

GREAT DECISIONS

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Background guide: Turkey

Overview

Turkey – a longtime critical ally of the United States and Europe, and a member of NATO, is playing an increasingly vital regional role in the broader Middle East. Straddling the continents of Europe and Asia, Turkey literally serves as the bridge between East and West.

But in Turkey's bid to join the European Union, 17 of 35 chapters, the requisites of EU membership, regarding domestic policy remained blocked for three years, in part because of its human rights record. The human rights record is an on-going concern, especially after the rise of the moderately Islamist government of Recep Erdogan and recent crackdowns on the press and protesters in Taksim Square.

Turkey's trade patterns and diplomatic outreach have expanded over the past decade to transform the country into a dynamic actor. As a result, the U.S. and European powers need Turkey's support in their efforts to navigate Middle Eastern politics amid the Syrian conflict, Iran's nuclear ambitions and even the ever-present conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Geography and History

Istanbul has long exerted influence over the two continents it sits upon – Europe and Asia. Once the center of the Ottoman Empire that stretched from Europe into the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey's identity still lies in its position as crossroads between East and West. Its geographic advantage allowed the Ottoman Empire to control trade in the eastern Mediterranean – a position that put it at odds with European powers. Like their western counterparts, the empire's Muslim rulers aggressively pursued territorial expansion.

It wasn't until 600 years after the birth of the empire – and amid its precipitous decline – that Turkey's leaders turned toward the modern and secular trends of the West. In 1920, the great reformer, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk emerged from the chaos of World War I. He ended centuries of dynastic rule by transforming old Ottoman-Turkish state into a new secular republic by founding the modern Republic of Turkey, internationally recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

Since its founding, Turkey has experienced several political transitions and development initiatives leading to its position as a growing economic power. As half of Turkey's trade is with the European Union, Turkey has moved closer to the West with its longtime bid for membership in the EU.

More recently however, Turkey's approach towards the west has shifted. This does not include Turkey's commitment to successfully complete its western-friendly transformation process at home and abroad, but rather the decades-old fixation with the idea that membership in western institutions, most notably the European Union, is a must for this to happen. Under Erdogan's Justice and

Development party (AKP), Turks are increasingly less concerned that their western and European identity be recognized by Western countries and are more concerned with global economic standing and investment appeal.

Internal Challenges

A predominantly Muslim nation, Turkey is now facing a growing internal power struggle between secularists and conservative Muslims. Conservative Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, seen as promoting a more religious and sectarian tenure, is contemplating rewriting the constitution so that the country's parliamentary system becomes a presidential one. As a result, Erdogan would be vested with even more power until at least 2023, Turkey's centennial, which rights activists fear is a foundation for a "theocratic" government.

Freedom of the press, one of the acknowledged pillars of democracy, has also suffered under the Erdogan administration. Violent demonstrations shook Turkey this summer when a peaceful sit-in protesting the redevelopment of an Istanbul park in Taksim Square transformed into nationwide protest after a brutal police crackdown. The demonstrations came amid an extraordinary suppression of Turkish media, with 47 journalists jailed for challenging Erdogan's policies. Millions of protesters demonstrated about a plethora of issues including freedom of speech and the Erdogan government's increasing religiosity in what analysts say is a reaction to the increasing authoritarianism of the government.

Some journalists earned the government's ire for their reporting on Turkey's Kurdish separatist movement. For more than three decades, the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, has been fighting for greater autonomy for ethnic Kurds. Turkey, the U.S. and European powers consider the PKK a terrorist group, but the prime minister says he is communicating with Kurdish separatist leaders as armed PKK militants withdraw to outside Turkish borders in a fragile yet formal peace plan.

With such internal developments, many Turks and outside observers are concerned about the ramifications of strengthening AKP's grip in the name of democratic reform would have for the so-called "Turkish model" of democracy.

Regional Hegemon?

Since 2002, Prime Minister Erdogan has sought to shore up Turkey's role as a regional leader with a policy of "soft power." Turkey is already a member of NATO, but the new policy reflects Ankara turning away from Europe and the U.S., with an effort to improve ties and influence in the Middle East. But the "soft power" policy is now being tested by the conflict in Syria. Ankara severed ties with Damascus after the Assad regime rejected overtures by

Turkey to play the role of peace broker there.

At the core of this emboldened foreign policy lies the idea that coping with the challenges of the ongoing globalization process requires Turkey to continue its liberal democratic transformation process at home and help develop friendly strategic environment in its own region.

Turkey balances its relations with key western actors by strengthening its relations with non-western actors whenever this is considered to be in Turkey's national interests. Some observers believe for example that Turkey wants to position itself to be mediator in any future peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians especially after a recent Israeli apology for the results of the Gaza blockade Mavi Marmara raid.

Relations with Iran and Iraq have also chilled, because as predominantly Shia countries, they are sympathetic to the Assad regime, not Syria's Sunni population. But with hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees – and fighting – at times spilling over its border, Turkey cannot just walk away. Instead, it's finding itself again – turning toward the West.

Policy Options

Turkey is an ally that Washington needs on the chessboard of Middle Eastern politics especially with increasing importance to geostrategic interests. The U.S. is wary of Turkey pushing for renewed talks between the Israelis and Palestinians on their own, though president Obama helped facilitate a return to normal relations between Turkey and Israel following a fallout over the fate of a Turkish ship that broke the blockade on Gaza.

But like Turkey, the U.S. has an interest in containing the Syrian conflict so it does not engulf the entire region in fighting. They both believe the Assad regime must go. Both nations also want to contain Iran's nuclear program, and any efforts by Tehran to exploit the Syrian conflict to their own advantage.

Several of these exogenous factors occurring at international and regional levels have provided the context in which Turkey's bargaining power vis-à-vis western actors, namely the U.S., has increased and Turkey has been able to adopt a more nationalistic and self-centric foreign and security policy outlook.

Therefore, despite the common ground, Turkey's domestic politics and increasingly autonomous foreign policy will also play a part in Washington's thinking. The U.S. no doubt hopes that any moves by Prime Minister Erdogan toward greater autocracy – or toward a more Islamist form of government, becoming the twenty-first century's first Muslim world power – will not undermine Turkey's decades of openness to the West.

Experts

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Quick Facts

According to the international media watchdog Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Turkey is the world's leading jailer of journalists, with 76 in prison.

At least 3 million people attended protests connected to the Taksim Square demonstrations across the country this summer. Nearly 5,000 were arrested and over 8,000 were injured.

The AKP's 2007 parliamentary elections victory marked the first time in 52 years that the party in power increased its votes for the second term.

Prime Minister Erdogan received a ten-month prison sentence in 1999 for reciting a poem that was considered an incitement to violence. The sentence forced him to step down from the Mayorship of Istanbul.

In 2008, the British magazine Prospect named Fethullah Gulen the world most prominent public intellectual. He was also chosen as one of TIME magazine's "100 Most Influential People for 2013."

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, more than 600,000 refugees have flowed into Turkey and rebels have sought training and medical assistance in Turkish territory.

On May 12, 2013, Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, issued a cease-fire declaration from his jail cell calling for Turks and Kurds to "build the democratic modernity together, as two prominent strategic powers in the Middle East."

Turkey's GDP has more than doubled in the past decade and the International Monetary fund expects it to grow by 3.4% and 3.7% in 2013 and 2014.

Turkey has jailed more journalists than Iran and China and currently ranks in the bottom 14% in the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index.

The Turkish government has strongly invested in education with teacher numbers increasing by 350,000 over the past decade.

Inflation has been a concern with Turkey with the rate reaching 8.9% in 2012.