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Turkey: A Strategic Appreciation

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Turkey is a growing conundrum. Its geo-political importance is self-evident. It combines East and West in its own special way, separate from, say, the Russian cultural melting-pot. It has NATO's second-largest army and one of the few navies in the world capable of building its own warships (albeit small ones). It has the potential to become a significant regional defence supplier with wider reach.

Economically, Turkey's performance over the last decade has been impressive (and significantly better than many EU members). It leads the world in some areas, including the construction of modern airports in earthquake zones. Visiting Istanbul in 2014 I could not fail to be impressed with the sense of drive, determination and activity.

So Turkey is by any standards a force to be reckoned with. We should think carefully about where it sits on the political stage and how that affects our interests.

Internally, the AKP government has pursued its own distinctive programme, partly based on its own beliefs and partly on President Erdogan's agenda. There are clear implications for the structure of the secular state carefully constructed by Ataturk and for the fundamental (if restrictive) freedoms it enshrined. Erdogan's long-running confrontation with the military - ended in his favour by July's abortive coup - is the most obvious manifestation of this. Serious concerns about human rights, press freedom and the Kurdish question are ongoing; we should not expect the Turkish approach to the Kurds to coincide with our own. But it is worth remembering that the AKP does not represent a fundamentalist strand of Islam and that IS is as much Turkey's enemy as ours. The sweeping scale of the purge undertaken since the failed coup has given rise to concerns about the protection of individual rights. But it reflects also the depth of the shock created by the attempt, and there is no doubt that it has considerable popular support across the Turkish political spectrum.

Externally, the AKP decided some time ago that it was better to build up Turkey's position as a major regional power than to suffer the continual agony of unproductive EU accession negotiations. Who can blame them. The Turkish/Brazilian Iran nuclear initiative was one early manifestation of this policy and profoundly uncomfortable for the P5 + 1 (not to mention Israel).

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Since then the strategic nexus has sharpened. Events in Syria both threaten Turkey and give it new leverage, which it will exploit. The Russian bid to secure use of the NATO airbase at Incirlik need not be taken seriously but President Putin's wider intrigues most certainly should. Through inadequate diplomacy and remedial action the EU has given the Turks a determinate role in the handling of the current refugee crisis. A major price has already been exacted and more will be asked.

Where does that leave the UK? For many years we have been a supporter of Turkey within the EU - though quite rightly a not uncritical one. Our NATO links matter. Brexit will give us new freedoms to build our relationship with a powerful Eurasian partner that is, and is likely to remain, outside EU structures. There will be economic, political and trade-related gains and a chance to make sure fundamental freedoms in Turkey are not irrevocably damaged. In our own self-interest we should not shy away from the challenge.

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