

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey is depicted as key to the coming together of an enlarged West, capable of confronting the challenges from the East. Discussions involving Turkey should move beyond the narrow confines of the “broader West” debate to focus on some of the critical issues that will confront Turkey in the coming years. And while horizontal maps are still of great relevance, the reality of a fast globalizing world calls for a greater understanding of international dynamics, including as concerns definitions of “the West.”

Beyond the “Broader West” Debate: What Will Turkey Stand for?

by *Emiliano Alessandri*

Protracted economic malaise in the developed world has spurred a debate on whether the United States and Europe need a “broader West” in order to cope with rising powers such as China who seem poised to threaten traditional Western dominance in international affairs. Differences between the current and previous “enlargement” debates after the fall of the Berlin Wall are certainly not lacking. In the 1990s, Western triumphalism and a sense of historical necessity mixed with moral duty, rather than Western weakness and fear of decline, underpinned the discussion. But similarities are also striking. Despite the transformations since the Cold War, Western mental maps have remained characteristically horizontal, with Russia and the post-Soviet space being the central focus of Western attention, along an axis that remains characteristically North Atlantic. In this context, Turkey is depicted as key to the coming together of an enlarged West, capable of confronting the challenges from the East.¹

The sixth meeting of the GMF Trilateral Strategy Group explored the topic

¹ See, among others, Zbigniew Brzezinski *Strategic Vision. America and the Crisis of Global Power* (Perseus Books, 2012)

“Can the West Cope?” and could not help but engage in this debate. However, the presence of Turkish participants and a diverse group of experts on transatlantic affairs helped frame the discussion in a different way.

Two points in particular are worth emphasizing and reinforcing. First, discussions involving Turkey should move beyond the narrow confines of the “broader West” debate to focus on some of the critical issues that will confront Turkey in the coming years. The question, in fact, is not whether or not Turkey “belongs” to the West. In historical terms, Turkey has been part of larger Western developments from even before the modernizing and Westernizing experience with Kemalism after 1923 and Atlantic security integration during the Cold War. Rather, the critical test is whether in the context of a West that is becoming less able to conserve some of its defining features — from liberal democracy to widespread economic opportunity — Turkey will be a stronghold of a regenerated West. Or will it instead contribute to the growing pluralization and fragmentation of the West in the face of globalization and competing international models.



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Economic dynamism and foreign policy activism seem to suggest that Turkey can be an important factor contributing to a revival of the community of Western nations. Its “democracy with Islam” is hailed in some quarters as an experience that Muslim communities in the Arab world could draw critical lessons from. But Turkey is also a country of rising nationalism, rampant populism, and a still weak (if not weakening) culture of political pluralism and respect for the rule of law, minorities, and human rights. When it comes to foreign policy, Turkey’s activism may limit itself to scoring political points for Ankara, or be channeled toward initiatives that will strengthen Western influence in the many surrounding regions where Turkey has stakes, as well as lead to reforming and strengthening the liberal world order that the United States and its allies helped erect after WW II.

The second point that is worth underlining is that while horizontal maps are still of great relevance — the main 21st century geopolitical developments are still taking place largely in the northern hemisphere along a East-West continuum — the reality of a fast globalizing world calls for a greater understanding of international dynamics, including as concerns definitions of “the West.” In this context, a key question is whether some of the emerging economies and largest democracies with deep but mixed historical connections with Western societies — in particular Brazil, India, and South Africa — will display

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some convergence with developed nations in the end, and whether this alignment will lead to enhanced strategic cooperation and perhaps a sense of common identity. Signs are inconclusive for now, as intensifying engagements with Western countries seem to co-exist with strong national and regional aspirations in much of the developing world, and with the cultivation of international identities that emphasize autonomy, from the “Global South” to the “BRICS.”

Even on this aspect of the debate, Turkey seems to have a role to play. Not only has Ankara strengthened its connections with other emerging economies around the world in recent years, but Turkish leaders have also played with the idea of adding Turkey to the BRICS, and projecting Turkish influence beyond the horizontal East-West map on the rounder and wider global arena. As showed by Turkish-Brazilian engagement over the Iranian nuclear question, however, Turkey’s global profile has raised questions as to whether Ankara’s goal is the maintenance of the liberal international system as we know it through a mix of reform and consolidation, or the transition to a different type of order, however vaguely defined.

Democracy as Populism or Liberalism?

The defining trend of Turkey’s last decade has not been its alleged swinging between West and East, but the transition from a tutelage system under Kemalism to a post-Kemalist society where the role of traditional forces, starting with the military, has been vastly reduced. But the outcome of this transformation is still very much unclear. The fact that the new ruling elites have been able to represent the interests and embody the aspirations of wider sections of the Turkish people — including the more pious constituencies — shows that Turkey has become more democratic than during the Cold War era, when it was firmly anchored in the West but was subjected to repeated military coups and internal repression. To equate the Turkish Republic and Turkish democracy, however, is shaky. The issue is not so much the formal structure — through EU-driven and other reforms, Turkey has acquired the basic elements of a democracy. Rather, what remains troubling is the “living constitution,” the actual workings of the Turkish democracy and the dominant Turkish political culture. The Turkish leadership has concentrated prerogatives and extended its control over the multiple layers of state structures after three terms



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in office, undermining the balance of power. Traditional Turkish nationalism has not been abandoned in the transition to post-Kemalism, but instead reinterpreted by adding a new populist slant to it.

As “New Turkey” has been rising, moreover, some of the old problems have not found a satisfactory solution, such as the long-standing question of the rights and demands of the Kurds. More broadly, from minority to gender to human rights, Turkey has yet to show that a deep change in both practice and mindset has taken place. The risk here is similar to that faced by other Western democracies: under the pressure of globalization and competing models, the processes of emancipation and reinforcement of the rule of law stall or even regress. The drafting of a new constitution replacing the one adopted in 1980 under military rule, if successful, will settle some of the outstanding issues. But once again, the verdict will only be fully borne out by real dynamics. Turkey can indeed represent a successful and extremely important example of democratic consolidation through internal reconciliation and new, more advanced political balances than those it had known in the first part of its Republican era. But it can also remain stuck in a populist-nationalistic path, which has dangerous incarnations in “national” and “sovereignist” democracies like Russia, and that may become more common even in the European context if present economic weaknesses and political challenges are not overcome.

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Developments in Turkey along the continuum between liberal and managed democracy, rather than along the “West vs. East” divide, will be a crucial test both domestically and for Turkish influence in its near abroad. While the “Turkish model” is talked about, already some argue that it is Turgut Ozal’s Turkey of liberalization and opening, not Erdoğan’s populist Turkey, that should form the points of

reference. Turkey can be a powerful force for change in the Arab world, as showed by Erdoğan’s own calls for political reform in critical countries like Egypt. If Turkey continues to democratize internally, and supports reforms on the separation between religion and the state and a culture of pluralism in transitional Arab countries, this will indeed create a new “axis of democracy” across the region. But the risk is creating a selective engagement from the Turkish side and a Turkish appeal among the Arab elites that has more to do with Israel bashing than with Turkey’s liberalism.

The New Global Context and the West

From the beginning, the notion of the “West” has had less to do with geography than with interest, values, and — no less importantly — ideology. At a time of accelerated globalization and the spreading of wealth beyond the traditional centers of power of the past centuries, its definition may change and broaden. But Western commentators seem still deeply influenced by the Cold War division of the international system along a northern axis spanning from the North Atlantic to China in the Far East through the Eurasian landmass, and split along the Manichean divide between democracy and authoritarianism. This view is not only outdated given the more fluid and variable geographies of globalization, but may miss the important challenges facing transatlantic countries in the coming decades.² The logics of interdependence force the inclusion of the East and South. The “rise” of countries like Brazil and South Africa have direct implications for developed economies in the North Atlantic, and can offer great political and economic opportunities for a “West” that is seeking new partners.

At the same time, the never-perfect equation of West as democracy and East as authoritarianism is even less relevant today. Democracies have long emerged outside the traditional boundaries of the Atlantic West, while some of the Western countries have experienced setbacks on a host of key indicators, including the rule of law, while losing some of the purported accompanying elements of liberal democracy, such as social inclusiveness and widespread economic opportunity. While globalization is exerting formidable pressures on the liberal democratic model, a protracted economic crisis may lead to protectionism and

² For a critique of still dominant Western horizontal world maps, see, Marta Dassu, “Why the West Should Be Enlarged,” *Aspenia*, February 2012, <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspensia-online/article/why-west-should-be-enlarged>



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renationalization, thus weakening the multilateral liberal international order from within.

Again, the question for Turkey is not so much whether it belongs to the “West” — a notion that is itself put to test. The issue is what Turkey will stand for in the new fluid context. Signs have been mixed and at times contradictory. Turkey’s interest in multilateralism as a way to provide stronger international backing and legitimacy to international actions has been strong in recent years. Turkey has also worked constructively within the G20, and has also resisted protectionist tendencies. But a certain “revisionism” nonetheless seems a part of the emerging Turkish discourse, which tends to associate a fairer international system with one that not only makes room for emerging powers in the international system but also moves beyond some of foundational and organizing principles that had inspired the liberal order erected after WW II.

A key question seems to be whether Turkey’s main efforts on the world stage will be directed at reforming the international order as we know it or transforming it. Will Ankara work with Western countries to reinforce the system by binding new powers to the same broad set of principles, from free trade to human rights, or will it side with the BRICS or other groupings in redefining the rules of the road? These open questions show that on both domestic and international issues, one should move beyond the “broader West” debate when it comes to Turkey. Turkey is already a member of the West. But as the new global context poses challenges to the West’s relevance, unity, and identity, it will be specific decisions on critical issues of pluralism, democracy, and liberal international principles that will determine whether Turkey will be in the position to regenerate the West and the global order, or hasten the transition to something different.

About the Author

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