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Deciphering Erdoğan's Foreign Policy after Turkey's 2023 Elections

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ZENONAS TZIARRAS, DEC 7 2023

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has firmly established himself as the dominant figure in Turkish politics, as evidenced once again by his triumph in the 2023 presidential and general elections. Securing a third term as president and a parliamentary majority through his People's Alliance coalition, Erdoğan has solidified his place as the longest-serving leader in the history of the Turkish Republic, surpassing even the revered Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. His ideology, often referred to as "Erdoğanism," continues to gain traction across various sectors of Turkish society, influencing institutional, social, and political spheres. This phenomenon becomes all the more pronounced as Turkey celebrated the centennial of its founding, with signs of Erdoğan's vision for the "New Turkey" and the "Century of Turkey" already materializing. Nevertheless, the Turkish populace finds itself more divided than ever.

The implications of the latest election results extend beyond Erdoğan's personal triumph. Two key takeaways stand out amid the political dynamics. Firstly, it is abundantly clear that Erdoğan intends to persist in his trajectory towards authoritarianism, seeking to exert unprecedented control over the state while suppressing or dividing the opposition. Secondly, a notable surge in nationalism has occurred, underscoring the fact that this sentiment now occupies a more central role in Turkish politics. The entire political landscape has shifted rightward, with ultra-nationalism assuming a mainstream position. This shift is observable not only in the ruling People's Alliance, led by Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), defined by a unique blend of right-wing Islamism and nationalism, but also in the opposition's Nation Alliance. The latter comprises a diverse array of center-left, center-right, and far-right parties, which converge mainly in their opposition to Erdoğan's rule. The presence of Sinan Oğan in the presidential race, a third candidate supported by the Ancestral Alliance, a coalition of ultranationalist parties with a particular focus on criticizing Erdoğan's refugee policy, further underscored the dominance of right-wing politics.

The shift towards right-wing politics is poised to significantly impact Turkey's domestic and foreign policies. Erdoğan's quest for greater control and influence will have far-reaching implications for the nation's dominant narrative and political culture. The next political phase is already underway, with Erdoğan setting his sights on the local elections scheduled for March 2024. He seeks to regain control over key cities, notably Istanbul and Ankara, which slipped from his grasp in the 2019 local elections. The opposition, for its part, faces high stakes in these local elections, as the results will either signal the anti-Erdoğan coalition's downfall or its ability to sustain itself for another term. Discontent and infighting within the opposition's ranks in the aftermath of the elections, coupled with the election of Özgür Özel to the leadership of the Republican People's Party (CHP), might pose significant challenges in the months ahead. These internal dynamics, combined with an ailing Turkish lira, high inflation, soaring borrowing costs, and looming loan defaults, paint a challenging road ahead for both the government and the opposition.

Erdoğan appears to believe that he can navigate these challenges while simultaneously improving Turkey's foreign affairs through a combination of symbolic gestures and tactical maneuvers. His cabinet appointments after the elections reflect this approach as well as an attempt to restore international trust and signal a commitment to a more orthodox economic policy. The cabinet also features other significant names, such as Hakan Fidan, the former head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, who has been appointed as foreign minister, and Yaşar Güler, the former Turkish Armed Forces General Staff Chief, taking on the role of national defense minister. Notably, the controversial and hardline Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu has been replaced by former Istanbul Governor Ali

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Yerlikaya. Additionally, İbrahim Kalın, Erdoğan's personal advisor and spokesman, has assumed the position of head of the National Intelligence Organization (MİT), replacing Hakan Fidan, among other changes.

The hope, among optimists, has been that these changes might pave the way for a more constructive foreign relations climate, particularly in Turkey's relations with the West, which have been marred by recurring crises involving the United States, the European Union, and NATO, alongside growing ties with Russia and China. Especially during the first months of his re-election, there was an expectation that Erdoğan may adopt a more pragmatic and positive approach that could result in more conventional economic policies, crucial shifts in foreign policy, and more cooperative stances in relation to areas such as Ukraine, Syria, and the EU. This expectation has not entirely faded, although the breakout of the Israel-Hamas war and Erdoğan's harsh rhetoric against Israel and in favour of Hamas has cast a shadow.

It is however necessary to make a clear distinction between short-term tactical adjustments and long-term strategic goals in foreign policy. Erdoğan's vision for the "Century of Turkey" implies a challenge to established Western norms and principles on democracy, development, and peace. This vision posits a geopolitical, civilizational, and economic contest between Turkey and the West, driven by historical myths, narratives, and nostalgia surrounding the Ottoman Empire. In essence, the "Century of Turkey" entails promoting a more independent and autonomous Turkey, capable of advocating its own values and interpretations of democracy, development, and peace on the global stage. Erdoğan's vision also incorporates elements of electoral authoritarianism and combines Islamic conservatism with a nationalist perspective on peace and democracy.

The concept of the "Century of Turkey" ultimately encompasses Turkey's aspiration to challenge the liberal international order, as well as the dominance of the United States, by aligning with like-minded Eurasian and global Southern powers, as evidenced by Turkey's relations with Russia and its interest in groups like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In summary, Erdoğan's vision represents a long-term and strategic outlook. While tactical adjustments are evident in his post-election approach, the fundamental trajectory remains consistent. This point is critical to grasp, as Turkey's role and position on the international and regional stage continue to evolve.

Turkey's engagement at the regional level, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, has brought it into competition with other ambitious regional powers, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iran. More recently, Turkey has made efforts to alleviate these regional rivalries, with improved relations seen with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, resulting in economic benefits and a stance in line with the shifting geopolitical climate in the Middle East. The normalization of relations with Israel and Egypt similarly fits into this context, de-escalating tensions and bolstering economic cooperation. These moves also send a message to the West that Turkey is a reliable ally and not a destabilizing force. Particularly the relations with Israel are currently under much pressure because of the dynamics produced by the Israel-Hamas war. For reasons that have to do with his ideology, his domestic audience as well as the Arab-Muslim audience abroad, Erdoğan cannot turn a blind eye to the situation in Gaza.

Having said that, it is important to recognize that the shifts observed in Turkish foreign policy after the elections may have been superficial. The Turkish-Israeli relationship and Ankara's delay to ratify Sweden's accession to NATO provide a couple of strong indications. In the medium to long term, Turkey will likely revert to its more disruptive foreign policy behavior in the region once it regains confidence and feels ready to do so. The volatility and uncertainties of the international order transitioning into a post-American era add an additional layer of complexity both for the imbalances in the international system and Turkey's position and aspirations within it.

Erdoğan remains a leader with a clear sense of purpose. He is determined to advance his vision for Turkey, not only as a major global power but also as a leading force in the Islamic world. Observers of Turkey's path in the 21st century are well aware of this unwavering commitment. Beyond his grand vision for the nation, Erdoğan harbors a personal ambition—to etch his legacy into Turkish history as the modern-day equivalent of Atatürk, the leader credited with restoring the country's original essence and glory. Yet, the realization of this aspiration is far from guaranteed and could even be considered an uphill battle. Signs of weariness in Erdoğan, coupled with indications of decline within his sphere of influence, are becoming evident despite his firm grasp on governmental power.

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The international community, both regionally and globally, is growing increasingly skeptical of Turkey's role and foreign policy under Erdoğan's leadership. Foreign actors are more inclined to assert their positions or react to Ankara's demands rather than acquiesce to actions that may run counter to their own interests. Despite these challenges, Erdoğan remains cognizant of Turkey's regional significance, leveraging it as a bargaining chip in negotiations. In the medium to long-term, Turkey is poised to assertively negotiate for its regional and international standing, undeterred by the changing geopolitical landscape.

While global entities such as the US, NATO, and the EU continue to seek avenues for collaboration with Turkey, their efforts are tempered by a desire to maintain a degree of control over Turkey and, to the greatest extent possible, discourage further integration into Eurasian spheres. This delicate balance sets the stage for potential new tensions, crises, and a climate of uncertainty and instability. The world is undergoing a transition into a post-American order, and the specific nature of this transformation remains unclear and uncertain. The interplay between Erdoğan's ambitions, international actors' strategies, and the evolving global order creates a complex landscape marked by unpredictability and the potential for significant geopolitical shifts.

About the author:

Zenonas Tziarras is a Lecturer in the Department of Turkish and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cyprus. He is the author of *Turkish Foreign Policy: The Lausanne Syndrome in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East* (Springer, 2022)