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Turkey's global strategy: executive summary

Report

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➤ Executive Summary

Dr Nicholas Kitchen, *LSE IDEAS Editor*

All eyes will turn to Turkey this month as it votes in parliamentary elections. After nearly a decade in power, and despite setbacks in the 2009 local elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is expected to win another landslide victory. Since January, poll ratings have consistently placed the party's support in the high forty-percents, and commentators have raised the possibility that the AKP might gain a supermajority of 376 seats in parliament, which would allow it to change the constitution without a referendum. Such an outcome would cement the major changes that Turkey has undergone since the turn of the century, and almost certainly see Erdogan remain in power for longer as Turkey's constitution transitions towards a more presidential system.

Yet whatever the election result, Turkey's international role will remain an intense topic of debate. In the last few years, as the AKP has grown increasingly confident in its foreign policy, observers have wondered aloud whether the country might be leaving 'the West', forcing that group to confront the question 'who lost Turkey?'

This is to cast Turkey's role, and its emerging global strategy, in unhelpful binary terms. Turkey's foreign policy strategy of Strategic Depth, articulated by foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, has at its heart the proposition of regional engagement, or 'zero-problems with neighbours'. Turkey's geographical position provides the logic for this strategy: at the confluence of East and West, connecting Europe to the Arab and Muslim world, and most concretely, the bridge between the energy suppliers of the Middle East and Central Asia and the EU's 500million consumers.

The first pillar of that strategy has been economic. Turkey now ranks as the 15th largest economy in the world, its economy having tripled in size since the end of the Cold War and doubled since the turn of the century. Whilst the global financial crisis caused a recession in 2009, in 2010 real growth had recovered to 8.9%. The orientation of Turkish trade has been changing too, and although the EU remains Turkey's preeminent trade partner it accounted for less than 50% of Turkey's total exports for the first time in 2008, as trade relationships with the Middle East, Russia and the Caucasus grew strongly. Whilst investment and financial relations remain dominated by the West, the trend of diversification of the Turkey's international economic relations looks set to continue. The OECD expects Turkey to be the fastest growing economy of the OECD between now and 2017, with the proposed relocation of Turkish financial institutions from Ankara to Istanbul designed to promote Istanbul as a major regional financial centre and boost Turkey's voice in the G20.

Economic self-confidence has been matched by growing political assertiveness in the region. The headlines may have focused on the criticism of Israel over the Gaza flotilla and the rejection by the United States of Turkey and Brazil's diplomacy on Iran. But Turkey's deepening economic and political ties with its neighbours are increasingly making it the default regional power, a role in which Turkey itself

has been only too glad to cast itself, as a model of secular democratic development of a predominantly Muslim society. At the same time, the upheavals of the Arab Spring have proved problematic for a nation that simultaneously regards itself as a champion of democratic change whilst predicating its foreign policy first and foremost on pragmatic realist engagement. Whilst Turkey was quick to turn against Mubarak in Egypt, on Libya Ankara vacillated, caught between their longstanding humanitarianism in the country and an opposition to NATO intervention. As Syrian unrest grew, threatening the bilateral gains in security and economic relations achieved over the previous decade, Turkey sought to use its influence to pressure President Assad to adopt reforms in private.

Turkey has not been alone in struggling to realign its thinking in the face of such dramatic political change, and its influence and reach are certain to be central to the future to the economic and political development of the region as the revolutions responsible for overthrowing governments make the difficult transition to constructing them. The test of Turkey's foreign policy will be to articulate a political conception of the future for the region beyond the notion of ensuring strong bilateral relations with other governments.

In the final analysis however, Turkey's strategy cannot be captured simply by understanding the bilateral relationships, regional upheavals and economic and energy flows that constitute Turkey's core interests. Turkey's emerging role also more fundamentally reflects the changes in the world politics whereby power is becoming decentred and more diffuse, and established blocs are becoming less and less the bedrock of international system, to be replaced by more fluid arrangements that loosely bind states on the basis shifting interests, rather than lock them together as part of a more fundamental struggle for international order. In this sense, understanding Turkey's shifting global role can shed light on the emergence and orientation of other rising powers, including Brazil and India, and those emerging in the region which may rise in the future, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Iraq. For the West, the challenge will be to shed the bloc mentality that remains pervasive, and reconceptualise an international order in which independent states become assets rather than inconveniences. In a post-American world, there are likely to be more Turkeys. ■

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