

# Turkey: A Resurging Pivotal Power

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For the last few decades, the world has been essentially unipolar. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has enjoyed an unrivaled position at the top of the global pecking order in political, military, and economic terms.

However, geopolitical machinations never cease. The small events that drive our lives also propel entire nations—sometimes forward, at other times backward. Russia is gaining political and economic influence, and China and various banking hubs in the Middle East are gaining financial ground. Nobody is truly challenging the U.S. at this point, but a small cadre of potential contenders is gaining visibility.

One such awakening power is Turkey, heir to the formidable Ottoman Empire, which at various times dominated the eastern Mediterranean, Europe (nearly to Vienna), North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, and parts of Russia. Since the end of World War I, though, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, Turkey's role on the world stage has been limited and muted. For nearly a century, it has been focused inward and cautious in its foreign policy. That, however, is quite uncharacteristic of Turkey's typical role in the region. Strategic Forecasting's George Friedman observes:

Until the fall of the Ottomans at the end of World War I, and for centuries before then, Turkey was both the dominant Muslim power and a major power in North Africa, Southeastern Europe and the Middle East. Turkey was the hub of a multinational empire that as far back as the 15th century dominated the Mediterranean and Black seas. It was the economic pivot of three continents, facilitating and controlling the trading system of much of the Eastern Hemisphere. ("The Geopolitics of Turkey," July 31, 2007).

However, the saeculum of Turkey's quietude is ending, and it is again emerging—though slowly—as a pivotal power. The Turkish Armed Forces is the second largest standing armed force in NATO (after the U.S.), with a combined strength of over a million uniformed personnel serving in its various branches. In 2006, Turkey had the eighteenth largest economy in the world, and it has grown between five and eight percent for more than five years. Its economy is larger than that of any other Muslim country—including Saudi Arabia—and ranks between Belgium and Sweden in terms of GDP.

To an extent, opposition from every direction—Russia, Greece, Armenia, Syria, Iraq, and Iran—is still restraining Turkey's economy. Yet, as its economy continues to grow, the ability of these nations—with the notable exception of Russia—to continue to oppose its influence meaningfully is decreasing. Moreover, as its economy, military capabilities, and influence expand at the intersection of Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, the likelihood of Turkey remaining passive is slight. The balance of power will have to change in each of the regions where Turkey can assert itself, such as southeastern Europe (including the highly-pressurized Balkans) and the ever-volatile Middle East. Friedman explains it this way:

Not only does Turkey interface with an extraordinary number of regions, but its economy also is the major one in each of those regions, while Turkish military power usually is pre-eminent as well. When Turkey develops economically, it develops militarily. It then becomes the leading power—in many regions. That is what it means to be a pivotal power.

While Turkey is not the regional hegemon just yet, its influence and politico-military activity are steadily increasing. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, Turkey—a long-time U.S. ally—firmly declined to let American forces use its territory as a staging ground. Among other things, it did not want to be seen as a collaborator in a war against another Muslim nation. Turkey is thus in the unusual position that America needs Turkey—both as a basing point as well as a counterweight to Iran—more than Turkey needs America.

Though surrounded by chaos, Turkey has a vested interest in stabilizing the region. Friedman states:

It no longer regards the United States as a stabilizing force, and it sees Europe as a collective entity and individual nations as both hostile and impotent. . . . It is far more interested in the future of Syria and Iraq, its relationship with its ally, Israel, and ultimately the future of the Arabian Peninsula. In other words, Turkey should be viewed as a rapidly emerging regional power—or, in the broadest sense, as beginning the process of recreating a regional hegemon of enormous strategic power, based in Asia Minor but projecting political, economic and military forces in a full circle. Its willingness to rely on the United States to guarantee its national security ended in 2003. It is prepared to cooperate with the United States on issues of mutual interest, but not as a subordinate power. ("Turkey as a Regional Power," October 23, 2007)

Though it is a Muslim nation, its republican, constitutional government, founded in the 1920s, has fought fiercely to remain secular and non-extremist—even deploying the military at times to guarantee its secularism. Even so, anti-Americanism is strongly on the rise. According to Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes, "Turks regularly poll as the population most hostile to America in the world. In 2000, polls show 52 percent of them looking favorably on the United States; just 9 percent do so in 2007."

While Turkey is rising again in its capabilities and potentialities, it still lacks a clear direction or purpose for its rediscovered power. Though a NATO member, it is increasingly acting more out of self-interest than according to the dictates of that treaty. It is not quite a Western ally, but also not an enemy. What it will do in the coming years is becoming an increasingly significant question in the world of geopolitics.