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The Coup Attempt in Turkey: Erdoğan's Strength and Weakness

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The wave of repression that engulfed Turkey after the unsuccessful military coup (which itself also seemed a little strange, reminiscent of some local plot that an awful lot of people seemed to be in on) is gathering speed. More than 20,000 people have been either dismissed or detained, including soldiers, police, judges, prosecutors, and civil servants. Among the sacked were 257 staffers in the prime minister's office, 492 employees from the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and 100 intelligence officers. According to other sources, the total number of those who have been dismissed, detained, or arrested – including teachers, administrators in educational institutions, and journalists – has now topped 50,000.

The Turkish government has sent the US a request for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric living in Pennsylvania who leads a networked organization known as Hizmet, as the Turks believe him to be the mastermind who encouraged the conspirators. In turn, Gülen, a former ally-turned-opponent of Erdoğan's who from the beginning denounced the military operations, claims that the coup always seemed a bit too scripted: «*I do not think the world believes the accusations made by the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It is possible that this was a staged coup that could have been intended to create further accusations [against Gülen and his followers – A.A.]*».

Indeed, so many in the army were upset by the agenda being pursued by the ruling AKP party and its leader to Islamize all aspects of life that – coupled with the steady decline in the prestige of the military – this set the stage for the army’s frequent incursions into the country’s political life, and Turkey’s history offers many successful examples of such interventions. In addition, the military council (*Askerî Şûra*) that was scheduled to convene in August – although that has been postponed for now – was planning to consider the dismissal of a number of disloyal senior and mid-level army officers. Of course, due to the uncertainty of their futures, many of them could have been showing signs of nervousness, which would certainly have been no secret to the National Intelligence Organization. It is interesting that the rebels made no serious attempt to neutralize the leader of Turkey, who quickly urged his supporters (using FaceTime and social networks) to take to the streets. Not one political party supported the defenders of the coup, who themselves never presented any sort of recognizable leader from among their ranks (except for someone named Muharrem Köse, whose name briefly emerged in the wee hours of July 16). The statements made by the «rebels» seemed remarkably incoherent, and the senseless bombing of empty government buildings in the middle of the night, as well as the (rush hour!) roadblocks on the bridges over the Bosphorus, seemed almost deliberately designed to infuriate the residents of Istanbul. And when July 16 dawned, they vented all their rage on the orchestrators of the coup, which was when a crowd of livid Erdoğan supporters on a bridge over the Bosphorus began to lynch the soldiers who were surrendering to them (and whose faces registered their utter bewilderment about what was going on). On the contrary however, no such bewilderment was seen in the camp of Erdoğan’s supporters, which included Syrian «refugees», rabid nationalists, and Islamists of various stripes who took to the streets of Turkish cities to celebrate their victory... One very representative proclamation was heard from the local branch of the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami terrorist organization fully endorsing the Turkish president’s move to quash the military rebellion and subsequently amend the country’s constitution: *«We urge the nation, which has decisively turned against the coup plotters, to show the same support for the plan to establish the Righteous Caliphate, rejecting all other ideas and plans as they have rejected the coup!»*

The events of recent days in Turkey have reignited a number of conspiracy theories that are usually trotted out by supporters of the country’s president when they allude to external antagonists or even a «Higher Power». Possibly the correspondence of the ruling AKP party, which was published on the *WikiLeaks* website, might help answer a few questions, but the access to the site was quickly blocked by the Turkish government, which turned out to be far more on the ball than the hapless coup plotters.

The biggest beneficiary of the «would-be coup» was Erdoğan himself, who immediately described the incident as «a blessing from Allah» (*Bu Allah’ın bir lütfü*) and a reason to «cleanse» the country’s armed forces. The process of Islamizing Turkey, which has become a trademark of his administration (especially in recent years), will likely be fast-tracked, in spite of resistance from much of the public – because objectors can now be accused of anything and everything. The same can be said for the transition to a presidential form of government allowing the chief executive virtually unlimited powers. There can be little doubt that the Turkish leader will redouble his efforts to advance his pet project, but that will entail significant costs. Those costs will come in no small measure from the growth of radical sentiments among the public, a phenomenon that has already created serious security challenges

and set the stage for a deepening rift in society (these trends will come into even sharper focus if the Turkish government goes ahead with its initiative to grant citizenship to refugees arriving in the country from Syria).

The government's hardnosed moves against genuine opponents – as well as anyone even expressing reservations – have naturally prompted some critical statements from Western politicians and the press. However, the fact that the Turkish government has temporarily blocked the Americans from using Incirlik Air Base is unlikely to seriously complicate US-Turkish relations. Turkey remains an important component of global trade, as well as a US military and political partner and a member of NATO, which is important in the context of what is called «containing Russia». Allusions to a possible suspension of Turkey's membership in NATO can be seen more as part of the general noise intended to pressure the state into scaling back some potential excesses against the military, as many officers in the Turkish armed forces were educated in the West. Erdoğan's emotional proclamations about it being *«time for the Americans to make up their mind»* are aimed at his livid domestic supporters and echo similar statements from the past that did not result in any serious harm to the Washington-Ankara relationship. The discussions and arguments that go on between the two of them, which no one denies, remain safely within the confines of their relationship, although the two may have tactical disagreements.

The Turkish-American relationship is multi-layered and wide-ranging, encompassing far more than mere dialog between heads of state. Nor has anyone scrapped the financial and economic ties or (and this very much needs to be emphasized) the close cooperation between the defense departments, intelligence services, and the military-industrial complex (despite the Turks' desire to pursue their own projects in this area). Ashton Russia, who heads the Pentagon, has once again assured Ankara (as has Barack Obama) of American support for the democratically elected civilian government of Turkey. But as Pavel Shlykov – an analyst at Moscow State University's Institute of Asian and African Studies – has noted, even the economic growth figures for that government *«are tied to increased expenditures on special operations, emergency medical assistance, and the rebuilding of battered cities, and only the civil war against the Kurds gave it the edge it needed at the ballot box»*.

This in no way means that Ankara will not try to resurrect its relationship with Moscow, but it is unlikely that that will return to where it was before that bond came to an abrupt, tragic end in the skies over Syria on Nov. 24, 2015. Turkey needs to at least partly resolve its domestic problems, consolidate power, and ultimately replace the military and civilian personnel who were eliminated during the reprisals, which might somewhat temper the Turkish leaders' «neo-Ottoman» ambitions around the perimeter of their national borders. There was a time when the Turkish military was less than enthusiastic about the prospect of fighting in Syria (including the possibility of running into the Russian military contingent there). Nevertheless, the policy of «neo-Ottomanism» remains the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy for the foreseeable future. The approach announced by Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım of «more friends – fewer enemies» is intended to promote the pragmatic goals of the Turkish leaders in the near future. For example, the downward economic spiral will weaken support for the AKP and its leader (especially in coastal provinces where the difficulties are strongly tied to tourism) on the eve of

fateful decisions about the transition to a presidential form of government and possible early elections in the Grand National Assembly. In conjunction with the setbacks in regard to Europe, that will require a balanced foreign policy and steps to normalize relations with Tel Aviv and Moscow, while generally preserving its pro-Western focus in key areas, including those that affect the security interests of Russia and its allies and partners in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The best thing that Turkey could do in Syria would be to renounce support for radical armed factions as well as the terrorist gangs that operate in the country, which would pave the way not only for a political settlement of the conflict, but would also sharply increase trust in a dialog with Moscow. However, that's not what's happening and mercenaries keep crossing the border – ousting the government of Bashar al-Assad is still a top priority for Ankara and its Western allies.

As before, a possible thaw when it comes to specific aspects of the trade and economic cooperation between Russia and Turkey should not give anyone any false hopes about a change to the focus of Ankara's foreign policy.