

The Global Implications of Turkey's Election

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Supporters carry an image of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Turkish town of Yayladagi (Burhan Ozbilici/AP Photo).

In Turkey's June 12 election, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development (AK) Party won a convincing third term in a showcase of stability that has characterized the country's rise over the past 10 years. With membership in the G20 and increasing diplomatic clout in global affairs, Turkey has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. We talk to CIGI Distinguished Fellow and former Ankara resident Paul Heinbecker, who lived in Turkey as a young diplomat and has followed the country's politics ever since.

CIGI: Under the stewardship of Erdogan, Turkey has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, outpaced only by India and China in 2010. It now has the world's seventeenth-largest economy, a seat at the G20 and Eurasia's largest city in Istanbul. With Erdogan's convincing re-election, is Turkey on the path to becoming an emerging economic superpower?

Paul Heinbecker: No, that's not going to be the case. Turkey's growth rate has been spectacular, but its population of 70 to 80 million will never allow it to reach the size or importance of India or China. But it will be a very significant country, and an increasingly prosperous one.

CIGI: Could that newfound economic clout re-open the case for Turkey's eventual entry into the European Union?

Heinbecker: The reality in Turkey is that they've lost interest in EU accession — the goalposts have been moved too many times, and the EU has made demands of Turkey that it hasn't for other aspiring members. What's happening now is a very sophisticated game on the part of the Erdogan administration, to use EU pressure to suppress the Turkish military, which is the safeguard against the Islamization of Turkish politics. That's not well understood in the West.

CIGI: Throughout the Arab Spring, Turkey has emerged as a key diplomatic actor in the Muslim World — adding legitimacy to NATO's mission in Libya and claiming to be the first country to call for Hosni Mubarak's resignation in Egypt. Yet some say it has also alienated some Western allies with close ties to ruling regimes in Syria and Iran, and increasing belligerence towards Israel. Under the increasingly centralized leadership of Erdogan, how should the world approach Turkey diplomatically?

But how should countries deal with Turkey? They should recognize its growing significance and stop trying to see its rise in relation to Israel.

Heinbecker: First of all, Turkey is not belligerent towards Israel; in fact, Israel is belligerent towards Turkey. It was the Israelis who attacked a [Turkish ship](#) in international waters, after all.

As regards to Libya, the Turks were slow to call on Gadhafi to leave because they have very substantial economic interests there — 25,000 to 30,000 workers on Turkish projects, and a large construction and engineering industry in Libya with many outstanding payments to receive. They subsequently changed their minds and tried to persuade Gadhafi directly to be reasonable and leave, which obviously didn't work, so they ended up lining up with the NATO position.

But how should countries deal with Turkey? They should recognize its growing significance and stop trying to see its rise in relation to Israel. Syria and Iran are two of Turkey's largest trading partners, so when there's talk of economic sanctions and military action in those places, it's not surprising the Turks take measures to protect those significant interests.

What people don't remember is that Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel, and the two countries have had constructive diplomatic relations all of these years. But the Turks objected to the way Israel handled the invasion of Lebanon in 2006, and the ongoing blockade of Gaza — and made all of that very clear.

CIGI: Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu calls his country “a source of inspiration” to other Middle Eastern countries with democratic aspirations. But with a constitution in need of re-writing and an increasingly authoritarian government determined to do so, is Turkey merely an inspiration or could its secular state and Islamic ruling party be a democratic template for other large Muslim countries?

Heinbecker: That gets to the heart of the issue — to what extent is Turkey going to be a secular country? The Islamist-light government of Erdogan certainly wants to change the constitution to make it friendlier to their political ideology. Secularism and the role of the military in guaranteeing the current constitution is seen as an obstacle. But people have to ask themselves: how moderate would the Islamists be if they didn't face a strong military and courts system? Are they inherently moderate or moderate because they don't have a choice? The West tends to think that Erdogan is acting like a Christian Democrat, in European terms, which isn't certain at all.

So is Turkey actually a template for other Muslim countries? I think some people in countries like Egypt and Iran see it, to some degree, in those terms. You have to remember that Turks are ethnically distinct from Arabs and Persians, and ran an empire that subjugated Arabs to their authority for 600 years, so Turkey as a template is probably tempered by historical experience. But other Muslim countries certainly see Turkey as much better than what they have now. It's considerably more democratic, responsive and prosperous than most of those other countries are, so in that respect it's an inspiration.