

GPAJ Seminar  
"Turkey under the Erdogan regime"

By Akio Miyajima, Japanese Ambassador to Turkey

Akio Miyajima, Japanese Ambassador to Turkey gave a lecture at the seminar "Turkey under the Erdogan regime" held on September 12. The ambassador explained Turkey as a "rising power" with "volatility" and "resilience" in the turbulent Middle East region and beyond from various aspects including its diplomacy, military, domestic affairs, and economy. He also emphasized that Turkey, a nation of 83 million people with tremendous potential holds the key to regional stability and global peacebuilding as the influence and commitment of the United States wanes and declines. The outline of his remarks is as follows. (The original text is Japanese)

◇ ◇ ◇

《“ Volatility” and “Resilience”: Turkey's two faces》

With twice the size of Japan and a population of 83 million, Turkey connects the Middle East, Europe, Asia and Africa, both geographically and historically. This country has two faces, "volatility" and "resilience". On the surface, Turkey is constantly facing dynamic changes inside and outside the country, but has a strong core that does not waver no matter what. As an example, I get the impression that Turkey is doing fairly well in the battle against Covid-19, while the whole world continues to struggle. The death toll per million people is 79, less than in Germany. The number of ICU beds is also higher than most countries in Europe. Their young population with the average of 32 years old must have been helping them. Indeed Turkey has a promising future to grow beyond a regional key player in the coming years.

《 Image Problem? 》

The latest news coverage by Western media portrays Turkey as an authoritarian regime governed by "strongman-rule" Events such as its cross-border military operations in Syria, the decision to transform Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque, and the confrontation with Greece in the East Mediterranean have been reported widely, and President Erdogan's "strongman style" is often their only focus. I am afraid that Turkey has too often been painted as a "troublemaker" and a "villain". To be sure, Turkish politics has areas which raise some concerns in terms of principles of democracy. For example, looking at its ranking of "freedom of the press," it has scores low for a "democracy" across various indexes. It is true that many journalists remain imprisoned today. However, if you compare Turkey's degree of political freedom with other countries in the region, the impression may be different. It is difficult to evaluate the maturity of a country's "democracy" and to decide on objective criteria to make such evaluation. Only criticizing the country with looking-down-from-the -above attitude would instead provoke nationalistic sentiment and may not lead to improve the democratic standards. I tend to believe in the Japanese way to encourage positive changes and work quietly and tenaciously with interlocutors.

As the Turkish currency continues to depreciate, the polls show that the approval ratings of the president and the ruling party are declining. Both recently-held presidential election and parliamentary election were narrowly won, and the next election cannot be easy for the leader and the ruling party. Mr. Erdogan is indeed "strong" under the Executive Presidency system as he has concentrated the political powers to himself. However, this does not mean he can get whatever he wants and his ruling parties are guaranteed victory in every election. There are opposition parties challenging the ruling party ensuring a choice for the Turkish people. Political pluralism in democracy is fairly well established. This is also exceptional compared with other countries in the region. I would like to emphasize that the "strongman" in Turkey has popular support of just above 50% of voters, different from

“strongmen” in other countries without a free and fair election.

#### 《Foreign Relations》

Mr. Erdogan has been muddling through “volatility”, such as the attempted coup d’état, the assassination of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the shooting down of a Russian aircraft and so on. There are many issues to solve with the United States, such as the extradition of the alleged “mastermind” of the coup d’état, the purchasing Russian-made S400 anti-air defense missile system, and the Syrian civil war, where the United States supports Kurdish forces, YPG/PDY in the war against IS while Turkey regards them just as a cover of PKK, its domestic Kurdish terrorists organization and as such its serious national security threat.

President Erdogan and Russian President Putin so far have met 10 times. But this does not mean Turkey trusts Russia. There is no need to explain that Russia has been and will remain a serious geopolitical concern for Turkey. They are also at odds in Libya, where they have taken opposing sides. Turkey maintained a pragmatic and realistic relationship with Russia to keep a ceasefire in order to avoid further influx of refugees from Syria. The introductions of Russian S400 air defense missile system, building a Russian nuclear power plant and energy supply from Russia are good examples. Russians are the top foreign tourists to Turkey, 7 million last year.

In relation to the European Union (EU), Turkey has not officially given up its aspiration to be a member, but the negotiation goes nowhere. It seems the momentum has been lost for various reasons. For many Europeans, Turkey has become too powerful for the EU to accommodate. Turkey will exceed Germany in population in the not far distant future. Still, the EU is Turkey's most important trading partner with half of their total trade volume. Many Istanbul citizens and around 30% of the Turks consider themselves as “European” and nobody in Turkey thinks they belong to the “Middle East.”

China has been expanding economic relations with Turkey through increasing exports of daily products and commercial goods and has approached Turkey under its “Belt and Road Initiative”. However, I do not have the impression that China's influence is getting particularly stronger in Turkey. Like China, Turkey itself has high pride for their tradition and culture and it seems Turkey does not trust China based on their historical experiences. Although Turkey does not often criticize it openly, it has a strong concern about the crackdown by Chinese authorities on the Muslim Uighurs, ethnically very close to the Turks.

The announced purpose of the cross-border military operations in north-eastern Syria the autumn last year was to set up a buffer zone of 30 kilometers wide, to prevent rocket attacks by Kurdish terrorist forces (PYG/PDY) based in northern Syria and Iraq. It was also expected to facilitate the “voluntary return” of Syrian refugees to the “safe zone” to be established by the operation. The military action was strongly supported domestically by both the ruling and the opposition parties. In Idlib province in north-western Syria alone, there are 1.5 million IDP, internally displaced persons who may try to cross the border once the Assad regime resumes the fighting to retake the area. In order to avoid another massive influx of Syrian refugees Turkey must maintain the delicate ceasefire with cooperation with Russia and Iran in north-western Syria.

In terms of refugee issue, I would like to emphasize the fact that Turkey has accepted 3.6 million Syrian refugees, the largest number in the world during the past nine years. Turkey has become the bulwark against the huge influx of Syrian refugees who otherwise would have moved to European countries. I am truly impressed that those refugees are not just accepted by Turkey but also treated generously and welcomed warmly by Turkish people

without discrimination in education or medical services at the time of their economic hardships. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has repeated his high appreciation toward the Turkish government and people for their very humanitarian efforts. The Japanese government also tries to alleviate the heavy burden by assisting local Turkish communities with large refugee populations through JICA and UN agencies.

There is a long and complicated conflict between Greece and Turkey over the boundaries of their territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in Eastern Mediterranean. The confrontation intensified by the discovery of natural gas potential in 2009. Turkey claims that EEZ demarcation must be determined based on its continental shelf while Greece, insisting on its islands as baseline, claims its EEZ extends from the Aegean Sea to the close offshore of Turkey. The Greeks started drilling. Turkey found it could not let the Greek drillings keep going. The Turks dispatched their seismic exploration and drilling ships to the disputed area and started their on-site research. In response the Greeks dispatched their warships and the Turks did the same, raising concerns that both sides are on a collision course. In fact, there is a risk of accidental collision which might lead to an inadvertent military conflict. A peaceful solution through dialogue based on the rule of law is absolutely needed. The EU, especially Germany as EU Council Presidency, has tried to make mediation efforts while the United States has not played an active role here.

Among the Islamic countries, Turkey seems trying to strengthen its leadership role by for example, criticizing harshly Israel on the Palestinian issue or raising its loud voice in defense of the Rohingya refugees. Other regional countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia and UAE seem to be very alarmed by Turkey's aspiration for more influence.

<< Its Future and Relation with Japan >>

Despite its “volatile” internal and external environment, Turkey has always shown “resilience” to muddle through one crisis after another. As a regional power with its young population, an average age of 32, its GDP has tripled in two decades to \$ 28,000 per person (PPP, Purchasing Power Parity). In the coming years, Turkey will not just be a key player in the region, but will become one of the “global rising powers”. Turkey’s strong ethnic connections and wide networks with Central Asian countries such as Azerbaijan and others must be its strength. Toward the African continent, Turkey’s engagements are on the rise. The capitals of 31 African countries are now connected with Istanbul by direct flights.

With relations with Japan, it is true that Turkish people have a special affinity for “Japan” and very friendly sentiment toward Japan and Japanese people. Many Turkish people often mention that they respect Japan's modernization since the Meiji Restoration, its victory over Russia in 1905, and its rapid development after WWII and two atomic bombs. Both countries have helped each other in disaster reliefs as Japan and Turkey are prone to earthquakes. They even cherish a 130-year old episode as a basis of their friendship with Japan; In 1890, the Turkish warship, the Ertugrul was wrecked off the coast of Wakayama Prefecture, more than 500 crew were drowned to death and the local villagers, risking their lives, rescued some 50 survivors and the Japanese Imperial Navy sailed them back to Istanbul. In 1985, almost a century later, Turkey returned the favor to Japan. The Turkish government sent a rescue aircraft to Teheran during the Iran-Iraq War to evacuate the stranded 215 Japanese. Turkey and Japan share a common interest on many issues. I am convinced that Japan and Turkey are natural strategic partners to cooperate each other from Government to Government to People-to People levels.

(Summarized by Takaaki Mizuno)

Q) Director Sakane: Turkey occupies an important position and has an influential diplomacy amid various instability factors in neighboring countries such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Palestine / Israel, and Iran. How does Turkey try to maintain relations with neighboring countries, and how should Japan deal with Turkey in the future?

A) Many Turkish people seem to consider themselves European, and Turkey does not belong to the "Middle East", which was the region once under control of the Ottoman Empire. They have a high pride for their rich culture and a long tradition. Though Turkey established diplomatic relations with Israel first among Muslim countries, it sent the harshest criticism when Israeli security forces attacked the Palestinian demonstrators in Gaza. Egypt and the Gulf nations except for Qatar are very wary of Turkey's growing influence partly because of its political and military power. Since the United States has made it clear that it will no longer play a role as policeman and withdraw from the prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, it is obvious that US power and influence to create and maintain the geopolitical order in the region has been diminished. Under such a circumstance, Turkey seems to feel that it has no choice but to protect its own vital national interest and regional stability by themselves, if necessary, using military forces. I believe in strategic partnership between Japan and Turkey.

Q) Vice President Kumagai: With regard to the centralization of power and so-called "Islamization," you indicated that it may not be a departure from secular democracy but rather a response to domestic politics. As the Japanese government emphasizes "value-oriented diplomacy," I am concerned about the future of democracy in Turkey. Are these trends temporary, or rather in a longer-term structural change?

A) I have the impression that restrictions on freedom of expression are indeed increasing, but in Turkey, you have access to criticisms against the government policies on the internet and opposition parties have always campaigned rather freely in elections. It is not true that the Turkish President can get whatever he wants. Based on his own experience in career development from the mayor of Istanbul to the prime minister and the president, President Erdogan often used to say that "who controls Istanbul controls Turkey." But in the last mayoral election of Istanbul the spring 2019, the opposition candidate secured the victory with bigger margins at the second ballot. In the last presidential and parliamentary elections, the ruling party has maintained a narrow majority only by making coalition with another nationalistic party and will face a fierce competition with the opposition parties in the next elections to be held in 2023. In this sense, pluralism in democracy has been fairly well-established in Turkey.