Turkey Rising: Challenges and Prospects for the New Administration

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Jan 18, 2013

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Brief Analysis

On January 14, 2013, Soner Cagaptay, Ross Wilson, and James F. Jeffrey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Cagaptay, the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Institute, is author of the new report The New Turkey and U.S. Policy **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-new-turkey-and-u.s.-policy)** *. Mr. Wilson is director of the Atlantic Council's Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey (2005-2008) and Azerbaijan (2000-2003). Mr. Jeffrey is a visiting fellow at the Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey (2008-2010) and Iraq (2010-2012). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

SONER CAGAPTAY

Much has changed in Turkey after eleven years of rule under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Previously, fragile governing coalitions had been the norm, usually collapsing after a few years. The AKP's rule has been long and steady, however, allowing the party to transform the country politically and socially. Turkey is no longer secular in the way its founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, envisaged: religion has now permeated government, politics, and education. The AKP has also remolded the country's global political identity. In the past, Turks regarded

themselves as Europeans who happened to live next to the Middle East. Today, they have reimagined themselves as members of the Middle Eastern world, though with connections to Europe.

These drastic changes have also split Turks into polarized camps. About 35 percent of the population staunchly opposes the AKP, and another serious split exists between Kurdish and Turkish nationalists.

Yet there is much good news for Turkey as well. Its economy has trebled in size over the past decade and is catching up with many European economies. This growth has been driven in part by trade diversification. Turkish firms have ventured beyond their traditional markets in Europe to attain a truly global reach, and the worldwide economic downturn and Eurozone crisis have only highlighted the advantages of this approach.

Political stability has been another key driver of economic growth. For example, many wealthy moguls in unstable neighboring states use Turkey as a haven for their assets. Thus, Turkey is growing because it is more stable than other countries in the area, and the AKP wins elections because Turkey is growing. The downside is that Turkey's large account deficit and high unemployment could foreshadow a sharp and disorderly bust in the coming years; for now, though, the economy is humming.

Turkey has also managed to build soft power abroad. Its businesses have grown in international recognition, and its "Gulen school" movement has exported Turkish culture worldwide. Similarly, the Foreign Ministry has vastly expanded its diplomatic representation, and Ankara has joined numerous regional and international forums.

Yet Turkey realizes that this soft power is not readily transferable into hard power, and this realization has prompted Ankara's foreign policy pivot over the past two years. The crisis in Syria and rivalry with Iran have reminded Turkey of the importance of having a strong NATO partner for defensive purposes. To borrow a comparison from Ambassador Jeffrey, Turkey resembles Japan in this respect: both countries have large economies and soft power, yet they cannot do without a robust external security framework. This fact, coupled with a long history of Westernization, show why Turkey cannot simply tear off its Western overlay like a Band-Aid.

To sustain its rise, Turkey must resolve its internal conflicts. It can do so in part by drafting a truly liberal democratic constitution that makes room for all groups, using religion-blind language that welcomes Jews and Christians as equal citizens. Ankara must also relearn how to leverage its Western credentials. If it wants to truly lead in the Arab and Muslim worlds, it needs to prove that it is more than a "wealthy Yemen" (i.e., a large, prosperous Muslim nation that adds no real value to regional security). Turkey's Western ties -- in particular, its access to NATO hardware and security frameworks -- can facilitate such efforts.

This is good news for Washington. In past years, U.S. policymakers lamented that Washington needed Turkey more than the other way around. This is no longer true; the foundations for a truly interdependent relationship are recognizable in the current geopolitical configuration.

Yet Washington should also be aware that the Syrian conflict has shown signs of becoming a stress test for U.S.-Turkish relations. If worst-case scenarios prevail next door, Turkey's internal security and economic stability could be in danger. Spillover from Syria could also dent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ambition to become president after reshaping the post's powers. Consequently, Ankara wants to address the Syria conflagration now, while Washington favors a more prudent policy.

ROSS WILSON

In the course of a generation, Turkey has grown from a $70 billion economy to over $700 billion. The drastic economic changes have brought demographic and social transformation as well, including greatly accelerated urbanization. The AKP has been the main political beneficiary of these transformations because it is the only party with an agenda that speaks to the new Turkey.

To be sure, these transformations have their limits. Turkey's economic growth has not reduced unemployment, and its education system is still outdated. The Kurdish issue remains a problem, as does the status of women. These qualifications temper the notion of a transformed country.

Nevertheless, Turkey is more confident today than it has been for centuries, and the public now insists on a greater role abroad. But this exuberance comes with an important corollary: Turkey's aspirations often outstrip its capacities. This is why Ankara is once again relying on its traditional relationships. In particular, U.S.-Turkish relations are better than ever. Previously, military-to-military ties were the mainstay of the relationship, complicating efforts to facilitate dialogue between mid-level civilian officials. Today, bilateral ties are based on a more modern diplomatic framework, not just military affairs.

Going forward, Turkey has a prevailing interest in promoting stability in the region, and this imperative necessitates interdependence with the United States. In order to realize this mutual goal, Washington must sustain dialogue with the Turks on Syria and other regional matters. Such coordination is currently functioning well, but personnel changes during the postelection transition in Washington could prove disruptive. Senior leaders in the new administration should make it a priority to safeguard the depth of this relationship.

JAMES F. JEFFREY

Turkey's rise in the region comes with two qualifications. First, Ankara's foreign policy transformation should not be overstated, given the considerable degree of continuity seen in its approach to the region over the years. Second, Turkey's aspiration to become a regional power will mean grappling with many of the same exceedingly difficult dilemmas that former aspirants have faced. Accordingly, Ankara will likely restrict its focus to the immediate south.

Turkey's growing profile is the culmination of decades of economic and political development. Much of what we regard as "new" in Turkey today actually comes from former leader Turgut Ozal's reform agenda during the 1980s. In the same sense, the country's Middle East agenda predates current foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu. In fact, Turkey has always had a deep interest in its near-abroad, based primarily on promoting security and access to petroleum resources.

For its part, the United States has long sought out regional powers as custodians of the global order, but this formula has often been elusive. Succeeding as a regional power is difficult because neighboring countries tend to grow wary of such actors and work to thwart their ambitions. Serbia discovered this in the 1990s, and Iran is discovering it today. Now Turkey is trying to assume that role, but its task is all the more problematic because its ties with the Middle East are relatively tenuous compared to its extensive links with the West.

In the coming months, Turkey's likely focus on its near-abroad gives the United States opportunities for direct engagement. On Iraq, Washington should watch Turkey's growing ties with the Kurdish region closely in order to minimize conflicts over petroleum ownership. And on Syria, Washington should pay close attention to the particular modalities of greater involvement in the crisis. This requires a better understanding of the areas of convergence and divergence in Ankara and Washington's visions for Syria's future.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Tyler Evans.

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