

# **THE GEOPOLITICS OF TURKEY'S COUP**

## **Shaun Riordan**

(Senior Visiting Fellow of the Netherlands Institute for International Relations (“Clingendael”) and a senior analyst with Wikistrat. At Clingendael, Shaun heads the project on Business Diplomacy and is a member of the Futures for Diplomacy team. He also works as an independent consultant on geopolitical risk and diplomacy for governments, Spanish companies and Anglo-American hedge funds. Shaun spent 16 years in the British Diplomatic Service, including postings to New York, Beijing and Madrid and stints in the Counter-Terrorist and Yugoslav Departments of the Foreign Office in London. Shaun is author of “The New Diplomacy” (Polity 2003), “Adios a la Diplomacia” (Siglo XXI, 2005) and “Reforming Foreign Services for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Clingendael 2010) and co-author (with Paul Ormerod) of “A New Approach to the Analysis of Geo-Political Risk”, (with Brian Hocking, Paul Sharp and Jan Melissen) “Diplomatic Futures: Integrative Diplomacy” (Clingendael 2012) and a Clingendael policy brief “Whither Foreign Ministries?”. He is co-editor of the special edition of the Hague Journal of Diplomacy on Business Diplomacy)

Copyright: <http://www.shaunriordan.com/?p=295>

Publication date in RIEAS web site ([www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr)) on 23 July 2016

**The analysis of the motivation and consequences of the Turkish coup have underestimated the geopolitics.**

## **Motivation**

First it is important to understand Turkish geopolitical dilemmas and reactions. In recent months Turkey (together with Saudi Arabia) has emerged as the major loser in the Middle East. Turkey's proteges are losing out in Syria. Russian support has reinforced the Assad regime. The nuclear deal with Tehran has enhanced the position of its rival Iran. The Kurds are benefiting from the chaos in both Iraq and Syria, and with US support will almost certainly emerge with their own state. Turkey's flirtation with ISIS has backfired with large-scale terrorist attacks in Turkey itself. PKK terrorism is adding to the internal instability. The Turkish governments increasingly mistrusts the US, in large part because of the deal with

Iran. Relations with the EU have been tense, partly because of the migration crisis and partly because of persistent criticism of Erdogan's human rights record. The Brexit campaign in the UK exacerbated the tensions when then Prime Minister Cameron publicly proclaimed that Turkey would never join the EU.

Prior to the coup, there was evidence of Erdogan responding to Turkey's geopolitical dilemmas with a radical change in the direction of Turkish foreign policy. Firstly, Erdogan initiated a rapprochement with Israel. He responded to the Brexit vote with relish, speculating on a referendum to withdraw the Turkish application to join the EU. He then appeared to launch a rapprochement with Russia by apologising for the death of the Russian pilot shot down over Turkish airspace (Russia Today reported that Putin and Erdogan would soon meet). Put together these steps suggested an Erdogan who was abandoning the EU, and possibly the US, to realign Turkey with the more congenial Russians.

*This realignment would be a considerable victory for Russia.* But it would also threaten many foreign policy objectives held dear by elements within the Turkish Armed Forces: a close relationship with the US, eventual membership of the EU, an active role in NATO, opposition to the Assad regime and thwarting Russian ambitions in the Black Sea and Mediterranean. While it may be true that the coup plotters were concerned at Erdogan's increasing authoritarianism, were Gulenists or concerned about a reported reshuffle of military commands on 16 July, it is equally likely that they were motivated by Erdogan's new move foreign policies and their implications, in particular for Turkey's membership of NATO.

## **Consequences**

The immediate consequence of the coup's failure will be to reinforce Erdogan's position, and the policy directions he was already following. He is already taking advantage of the coup to purge the armed forces, especially the Air Force, and the Judiciary. But the geopolitical consequences are also becoming clear. Erdogan has already blamed the coup on Gulen and demanded his extradition from the US. The US will refuse, and is already implying criticism of Erdogan's internal crackdown. Turkey has stopped US operations against ISIS from the Incirlik airbase and arrested the base's Turkish commander, who clearly enjoyed close relations with his US counterparts (apart from US attacks on ISIS, the base also stores US tactical nuclear weapons). Tensions will also grow with the EU as EU leaders feel obliged to criticise Turkey's domestic crackdown, all the more so if Turkey reintroduces the death penalty. *The crackdown itself could lead to a new wave of Turkish migrants seeking refuge*

*from Erdogan in the EU. Many may be wanted by the Turkish authorities. The Greek government already has to decide whether to return eight Turkish military who have sought refuge there. Meanwhile, Erdogan will continue to hold the migration blackmail over the EU. The EU has already failed to deliver on visa free access for Turkish citizens and it is even less likely to do so now. **At any moment, Erdogan can unleash new waves of Middle Eastern migrants, destabilising the Balkans.***

With growing tensions with the EU and US, Erdogan has every reason for continuing and even deepening the rapprochement with Russia. He needs a reliable ally to confront instability both abroad and at home. He knows that Moscow will not criticise his human rights record. In the medium term this could lead to a radical realignment of the Middle East, with Moscow, as the price of its friendship, brokering further rapprochement between Turkey and Iran and the Assad regime. This would effectively lock the Americans out of the region and would question Turkey's continued membership of NATO. It would also greatly strengthen Russia's position in its near abroad on Europe's eastern frontier.

The geopolitical consequences of the coup could impact severely on Turkey's economic performance. Turkey is highly dependent on short-term foreign portfolio investment to support its current account deficit and property and housing markets. Such financing is highly volatile. Internal repression and tensions with the US and EU could lead to significant capital outflows undermining an already suffering economy. *Economic instability would feed into increasing political instability.* Although this might undermine the radical realignment of the Middle East suggested above, the political and economic collapse of Turkey should be of no consolation to the US or the EU, both because of its impact on the further destabilisation of the region, and *in reigniting Europe's migration crisis.*