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WHY SHOULD TURKEY PLAY BY WESTERN RULES?

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Turkey has re-emerged as a confident regional power in areas of vital interest to the European Union and the United States. It is no longer the pliant supplicant that the Europe and the United States West imagined it would forever remain. It is economically vibrant and politically self-confident. It has outgrown the role allotted to it by the West. This is one reading of Turkey's new found confidence. A second very fashionable one is that Turkey is seeking to reclaim leadership in the lands of the former Ottoman Empire, a reading which is comforted by the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu's goal of *Pax Ottomana*. The rift with Israel over Gaza and the angry rhetoric of the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan carry dangerous undertones for some observers in Europe and for those in Turkey committed to the secularist political settlement of modern Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Whatever the truth, the contrast is palpable between Turkey's new regional status and the disdain shown by France's Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany's Angela Merkel.

The government of Turkey hopes that the country's rising regional influence will strengthen its claim for admission to the European Union (EU) but such may not be the case. To Americans and Europeans who had come to know the country in the late 20th century, the Turkey of their imagination was one forever in their debt and forever grateful for any seat at the western table. A reality check tells us that Turkey has a dynamic and growing economy, a constitutional revolution which, until recently, was broadening democratic rights and a foreign policy

which, as it settles long running disputes with neighbours, seeks to establish the country as a new regional power. Turkey is using the tools of soft power developed by the EU in a creative fashion. The country's growing regional influence is however a mirror reflexion of Europe's declining sway, a state of affairs which grates nerves in Paris, London, Berlin and Washington.

For most of the 20th century, the constraints of nation building, the Cold War and its erratic economic development forced Turkey to punch below its weight, today the risk is that Turkish leaders believe their own rhetoric and imagine themselves as major contenders on the global scene. Practising *realpolitik* is one thing, representing Islamic culture is another.

The founder of modern Turkey was not afraid of the outside world: his nationalism looked outwards and he was able to combine a realistic recognition of his countrymen's backwardness with total faith in their ability to overcome it. Secularism was central to the political revolution which Kemal Ataturk wrought but it never implied renouncing Islam. He was careful to preserve the urban elites but banned religious fraternities. We are not witnessing today a religious revival but rather a redistribution of power among social forces between those who claim to represent the "true" Turkey, that of Kemal Ataturk and the middle classes which have been largely ignored until the AKP's rise to power. The Islam-within-secularism which developed gradually in Turkey may have been illogical in theory but has turned out to be quite viable in practice.

Ataturk believed there was only one culture in the world, one civilisation but while this may be true of high culture, it is manifestly not the case when culture is understood in the anthropological sense as the way of life of a people. The social class to which he belonged found it easy to adapt to European ways but the founder of modern Turkey underestimated the difficulty of leading the mass of his countrymen in the same direction.

There are at least four prerequisites to Turkey's ability to use tools of soft power as it seeks to play a greater regional role, four pillars if you prefer. The first pillar would be prosperity and economic progress, the second the legitimacy of its elected prime minister, the third its capacity to stand up to Israel and, last but not least, its acceptance as a real member of the Western Alliance.

Prosperity and Economic Progress

The first and most important is prosperity and economic progress. Recep Tayyip Erdogan's main goal in foreign policy is doing business. Istanbul has again become the glamorous centre of regional trade which boasts a Gross Domestic Product of \$150bn. The abolition of visas for travelling to and from Iran

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and Syria has done wonders for trade but all this would not be possible had not Turkey undertaken painful reforms, first prodded by the International Monetary Fund and then by the EU. Powerful private industrial groups have developed which can take advantage of the opportunities offered by the markets of Europe and Turkey's Middle Eastern and Eastern European hinterland.

The priority of Turkish foreign policy is the expansion of an economy that is already more than half the size of the whole of the Middle East and North African region. But Turkey actually sells proportionately less to the Middle East than it did two decades ago, a figure that represents less than a quarter of its total exports. Trade with the Middle East is however very lucrative as the country ran an overall deficit in its foreign trade with the world in 2009 while enjoying an \$8bn surplus with Arab countries which, in 2009 took 18% of Turkey's exports as against 9% in 2002. The EU remains essential accounting for half of Turkish trade and 90% of foreign investment.

What should be worrying Turkey's leaders is that the drive for economic reforms has run out of steam since the AKP hugely increased its majority in the general election 4 years ago. Corruption remains a huge problem – Transparency International puts Turkey on a par with Cuba. Yet the country is on the verge of achieving an investment grade rating for the first time. For most politicians and businessmen, economic weight dictates much of their attitude to a given country. As it reopens its rail-

way line with Syria and Iraq, as it shows interest in accessing gas from northern Iraq to feed into the planned Nabucco trunk pipeline to central Europe, Turkey knows that many difficult economic challenges lie ahead, not the least of which is the water sharing agreement with Syria and Iraq. Overall the win-win attitude which characterises Turkish behaviour towards its neighbours contrasts favourably with the zero-sum equation of economic relations between most Arab countries. But were the Turkish economy to falter as happened in the 1990s, the country's soft power would rapidly decline.

Legitimacy of its Prime Minister

The Prime Minister increased the AKP's share of the vote from 34 to 47% on an 84% turnout 4 years ago which gave his leadership added power and weight, both domestically and abroad. What followed was however rather disappointing: the government and its opponents fought bitter culture battles through the judiciary which allowed those in the EU who are opposed to Turkey joining to forget the country's success in coming up with a more modern form of politics. These battles had the unfortunate consequence of distracting the government from the path of reform and increasing the autocratic instinct of the mer-

curial prime minister. It may be that the stalling of negotiations with the EU encouraged the clashes between the new AKP elites and the old elites but the government lost a golden opportunity to address the country's structural weaknesses and improve the institutions that underpin a

successful economy. The legal system remains Byzantine and can do without the government meddling more in the appointment of judges while the education system is evolving in a very interesting way. Private schools and universities offer the children of the rising middle classes opportunities which, until a decade or so were available only for the wealthy, essentially abroad. For all these reasons and because Turkey's major export market, the EU accounts for 43% of foreign trade and is facing sluggish growth, Turkey should focus on a policy of "self-help."

In Europe, Spanish and British political leaders understand that the EU was working as the load-bearing bridge for Turkey's transition but French and German leaders are more sceptical; they are mindful of the impossibility of selling Turkish future membership to western European voters with the prospect of the further mass migration to the rest of the EU it entails. It would be indeed be very difficult for European leaders to press head with negotiations to bring Turkey in without addressing the issue of potential immigration but populist grandstanding in Europe will only exacerbate tensions. Immigration from Muslim countries is so unpopular that it can transform domestic politics in some western European countries: why not put off that question till later and continue to open chapters in the accession talks? But would Turkey have a lot to gain today from joining the EU? Ever fewer Turks are in favour, many European leaders and public opinion are increasingly against. What matters is that Turkey should continue to pursue reforms. While Turkey remains

committed to its EU path, however, France and Germany must keep the country's membership perspectives credible.

The difficulty the EU has in thinking strategically does not justify some of the Turkish Prime Minister's behaviour. He should press ahead with economic reforms; avoid presuming that the US needs Turkey more than it needs Israel. How Turkish leaders accommodate Islam is of concern to a number of Turks and Europeans. It is worth remembering the words Kemal Ataturk used on his first visit to Istanbul in 1927, after an eight year absence. "This palace belongs no longer to the Shadow of Allah on Earth, but to the nation, which is a fact and not a shadow, and I am happy to be here as an individual member of the nation, as a guest" he told an audience at Dolmabahce Palace. If Turkish leaders frame the debate on Islam-within-Secularism in a populist manner extremists on both sides of the Bosphorous will have a field day.

The Prime Minister should promote press freedom and democracy within AKP and avoid filling the judiciary with placemen: these are prerequisites to consolidating democracy in Turkey. He should avoid inviting ridicule by lecturing Israel on human rights in Gaza while turning a blind eye to what Soudan does in Darfur. More broadly, he should avoid playing to the prejudices of some European leaders and many of his own electors: in this media soaked age, emotional outbursts carry a heavy price tag.

Standing up to Israel

Certain observers in the West feel that current Turkish leaders lend to much support to Islamist parties in conflicts and hold an exaggerated bias against the non Muslim side. But Turkish leaders are not alone in fearing that the recent re-launch of Israeli-Palestinian talks is but one final act in the Middle East farce. Their despair stems from the relentless rise in Jewish settlements on Arab land ever since peace negotiations started. The Israeli human rights group, B'Tselem, has pointed out that the biggest single increase of Jewish settlers on Arab land – a 50% rise – took place in 1992-96 under the governments of peace-makers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres at the high-water mark of the Oslo peace accords and that Israel has now taken 42% of the West Bank with 300,000 settlers there and another 200,000 in East Jerusalem. These are the voices of observers who are concerned that Israel's ever more wobbly international legitimacy is its greatest security risk.

The EU has little influence in the Middle East, not least *vis a vis* Israel today so it is hardly surprising that Turkey should step forward, but it has to tread cautiously. That the Turkish Prime minister is emotionally attached to the Palestinian cause is as worthy of respect as the emotional attachment many Europeans feel with regard to Israel. Jews were the underdog until 1948, today it is the Palestinians. The simple fact of the matter is that Turkey is moving away from being a Nato-backed gendarme to being a more independent player determined to use a number of regional integration tools in order to be taken seriously on its own account.

Turkey's leaders need be mindful of two points. First they must continue to put their own house in order, which means solving outstanding problems with the Armenians and the Kurds, not to mention Cyprus. Normalization with Armenia is essential which means coming to terms with the Ottoman-era mass killings of Armenians. The issue of how to treat the Kurds is arguably the greatest drag on political life as it undermines reforms, constrains foreign policy choices and requires huge military expenditure.

Beyond these specific problems, increasingly polarised views in Turkey about the current AKP leadership will undermine the government's ability to spearhead political change and broker agreement on the future of the Kurds. It must be said that the army and the old *kemalist* establishment are the main obstacles to progress on this front. If the AKP is held back by its Islamist past and the culturally conservative inclination of its core constituents, if its leaders pander to the prejudice of many rather than lead from the front and convince their supporters of the value of new ideas, the future looks less rosy. Nor should the country's leaders confuse frenzy with mediation when it comes to policy towards neighbours and their many disputes. Caution dictates a more sober behaviour when attempting to address or solve the myriad problems of the wider Middle East when

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Finally, destroying the opposition press will do little to help promote soft diplomacy, let alone dialogue between Turks. Freedom of expression has been often enough denied in the recent past in Turkey not to be properly respected today. Any attempt at censorship, either directly or by means of financial skulduggery will carry a heavy cost.

Acceptance as a real member of the Western Alliance

It is Turkey's overall moderation which attracts interest. Money is interested in a country where EU style rules and regulations apply, not a country which is turning its back on Europe. Turkey is viewed in the Middle East and North Africa as a channel through which Muslim and Middle Eastern views can be put forward – a medium which is not distrusted by the West. Arab leaders have no interest in following the model set by Turkey while Arab people only know the country through its very popular sitcoms. Many Arabs are however aware of Turkey as never before since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire: whether that will translate into any influence on the political or social evolution in Arab countries is more doubtful.

American anger at Turkey's vote against sanctions towards Iran at the UN earlier last summer has led to US threats not to sell certain weapons to Turkey: Iran presents a particularly serious

challenge all the more as the US and the EU see eye to eye on the issue. Turkish leaders risk losing the trust of the West.

The Prime Minister may have underrated the importance of Turkey's convergence with the EU to its success. As the EU gets back to business after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and attitudes are softening towards Turkey in Paris, reviving the accession talks and accepting the key importance of economic convergence with the EU are prerequisites to cementing Turkey's role in the "Western Alliance."

Whatever it does, Turkey remains an important player in the Middle East. Where it is involved in key disputes where it is on the front line that it can best bolster its role – breakthroughs on Armenia and Cyprus would help Turkey more than whatever it gets up to in the Middle East. The question here is whether the AKP government has the internal coherence and commitment to move forward?

Does Turkey have to play by Western Rules?

When Brazil and Turkey, enjoying temporary seats on the UN Security Council refused to vote according to the Western wishes on Iran last summer and attempted to broker a deal on Iran, it was difficult not to detect, in Western capitals, a note of conde-

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scension, not to say petulance that two such nations had dared strike out on their own. Great powers on both sides of the Atlantic dislike trespassers: Paris and London, let alone Washington have yet to come to terms with the fact that no longer are they the sole players in town. Getting used to the Chinese is proving to be a painful experience, accepting the Brazilians and Turks will take time; accepting Turkey in the EU will not be easy for those countries which ruled the world for three centuries.

Beyond this the West is facing a sharp learning curve with Peking, as indeed with the Ankara and Brasilia. It wishes these fast rising economies would play by a rule book they have established over the years but in no way are they being asked to craft a new international order. Neither at the IMF nor at the UN are the victors of the Second World War prepared to give any rope. As one Chinese diplomat remarked, Western attitudes are akin to China being offered a seat at a roulette table only on the strict understanding that the West retains ownership of the casino. Even more than Americans, Europeans anxiously cling to the old Euro Atlantic order. The Union for the Mediterranean offers no new strategic vision for the region. Western leaders are coming to appreciate that the financial crisis of the past two years has done more to bring the American Icarus to ground and weaken the EU economies than violent Islamist militancy: it will take

time to accept that three centuries of Western supremacy are giving way to a new balance of power.

Many in Europe welcome Turkey's more active regional role. Whatever misgivings there might be are tempered by the knowledge we have of the history of this great city – Byzantium, Eastern Rome, and Istanbul. We know the role Islam played in bringing classics of Greek science and philosophy to the West; we fully appreciate the greater tolerance the Ottomans showed towards other creeds and people except when the empire collapsed – Turkey must come to terms with the Armenian blemish of its flag. As Turkey has to reconcile its different pasts, Ottoman and Kemalist, so it must not forget that Atatürk's allegiance was to an ideal, not a geographical area – he steered towards the West but the idea was to catch up with modern civilisation wherever it may be found.

The challenge of attempting a social and political transition along European or North American lines, to reconcile a population with a large proportion of Muslims to Western ways of government and thinking remains a challenge, a work in progress. The relative success of the Atatürk revolution suggests it is possible but extremely difficult. Until recently the goal had only been realised at the expense of other cherished European ideals such as freedom and human rights. Today, the soft power Turkey seeks to exercise beyond its borders depends on its capacity to avoid culture wars.

Its history offers Turkey a multilayered memory, a rich tool box of soft diplomacy which may not always play out by Western rules. The country does however benefit from firm anchors to stop it drifting into uncharted waters has happened more than once in the past five decades.

The lure of EU membership offers a very good anchor. Such tools are of great value at a time when great powers are rising and falling. The transition from British to US hegemony and inappropriate economic and monetary policies in London and Washington resulted in the great crash of 1929. The collapse of the USSR and, today, the relative decline of the EU and the US in the face of a fast rising China carry risks of similar amplitude. That is why this country's foreign policy – on the regional level, are of such interest. The Middle East is the focus of so many dangerous confrontations that Turkey's sophisticated use of soft power tools is to be welcomed: it can and should make a very useful contribution to the region's future stability.