

Turkey's expanding role

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Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has been playing an ever-expanding role in international affairs. Given its geo-strategic position, straddling Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Black Sea, Turkey is naturally well-placed to be one of the vital hubs and pivot points of the first half of the twenty-first century. Today, it is also expanding its horizons – whether in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa or the Caucasus, Turkey's impact and influence are increasingly visible.

Turkey is located in a complicated region however, and the major institutions and alliances in its neighbourhood are currently in a state of flux. It is unclear how the European Union (EU) will evolve during the next decade, and the EU's future neighbourhood policy remains uncertain. NATO, meanwhile, is trying to define its role in a more complex world, an indication that its future purpose is far from being secured. Turkey is therefore rising to prominence in a relative vacuum, one that makes its future policy choices all the more important.

Under the leadership of President Gül and Prime Minister Erdogan, Turkey's international agenda embraces four broad areas. First, Turkey is seeking to tie itself to the most important international organisation in its region, namely the EU. Although Turkey's potential accession to EU membership will certainly encounter further difficulties during the coming years, the process will be central to Turkey's foreign policy as well as its domestic reform process and its overall political and economic development. The desire for accession reflects a decision by Turkey's leadership and foreign policy-makers that Turkey can be more powerful and influential internationally inside the EU than it can be outside.

Second, Turkey is playing a more important role within its region. This appears to reflect a decision by Turkish policy-makers that it is not in Turkey's interests to have frozen conflicts on or near its own borders, and that it wants to direct its own destiny rather than be buffeted by the ongoing crises in its immediate neighbourhood.

In the realm of regional diplomacy, Turkish diplomats are reaching out to Armenia, meeting regularly with the Gulf Arab states, and are now engaging in an active dialogue both in Baghdad and in the Kurdish Autonomous Region to build a secure and stable Iraq. More controversially, the government has

set aside Turkey's past close relationship with Israel in order to become a more outspoken champion of the Palestinian cause.

Beyond this diplomatic activity, Turkey is actively promoting trade and investment with its former regional antagonists, including Syria and Iran. Turkey's annual trade with the Arab world now stands at US\$30 billion, compared to less than US\$2 billion a decade ago. Turkey is leading efforts to establish a nascent free trade zone in the Middle East, which accounts for 25 per cent of Turkey's total foreign trade volume.

Furthermore, in line with its declared 'zero problems with neighbours' policy, Turkey's 'visa diplomacy' has removed travel restrictions with Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iran, among others. In 2010, 1 million Syrians are expected to visit Turkey for cross-border trade. Turkish soap operas, meanwhile, are extremely popular across Central Asia and the Arab world. This cultural and 'people-to-people' approach is a pivotal aspect of Turkey's engagement with and growing connections in its surrounding region.

Third, Turkey is seeking to become a more active participant in international security. It is already a key contributor to international peacekeeping operations, with 1,300 Turkish troops currently present in Afghanistan and 1,000 in Lebanon. In addition, Turkey also took up its place as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in 2009, after receiving unprecedented support of 151 votes in the General Assembly. And, importantly, Turkey is the only Muslim member of the NATO alliance and one of the major contributors to its military capabilities.

This desire to be recognised as a major player in international security received new prominence as Turkey inserted itself actively into the international community's dealings with Iran over its nuclear programme. Turkey's joint attempt with Brazil in the first half of 2010 to negotiate a settlement with Iran over its stocks of enriched uranium led to some sharp disagreements with Washington and European capitals, but underscored Turkey's new diplomatic self-confidence.


Fourth, in recognition of its regional economic ascendancy, Turkey is now a member of the G20 grouping of the world's leading economies. Driven by Turkey's strong endorsement of globalisation, Turkish companies are entering new markets in Africa, South

America and Asia. Lying between Europe and the East, the country is also crucial to European energy security, ranging from the existing Baku-Tbilisi-Çeyhan pipeline to the prospective Nabucco pipeline, which will transport natural gas from the Caucasus and the Middle East to European consumers.

If anything can be drawn from Turkey's recent international agenda, it is that Turkey, like other existing and emerging powers, is pursuing a more self-interested foreign policy. But there are also several questions over Turkey's future international role. To start with, it is reasonable to ask whether Turkey has taken on too large an international agenda, and whether it has the capacity and diplomatic infrastructure to manage successfully a wide range of issues.

Moreover, Turkey still faces significant domestic political, social and economic challenges. Turkey's political and economic development in the coming years will be a crucial determinant not only of its domestic

stability, but also its ability to play an influential role internationally. The government may also need to manage the growing influence of public opinion on Turkish foreign policy, which has been energised by the popular protests against Israel's response to the Turkish-led Gaza flotilla in May.

Despite these caveats, Turkey's policies and actions in a very fractious part of the world, as well as its ambition to play a more important international role, will ensure that the country is a significant player in international affairs in the coming years. During the Cold War, Turkey was on the periphery of Europe, a reliable but isolated NATO ally who was seen as a protector of Europe's southern flank in the bipolar struggle of that era. Turkey's rise to prominence and its growing regional and international influence at the start of the twenty-first century reflect the dynamics of a changing world and will be a compelling marker for how well the international system can accommodate new, rising powers. 

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