

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey is a global “swing state.” It has a large and growing economy, a strategic location, a democratic government, and mixed views about prevailing international arrangements. Like the other three global swing states — Brazil, India, and Indonesia — Turkey’s choices will influence whether today’s international order evolves and endures or fragments and fails. In the United States, it is time to move beyond simplistic debates and reframe Turkey as one of a handful of democratic rising powers that matter most. Turkey’s emergence translates into an even stronger case for its European Union membership. Now is the time to draw closer to a shared vision with Ankara of the future global order, and of Turkey — and the West’s — place within it.

Turkey: A Global Swing State

by Daniel M. Kliman and Richard Fontaine

From the point of view of the United States and Europe, what is Turkey? Is it a developing European country, a key North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally, and European Union aspirant? Is it a rising force in the Middle East? Or is it an emerging market economy, as business leaders see it? It is, in fact, all of these, and yet these perspectives on their own fail to capture the totality of Turkey’s international importance today. Policymakers in the United States and Europe would do well to consider Turkey in a new light: as a global swing state.

Global Swing States

The term “swing state” originates in U.S. domestic politics. It refers to the handful of states whose choices can tip the outcome of presidential elections one way or the other. While swing states are not always the largest in terms of population or economic output, their mixed orientation translates into a decisive impact within the U.S. political system. They are the states that matter most.

Internationally, there are countries that today occupy a similar position: Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey. Despite manifold differences, these countries share four defining attributes. All

possess large and growing economies. All occupy strategic locations in their respective regions. All boast democratic governments. And critically, all have neither fully embraced the existing international order, rejected it, nor offered a detailed alternative.

These rising powers have emerged as global swing states because the international order forged from the ashes of the Second World War and sustained by Western hard and soft power has come under new strains. After six decades of successfully safeguarding market capitalism, containing threats to the peace, and promoting respect for human rights, the order is now fraying. Its main pillars face unprecedented challenges with a non-democratic China’s ascendancy to superpower status, the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran, moribund global trade talks, and the aggressive pursuit of maritime claims. With the United States entering a period of fiscal austerity and much of Europe looking to retrench, whether the international order evolves and endures or fragments and fails will have much to do with the choices made by these emerging powers.

Today’s global swing states are not a bloc, an alliance, a league, nor even



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a loosely coordinated body; rather, they exist as a concept — all share the attributes discussed above. This perspective offers a way for those in the United States and Europe to think about these key countries commensurate with their importance in the global order.

Why Turkey

Since 2002, Turkey's gross domestic product has tripled, in part fueled by a boom in foreign investment. Not only is Turkey's economy large, it is also highly diversified, with Turkish firms competitive in construction, manufacturing, and services. Geographically, Turkey lies at the juncture of Europe and Asia. It borders many of the Middle East's most volatile countries and stands astride energy corridors linking the Caspian Sea to Europe. Although Turkish politics remain rough and tumble, military coups no longer punctuate periods of civilian rule.

Given Turkey's mixed views about prevailing international arrangements, its future choices will have significant impact on global order. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan last fall called for a “new global order,” one based on solidarity and trust rather than conflict. How Ankara might fill in the details of such a new order, however, remains to be seen.

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To date, Turkey's track record on the main elements of global order remains mixed. In trade and finance, Turkey has achieved phenomenal economic growth through an open economic policy that has made it a major force for free-market reforms and an open international financial architecture. On human rights, on the other hand, Turkey soft-pedaled Iran's crushing of the Green Movement, opposed but later supported the NATO intervention in

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Libya, and pivoted from backing the Assad regime in Syria to pressing for its ouster as evidence of widespread government brutality mounted. At a time of growing concern about Iran's nuclear weapons program, Turkey attempted to broker a deal enabling Tehran to enrich uranium abroad and voted against an additional round of United Nation sanctions. In the maritime realm, Turkey does not recognize the 12-mile international water line, pointing to interests along its own Aegean coastline.

Time for New Thinking

Turkey's emergence as a global swing state demands new thinking in Washington and European capitals.

In the United States, debates on Turkey's future continue to simmer. Ultimately, many of the contending perspectives — whether Turkey belongs in the West or the Middle East, or whether the country is succumbing to creeping theocracy — create more heat than light. It is time to move beyond these debates and view Turkey through the lens of its new global influence. Washington has recently taken steps in this direction by elevating Turkey's importance in overall U.S. strategy. A vital next step would be to introduce a global order component into high-level bilateral dialogues with Turkey. This will help both countries identify how they can better partner in pursuit of international order and encourage the two governments to address those areas in which their visions of the future rules of the road diverge.

In the past, the prospect of joining the EU served as an effective tool for encouraging Turkey to move toward the trade, finance, and human rights pillars of the international order. The EU has in recent years, however, put Turkey's accession on the back burner due to opposition from some member states. Brussels and other European capitals should recognize that Turkey's emergence translates into an even stronger case for EU membership. Fully integrating



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Turkey into the EU would make the process of adapting and renewing today's order considerably easier. With Europe's hard and soft power contracting due to cuts in defense and foreign affairs budgets, expediting Turkey's membership would represent a significant European contribution to global order.

Conceptualizing Turkey as a global swing state is, in essence, a way of recognizing the country's growing importance to the future of international order. To adapt and extend the rules-based order that has served the United States, Europe, and others so well for more than six decades, deeper partnership with Turkey on global issues will be vital. Now is the time to draw closer to a shared vision with Ankara of the future global order, and of Turkey's — and the West's — place within it.

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