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The Three Strategic Visions of Turkey

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While the growing importance of religion in Turkey should not be dismissed, a more nuanced debate on Turkish foreign policy should take into consideration three different visions of Turkey's place in the international order: (1) Neo-Ottomanism, (2) Kemalism and (3) Turkish Gaullism. The common denominator of these strategic visions is that they transcend the erroneous narrative prevalent in Western media that focuses on the dichotomy between Turkey's Islamic and secular, pro-West factions. Many Western policymakers, analysts and scholars equate the notion of a Turkish divergence from the West—or the fear of "losing Turkey"—with the idea of an Islamic revival. This is an understandable fallacy. After all, Turkey's population is almost fully Muslim and a political party with Islamic roots has won consecutive electoral victories. Moreover, this is exactly how some members of the Turkish secular establishment—the military, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the upper echelons of the judiciary—describe the current policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

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However, Turkey is too complex to fit into this facile paradigm. It defies sweeping generalizations about Islamization. This paper is an attempt to capture the multifaceted nature of Turkish foreign policy by analyzing the three strategic visions mentioned above.

1. Neo-Ottomanism

Since the AKP came to power in late 2002, its foreign policy has been based on what Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's top foreign policy advisor and now foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, calls "strategic depth." Davutoglu's main argument is that Turkey is a great power that has neglected its historic ties and diplomatic, economic and political relationships with its neighboring regions (Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, and Eurasia), dating back to the Ottoman era. It should be noted that this "neo-Ottoman" vision is not an imperialist agenda. It is also very different from policies advocated by Necmettin Erbakan, the Islamist leader of the now defunct Welfare Party. While Erbakan sought to create an Islamic alliance with Muslim countries like Libya, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia as an explicit alternative to alliance

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with the West, AKP leaders want to reach out to non-Western regions to complement their ties to the West—not to replace them.

The AKP's neo-Ottoman vision builds on the approach of former President Turgut Özal. Shortly after the Cold War came to an end, Özal helped Turkey rediscover its imperial legacy and his Motherland Party tried to establish a new consensus at home between the multiple identities of Turkey (western, Muslim, secular, Kurdish and Turkish). Neo-Ottomanism reminds Turks that they once had a great multinational empire that ruled the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans and parts of Central Europe. Such emphasis on the Ottoman legacy is not part of a plan to Islamize Turkey and its foreign policy. Rather, it is an attempt to balance and broaden the geostrategic horizons of a country, which in the past has been obsessed with following an exclusively Western trajectory.

Three factors help define the neo-Ottoman tendencies of the AKP. The first is the willingness to come to terms with Turkey's Ottoman heritage at home and abroad. Neo-Ottomanism does not seek to re-create the Ottoman Empire with territorial ambitions in the Middle East and beyond. Similarly, it does not seek to institute an Islamic legal system in modern Turkey. Instead, it favors a more moderate version of secularism at home and a more activist policy in foreign affairs, particularly in terms of a willingness to mediate conflicts. In this neo-Ottoman paradigm, Ankara exerts more "soft power" (i.e. political, economic, diplomatic and cultural influence) in former Ottoman territories and in other regions where Turkey has strategic interests. This broad vision for Turkish foreign policy requires an embrace of Ottoman multicultural legacy.

In practical terms neo-Ottomanism amounts to a change of "mindset", and has serious implications for policy making. For instance, because neo-Ottomanism is at peace with the multinational legacy of Ottoman Empire, it

opens the door for a less "ethnic" and more multicultural conceptualization of Turkish "citizenship." As a result, neo-Ottomanism is tolerant of Kurdish cultural rights and expression of Kurdish national identity, as long as loyalty to the Republic of Turkey is not put into question. Faced with demands for Kurdish cultural and political rights, the neo-Ottoman mindset opts for accommodation in the framework of multiculturalism and Muslim identity. Unlike hardline Kemalism which insists on assimilating the Kurds, neo-Ottomanism allows Islam to play a greater role in terms of building a sense of shared identity.

The second characteristic of neo-Ottomanism is a sense of *grandeur* and self-confidence in foreign policy. Neo-Ottomanism sees Turkey as a regional superpower. Its strategic vision and culture reflects the geographic reach of the Ottoman and Byzantine Empires. According to this neo-Ottoman vision Turkey is a pivotal state which should play a very active diplomatic, political, and economic role in a wide region of which it is the "center." Such grand ambitions, in turn, require a nation-state at peace with its multiple identities, including its Muslim and multinational past. The third aspect of neo-Ottomanism is its goal of embracing the West as much as the Islamic world. Like the imperial city of Istanbul, which straddles Europe and Asia, neo-Ottomanism is Janus-faced. In that sense, the fact that the Ottoman Empire was part of Europe matters a great deal to AKP's neo-Ottoman vision.

This is partly why, despite its Islamic roots, the AKP has worked much harder than previous Turkish governments to improve Ankara's chances of EU membership. Such efforts were eventually rewarded with the opening of accession negotiations between Turkey and the European Union in 2005. Not surprisingly, the AKP's ability to embrace the West and the European Union has not impressed the Kemalists, who are now suspicious of Westerners and see them as naïve and supportive toward the AKP's brand of "moderate Islam."

2. Kemalism

There are clear differences between Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism in the three main aspects of strategic culture discussed above. Where neo-Ottomanism favors an ambitious regional policy in the Middle East and beyond, Kemalism opts for modesty and caution. Where the first favors multiculturalism and a more moderate version of secularism, the latter prefers rigid measures against Islamic influence and Kurdish ethnic identity. Where neo-Ottomanism is trying hard to pursue EU membership and to have relatively good relations with Washington, Kemalism is increasingly resentful of the EU and the United States.

Under President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Kemalism was primarily about an independent and nationalist foreign policy. During the Cold War it came to represent an exclusively pro-Western approach, sometimes at the expense of Turkey's relations with the Islamic and Arab world. Today, ironically, many Kemalists, who were once Western oriented, have turned against the West. Since the arrival of the AKP to power, Turkey's domestic and foreign policy dynamics have turned upside down. In its first three years in power, the AKP passed more pro-EU legal reforms than most of the previous secularist governments. This formerly Islamist party became the strongest advocate of Turkey's EU membership in order to enhance political liberties and human rights at home. Yet, the Kemalist opposition remained very skeptical. What had caused this sudden change of heart among former Islamists? Was their pro-EU stance tactical? They came to the conclusion that the AKP was engaged in *taqiyya*, "dissimulation of real intentions." According to this logic, the Islamists were pushing for EU reforms in order to weaken the role of the Turkish military, the main bulwark against political Islam.

The Turkish military already had serious concerns about the EU's human and minority

rights agenda vis-à-vis the Kurdish problem. With the additional complication of an Islamist pro-EU agenda, its willingness to see Turkey move closer to the EU was further tempered. In that sense, the arrival of AKP to power proved to be the end of the love affair between Kemalism and Europe. The fact that the Bush administration praised the AKP as a model for the Islamic world and spoke of Turkey as a "moderately Islamic" country exacerbated the Kemalist frustration with the West. Under such circumstances Kemalism came to be associated with an anti-Western stance, sometime referred to as the neo-nationalist alternative. Today, hard-liners within Turkey's Kemalist establishment believe the United States and Europe have eroded Turkey's secular identity by promoting "moderate Islam" and by helping AKP's consolidation and monopolization of power.

In the event of a military or judicial coup against the AKP, hardliners within the secular-nationalist establishment might well break with the West and seek closer ties with authoritarian states like Russia, China, Syria, Iran, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian Republics. This so-called "Eurasian" alternative, sometimes openly supported by retired generals, would also enable Ankara to take action against Kurds without worrying about the reaction from the liberal West. In that sense a Kemalist foreign policy would prioritize full sovereignty and independence against the West.

3. Turkish Gaullism

Turkish Gaullism combines many elements that are common to the two versions presented above. Despite the important differences between Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism described above, they both share a strong sense of patriotism and attachment to the Turkish nation-state. Neo-Ottomanism represents a more pragmatic and liberal mindset than Kemalism, but it has successfully internalized the Kemalist paradigm of Turkish

nationalism. The concept of the nation-state and the achievements of the modern Turkish republic are not put into question or rejected by neo-Ottomans. At the end of the day, both neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism share a state-centric view of the world and Turkish national interests. In that sense, both Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism share Turkish nationalism as a common denominator. In fact, seen from the prism of rising Turkish self-confidence and nationalism, one can even argue that there is a certain convergence between neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism that is increasingly present in this third vision of Turkish foreign policy.

If current Turkish trends continue, Washington might witness the emergence in Turkey of not necessarily an Islamist foreign policy but a much more nationalist, independent, self-confident and defiant strategic orientation - in short, a Turkish variant of "Gaullism." Turkish Gaullism is primarily about rising Turkish self-confidence and independence vis-à-vis the West. A Gaullist Turkey may in the long run decide to no longer pursue an elusive EU membership. It may even question its military alliance with the United States. Burdened by a sense that it never gets the respect it deserves, Turkey may increasingly act on its own in search of full independence and sovereignty, strategic leverage and, most importantly, "Turkish glory and *grandeur*."

As France did under Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, Turkey may opt for its own *force de frappe* - a nuclear deterrent - and its own *realpolitik* with countries such as China, India and Russia. Similarly, it could even contemplate leaving the military structure of NATO, while maintaining its political membership in the organization. Contemporary analyses of Turkey in American circles constantly refer to the tension between "secularism" and "Islam" or "eastern" versus "western" proclivities. Such focus often comes at the expense of the most powerful force driving Turkish foreign policy: nationalism and self-interest. One should not underestimate the emergence of nationalist

and self-confident Turkey that transcends the over-emphasized Islamic-secular divide. After all, both the Turkish military's Kemalism and the AK Party's neo-Ottomanism - the ideal of regional influence - share a similar vision of Turkish independence and nationalism.

To understand Turkish Gaullism one needs to look at Turkey's impressive economic performance. Today's Turkey offers a considerably different picture than Turkey in the 1990s. During the "lost decade" of the 1990s, the Turkish economy was plagued by recessions, an average inflation rate of 70 percent, structural budget deficits, chronic financial crisis and constant political instability. In addition to such dismal economic performance, the war in the country's southeast against the Kurdish separatist group (PKK) caused 30,000 deaths during that decade alone.

Turkey managed to surprise most analysts with its remarkable economic recovery and political stability in the last 10 years. Shortly after the lost decade culminated with the worse financial crisis in Turkish history in early 2001, Turkey began structural economic reforms and cleaned up its financial and banking system under the stewardship of Finance Minister Kemal Dervis. Economic and political reforms continued after the moderately Islamic Justice and Development (AKP) came to power in 2002. In the last 8 years, the Turkish economy managed to grow by an average of 6.5 percent. Turkey is now the sixteenth largest economy in the world, and in the last decade, Turkish per capita income has more than doubled from \$4,245 to \$8,711.¹

Such economic performance, coupled with political stability, fuels an unprecedented sense of self-confidence and pride in Turkey. The AKP, under the charismatic and mercurial leadership of Prime Minister Erdogan personifies this sense of Turkish "hubris." One should not forget that

¹ International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2010

Turkey's newfound sense of confidence and *grandeur* is taking place in a context where most Turks feel they are not getting the "respect" they deserve from the West, particularly from Europe and the United States. New obstacles to EU accession, perceived injustice in Cyprus, growing global recognition of the "Armenian genocide" and Western sympathy for Kurdish national aspirations are all major factors forcing Turks to question the value of their long-standing pro-Western geostrategic commitments. Looking beyond the secular versus Islamist divide in Turkish politics, one would find that both the Kemalist and neo-Ottoman camps have come to embrace the same narrative of nationalist frustration vis-à-vis Europe and America.

After 2004, when the Greek Cypriots joined the EU and acquired veto power against Turkey's EU accession, the AKP grew increasingly disillusioned with the EU process. As a result of this dynamic, the neo-Ottoman camp joined the Kemalists and jumped on the bandwagon of nationalist frustration with the West. The irony is that such frustration with the West is in great part fueled by self-confidence and national pride. Turkey's recent problems with Israel and the United States also led to a convergence in the Kemalist and neo-Ottoman camp further reinforcing the Gaullist dynamics in Turkish foreign policy.

While Turkey feels it is not getting enough respect in the West, recent historic developments in the Arab world—where ossified regimes are finally overthrown by democratic revolutions—reinforce Turkey's political relevance and sense of importance. The potential for a more democratic Tunisia and Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to emulate a "Turkish model" are factors that fuel Turkey's Gaullist sense of sense of national pride and *grandeur*.

Conclusion

In the past, Americans and Europeans would often ask whether Turkey had any realistic

geopolitical alternatives and complacently reassure themselves that it did not. But today's Turkey is a much more self-confident and independent country and Turkey feel they no longer have only a "Western" option. The rise of Turkish Gaullism or neo-Ottomanism needs not come fully at the expense of Turkey's strong relations with the West. But if the strategic relationship between Ankara and Washington continues to erode and prospects for joining the EU continue to recede, Turkey will certainly have an additional incentive to look at strategic opportunities in relations with Russia, India, China and, of course, the Middle East and Africa. The stakes are high for Washington. Home to more than 75 million Muslims, Turkey is the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world. It has borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It is the corridor through which the vast energy reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia pass to the West—the only alternative being Iran. A stable, Western-oriented, liberal Turkey on a clear path toward the EU would serve as a growing market for Western goods, a contributor to the labor force Europe greatly needs, and a democratic example for the Arab world. A resentful, unstable and authoritarian Turkey, on the other hand, would be the opposite of all this.

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