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Turkey's New Course

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CHICAGO – Turkey has recently been at the forefront of international economic and political debates. On the one hand, despite the economic crisis engulfing neighboring Europe, Turkey remains the world's second-fastest growing economy, after China. On the other hand, there is almost no issue on the global agenda – from Iraq and Afghanistan to Somalia, Iran, and the Arab Spring, and from sustainable development to a dialogue among civilizations – on which Turkey is not playing a visible role.

This is a rather new phenomenon. Until a decade ago, Turkey was regarded as no more than a staunch NATO ally. That began to change in 2002, when an era of political stability dawned, giving rise to a vision for a stronger Turkey – and a firm commitment to realizing that vision.

To this end, Turkey's governments since 2002 implemented bold economic reforms that paved the way for sustainable growth and provided a firewall against the financial crisis that hit in 2008. As a result, in less than a decade, GDP has tripled, making Turkey the world's 16th largest economy. Moreover, the country benefits from strong public finances, prudent monetary policy, sustainable debt dynamics, a sound banking system, and well-functioning credit markets.

At the same time, we expanded the scope of individual rights, which had long been subordinated to security concerns. We streamlined civil-military relations, guaranteed social and cultural rights, and attended to the problems of ethnic and religious minorities. These reforms transformed Turkey into a vibrant democracy and a more stable society, at peace with itself and able to view its external environment in a different light.

Quite simply, we stopped viewing our geography and history as a curse or disadvantage. On the contrary, we began to regard our location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East as an opportunity to interact simultaneously with multiple players.

As a result, we began to reach out to countries in our neighborhood and beyond. We tried to expand political dialogue, enhance economic interdependence, and strengthen cultural and social understanding. And, while ten years is too short for a definitive assessment of such an ambitious policy, we have undoubtedly covered considerable ground. For example, we have quadrupled our trade volume just with our neighbors.

On several occasions, we have also been instrumental in facilitating peace and reconciliation. But, what is more important, Turkey has become a model of success that many countries around us now seek to emulate.

And yet, until a year or two ago, some political pundits were asking, “Who lost Turkey?” or “Whither Turkey?” – the assumption being that Turkey had shifted its foreign-policy axis away from the West. In fact, Turkey’s external orientation has remained constant, because it rests on the values that we share with the free world. What has changed is our increased assertiveness in our efforts to ensure greater stability and human welfare in our region, evident in our advocacy of freedom, democracy, and accountability not only for ourselves, but also for others.

This approach has been reflected in the Arab Spring, which Turkey ardently supported from the outset. We have not hesitated in siding with those fighting for their rights and dignity. Indeed, in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, which are now attempting to institutionalize change, Turkey is their most active partner, sharing our own experience and providing tangible assistance in the form of economic cooperation and political capacity building.

In Syria, on the other hand, the revolution has not yet come to fruition, owing to the regime’s brutal repression of its opponents. Every day, scores of people there die in pursuit of dignity. Turkey is doing all that it can to alleviate the Syrian people’s suffering. Unfortunately, the international community as a whole has so far performed poorly in providing an effective response to the crisis.

Turkey’s position on Iran’s nuclear program has been similarly clear: we are categorically opposed to the presence of weapons of mass destruction in our region. Attempts to develop or acquire WMDs might well trigger a regional arms race, leading to further instability and threatening international peace and security. That is why we have always called for the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, including both Iran and Israel.

We support Iran’s right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. But Iran’s program must be transparent, and its leaders must assure the international community of its non-military nature. The key is to close the confidence gap and pave the way for meaningful dialogue. In April, we hosted the inaugural round of revived talks between the international community and Iran.

Let us be clear: there is no military solution to this problem. Military intervention would merely further complicate the issue, while creating new layers of conflict in our region and beyond.

In this and other matters, Turkey strives to act as a “virtuous power,” which requires us to align our national interests with values such as justice, democracy, and human dignity, and to achieve our foreign-policy goals through mutual cooperation rather than coercion.

Effective multilateralism is a key facet of this vision. Turkey served as a member of the United Nations Security Council in 2009-2010, and is now seeking another term in 2015-2016. Given the crucial importance of developments in our part of the world, Turkey’s contribution to the Council’s work promises to be highly valuable.

In 2015, moreover, we will assume the presidency of the G-20, and we are committed to using our means and capabilities to make it a more effective organ of global governance.

Turkey’s internal transformation over the past decade has placed it in an ideal position to benefit the region – and thus the global community. While we have accomplished much already, more is required of us. Given the challenges of our neighborhood, and the region’s central role in global affairs, Turkey will not refrain from taking on new responsibilities.

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