

TURKEY'S GEOPOLITICS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER*

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This essay briefly explores some noticeable trends with respect to Turkey's regional aspirations, notably Ankara's new vision concerning the Eastern Mediterranean, and attempts to assess the potential impact of this policy on the power balances in the region. In this context, a presumably eastward orientation in Turkey's foreign policy is examined through the lens of an increasingly assertive posture. It is postulated that, given its size, economic potential and military posture, Turkey aspires, perhaps naturally, to becoming a dominant player in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Caucasus region. The paper asserts that the prospect of Turkey being accepted – hence recognised – as a regional power would be higher if (a) it is perceived as a consistent peacemaker and facilitator of conflict prevention; (b) it promotes the collective policy objectives of the EU and NATO in South-East Europe, thereby maintaining and respecting the fragile regional balance of power; and (c) it avoids the image of a (traditional) regional hegemon, whose primary national interest would be translated into territorial control and domination using – or threatening to make use of – military power and coercion.

A new power balancer

Turkey's ambitious new role conceivably aims to address a power imbalance malaise, the latest symptom of which is a fragile and fragmented Iraq, on one hand, and a re-assertive Iran, on the other – all in the light of the ongoing Arab Spring and the subsequent politics in transition that are clearly evident in certain countries, notably Libya and Egypt, and as of late Syria a well. In other words, this new and assertive role is seemingly designed to create a new order and restore the regional balance of power, not only in the Eastern Mediterranean but also in the wider region. In the process, one cannot fail but notice the old dictum of power relations and domination in the context of hegemonic (or empire) politics. As Hedley Bull readily observes in his classic, *The Anarchical Society – a Study of Order in World Politics* (3rd ed., Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), often the balance of power – in particular among the great powers – has been preserved through partition and absorption of the small (e.g., Cyprus).

In a nutshell, Turkey perceives itself, and is increasingly perceived by other states in the region, as a new dominant power which, as a secular Sunny society, presumably aims to counter Shiite Iran's influence. Moreover, Ankara has dared to openly challenge Israel's might, if only to win the hearts and minds of the majority of Muslim states in the region.

* The views expressed in this article are personal.

Geopolitics and the national interest

Geopolitics to the Turkish leadership is conceivably 'not anathema', as Kissinger has often referred to it, but rather what he contends as 'the basis of their internal analysis and their external actions.' The concept of the national interest in Turkey is arguably quite strong and as such it 'still rallies public and leadership opinion'. Moreover, Turkey seems to perceive the balance of power from a rather traditional realist perspective, i.e., with hard power and the military, the second largest in NATO, being of utmost importance both for its image and its national security. In brief, geopolitics and balance of power, albeit complemented with significant doses of 'soft' or 'smart' power, combined seem to embrace the overriding principles of Turkey's strategic policy objectives in the region.

In order to shed more light on the presumed shift of Turkey's foreign and regional policy, one has to look at the interaction of internal and external factors. For the first time in Turkey's modern history, the policies of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development (AK) party have arguably modified, to a significant degree, both the domestic structure of the country and its foreign policy orientation. Still, major obstacles to this modern 'transformation' remain – namely, the resistance on the part of those who vehemently defend Kemalism, which has been the cornerstone of modern Turkey.

The presumed shift of axis in both domestic and foreign policies under AKP – from Kemalism to 'democracy' to what is often referred to as 'political Islam' – constitutes a major geopolitical event. This 'shift of axis' – that is, Turkey moving from a clearly Euro-Atlantic 'eastern outpost' during the Cold War toward the 'Islamic Middle East' and the former territories of the Ottoman Empire – marks a serious reassessment of the Turkish role in the region and, by extent, in the world. At the same time, it potentially threatens to further erode the internal pillars of Kemalism.

Conclusion

This short essay has attempted to examine the presumably radical changes pursued by the AKP and the subsequent rise of a new geopolitical actor with a significant weight on the fragile regional balance of power. Notwithstanding, Iran and Israel as well as Egypt and Syria, remain major regional players. Turkey is clearly asserting its regional posture (through what many observers perceive as an 'Islamist agenda') with two recent developments worth noting: First, the threats against Cyprus concerning the exploration of natural gas in its exclusive economic zone, and secondly, tense relations with Israel. Combined, these events could conceivably upset – instead of restore – the fragile balance of power in the region. The analysis has also demonstrated that Internal and external factors are heavily intertwined and, as such, they have a significant weight with respect to the perceived, yet noticeable, shift in Turkey's foreign policy and its strategic orientations.