as a frame of reference has been particularly striking in Turkey's domestic and international political discourse. This includes seemingly inconsequential but media-savvy pronouncements, such as the Turkish president's claim that Muslims discovered America.²

Turkey also attaches primacy to being the voice of the marginalised, destitute and prejudiced, in domestic and international contexts. In both cases, Turkey's recent policy pronouncements tend to place an emphasis on Islam. Domestically, Turkey's political priority has been to break away from a past that had emphasised secularism and modernity, and other Western norms and ideals, at the expense of traditional and religious values. This changing emphasis, together with the country's reasonable economic performance, has led to a series of election victories for Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), which holds the majority in parliament.

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In terms of international policy, this Islamic emphasis has resulted in Turkey taking sides in regional conflicts – in a rather rigid fashion. Such partisanship has meant that Turkey has forfeited its role and function as a model of democracy among Islamic states and as a trusted regional intermediary. It continues to help resolve domestic issues involving Islamic minorities in such remote places as the Philippines and Myanmar.

SOUTH-SOUTH RELATIONS

Turkey has long been a staunchly pro-Western member of NATO. It is also a country that has never been colonised and heir to a former empire. This may partly explain why solidarity with other developing states is a relatively new element of Turkish foreign policy, together with its anti-colonial, non-interventionist discourse, which it often adopts outside the region. But when it comes to issues in the region, Turkey adopts them as very much as its own affair. One of Turkey's deficiencies, and one that reduces its effectiveness in the global arena, is its mistrust of international organisations and multilateral processes. Linked to this is the fact that it pays insufficient attention – matters of peace and security are an exception – to the provision of global public goods, such as measures against climate change.

Economic co-operation is a key element in Turkey's relations with many developing countries. It tends to allocate most of its funding to countries with which it has some identity-based relationship. Somalia, for example, enjoys a privileged place when it comes to Turkey's economic support and sub-Saharan Africa, in general, is well covered. Compassion is a significant factor in Turkey's decision to allocate official and private funds, with emergency and humanitarian assistance dominating its co-operation activities, followed by health and education. Productive sectors such as agriculture and industry, on the other hand, are not sufficiently addressed.

CONCLUSION

Turkey has been implementing an increasingly activist foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, which is closely linked to its domestic politics. This has had the effect of boosting its influence for a while but seems to have waned as its international relations assume a sectarian character. A return to its traditional non-interventionist policy rooted in close relations with all parties would re-establish and augment Turkey's weight both regionally and globally.

ENDNOTES

- 1 World Bank, World Development Indicators, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>, accessed 27 December 2013.
- 2 See, for example, Yuhas A, 'So Muslims beat Columbus to America? They had better get in line', *The Guardian*, 17 November 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/17/muslims-beat-columbus-america-better-get-in-line>.

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