By George Friedman

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan exploded during a public discussion with Israeli President Shimon Peres at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, recently. Erdogan did not blow up at Peres, but rather at the moderator, Washington Post columnist and associate editor David Ignatius, whom Erdogan accused of giving more time to Peres. Afterward, Erdogan said, "I did not target at all in any way the Israeli people, President Peres or the Jewish people. I am a prime minister, a leader who has expressly stated that anti-Semitism is a crime against humanity."

Nevertheless, the international press focused not on the finer points of Erdogan's reasoning, but rather on his attacks on Israeli policy in Gaza and his angry exit, which many thought were directed at Peres and Israel. The confusion, we suspect, suited Erdogan quite well. Turkey is effectively an ally of Israel. Given this alliance, the recent events in Gaza put Erdogan in a difficult position. The Turkish prime minister needed to show his opposition to Israel's policies to his followers in Turkey's moderate Islamist community without alarming Turkey's military that he was moving to rupture relations with Israel. Whether calculated or not, Erdogan's explosion in Davos allowed him to appear to demonstrate vocal opposition to Israel - directly to Israel's president, no less - without actually threatening ties with Israel.

It is important to understand the complexity of Erdogan's political position. Ever since the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Turkey has had a secular government. The secularism of the government was guaranteed constitutionally by the military, whose role it was to protect the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk -- the founder of modern, secular Turkey, who used the army as an instrument of nation-building. The Turkish public, in contrast, runs the gamut from ultrasecularists to radical Islamists.

Erdogan is an elected moderate Islamist. As such, he is held in suspicion by the army and severely circumscribed in how far he can go on religious matters. To his right politically are more hard-line Islamist parties, which are making inroads into Turkish public opinion. Erdogan must balance between these forces, avoiding the two extreme outcomes of military intervention and Islamist terrorism.

Meanwhile, from a geopolitical perspective, Turkey is always in an uncomfortable place. Asia Minor is the pivot of Eurasia. It is the land bridge between Asia and Europe, the northern frontier of the Arab world and the southern frontier of the Caucasus. Its influence spreads outward toward the Balkans, Russia, Central Asia, the Arab world and Iran. Alternatively, Turkey is the target of forces emanating from all of these directions. Add to this its control of the Bosporus, which makes Turkey the interface between the Mediterranean and Black Sea, and the complexity of Turkey's position becomes clear: Turkey is always either under pressure from its neighbors or pressuring its neighbors. It is perpetually being drawn outward in multiple

directions, even into the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey has two different paths for dealing with its geopolitical challenge.

Secular isolationism

From the army's point of view, the Ottoman Empire was a disaster that entangled Turkey into the catastrophe of Word War I. One of Ataturk's solutions involved not only contracting Turkey after the war, but containing it in such a way that it could not be drawn into the extreme risk of imperial adventure.

In World War II, both Axis and Allies wooed and subverted Turkey. But the country managed - with difficulty - to maintain neutrality, thereby avoiding another national catastrophe.

During the Cold War, Turkey's position was equally difficult. Facing Soviet pressure from the north, the Turks had to ally themselves with the United States and NATO. Turkey possessed something the Soviets desperately wanted: the Bosporus, which would have given the Soviet navy unimpeded access to the Mediterranean. Naturally, the Turks could not do anything about their geography, nor could they cede the Bosporus to the Soviets without sacrificing their independence. But neither could they protect it by themselves. Thus, left with only the choice of NATO membership, the Turks joined the Western alliance.

There was a high degree of national unity on this subject. Whatever the ideologies involved, the Soviets were viewed as a direct threat to Turkey. Therefore, using NATO and the United States to help guarantee Turkish territorial integrity was ultimately something around which a consensus could form. NATO membership, of course, led to complications, as these things always do.

To counter the American relationship with Turkey (and with Iran, which also blocked Soviet southward movement), the Soviets developed a strategy of alliances - and subversion - of Arab countries. First Egypt, then Syria, Iraq and other countries came under Soviet influence between the 1950s and 1970s. Turkey found itself in a vise between the Soviets and Iraq and Syria. And with Egypt - with its Soviet weapons and advisers - also in the Soviet orbit, Turkey's southern frontier was seriously threatened.

Turkey had two possible responses to this situation. One was to build up its military and economy to take advantage of its mountainous geography and deter attack. For this, Turkey needed the United States. The second option was to create cooperative relations with other countries in the region that were hostile to both the Soviets and the left-wing Arab regimes. The two countries that fit this bill were Israel and pre-1979 Iran under the shah. Iran tied down Iraq. Israel tied down Syria and Egypt. In effect, these two countries neutralized the threat of Soviet pressure from the south.

Thus was born the Turkish relationship with Israel. Both countries belonged to the American anti-Soviet alliance system and therefore had a general common interest in conditions in the eastern Mediterranean. Both countries also had a common interest in containing Syria. From

the standpoint of the Turkish army, and therefore the Turkish government, a close collaboration with Israel made perfect sense.

Islamist internationalism

There is a second vision of Turkey, however: that of Turkey as a Muslim power with responsibilities beyond guaranteeing its own national security. This viewpoint would of course break the country's relationship with Israel and the United States. In some sense, this is a minor consideration now. Israel is no longer indispensable for Turkish national security, and Turkey has outgrown outright dependence on the United States. (These days, the United States needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the United States.)

Under this second vision, Turkey would extend its power outward in support of Muslims. This vision, if pursued to the full, would involve Turkey in the Balkans in support of Albanians and Bosnians, for example. It would also see Turkey extend its influence southward to help shape Arab regimes. And it would cause Turkey to become deeply involved in Central Asia, where it has natural ties and influence. Ultimately, this vision also would return Turkey to maritime power status, influencing events in North Africa. It is at its heart a very expansionist vision, and one that would require the active support of a military that, at present, is somewhat squeamish about leaving home.

Along with Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran and Egypt, Turkey is one of only five major powers in the Islamic world with enough economic and military potential to affect anything beyond their immediate neighbors. Indonesia and Pakistan are internally fragmented and struggling to hold together; their potential is largely bottled up. Iran is in a long-term confrontation with the United States and must use all of its strength in dealing with that relationship, limiting its options for expansion. Egypt is internally crippled by its regime and economy, and without significant internal evolutions it cannot project power.

Turkey, on the other hand, is now the world's 17th-largest economy. It boasts a gross domestic product (GDP) that is larger than that of every other Muslim country, including Saudi Arabia; larger than that of every EU country other than Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands; and nearly five times larger than that of Israel. In per capita GDP, Turkey ranks much lower on the global scale, but national power - the total weight a country can bring to bear on the international system - frequently depends more on the total size of the economy than on per capita income. (Consider China, which has a per capita income less than half that of Turkey's.) Turkey is surrounded by instability in the Arab world, in the Caucasus and in the Balkans. But it is the most stable and dynamic economy in its region and, after Israel, has the most effective armed forces.

On occasion, Turkey goes beyond its borders. It has, for example, moved into Iraq in a combined air-ground operation to attack units of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a Kurdish separatist group. But it is Turkey's policy to avoid deep entanglements. From the Turkish Islamist point of view, however, a power of this magnitude under the control of an Islamist regime would be in a position to spread its influence dramatically. As mentioned, this is not what the army or the secularists want: They remember how the Ottoman Empire sapped Turkish

strength, and they do not want a repeat.

Erdogan's challenge and Turkey's future

It is not fair to say that Turkey is a deeply divided society. Instead, Turkey has learned to blend discord. At the moment, Erdogan probably represents the center of the Turkish political spectrum. But he is stuck trying to balance three competing forces. The first is an economy that remains robust and is likely to grow further despite suffering setbacks (along with the rest of the world). The second is a capable military that does not want excessive foreign entanglements, and certainly not for religious reasons. And the third is an Islamist movement that wants to see Turkey as part of the Islamic world - and perhaps even the leader of that world.

Erdogan does not want to weaken the Turkish economy, and he sees radical Islamist ideas as endangering Turkey's middle class. He wants to placate the army and keep it from acting politically. He also wants to placate the radical Islamists, who could draw the army out of the barracks, or worse, weaken the economy. Erdogan thus wants to keep business, the military and the religious sector happy simultaneously.

This is no easy task, and Erdogan was clearly furious at Israel for attacking Gaza and making that task harder. Turkey was crucial in developing the Israeli-Syrian dialogue. This means the wider world now views Turkey's leadership as regionally engaged, something its risk-averse military is more than a little touchy about. Erdogan therefore saw Israel as endangering Turkey's military-civilian power balance and squandering its tentative steps into the regional spotlight for what he considered a pointless operation in Gaza.

Still, Erdogan did not want to break with Israel. So he became furious with the moderator. Whether this was calculated or simply reflected his response to the situation he finds himself in is immaterial. The outburst allowed him to appear to break with Israel decisively without actually creating such a rupture. He thus deftly continued to walk his fine line.

The question is how long Erdogan can maintain the balance. The more chaotic the region around Turkey becomes and the stronger Turkey gets, the more irresistible will be the sheer geopolitical pressure on Turkey to fill the vacuum. Add to that an expansionist ideology - a Turkish Islamism - and a potent new force in the region could quickly emerge. The one thing that can restrain this process is Russia. If Moscow forces Georgia to submit and brings its forces back to the Turkish border in Armenia, the Turks will have to reorient their policy back to one of blocking the Russians. But regardless of what level Russian power returns to over the next few years, the longer-term growth of Turkish power is inevitable - and something that must be considered carefully.