

EURO-ATLANTIC OR MIDDLE EASTERN? TURKEY SEEKS A STRATEGIC COMPROMISE

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The recent Turkish-Israeli crisis which occurred immediately after the attack on the humanitarian assistance flotilla headed for Gaza merely confirmed that Turkey is front and centre in the news for geopoliticians, as well as for economists, specialists in Islam and the general public interested in international relations. Like its place in the world planisphere, Turkey figures among the most central and sensitive points of the international balance of powers, as its increased visibility on the international stage bear witness: it is a member of NATO, a member of the G20, a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period 2010 and 2011; and in April 2009 it was the venue for one of the first trips abroad of President Barack Obama. Such issues as the enlargement of the EU, NATO's new strategic concept, the peace process in the Near East, Iran's nuclear programme and a possible 'clash of civilisations' between the West and Islam have thus become linked with the challenges Turkey faces going forward.²

This new focus of interest in Turkey is based on the surprising evolution over the past few years of a country which is located at the crossroads of three continents and of many areas of past and present crises such as the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East. As regards domestic affairs, for nearly eight years the world has been following episodic tests of strength between a government said to have a 'moderate Islamic' orientation and the Army, which has always sought to be the guarantor of the secular regime established by Kemal Atatürk on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire during the 1920s. As regards foreign policy, international public opinion has witnessed over the same period a series of events which are surprising, to say the least: who can forget the refusal of America's strategic ally in 2003 to allow the use of Turkish territory for American operations against Iraq? Or, more recently, the verbal attack which Prime Minister Erdoğan directed against Israeli President Simon Peres during the World Economic Forum of Davos?

These events are linked with instability and fluidity at both the regional and international levels, and they raise an increasing number of question marks over what is

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²The importance of Turkey was, for example, once again underscored by the attention which the visit of its Prime Minister to Washington attracted in December 2009. Hugh Pope, 'What Obama should say to Erdogan' in

<http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/view/resources/uploaded/Hugh%20Pope%20-%20What%20Obama%20should%20say%20to%20Erdoğan.pdf>, November 2009, page viewed on 15/04/2010.

happening to Turkey, over where it is headed. What will be tomorrow's Turkey? The first truly liberal democracy in the Muslim world? A permanent arena for rivalries between soldiers and politicians? A regime tilting ever more towards Islamism and dominated by the personality of the charismatic Mr. Erdoğan.³ Will Ankara remain the loyal ally of the United States and the West that it has been ever since 1945? On the contrary, isn't it well on the way to changing the vector of its foreign policy and to focusing all of its attention on its Middle Eastern and Muslim neighbours? After having knocked at the door of Europe for so long, isn't Kemalist Turkey in the process of going back nearly a century to become 'neo-Ottoman'?⁴

From the syndrome of encirclement to regional cooperation, the Turkish geopolitical revolution of the new millennium

To assess the extent of change which has taken place in Turkey over the course of the past few years, it would not be beside the point to bring to mind the image which the country projected at the end of the 1990s. As regards domestic policy, several unstable coalition governments succeeded one another in power. The backdrop to it all was partisan quarrels, personal rivalries, corruption scandals, an armed Kurdish rebellion and open intervention of the Army in political affairs. This unstable climate was reflected in the country's foreign relations, where we could see a state of nearly total tension with its neighbours. In the Caucasus, Turkish-Armenian relations were at an impasse due mainly to the support which Ankara extended to Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (which came on top of the pre-existing latent quarrel over the Armenian genocide). In the Middle East, Ankara was in disputes with practically all of its neighbours: with Iran, which it suspected of preparing to export the Islamist revolution; with Syria, which was said to harbour rear bases of Kurdish separatists; and with Iraq, which was cool to Turkey ever since the Gulf War of 1991. Finally, in the Balkans, the Cypriot problem poisoned the difficult relations with Greece which were also agitated by territorial conflicts in the Aegean Sea and by questions of ethnic minorities. Often viewing its conflict-laden surroundings as a veritable 'ring of evil'⁵ threatening its territorial integrity, Ankara initially withdrew to its traditional alliance with the United States, which, ever since the end of the Cold War, it perceived as the sole super-power still bearing the halo of its victory in the first Gulf War. The other pillar of this policy was the strategic partnership (having a strong military connotation) put in place with Israel, with whom Ankara shared hostility to Iran and Syria, as well as close adherence to American policy. Relations between Turkey and the European Union, where it presented its request for membership in 1986 (twenty-five years after its first agreement of association with the EEC), also suffered from this climate of instability in external and internal affairs. After the door was slammed in its face during the European summit held in Luxembourg in 1997 for failure to meet the Copenhagen criteria and failure to behave constructively over Cyprus, Ankara had to wait until the Helsinki summit two years later before it managed to achieve the status of candidate country for membership, due mainly to a change in the position of Athens on this subject.

What remains of this picture ten years later? As for the domestic scene, the situation has clearly become more stable: despite crises between the government and the Army as well as many court cases involving high officials of the Kemalist elite, the country has experienced

³ Regarding the issues of Turkish domestic policy, see, for example, MÜCAHİT BİLİCİ, 'Turkey's civil war' in <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-194705-109-centerturkeys-civil-warbr-i-by-i-brmucahit-bilicicenter.html>, 06/12/2009, page viewed on 15/04/2010.

⁴ This discussion of a possible change in the orientation of Turkey often found expression in alarmist if not overly dramatic terminology. See, for example, Nick Danforth, 'How the West lost Turkey' in http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/11/25/how_the_west_lost_turkey?page=0,0, 25/11/2009, page viewed on 10/5/2010.

⁵ Expression of Şükrü Eledağ cited in Malik Mufti, "Daring and Caution in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 52, n° 1, 1998, pp. 32-50.

its longest period of governmental stability for many decades ever since 2002 when the party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the AKP, or Party of Justice and Development) came to power and has ruled without interruption. This stability has enabled the country to reestablish its orientation in foreign policy and to calm down the tumultuous relations which it had with neighbouring countries.

As for the Caucasus, we have seen a rapprochement with Armenia which was initiated at the end of 2008 thanks to ‘football diplomacy.’ This made possible the visit of Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Yerevan and the reciprocal visit of his Armenian counterpart Serge Sargsian to Bursa on the occasion of football matches between the two national teams. Putting aside their fundamental disputes over the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian genocide, in October 2009 the two sides signed an agreement leading in the end to the reestablishment of their diplomatic relations.⁶ Although the ratification of these accords has since then been suspended by the Armenian government, this rapprochement contributed to raising the image of Turkey in the Caucasus, where a sense of shock over the Russo-Georgian conflict of August 2008 is still felt. One must include in this survey of strengthening regional partnerships, Turkey’s policy on relations with Russia and Greece. Ankara has been conducting an active policy of engagement with Moscow over energy matters, bearing in mind both the role of Russia as supplier of gas and its own position as crossroads of transit routes to Western Europe. In May 2010, the visit of President Medvedev to Turkey confirmed the partnership between the two countries, notably Turkish participation in the *South Stream* gas pipeline project, as well as Russia’s commitment to build Turkey’s first nuclear power plant.⁷ With respect to Greece, although fundamental disagreements between the two countries over Cyprus and the Aegean Sea still remain, the dynamics of rapprochement initiated at the start of the new millennium have never been denied. During his recent visit to Athens, the Turkish Prime Minister and his Greek counterpart Georges Papandreou jointly inaugurated a high council on cooperation charged with the task of supervising the implementation of some twenty bilateral accords in the domains of commerce, security, the environment and tourism.⁸

However, the changes in Turkish foreign policy have had the greatest visibility with respect to the Middle East. Ankara has become involved in a process of political and economic cooperation with its neighbours. A series of energy agreements with Iran has made this country the second largest supplier of gas to Turkey. Turkey has implemented a still broader policy of economic and commercial exchanges with Iraq and Syria, signing with each of these countries nearly forty accords which will be supervised by bilateral councils of strategic cooperation which bring together the main ministers of the two sides.⁹ These accords, which have given Ankara influence and prestige in the region, would surely not have seen the light of day had there not been a series of reciprocal concessions, particularly over the Kurdish question, which poisoned the regional environment and over relations with Syria and Iraq. Thus, Damascus ended its support for the pro-autonomy Kurds of the PKK following a massive incursion of Turkish troops into its territory in 1998. In the case of Iraq, an armed Turkish incursion in the North of the country in 2007 was followed by a compromise under which Ankara accepted the existence of an autonomous Kurdish

⁶ ‘Historic accords between Turkey and Armenia,’ in http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2009/10/10/la-signature-de-l-accord-turquie-armenie-retardee_1252358_3214.html, 11/10/2009, page viewed on 3/5/2010.

⁷ ‘Medvedev in Turkey: the power of energy’ in <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/columnists-209867-medvedev-in-turkey-the-power-of-energy.html>, 11/5/2010, page viewed on 18/5/2010.

⁸ ‘Erdoğan in Greece to consolidate the rapprochement between Ankara and Athens,’ in <http://www.france24.com/fr/20100514-premier-ministre-turc-visite-grece-erdogan-reduction-bilaterale-armements-papandreou>, 14/5/2010, page viewed on 18/5/2010.

⁹ Kemal Kirişçi, Nathalie Tocci and Joshua Walker, ‘A neighborhood rediscovered : Turkey’s Transatlantic value in the Middle East,’ in <http://www.gmfus.org/brusselsforum/2010/docs/BF2010-Paper-Kirischi-Tocci-Walker.pdf>, page viewed on 05/04/2010.

government in the North of Iraq on the condition that Iraq stop all support for Kurdish fighters operating in Turkey.¹⁰

With the help of this new dynamism, Turkish diplomacy has also tried to act as mediator in various Middle Eastern conflicts, most particularly in the Israeli-Arab conflict and in the dispute between the international community and Iran over its nuclear programme. In the Israeli-Arab case, Ankara offered its mediation between Israel and Syria beginning in 2004, as well as mediation between Israel and Hamas when the latter took control of the Gaza Strip. Despite Turkey's increased visibility, these attempts did not succeed in unblocking the situation, especially when the Israeli Army launched its offensive in the Gaza Strip in December 2008.¹¹ Turkish mediation in the Iranian case also met with mixed results even though Ankara did not fail to promote its role as mediator with Tehran in order to obtain a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council at the end of 2008. To be sure, an accord was snatched on 17 May 2010 by Recep Erdoğan and Brazilian President Lula in their talks with President Ahmadinejad providing that Iran would have its uranium enriched in third countries after having it transit via Turkey. However, it is premature to think this accord will help solve the Iranian crisis without recourse to new sanctions. On the contrary, the United States immediately suspected Tehran of merely seeking to gain time without abandoning its nuclear ambitions given that the Iranian government hastened to add that it would continue to enrich uranium.¹²

Put in place since the start of the new millennium, this new foreign policy is often called the policy of 'zero problems.' It has raised many questions about Turkey's future. It is obvious that Ankara no longer sees its alliance with the United States as a panacea, no more than its long negotiations with the European Union which have continued for five years now. But would we not be going too far in saying that Turkey is making a reversal of direction, moving towards the Middle East?

Strategic reversal or multi-dimensional policy? Elements of an interpretation and the prospects

The new face of Turkish foreign policy obviously is the result of many inputs, which are not solely diplomatic. We can discern three major factors which influence Ankara's strategy: changing international relations, the progressive democratisation of Turkish political life and, finally, the context of economic and demographic dynamism which the country has been experiencing.

- Changes in the balance of international power have considerably weakened the influence and the prestige of the United States. This has been especially true in the Middle East during the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, the years since 2000 have marked the start-up and the bogging down of Turkey's negotiations over joining the

¹⁰ In March 2009, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani invited the Kurdish rebels based in Iraq to 'put down their arms or leave the country.' 'Turkey's President Abdullah Gul makes landmark visit to Iraq' in <http://www.france24.com/en/20090323-turkeys-president-abdullah-gul-makes-landmark-visit-iraq->, 23/3/2009, page viewed on 7/5/2010. For the relations between Ankara and the autonomous Kurdish government, see Amberin Zaman, 'Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds: From Red Lines to Red Carpets, in <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-210325-100-turkey-and-the-iraqi-kurds-from-red-lines-to-red-carpets.html>, 16/5/2010, page viewed on 18/5/2010.

¹¹ Kemal Kirişçi, Nathalie Tocci and Joshua Walker, 'A neighborhood rediscovered : Turkey's Transatlantic value in the Middle East,' in <http://www.gmfus.org/brusselsforum/2010/docs/BF2010-Paper-Kirischi-Tocci-Walker.pdf>, page viewed on 05/04/2010.

¹² 'Accord des 5+1 sur un projet de résolution contre l'Iran,' in http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/2/accord-des-5-1-sur-un-projet-de-resolution-contre-l-iran_892963.html, 18/05/2010, page viewed on 18/05/2010.

European Union in a context where European public opinion has shown its weariness over enlargement and often hostility towards Turkey. The image of a country operating solely as an Eastern pillar of the Euro-Atlantic world was put in question.

- Though not without tensions, progressive democratisation of Turkish political life has gradually strengthened the role of public opinion in government decision-making and facilitated a rise in influence of the new elites of Anatolia which are much more attached to traditional values and to Islam than the Kemalist elite of the major cities.
- The economic and demographic dynamism of the country has finally moved the issue of trade to the heart of diplomatic motivations. On the one hand, demographic dynamism is presently in its final phase, making Turks a young population. The development of a consumer society renders crucial the issue of the country's supplies of energy and other resources. On the other hand, this same dynamism associated with liberalisation of the economy has opened up new prospects for a new category of entrepreneurs who are ideologically close to the party of Erdoğan.¹³

The interaction between these three phenomena gives Turkish foreign policy its present image. The Turkish-American disagreement of 2003 was, for example, the result of both the loss of prestige of the United States in the region which began in the 1990s and the rising power of public opinion, which reflects the majority's attachment to Islam and its suspicion towards the American intentions. Similarly, by verbally attacking Shimon Peres during the 2009 Economic Forum in Davos and by making himself the defender of the flotilla which tried to break the blockade of Gaza on 31 May, Prime Minister Erdoğan addressed himself as much to his pro-Palestinian electorate as to the Arab capitals with which he would like to deepen economic cooperation. The changing course of negotiations with the EU is also a product of these three factors. Even though Turkish public opinion is more and more reserved with regard to the EU, the process of rapprochement continues to be followed inasmuch as it is the driver of democratisation and of economic growth which is based largely on European investments.¹⁴

One should add to these elements the conceptualisation of foreign policy formulated by the academic Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was the diplomatic adviser to the Prime Minister before Erdoğan appointed him Minister of Foreign Affairs in March 2009. Davutoğlu developed the doctrine of 'strategic depth' which takes into account Turkey's proximity to many strategic regions (particularly the Middle East) and aims at establishing the political and economic influence of Ankara in its neighbourhood. This 'soft power' on the regional scene would then make Turkey an unavoidable actor on the international scene.¹⁵ Often criticised as 'neo-Ottoman' (i.e., aiming at re-establishing Turkish predominance in the former lands of the Ottoman Empire), this vision has unquestionably provided a foundation for changes of environment both inside and outside Turkey.

Thus, Ankara's new foreign policy is not considered to be a strategic reversal of the Atlanticist tradition it has followed for many decades. The Turkish leadership has repeatedly stated that the regional change in policy does not in any way call into question its Euro-Atlantic orientation: on the contrary, this shift regionally should allow Ankara to broaden its network of partnerships and so, in the name of the international community, contribute to

¹³ Ali Kazancigil, *La Turquie [Turkey]* Paris, Le Cavalier Bleu publishing house, 'Idées reçues' [Ideas handed down] collection, 2008, pp. 117 ff.

¹⁴ Despite increasing trade with the countries of the Middle East, the European Union remains by far Turkey's number one commercial partner.

¹⁵ Dimitris Rapidis, "Turkey's Geopolitical Assertiveness: Re-evaluating the balance of power in terms of political and economic leverage in Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Caspian Region," in <http://www.gpotcenter.org/dosyalar/GeopoliticalAssertiveness.pdf>, 10/05/2010, page viewed on 19/05/2010.

stabilisation of a region having major importance for the security of both Europe and the United States.¹⁶ Still there remain questions about the ability of Ankara to implement this policy over the long term while maintaining balance between all the actors in the Middle East.

This question is certainly most relevant as regards the Turkish position in the conflicts of the Middle East, beginning with its attitude vis-à-vis the partnership between Ankara and Tel Aviv, which during the 1990s was the corollary of the Turkish-American partnership. It is clear that a strategic partnership with Israel seems difficult to reconcile with a regional policy directed at all the countries of the region. Ever since Erdoğan struck his blow at Davos, Ankara has followed a policy expressing disapproval of Israeli actions in the media. This has led to many diplomatic incidents, such as the cancellation of Israeli participation in a NATO exercise held in Turkey¹⁷ and the turbulent affair of the Turkish television series which was denounced as anti-Semitic by the Israeli government.¹⁸

One might certainly reply that this rise in tension was very largely media-driven, that the two parties have never cut their ties, that Turkey still remains the country in the region with which Israel maintains the best relations and that it is one of several possible mediators with the Arab world.¹⁹ However, it is no less true that if there are no prospects for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict the Turkish position vis-à-vis Israel may turn out to be an extremely complicated issue to handle over the long term. The role of mediator which Turkey wishes to claim can have only limited effects on the positions of the various parties. The affair of the flotilla will perhaps constitute a critical turning point in this matter: the convoy headed for Gaza was in fact largely sponsored by Turkish organisations close to the radical fringes of the AKP, and many Turkish activists were among the victims. The coming weeks will show whether in addition to the initial heated reactions, the wave of indignation and anti-Israeli demonstrations which swept the country²⁰ the Turkish government will wish and, above all, will be able to maintain balance between the different sides insofar as possible.

We see a similar situation with respect to the issue of Iran. There as well Ankara is divided between its loyalty to the West, on the one hand, and its interest in economic partnership with Iran on the other hand. This is all the more true given that the prospect of an Iran equipped with nuclear arms seems to worry Turkey much less than its American and European partners. While demonstrating solidarity with international concerns over the Iranian nuclear programme, the Turkish government fears the effects of escalation of the conflict (economic sanctions or military strikes) on its regional policy and does not lose sight of the fact that Iran is one of its main suppliers of energy. Here again Ankara is trying to

¹⁶ Cengiz Çandar, 'Turkey's soft power strategy: a new vision for a multipolar world,' in http://www.setadc.org/images/stories/brief/Policy_Brief_No_38_Turkeys_Soft_Power_Strategy_Candar.pdf, December 2009, page viewed on 19/05/2010.

¹⁷ 'Turkey/Israel: New chill' in http://www.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/118/article_85528.asp, 11/10/2009, page viewed on 17/05/2010.

¹⁸ 'Turkish ambassador humiliated by the number two ranking officer of Israeli diplomacy,' in <http://www.rfi.fr/contenu/20100113-crise-turco-israelienne-senvenime>, 14/01/2010, page viewed on 18/05/2010.

¹⁹ Kemal Kirişçi, Nathalie Tocci and Joshua Walker, 'A neighborhood rediscovered: Turkey's Transatlantic value in the Middle East,' in <http://www.gmfus.org/brusselsforum/2010/docs/BF2010-Paper-Kirischi-Tocci-Walker.pdf>, page viewed on 05/04/2010.

²⁰ The day following the Israeli attack on the flotilla, Prime Minister Erdoğan accused Israel of practicing 'state terrorism,' while the first communiqué issued by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs speaks of possible 'irreparable consequences' for relations between the two countries. See 'Gaza: "state terrorism" (Erdoğan),' in <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2010/05/31/97001-20100531FILWWW00564-gaza-terrorisme-d-etat-erdogan.php>, 31/05/2010, page viewed on 02/06/2010 and 'Flotilla on its way to Gaza: Turkey warns Israel of 'irreparable consequences'' in <http://www.rfi.fr/contenu/20100531-flotille-vers-gaza-turquie-previent-israel-consequences-irreparables>, 31/05/2010, page viewed on 02/06/2010.

assume a difficult position by posing as mediator between the various parties. However, at the same time that they increase Turkey's visibility on the international stage, these attempts at mediation risk placing the Turkish government in an awkward situation. When confronted with a new UN resolution which, despite the accord of 17 May 2010, would introduce new sanctions against Iran, Turkey used its non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council to vote against these sanctions and to break ranks with its Western allies.²¹

These cases show the complexity and fragility of the Turkish diplomatic edifice and illustrate why it is difficult to foresee chances of success. Though Ankara wishes to become an added value of the West in its neighbourhood, one cannot deny the risk that it will end up over time much more Middle Eastern than Western. It is obvious that this evolution will not depend solely on the future of the Middle East conflicts but also on numerous other factors, among which we may cite the following:

- The change in American policy in the region. Apart from the direct role which the United States plays in Middle Eastern affairs, one also must examine the extent to which Washington wishes to support Turkey in its multi-dimensional policy and, most especially, in its overture to countries like Syria and Iran. This question is far from being simple and we have seen how, in the flotilla affair, Ankara managed to force the hand of the United States in a number of international forums (the UN Security Council and NATO) getting it to acquiesce, even timidly, in a condemnation of the events.²²
- The changing course of negotiations with the European Union. Negotiations over joining the EU have for moment continued to be pursued, both for better or worse, because for the Turkish government they serve as an extraordinary vehicle for democratisation and economic development of the country. Nonetheless, it has had to take into account the reticence demonstrated by all the public opinions (including within Turkey), as well as the fact that some European governments see these discussions as leading to an impossible marriage. A possible breakdown of the Turkish-European rapprochement will have consequences for the strategic priorities of Ankara, which ever since the 1960s has set for itself the goal of ultimately joining the EU, purely and simply, and not merely some 'privileged partnership.'
- The domestic evolution of the country. The compromise emerging in the diplomatic realm among the various dimensions of Turkish foreign policy follows the synthesis which is operating domestically between the Kemalist elitist tradition and the emergence of a new society founded on democratisation of the institutions. These two processes – whose difficulty must not be underestimated- are unquestionably developing in parallel and Turkey's foreign policy will very largely depend on the influence which is assumed by Turkish public opinion and its high sensitivity to the theme of Islam.

Is the West is in the process of 'losing Turkey'? It is much too early to give an answer. During the course of the past few years, Ankara has undoubtedly developed its influence among its near neighbours (especially in the Middle East) without openly denying its Euro-Atlantic orientation. However, it is a delicate task to play a multi-dimensional policy, above

²¹ After the signing of the accord with Iran, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hastened to tell the press that it was time for negotiations and that there was 'no longer need for sanctions.' 'Nuclear issue: Iran signs an accord to exchange uranium,' in <http://www5.lefigaro.fr/international/2010/05/17/01003-20100517ARTFIG00449-nucleaire-l-iran-signe-un-accord-d-echange-d-uranium.php>, 18/05/2010, page viewed on 19/05/2010.

²² Assembled at the request of Turkey, which is a non-permanent member, on 31 May 2010 the UN Security Council issued a communiqué condemning 'actions which resulted in the death of at least 10 civilians during the Israeli military operation conducted in international waters against a convoy heading for Gaza. See <http://www.un.org/News/fr-press/docs/2010/CS9940.doc.htm>, 31/05/2010, page viewed on 02/06/2010.

all in one of the most strategic and tense areas of the world. The quarrels between Turkey and Israel, the difficult involvement of Turkey in the dispute between Iran and the West, and the failed mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflicts are indicative of the difficulty of establishing equilibrium between the various Middle Eastern actors.

Having said this, we must add two remarks. Apart from the role of Ankara, one cannot deny that the future of relations between Turkey and the West also depends on the attitude of the West itself, and particularly on the future of the rapprochement between Ankara and Brussels. On the other hand, whatever the future holds, the experience of this decade has enabled Turkey to emerge from its regional isolation and to show the extent to which its geostrategic position is unavoidable and its future is intimately linked to the most crucial issues of present-day geopolitics.

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