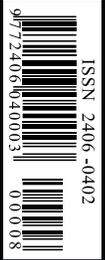


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# HORIZONS

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## GLOBAL SECURITY CHALLENGES



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# A NEW TURKEY?

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## IMPLICATIONS OF THE FAILED MILITARY COUP AND SUBSEQUENT POLITICAL COUP

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*Cengiz Çandar*

**B**ILL CLINTON was the first American president to address Turkey's legislators from the rostrum of the Grand National Assembly. On November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999, he said that

for better and for worse, the events of that time, when the Ottoman Empire disintegrated and a new Turkey arose, have shaped the history of this entire century. From Bulgaria to Albania, to Israel to Arabia, new nations were born and a century of conflict erupted from the turmoil of shifting borders, unrealized ambitions, and old hatreds, beginnings with the First Balkan War and World War I, all the way to today's struggles in the Middle East and in the former Yugoslavia. Turkey's past is key to understanding the twentieth century. But, more importantly, I believe Turkey's future will be critical to shaping the twenty-first century.

Much later, I learned from one of his

speechwriters that, while the speech was being finalized aboard Air Force One—the plane was en route to Turkey for an OSCE summit in Istanbul—Clinton did not really grasp the weight of those words, or rather, their strategic implications had not been thought through. In other words, he did not intend to deliver a prophetic speech, nor was he fully aware of the significance of every single word that he was about to utter. Yet he could well be remembered as a remarkable visionary thanks to that speech, at least in Turkey—no matter what he actually meant.

His intention, though, was to bring Turkey and the European Union closer together in the first days of the twenty-first century. This was clear, especially given that it was in accordance with Turkey's centuries-old Western inclination: ever since the Turks stepped into Asia Minor—the eastern territories of the Byzantine Empire—their drive has

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Photo: Guiver Image/Getty Images

*President Erdoğan addresses the Turkish people via social media during the failed coup*

been directed towards the West. The Ottoman Empire, which the Turks inherited in the early decades of the twentieth century, was part of the Concert of Europe, albeit with unique Eurasian features.

In retrospect, the validity of Clinton's speech could be better evaluated by taking into account the breathtaking developments that took place in the international arena in the wake of his Ankara speech—from the Iraq War, the Arab Spring, and the ongoing saga of Syria, to a resurgent Russia, new emerging power centers like China and India, and even Brexit.

Having played a pivotal role in some of the aforementioned developments, Turkey is related in varying degrees to almost all of them. The country has come a long way from having been relatively marginalized in the conduct of international politics on the eve of the twenty-first century, to earning prominence over the course of the new century's first two decades.

That being said, it is not much of an exaggeration to argue that the momentous events that shaped the history of the entire twentieth century—including the rise of a new Turkey—revolved around the demise of the Ottoman

Empire. In that sense, there should be no doubt that Turkey's past is key to understanding the twentieth century. By implication, therefore, Turkey's future will be critical to shaping our contemporary era.

### COUP AND COUNTER COUP

The botched military coup that took place on the night of July 15<sup>th</sup> to July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, is a milestone in the birth of the "New Turkey," as envisioned by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his loyalists.

The controversy over whether Erdoğan's "New Turkey" represents a break with the secular Kemalist Turkey, or whether it forms a sequential continuity of sorts, is a matter that has yet to be resolved.

The founder of the republican Turkey that emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman state was General Mustafa Kemal, later known by decree as Atatürk. The founding institution of the new state's structures was the military, which served as a self-appointed custodian of its founding principles. For decades, the military oversaw the preservation of the Kemalist edifice, sometimes intervening directly, as per its role in the coun-

try's constitution, to put the country's affairs in order whenever it felt necessity forced its hand.

The quasi-Islamist authorities that have been ruling Turkey since the dawn of the twenty-first century have exhibited an ambition to revive their nation's imperial heritage and act as leaders of the entire Muslim world. Furthermore, Erdoğan has created circumstances that

*The country has come a long way from having been relatively marginalized in the conduct of international politics on the eve of the twenty-first century, to earning prominence over the course of the new century's first two decades.*

give him uncontested power. This took place in the context of a succession of impressive political victories and a corresponding diminishment of the military's influence and standing on the national political stage. It was thus widely believed that the military had been pushed back into its barracks, never to step into political life again.

The recent coup attempt proved all such presumptions wrong. More importantly, the consequences of the coup's failure have been devastating for the military. In the new picture of regional and international security, Turkey is now a pivotal actor.

In this context, the fallout of the botched coup for the Turkish military, which is the second-largest armed force

in NATO, is unprecedented. Almost half the generals and admirals in the Turkish Armed Forces have either been detained or arrested. Of a total of 325, the commanding elite of the military lost 149 generals and admirals—roughly 45 percent. Among them were two four-star generals, nine lieutenant-generals, 30 major-generals and vice admirals, and 126 brigadiers and rear admirals. In addition, around 3,000 officers in lower ranks—including 500 colonels—were among those purged.

The crackdown was not only confined to purges in the military, but rather extended to nearly all segments of society considered seditious or sympathetic to the coup plotters against President Erdoğan and his ruling party. The swiftness and scale of the crackdown has led to a widespread observation that Turkey's botched military coup has been followed by a counter coup carried out by President Erdoğan.

The title of a July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016 *New York Times* editorial—which came out only four days after the failed coup—was “The Counter Coup in Turkey.” It asserted that “President Erdoğan is exploiting the crisis not just to punish mutinous soldiers, but to further quash

whatever dissent is left in Turkey.” The editorial then went on to conclude that:

One can hope that this desperate uprising will prompt Mr. Erdoğan to reach out to his opponents. A more likely scenario is that the upheaval and lingering tensions will compromise Turkey's democracy and its ability to be a stabilizing influence in NATO and the region.

Similar evaluations regarding the implications of the counter coup could be seen among the majority of Turkey's NATO allies. Peter Westmacott, a former British ambassador to Ankara who oversaw Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU in 2003 and 2004, wrote in the *Financial Times*:

*The controversy over whether Erdoğan's “New Turkey” represents a break with the secular Kemalist Turkey, or whether it forms a sequential continuity of sorts, is a matter that has yet to be resolved.*

Turkey is a crucial player in the region and negotiating to join the EU. We need it to remain a strategic energy corridor, a significant commercial partner, a member of the coalition partner, a member of the coalition against ISIS, a reliable NATO player and part of the solution to the Syrian crisis. But it will not be credible in any of these roles if it does not remain secular, democratic and respectful of the rule of law [...].

The importance of Turkey's survival as a secular and functioning democracy for the international system is evident.

In this regard, besides the capacity to project soft power, the preservation of its strong military and effective security apparatus is equally important if Turkey wants to continue playing a role in providing security and stability in a volatile Middle East.

Such an apparatus seems to have been lost with the failed military coup and political counter coup that followed.

**MILITARY  
DISMANTLED,  
SECURITY VACUUM  
CREATED**

For a military that did not lose a single general during the National Struggle period (1919–1922) and World War I, losing almost half of its top officers in disgrace is not only devastating, but effectively amounts to its dismantling.

The remaining component of the commanding elite that survived the purge has suffered a monumental loss of cadres, breaking the Turkish military's *esprit de corps*. The cadet schools and military academies are now disbanded. A new national defense university was hastily established under the strict control of the current government. The command structure has been completely changed by linking

the commands of land, air, and naval forces to the defense minister, and the chief of the general staff directly to the president. The ministry of health is now entrusted with operating military hospitals.

The Turkish Air Force played a major part in the coup attempt (during the night of the coup, four Turkish KC-135 Stratotankers took part in the attempt), and thus took the brunt of the purges that followed. Seven air base commanders and 213 pilots, 150 of whom fly either F-16s or F4s—the jewel

in the crown of the Turkish military—were discharged. Even the Turkish commander of the Incirlik Air Force Base, the most important NATO facility in the East Mediterranean, was arrested.

As a result, NATO has been deprived of the Turkish Air Force—one of its most significant assets—in the wake of Turkey's failed coup.

The scale of the purges and changes inflicted upon the military are somewhat comparable to that of the impact and significance of the de-Baathification and disbanding of the Iraqi army in the wake of the 2003 invasion of that country. Equally, it can be measured

*Besides the capacity to project soft power, the preservation of its strong military and effective security apparatus is equally important if Turkey wants to continue playing a role in providing security and stability in a volatile Middle East.*

with that of the military purges conducted after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. The security vacuum created in Tehran facilitated Saddam's initiation of a catastrophic war in 1980, which took eight years to end.

It may still be too early to reach a thorough conclusion on the detrimental consequences of the failed coup on Turkey's security. However, the coup's negative implications for the country's foreign and security policy in the time ahead is beyond doubt.

Put simply, the Turkish military is in disarray, and wherever one looks, there is a near-consensus that it will take years to recover in the professional sense. It may never recover as an institution having a distinct status in Turkish politics.

The inevitable result of the incarceration of most of its active command structure, along with 7,000 police and intelligence officers and tens of thousands of civil servants, is a major loss of expertise and institutional memory. This is happening at a time when Turkey and its Western allies find themselves confronting new and significant security challenges in the Middle East.

## TWO CENTURIES AGO...

If the sheer impact of the dismantling of the Turkish military cannot be accurately foreseen at this point, Turkey's own history might provide some insight. Nearly 200 years ago, the Janissaries, then the backbone of Ottoman military might, had over time become a corrupt and unruly force, and had to be suppressed by the reformist Sultan Mahmud II. In a sense, the backbone of the Ottoman army had been abolished to make way for a "new army."

*For a military that did not lose a single general during the National Struggle period (1919–1922) and World War I, losing almost half of its top officers in disgrace is not only devastating, but effectively amounts to its dismantling.*

For renowned Anglo-American historian Eugene Rogan, Sultan Mahmud II is the "Peter the Great of Turkey." Along with his successor and son Abdulmejid I, Mahmud II was avowedly the most pro-European monarch of the Ottoman rulers, as illustrated by the fact that he undertook a Western-influenced wholesale project of centralization and modernization. During the early years of Mahmud II's reign (1808–1839), Ottoman Turkey saw the suppression of the first Saudi state in the Arabian Peninsula. That Wahhabi state is the predecessor of the contemporary organization that calls itself the Islamic State. Today, ISIS stretches over the territories of Iraq and Syria. Wahhabism, which is

the Islamic State's closest religious cognate, emerged in the Najd, the power center of today's Saudi kingdom.

At the time, Wahhabism challenged Ottoman authority in the Middle East and became a Salafi/jihadi harbinger of the political Islamist movements of the early twenty-first century. It was, also, the precursor of today's Saudi Arabia. After the re-conquest of the holy cities of Medina (1812) and Mecca (1813) by the Ottomans, the head of the then Saudi state, Abdullah bin Saud, was captured and brought to Istanbul for beheading. Ironically, Turkey's current rulers accommodate themselves better with the progenies of both the Wahhabi and Saudi states than did their Ottoman predecessors.

**A** brief examination of Ottoman history in the first quarter of the nineteenth century provides insight into contemporary developments, many of which have analogous precedents from that era.

Sir Winston Churchill's famous dictum that "the farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see" points to an analogy between the dismantling of the Ottoman military by the "Peter the Great of Turkey"

in 1826, and a similar action by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016.

The Ottoman Empire was facing the Greek revolt, which was supported by major European powers. It had started in 1821, a few years before Mahmud II abolished the Janissaries to create a new army. Greece eventually became independent in 1830, resulting in the first formal secession from the imperial territories,

*Ironically, Turkey's current rulers accommodate themselves better with the progenies of both the Wahhabi and Saudi states than did its Ottoman predecessors.*

although the Serbs had both victoriously revolted and achieved autonomy earlier. The Greek revolt, together with the 1830 French occupation of the Ottoman province of Algeria in North Africa, marked the beginning of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire.

Territorial losses, caused in large measure by the onset of various ethno-national aspirations, have greatly shaped the Turkish psyche with regard to Kurdish demands in the wake of Atatürk's establishment of modern Turkey—irrespective of their legitimacy. All of this can be traced back to the reformist zeal of the first decades of the nineteenth century.

**T**oday, we are witnessing Erdoğan's grandiose ambitions for Turkey. The president is incrementally but surely

monopolizing state power in his hands during a period in which the Turkish state has been weakened by the crack-down that followed the botched coup.

The collapse of the state system in the Middle East, having roots in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, presages the current turmoil. Redrawing international borders, a legacy of World War I, is no longer unimaginable.

Many Middle Eastern states are either fractured or failing, or, at best, dysfunctional. The collapse of the post-World War I state system in the region does not seem to be confined to certain unfortunate countries, but looks as though it may affect every single country related territorially, cultural, and politically with the Middle East.

Thanks to its long experience of statehood, electoral democracy, and formidable geography, Turkey has long appeared immune to the region's many troubles.

At this historical crossroads, Turkey is squandering its sources of strength in a treacherous geopolitical environment by creating a security vacuum at home, departing from democratic practices,

*Turkey is squandering its sources of strength in a treacherous geopolitical environment by creating a security vacuum at home, departing from democratic practices, and moving toward autocratic rule.*

and moving toward autocratic rule. The country is quickly becoming a one party-state fostering a personality cult, drifting away from its Western allies, and seeking tactical regional alignments to replace its strategic commitments—all of which are factors that create a recipe for disaster in the near future.

Consequently, the aforementioned Churchillian dictum does not bode well—either for Turkey or for the entire international system in

which the country plays a crucial role.

### **RAMPANT ANTI-AMERICANISM**

The great German historian Leopold von Ranke held the view that every period of history is unique, and must be understood in its own context. Replacing Churchill's dictum with Ranke's maxim might put a better face.

Even so, signals sent in the aftermath of the failed coup do not leave much room for optimism—certainly not for the prospect of Turkey playing a sobering role in the Middle East and contributing to the region's security and stability.

The steady distancing from the Western world, along with conflicting

positions and interests with the United States in Syria, have set Turkey apart from its formal allies. The indispensable geopolitical importance of Turkey and its place in the Western collective security system has compelled the United States and its European allies to lower the level of cooperation and security coordination in the region—a suboptimal result.

That situation was basically the same before the coup. The decades-old alliance and partnership between Turkey and the United States has been damaged due to a deliberately initiated erosion of trust. The divergences exposed in the initial stages of the Iraq War had brought new levels of animosity to relations between the military institutions of these once close allies. To add insult to injury, Turkey declined to facilitate the American war effort against the regime of Saddam Hussein. Worse even, the U.S. military’s humiliating interrogation of Turkish special forces in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Sulaymaniyah—widely known as the “hood event”—marked a low point in the two countries’ relations.

The bad blood began to circulate in the veins of the military and security relationship of the two allied countries, which not only infected the prospects for future coopera-

tion between them, but remained in the institutional memory of both the Turkish Armed Forces and the Pentagon. Despite all efforts to overcome this shrouded animosity, the relationship remains scarred and strained.

The botched coup of 2016 has struck a major blow to this extremely fragile relationship, which has declined even further after some Turkish officials blamed Washington for the coup attempt.

*Turkey is now  
a pivotal actor.*

One of Turkey’s deputy prime ministers pointed to the United States as the main culprit behind the coup while it was still ongoing. An MP from the ruling AKP party, known to belong to President Erdoğan’s inner circle, went even further, claiming that American troops dressed as Turks participated in the fighting. The moment President Erdoğan emerged triumphant from the failed coup attempt, he singled out his former ally, Fethullah Gülen, a cleric in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania since 1999, as the perpetrator. He then proceeded to ask Washington to immediately extradite Gülen back to Turkey.

At the time of writing this essay, the United States remains the object of vehement Turkish criticism for hosting the latter’s new “public enemy number one.” As long as Fethullah

Gülen's residence in the United States continues, it is likely that Turkish leaders will use this as leverage over Washington on issues where the two parties have conflicting postures.

Erdoğan quite frequently makes references to a "higher mind" that controls and manipulates a variety of protagonists against Turkey's interests and himself. To the Turkish public, this "higher mind" is a simple metaphor used by their president to describe the United States and its alleged ill intentions.

Such a veiled endorsement of anti-Americanism has led the Turkish media—which is either fully state-controlled or has become subservient to Erdoğan—to trumpet numerous conspiracy theories about America's role in the coup. Notwithstanding the seriousness of such theories, the Turkish public is perpetually being fed, and in turn being shaped by, the anti-American and anti-Western mindset endorsed by the country's leadership.

## EUROPE AND TURKEY

The European Union has also borne the brunt of accusations from Turkey's new ruling elite. While the United States is widely believed to have stood behind the putschists on the night of the botched coup, the EU attracted outrage because of its perceived inaction and passivity.

According to the official line, the Turkish people responded to their president's call and heroically took the streets to defend the nation's democracy against the putschists. Two hundred and forty one people were "martyred" in the defense of their elected representatives—to use the term favored by the authorities and the media. At such a dramatic moment, the attitude of the European Union, supposedly the upper house of democracy, was disappointing.

A month after the coup, the President's spokesperson and main public relations manager, İbrahim Kalın, stated bluntly that sentiment prevalent in pro-government circles. He wrote an article in *Politico* entitled "Turkey: Brussels, you've got a problem," which began with the following statement:

The failed coup attempt in Turkey marked a turning point not only for Turkish society but also for relations between the country and Brussels. The European Union portrays itself as a guardian of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, but its weak response to the most serious attack against democracy in any candidate country was disappointing.

His article then went on to say that "the EU's reputation as an advocate of democracy, human rights and the rule of law is on the line. By giving Turkey the cold shoulder," he concluded, "Brus-

sels not only alienates a major ally; it also betrays its values and principles.”

Marc Pierini, a former EU Ambassador to Turkey, contested the Turkish presidential spokesperson’s allegations in his August 25<sup>th</sup> blog post. He wrote in turn:

In the immediate aftermath of the July 15<sup>th</sup> failed coup attempt, EU leaders strongly condemned this violent attack on democracy and confirmed their support to Turkey’s elected parliament, president, and government. Official statements issued by the German Chancellor, the French Foreign Minister, the President of the European Commission, President of the European Council, and EU High Representative, the EU High Representative and European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy, the European Parliament President, as well as those from the Council of Europe and NATO, were loud, clear, and unambiguous. These are the facts. Whether they are received, ignored, or transformed by Turkish politicians and media does not alter the fact that EU leaders strongly came to defense of democracy in Turkey, as they always do.

The title for Pierini’s post was “The Ankara-Brussels Problem.” He added the following insight:

It seems to me, as a keen foreign observer, that injecting more hatred into a diverse and now shaken Turkish society is a recipe for more trouble down

the road, rather than an appeasement. I would contend that only a transparent and democratic reconstruction process in Turkey can succeed, one that reinstates press freedom, an independent judiciary, a free economy, a vibrant civil society, and cultural diversity.

The recipe Pierini offered was what he thought was missing in the “New Turkey,” a project still under construction. It looked like a society in which transparency, accountability, basic freedoms—including freedom of the press, an independent judiciary, and cultural diversity—were not observed.

### **A RECIPE FOR DISASTER?**

**T**he trajectory of constructing an extremely centralized “New Turkey,” where the monopoly of power lies in the hands of an elected autocrat—the patriarch of a newly redefined “nation”—is ultimately a recipe for disaster. Its ramifications would affect a much wider area than the territory of Turkey.

It runs counter to the needs and new dynamics of our peculiar historical period: at a time where the post-World War I state system in the region is crumbling, and the decentralization and devolution of power has become a matter of urgency—particularly with the recent advent of the Kurds onto the stage as never before—quasi-totalitarian practices are impossible to maintain for long.

Erdoğan's counter coup further exposed the perilous future of Turkey. The crackdown on any semblance of opposition—and the dreadful 'witch hunt' that followed—exceeded the limits of reasonable persecution of the putschists. The failed military coup suggests that Turkish politics is inherently unstable, and that its key institutions are fractured and incurably divided. The counter coup, instead of curing Turkey's maladies, aggravated them.

The botched coup left Erdoğan feeling even more fragile and threatened. Therefore, it seems likely that the efforts to purge Gülenists from state institutions and the economic sphere will continue. The danger is that, because of the imperatives of political survival and struggle for power, the architect of the "New Turkey" would need to resort to oppressive measures. We can look back to the 1920s, at the previous installation of a "new" Turkey, for a hint of what may come: the wholesale transformation of society, zealously directed from the top, and implemented, in some cases, in a heavy-handed manner.

Unless there is a game-changer on the way, Turkey's undemocratic drift will initiate a vicious cycle in its re-

lationship with the West—if, that is, the latter does not endorse the repressive measures to come and the curtailing of basic freedoms. Disorder would prevail.

*The failed military coup suggests that Turkish politics is inherently unstable, and that its key institutions are fractured and incurably divided. The counter coup, instead of curing Turkey's maladies, aggravated them.*

Certain Western intellectual circles have begun to question Turkey's place in NATO. An August 24<sup>th</sup> *Huffington Post* article entitled "Ankara Shares Few Values or Interests With The West" began thusly:

Turkey's brief democratic moment is ending. The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Development and Justice Party (AKP) in 2002 signaled

the collapse of the militarized secular republic created by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The recent failed coup killed the semi-liberal democracy that briefly replaced Kemalism.

The article concluded: "The U.S. should change its approach to reflect changing circumstances. Turkey's membership in NATO no longer serves America's and Europe's interests."

Such propositions are neither in the interest of the United States and Europe, nor in that of Turkey. Most probably, they will not receive much attention. However, it is understandable, perhaps more than ever before, as to why such

preposterous assumptions about Turkey are now beginning to circulate in the West. This would have been unthinkable until not that long ago.

### EURASIANISTS VS ATLANTICISTS

This sort of doubt is not only occurring at the Western end of the kaleidoscope. Turkey's prospects in NATO are being questioned by Turks themselves. Accordingly, a credible assessment of the outcome of the failed coup asserted that the "pro-Eurasianist faction" in the Turkish military prevailed over "pro-NATO" and "Atlanticist" generals. The prospect of the Eurasianist faction's domination over Turkish polity should be alarming for the future of Turkey-West relations, which are already on a collision course.

The struggle between the Eurasianists (those with anti-American and anti-NATO views who advocate closer relations with Russia, Iran, and even China) and the Atlanticists (the pro-NATO officer corps) goes back to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Those claiming to be Eurasianists mounted strong resistance to Turkey's orientation towards the EU.

Metin Gürcan, a former military advisor at the General Staff who is knowledgeable about the inner mechanisms of the Turkish military, wrote a piece for *Al Monitor* entitled "Will Turkey's military turn East or West?" What he wrote is sobering indeed:

A list of expelled generals shows most were officers who gave priority to

Atlantic ties and held strong pro-NATO stances. As Turkey has been an important member of the Western security bloc and a strong member of the NATO army, there is no doubt that these dismissals will have major effects on [the Turkish Armed Forces'] strategic identity and organizational culture.

*The prospect of the Eurasianist faction's domination over Turkish polity should be alarming for the future of Turkey-West relations, which are already on a collision course.*

### WEAKER AND MORE VULNERABLE

Turkey is now more vulnerable than at any time in its recent history. During such an unfortunate state of affairs, its leadership's lack of clear vision might prove even more lethal for Turkey's future prospects.

It is an increasingly paranoid leadership, keen on seeing the United States behind every conspiracy against its hold on the country. Fur-

thermore, such a leadership tends to disregard the European Union on all the instances in which democratic cooperation is needed. What is equally problematic, and more worrying still, is that most Turks share the views of their leadership.

The imminent danger of the rampant paranoid perceptions in today's Turkey is that these might exacerbate the country's autocratic tendencies. As a result, Ankara's foreign policy course could involve pivoting to Russia and Iran.

*The imminent danger of the rampant paranoid perceptions in today's Turkey is that these might exacerbate the country's autocratic tendencies.*

Turkey realigning itself to Russia and Iran, and thus creating additional fissures within NATO, would render it "new" but weaker. A weaker new Turkey would be repugnant, and would adversely influence the most troubled geopolitical area of the world.

When in the last days of 1999 President Clinton voiced his belief that Turkey's future will be critical to shaping the twenty-first century, he probably did not foresee the rise of this kind of "New Turkey" repeating the calamitous mistakes of the past. ●

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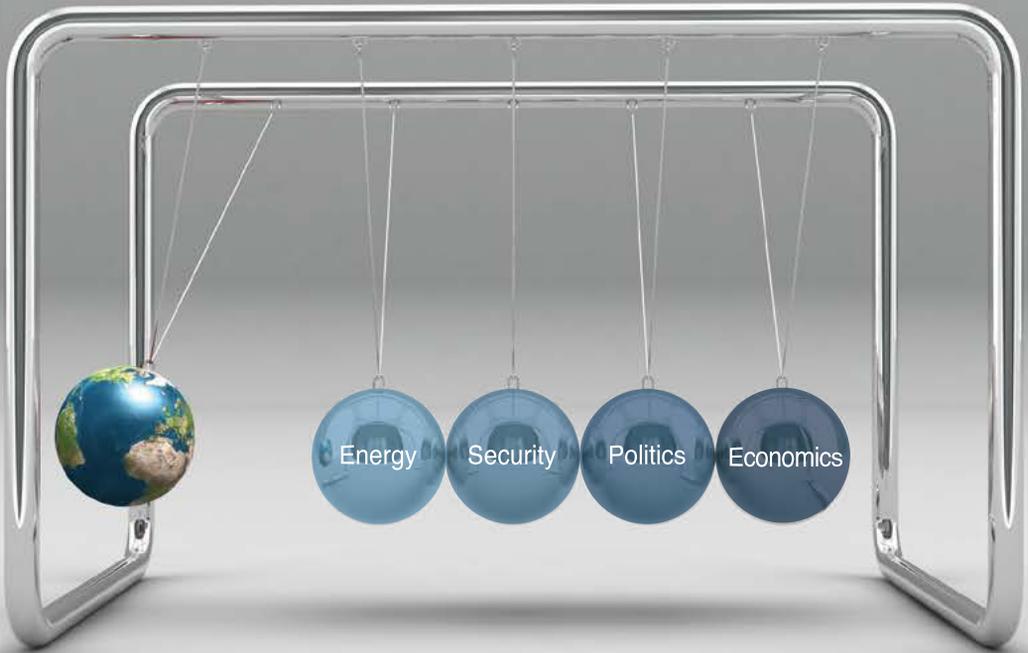
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