



## Post-Kemalist Turkey and its alliance with the West

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The "Turkish issue" refers to a shift in the internal political balance, to an assertion made nationally by a state to the outside world and to a continual awareness of Islamic referents. Consequently, the West is in danger of losing Turkey, a key power which stands at the intersection of some major geopolitical regions. And yet Ankara's freedom of action in today's difficult environment is based on reassurance from the West. For want of a clear geopolitical strategy that could dissipate any grey areas, all the parties involved in this major alliance need to exercise the art of prudence and concentrate on the "basics".

"How happy is he who calls himself a Turk!"

Kemalist motto,  
inscribed on the pediment of administrative buildings

Geopolitically speaking, Turkey is often depicted as a transition zone between East and West, just as it is in the "real world", given its location at a crossing point between Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East. Economic development, the growing importance of Islamic referents in the political field and the international ambitions of Turkish leaders have resulted in what we will refer to as the "Turkish issue". A key question: Is the West in danger of losing Turkey?

Ever since 2002, Turkey has been under the leadership of the JDP (Justice and Development Party) and has been attempting to establish itself as a key geostrategic player in its immediate environment. Despite talk of a "Turkish model", the geopolitical context is difficult and extremely uncertain. And yet the current redefinition of political balance does not mean that Turkey is swinging towards an improbable, unified "Islamic East". It is true

that in terms of comparative strength, Turkey represents an essential power, but its freedom for action is more limited than it seems, as the country's security and prosperity depend on its "special relationship" with the West. Consequently, there is a convergence of interests between allies which still overrides any differences in opinion on a certain number of issues.

## Historic analysis of Post-Kemalism

### Kemalism: a type of "Herodianism" with no geopolitical alignment

We are familiar with the role played by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) and his progressive authoritarianism in the formation of a Turkish nation state, even if Asia Minor is ethnically speaking more heterogeneous than the official doxa claims. If we refer to the categories invented by historian Arnold Toynbee, Kemalism is a type of "Herodianism", the idea being to get rid of the Islamic and Ottoman past, which is a source of moral corruption and vital weakening according to Mustafa Kemal, and instead to adopt the ways of the West and take on its techniques for power. There is actually nothing new about this idea. Following the defeats of the Ottoman armies by the Austrian and Russian empires in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Sublime Porte became aware of its power differential compared to its geopolitical rivals. Attempts at "reorganisation" ("*tanzimats*") in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the coup carried out by the "Young Turks" in 1908 failed to achieve the desired reconstruction. Mustafa Kemal realised that half measures would not be sufficient, he needed to go one step further.

It would be a mistake to give in to the retrospective illusion that Kemalist plans for modernisation led to a geopolitical alignment behind the Western powers of the time. When Mustafa Kemal rose up to create the Turkish nation state, he did so against the will of the victors of the Great War and the Treaty of Sèvres (10<sup>th</sup> August 1920). A Turkish delegation participated in the Baku Congress (1920) organised by the Bolsheviks, who made a plea to the East. The following year, Mustafa Kemal signed a treaty with Moscow to help him prevent Western powers from setting up in the straits. In 1925, Ankara and Moscow signed a Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality. Turkey's Kemalist political and economic organisation was indeed similar to that of the USSR. Political life was monopolised by a single party (the Republican People's Party) responsible for organising a command economy. Externally, a policy of neutrality was implemented and Turkey did not join in the Second World War until the Yalta conference (February 1945).

### The post-war Islamic phenomenon within the JDP

The Turkish leaders turned to the West in 1945 when Stalin broke the 1925 treaty and demanded the revision of the Montreux Convention. Ankara was covered by the Marshall plan and became a member of NATO (1952); from then on, Turkey became a military mainstay on the southern flank of the USSR, north of the Arab East. Its alliance with the West was extended internally through the establishment of multiparty politics (1945) and the victory of the Democratic party (1950). At this point, Islamic themes reappeared in politics and gained an audience which went far beyond the Islamist parties founded consecutively by Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011), the political sponsor of Recep T. Erdoğan (founder of the JDP and head of government). Islamic brotherhoods also reappeared and had a growing influence on the political scene. The army was the guardian of the Republic and of secularism in this "guided democracy". It was responsible for three coups d'Etat (in 1960, 1971 and 1980) and substantial military pressure was put on the civil authorities (see the "post-modern coup d'Etat" in 1997); governmental action was monitored by the National Security Council (MGK).

The JDP's arrival in power, its successive electoral victories and its transmutation into a hegemonic power (not without concern) marked the arrival of a new era referred to as the "post-Kemalist" era for want of a better name. The long internal political battle between Islamists and soldiers ended with a victory for the former. Military pressure on the JDP government in 2007 and the judicial appeals introduced the following year were of no avail. The civil authorities prevailed and the MGK lost control of nominations within the army. The resignation of the main military leaders on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2011 failed to reverse the trend. From then on, the army and its leaders seemed to be confined to their barracks, marginalised by developments in the "Ergenekon" affair (a plot hatched by the military in 2003) and the revelation of "deep state" intrigues. As well as representing a clear break from the previous period, the new situation was also the result of medium term developments.

## A new national Islamic synthesis

The momentum gained by Islamic themes and the triumphant success of the JDP can also be interpreted through Toynbee's categories. The strict correlation between modernisation and westernisation is merely temporary. The process generates feelings of alienation and anomie in uprooted populations, manifested by a rejection of the West and by forms of "zelotism". Consequently, the rural exodus of the Anatolian rural population to large Western cities resulted in a display of Islamic customs and electoral support for the JDP. This phenomenon is extremely common in political science. It has often been described as transitory (a mere detour on the path to modernity). The successes of modernisation – significant economic growth and the development of a middle class – subsequently generate feelings of pride as well as social, cultural and religious self-assertion. The pursuit of modernisation and the strengthening of the country also alter the balance of power in terms of values.

And yet it would be simplistic to regard this form of indigenism as no more than a return to the Islamic and Ottoman past, the underside gaining the upper hand as it were. Behaviour and attitudes were radically modified by the Kemalism and coercive secularisation initiated and subsequently relayed by the modernisation movement itself, as shown by the constant decline in the birth rate (the total fertility rate was 6 in the 1960s, but today stands at 2.2) and the departure from demographical transition. According to observers abreast with religious phenomena, the ostentatious aspect of certain practices in modern-day Turkey is very far removed from the traditional Islam seen in small-town Anatolia. Furthermore, the disappointments suffered by the Kemalist *establishment* ("white Turks") do not mean that Turkish nationalism has been obliterated in favour of Islamism. In fact, a new national-Islamic synthesis is developing in JDP Turkey, which partly explains the difficulty in qualifying this political force ("Islamic-conservative" or "neo-Islamist"?).

## Turkey in regional and trans-Eurasian balances

### The limits to "no problems" and the Kurd issue

The JDP's "national-Islamism" and the "strategic depth" described by Ahmet Davutoglu, current Minister of Foreign Affairs, aroused concern amongst Turkey's allies watching from an outside perspective – especially the United States – and caused more than one stir in the close but ambivalent relationship with Turkey's "strategic partner", Israel. The desire to solve problems in Turkey's geopolitical neighbourhood did not bear fruit. "Round ball" diplomacy with Yerevan failed and the border between Turkey and Armenia remains closed. Turkish plans for a large regional market in the Middle East based on a close relationship between Ankara and Damascus are

definitely no longer on the agenda, given the Arab revolts and break in the *status quo*. Troops have gathered on both sides of the border between Turkey and Syria, just as they did at the very worst of the 1990s. This reciprocal hostility has an effect on the relationship between Turkey and Iran, Syria's main ally.

Despite the hopes placed in renewing Turkish political life, the JDP failed to provide any real answers to the Kurd issue, which is at a crossroads between Turkey's internal and external geopolitics. Since the end of the caliphate, Kurdish demands regarding politics and identity have resulted in several episodes of fighting. A minor conflict took place between the army and the PKK between 1984 and 1999. To a great extent, anticipating the effects associated with the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan explain the refusal to make a stand in northern Iraq in 2003. Although the JDP emphasised the fact that both sides belonged to Sunnite Islam and acknowledged certain cultural rights belonging to Turkish Kurds, the conflict broke out again and, since the summer of 2011, has been getting worse. Looking beyond the controversial issues (Cyprus, problem of EU application, etc.), Turkey's allies owe it to themselves to provide a political solution to the fight against the PKK and to cooperate closely with the police and judicial system. When it comes to its genealogy and methods, the PKK is a terrorist organisation recognised as such by the international community.

## Turkish-Iranian rivalries and inter-allied solidarity

Regional developments regarding the Kurd issue lead us to the question of Turkey's relationship with Iran. The Iranian leaders are thought to support the PKK, as is the case in Syria. Despite the international sanctions restricting Turkey's relationship with Teheran, commercial exchanges between Turkey and Iran have grown considerably over the last ten years, driven on by an important energy "*business*". Ankara needs to satisfy the rising energy requirements of an emerging economy. The energy *realpolitik* sets the scene for the position adopted on the cultural enhancement of the Turkish and Iranian world and, at least temporarily, for diplomatic manoeuvres aiming to put a new regional friendship on display. Observers are reacting with scepticism. In May 2010, the new bilateralism culminated in the Turkish/Brazilian attempt to act as an intermediary in the nuclear crisis which set the Iranian regime against the West as well as its closer geopolitical neighbours.

For obvious geographical reasons, the Iranian nuclear programme and the development of medium range ballistic missiles are of major concern to Turkey, since the whole Turkish soil is within missile range. In addition to the direct threats, Iran's "aggressive sanctuarisation" and the increased possibility that Teheran could implement a policy of regional hegemony would endanger Ankara's legitimate ambitions in the Middle East. Since the beginning of the "Arab Spring", latent rivalry has been brought out into the open and Turkey has found itself confronted with the Iranian-Syrian alliance on its Eastern borders, with the PKK acting as a relay. The sensitive geopolitical context needs to be taken into account in order to fully appreciate the importance of Ankara's rallying to NATO's antimissile defence and the installation of an American radar in eastern Anatolia. In return and to counter Eastern threats, the guarantee of security which Turkey enjoys under NATO should be emphasised and made more explicit, as a way of clarifying inter-ally relationships.

## From Eurasia to Turkestan

After the Cold War and despite significant disagreements in the Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo) and Caucasia (Chechnya), the relationship between Turkey and Russia grew stronger, encouraged by significant exchanges in the energy field. Russian gas represents three fifths of Turkish consumption and has generally been transported by *Blue Stream* since 2003. Ankara and Moscow signed an agreement for a hypothetical South Stream (a rival Nabucco project) crossing Turkish territorial waters in the Black Sea. In exchange, nuclear power stations would be built as well as a new gas pipeline (*Blue Stream II*) or even an oil pipeline from Samsun to Ceyhan, supplied by Russian petrol. As a result of these energy ties, some observers expect there to be a global strategic partnership between Ankara and Moscow according to Eurasist logic, as opposed to the

American-Western axis. However, this would be attaching too much importance to the magic of words ("Eurasia", "multipolarity") and to shared resentment. By contrast, this type of analysis minimises the importance of the Atlantic pillar in terms of Turkey's national security and geopolitics.

Although Turkey is trying to establish itself at the junction of the flow of hydrocarbons from East to West and North to South in order to transform itself into an energy crossroads (a "hub"), it would be much more beneficial in terms of energy security and trans-Eurasian dynamics to open up a southern corridor connecting the western markets to the Caspian basin – Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, *Nabucco* gas pipeline project, etc. Following the example set by Western powers and in close liaison with them, Turkey is aiming to diversify its sources of supply, to unblock central Asia and to contribute to geopolitical pluralism in the post-Soviet area. Russia's comeback in South-Caucasia following the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 provoked dissatisfaction in Ankara, and Vladimir Putin's open desire to form an "Eurasian union" giving shape to the "nearby stranger" doctrine goes against promoting Turkish interests in Upper Asia and in former Turkestan.

## The art of prudence

It is impossible to establish any "clear line geopolitics" in the relationship between Turkey and the West because of the ambivalent historic and cultural relationship with the Sublime Porte, the complex regional situations and the uncertainty specific to the *interregnum* into which we are venturing. In this day and age, a progressive interpretative framework is obviously required, and the vital issues at stake call for a more elaborate Turkish policy with carefully defined objectives.

What we do know for certain is that there is obviously a need to renew the links forged between Western powers and the Turkish nation, both bilaterally and multilaterally. On the one hand, Turkey represents a vital geopolitical pivot in the Greater Middle East and in Southern Eurasia; on the other hand, Ankara would not be able to venture into this "great game" without solid reassurance from the West. The alliance between the West and Turkey is all about these basics. To preserve them, we need to exercise the art of prudence or, in other words, tread with care.

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