Erdogan has made Turkey the sick man of Europe again

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One of the great geopolitical issues in 19th-century Europe was the so-called Eastern Question. The Ottoman Empire, then known as the “sick man of Europe”, was rapidly disintegrating, and it remained to be seen which European power would succeed it.

When the self-annihilation of World War I finally arrived, it was no coincidence that it emanated from the Balkans, the geopolitical playground for the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires.

All three great empires met their demise after the war. During the Allied partition of the Ottoman Empire, General Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the defeated Turkish army withdrew to Anatolia, where they repelled a Greek intervention, and then rejected the Treaty of Sevres. In its place came the Treaty of Lausanne, which paved the way for the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.

Ataturk's ambition was to turn Turkey into a modern, secular country that would belong to Europe and the West, not to the Middle East. To achieve this goal, he ruled as an authoritarian, and created a hybrid state based on de facto military rule and multi-party democracy. Over the course of the 20th century, this arrangement produced recurring crises in which Turkish democracy was repeatedly interrupted by temporary military dictatorships.

After 1947, Turkish politics was heavily influenced by the Cold War. In 1952, Turkey joined NATO and became one of the West's indispensable allies. For decades, it used its strategic position between the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea to guard the alliance's southern flank against Soviet encroachments.
Still, Turkey remained an unstable political entity. The vacillation between democracy and military rule arrested most of its progress towards modernisation. For Turkish proponents of democracy, the country’s best hope rested with Europe. Formal accession to the EU would signal the completion of the modernisation process. Whereas the Ottomans had maintained hegemony over the Middle East for a century, Turkey would become a card-carrying member of the West.

In 1995, Turkey entered into a Customs union with the EU. By the time the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the country seemed to have oriented itself towards Europe for good. In partnership with the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen’s movement, AKP governments led by then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan pursued far-reaching institutional, economic and judicial reforms, including abolition of the death penalty, a precondition for EU membership.

Moreover, during the early years of Erdogan’s rule, Turkey experienced rapid modernisation and strong economic growth, bringing it ever closer to the EU. By 2011, when the Arab Spring arrived, Turkey was rightly heralded as a successful model of “Islamic democracy”, in which free and fair elections were combined with the rule of law and a market economy. Seven years later, we seem to be in a completely different world. Turkey is quickly reclaiming its title as “the sick man of Europe”. Given its strategic location and economic and human potential, the country should be moving towards a brilliant 21st century future. Instead, it is marching backward to the 19th century, under the banner of nationalism and reorientalisation. Rather than embrace Western modernity, it is throwing in its lot with the Middle East and that region’s perpetual crises.

Erdogan, who assumed the presidency in 2014, has presided over Turkey’s rapid modernisation and equally rapid backsliding. He had the chance to follow in Ataturk’s footsteps, and to complete the task of integrating Turkey into the West, but he failed.

What explains this tragedy? One possibility is Erdogan grew overconfident during the boom that preceded the 2008 financial crisis. Another is he came to resent the West, owing to the humiliation of the stalled EU process and his authoritarian ambitions, which he finally pursued in earnest after the failed military coup in the summer of 2016.

In any event, Erdogan has squandered a unique opportunity for Turkey and the Muslim world. His country is beset by a currency crisis of his making, and it could even face the prospect of bankruptcy. As he divides his loyalties between East and West, he risks destabilising the Middle East further. Turkey’s domestic ethnic conflicts — particularly with the Kurds — have once again erupted with full force, even though past experience shows they cannot be resolved militarily.
Thanks to Erdogan, Turkey has become part of the problem in the region, rather than the solution.

And yet Turkey’s strategic importance to Europe remains. Millions of EU citizens are of Turkish origin, and the country will continue to bridge the gap between East and West, North and South. Under Erdogan’s regime, Turkey is no longer a prospective candidate for EU membership. But rather than break off the accession process, the EU should focus on stabilising the country and salvaging its democracy.

After all, a destabilised Turkey is the last thing Europe needs. Regardless of one’s sympathy for or antipathy to Erdogan, Europe’s security depends heavily on Turkey, which has absorbed millions of refugees. For the sake of European stability and Turkish democracy, the EU must confront Turkey’s crisis with patience and pragmatism, based on its own democratic principles.

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