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## **TURKEY'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY: THE QUEST FOR REGIONAL HEGEMONY IN THE MIDDLE EAST?**

### **ABSTRACT**

The last decades saw Turkey evolving from its Cold War era model of foreign relations, when it was the bastion of the West in the region, which involved alliance with the US and Israel. Following the doctrine of Ahmed Davutoğlu, a theoretician of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP), which rose to power in 2002, Turkey opened to the neighbouring states, striving to become a regional power by diplomatic rather than military means and through cultural and economic incentives. Both the internal and international actions of AKP governments were initially successful, and Turkey with its version of Islamic democracy was considered a model during the Arab Spring and a sound counterbalance to such countries as Iran. However, Turkey's bid to join the EU was stalled, and its approach to the civil war in Syria as well as other issues has been heavily criticized both in the West and in the region. The internal tensions are growing too, as the government has failed to recognize the rights of large minority groups, particularly the Kurds and the Alevi, which may threaten the integrity of the country.

### **Key words**

strategic depth, zero-problem policy, Turkish diplomacy, Turkish minorities

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In exchange for European Union membership, Ankara accepted its role as a NATO bastion of the Cold War and more recently, as a pupil to be tutored by Brussels on democracy as well as human and minority rights. Debate on Turkey's alliance with the West is sharply polarized between those who see Turkey moving away from the West and toward a more Middle Eastern and Islamic orientation and those who see Ankara's improved ties with Iran and Russia as a natural progression toward balance and diversification – and a potential boon for Turkey's Western partners. Is Turkey striving to overcome the Cold War order and dependence on US foreign policy? Critics have seen these deepening divergences on regional issues as proof of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) distancing the nation from its traditional close allies, the US and Israel. By distancing itself from the West and the US in particular, Turkey attempts to enhance its appeal.

In its foreign policy, through economic relations, Turkey's soft power has entailed cooperation and diplomatic solutions to regional problems. Its appeal as a "model" or "source of inspiration" for political, social and economic progress in the Muslim world has contributed to serving US and Western interests. Turkish foreign policy based on "zero problems with neighbors" to achieve economic prosperity, while augmenting Turkey's influence and attraction to Islamic societies, has missed its impact, particularly in Syria. The designs of Turkish foreign policy were shaken by the Arab Spring. Turkey first gained international prominence as a role model attracting the approval of Arab protesters and their political representatives, but soon afterwards Turkey's image began to fade. Nowadays, Turkey is facing growing criticism as a Sunni force allegedly fueling sectarianism both in Syria and in Iraq. The re-emergence of sectarian violence in Syria and Iraq has coaxed Turkey and Iran into a renewed pattern of competition.

After the collapse of the USSR and the resulting political vacuum in Central Asia and the Caucasus, American political scientists forecast a "New Great Game" that would take place in the region between Iran and Turkey under the patronage of the US and Russia (Brzezinski, 1997, pp. 66–68). Former national security adviser Brzezinski concluded that the great power controlling Eurasia would rule the world (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 76). After the Cold War, successive US administrations envisioned that Turkey would assume a leading role as a sovereign regional power set to advance its secular, democratic, and Western-oriented system into the Greater Middle East to counterbalance the influence of

the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Arabic- and Turkic-speaking world. (Huntingdon, 1998, p. 162)

Besides the great power rivalry for influence between the US and Russia that occurs in Eurasia, Shiite Iran and NATO member Turkey also compete for regional hegemony. It was mainly the US that initiated a contest of systems in the region as Washington intends to counter the power vacuum and resulting instability which can lead to Tehran's success in spreading its brand of Islam (Boot, 2004). In this competition the US envisions Turkey's role as that of a countervailing power to the extremist influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran which is under US and EU sanctions in the republics of Central Asia and the autonomous regions of the Caucasus (Steinbach, 1992, p. 819).

Turkey wants to become a regional power using its soft power resources. Davutoğlu's strategic depth doctrine brings a multi-dimensional approach to foreign policy with mutually reinforcing and interlocking processes. To pursue its foreign policy, the AKP government employs diplomatic means and cultural and economic incentives rather than military means. US administrations have depicted Turkey as a "role model" in the Greater Middle East. In the view of the US, Turkey represents an Islamic nation with a West-oriented, stable and secular democracy that might contain the influence of Iran. The US perceived Turkey's ruling party, the AKP, as mildly Islamist and serving as a "role model" to other countries in the region.

In general, the Obama administration avoided Turkish-US misunderstandings, and the stalled negotiations with the EU facilitated the reconciliation. Nevertheless, the US does no longer look at the geo-strategic importance of Turkey alone, but has realized the advantages of Ankara's good neighbourly relations with the countries of the Middle East and the Caucasus, and demands Turkish-Armenian dialogue and democratic reforms in Turkey. Therefore, the United States insists on the acceptance of secular Turkey into the European Union so that Islamic radicalism will lose its attraction (Bumiller and Hauser, 2004, pp. 1,4): 'pushing for a Middle East that looks more like Turkey than Iran seems eminently more likely and desirable in the long run'(Walker, 2011).

## **1. The US-EU-Turkey Triangle**

A negative decision by the European Council in December 2004 regarding the start of EU accession talks with Turkey contradicted US geopolitical ambitions since Washington feared that the influential Islamic circles in the AKP could

use this occasion to pursue a renunciation of the Western alliance for alignment with the Western rivals of Russia and Iran (Barkey, 2004). The US maintains that Turkey's transition to liberal democracy will serve as a highly visible model for the Islamic world, enhancing the security of Europe. In turn, the Turkish army's contribution to European security beyond NATO structures seems indispensable in the wake of 9/11 (Janning, 2002, p. 167).

Proponents mainly argue for the inclusion of this Islamic country because of its political potential in a crisis-torn region of the world. With regard to the discussions on EU reforms, the question is raised whether the alignment to the US should not be given preference before EU integration. For its part, the United States has strongly backed Turkey's bid for European Union membership. As for Turkey gaining EU membership, Washington hopes for backing from "its ally in Ankara" and that Turkey would implicitly support US plans for the Middle East. To assume this role as "a bridge and a hub", Turkey would have to be rooted in the EU; therefore Americans have encouraged Turkish efforts to join the EU (Lesser, 2006).

The practice of the strategic depth doctrine brought about a major paradigm change in Turkish foreign policy since traditional Turkish foreign policy has always been pro-Western and estranged towards the Middle East. Through this doctrine, the perceived over-emphasis of Ankara's Western orientation should be mitigated. Davutoğlu portrays Turkey as a state that lies at the centre rather than at the periphery of diverse regions. He also points at the "soft power" attraction of "Turkish democracy", the ambition to follow a "zero problem policy" towards its neighbouring states, and the merits of "multi-dimensional diplomacy". By doing so, Ankara does not dissociate itself from its Western partners but places "a less exclusive emphasis" on Western alignment, which may result in weakening of its allegiance to Washington (Park, 2011).

Citing European reservations to expanding its borders into the volatile region, Brussels has opted to reject Turkey's membership. Rather than regarding Ankara's stance on Iran's nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a sign of a more independent "European" Turkey, many European conservatives have seen Turkey's new foreign policy as distressing proof of its creeping Islamization and distancing itself from the West.

Because the strained relations with the EU make membership impossible to achieve in the short term, Davutoğlu points out that a complex regional strategy towards the Middle East had to be introduced as a viable option for Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu emphasizes Turkey had to peacefully overcome the mutual distrust with its neighbours by developing economic and cultural ties.

He stressed that the risks in foreign relations with neighbouring countries had to be reduced to enlarge Turkey's room for diplomatic manoeuvre and that interdependent relations would create a positive atmosphere in Turkish foreign policy. Free movement of goods, capital and persons, and cultural exchange would facilitate understanding with the elites of the mainly authoritarian regimes in the region. The Turkish Foreign Minister concluded that if Turkey were to create new economic opportunities in its neighbourhood, this would promote its economic weight in its EU accession bid (Davutoğlu, 2011).

Turkey's engagement in the Middle East and Eurasia also generates increasing anxiety that the AKP may be forsaking its European commitment – a concern that reflects US apprehensiveness of “losing Turkey”. Given its already troubled partnership with the United States, Turkey's growing frustration with Europe is alarming. For the first time in its history, Turkey has serious problems with both the United States and the European Union at the same time.

## 2. The Bush administration, the Iraq War and Turkey

Ankara's parliamentary ruling to refuse passage of US troops through Turkish territory for the invasion of Iraq precipitated an alteration in bilateral relations with the US. The decisive factor was the Turkish official's apprehension that the invasion could cause destabilization and partitioning of Iraq. In addition, Ankara was rightly concerned with Iran's increasing influence. The Turkish leadership recognized another menace in the rise of Kurdish nationalism and its aspiration to independence and self-determination – a situation in which the territorial integrity of Turkey was called into question by its own Kurdish minority (Gwertzman & Larrabee, 2010).

In the Middle East, taking an anti-American line builds Turkish influence and opens doors across the region. (...) Turkey can hope to fill; anti-American and anti-Israel policies win friends and supporters for Turkey as it flexes its regional muscles. (Mead, 2010).

The US establishment was caught off guard by the new Turkish strategy in the Middle East that ran contrary to US policies. In particular, Turkey and Brazil's coordinated efforts to mitigate the American isolation of Iran and prevent further sanctions thwarted the US diplomacy's attempt to broker a consensus between the veto powers of the UN Security Council. For US diplomats, this appeared as a Turkish challenge to Washington to distinguish itself at the expense of American power and influence (Mead, 2010). Turkish officials seemingly concluded

that close cooperation with its neighbours offered Turkey the containment of US influence in the region, whereupon the anti-American stance opened new communication lines with the Organization of Islamic States. Hence, Turkey ostensibly encourages its neighbouring states such as Iran to introduce more democracy to prevent US interventions. (Örmeci, 2010)

Turkey may even now be more powerful in the Middle East than Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. This is all supremely ironic for a country long excluded from positions of power in NATO and which has had the door to the European Union slammed shut in recent years. (Burns, 2012)

Turkey's role as regional power in the Greater Middle East constitutes a reason for Turkish self-dependence with the identification of national interests in opposition to the US, NATO and the EU, but primarily for Turkey's neutrality in conflicts where its security is not immediately threatened. In these areas of conflict, Turkey directs its foreign policy towards the US, Europe and NATO ('Wandel', 2006). As for the rest, Erdogan points out that good relations with Russia and China will not substitute those with the EU, NATO or the US ('Erdogan', 2007).

Former US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates contended that the West risked losing Turkey. Mr. Gates accused the European Union of denying a Muslim nation accession to the EU, and causing Ankara to turn East. Former French President Sarkozy proposed "privileged partnership" while the US President advised the EU to take Turkey in (Champion & Spiegel, 2010). With the EU's suspension of Turkey's accession bid, the democratization process was put on hold. The AKP's Islamist past was what stopped the party from promoting Turkey's accession bid.

### **3. The US, Turkey and the Syrian Civil War**

The Russian proposal to put Syria's chemical weapons under UN control was caused by the US preparations to punish Assad by degrading his capability to deploy weapons of mass destruction against his own people. There is a strong US national security imperative to at least contain the conflict in Syria, ensure that the regime's chemical weapons do not fall into al Qaeda's hands and prevent the neighbourhood from being destabilized. Military strikes should aim to create conditions for peace negotiations. Its goals should include limiting the influence of Islamic extremists and creating conditions for peace negotiations.

The Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance is a constant threat to regional stability. The civil war has reignited sectarian tensions in fragile Iraq and Lebanon. Achieving US objectives in the Syrian civil war is an opportunity to pressure

Iran into making hard choices not only in Syria, but regarding its nuclear program as well. Erdogan seems to have convinced President Obama to be serious on military strikes as Iran knows the risks. Syria has become an arena for a confrontation between Arab Sunni states, Turkey and Iran, as well as between Russia and the West. (Cagaptay & Khanna 2013) The US support for the Syrian opposition will inevitably run counter to Tehran's interests, and force Assad to come to the negotiating table and Tehran to become more involved in Syria in order to rescue its staunch ally. This would harm Iran financially, militarily and politically. These costs would make the Ayatollahs reassess their aspirations to acquire a nuclear bomb.

The AKP administration demands that the US should use military strikes to shift the military balance of power in Syria against the Assad regime and its allies. Moderate opposition groups that the United States and Turkey support in Syria are in retreat. That is why Washington arms rebels to counterbalance the military aid of Iran and its client, Hezbollah, in the fight on Assad's side. Turkish officials perceive that this will cause a crucial opening for talks. Russia and China may recalculate and help lead Syria to a real peace process.

While the US stood on the sidelines when Saddam Hussein used poison gas against Kurds and Persians, 26 years later American decision-makers use all options on the table. There is a moral imperative to try to stop this onslaught against civilians. For Turkey's national security, Iran should not become a hostile regional hegemon in the Persian Gulf. For America's national security, an Iran hostile to the United States should not acquire the nuclear bomb; the US should maintain good relations with the region's pro-Western regimes, and for these to survive, sectarian strife should be contained.

The Turkish leadership recognizes another menace in the rise of Kurdish nationalism and in the pursuit of independence and self-determination which would put into question the territorial integrity of Turkey by its own Kurdish minority. That is why American support for the Kurds in Rojava brought about a change of strategy in Turkish foreign policy. The instability in Syria threatens Turkey's national security, pushing Ankara towards a collision course with the nationalist Kurds. However, Turkey could overcome its difficulties with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) through political, economic, and diplomatic means. From its perspective, Kurdish independence in Rojava should not stabilize, Kurdish nationalism should be contained and any endeavor of diplomatic recognition of Kurdistan as a state should be averted. From the elite theorist point of view, the AKP has propagated the hegemonic-unilateral conception of Turkish interests, which came to the benefit of the arms industry and disregarded the interests of

its own citizenry in peace with its neighbours. Hawks in the administration used the heat of the Syrian conflict to promote the particular interests of the army, the arms industry and their lobbyists, i.e. the military-industrial complex in the wake of the Syrian civil war in opposition to the interests of the Turkish people. In this context, the term *derin devlet* (deep state) is used in Turkey.

#### **4. How the AKP Administration Elevated the Sunni Turkish Majority**

The politics of ethnic leveraging can be illustrated in the Erdogan administration's dialogue with Alevi representatives and the stalled "Alevi opening". I conclude from the media that Alevi concerns were not raised in the workshops between officials and the representatives; that is why I want to adjust the electoral leveraging according to the issues now raised by Alevi representatives in the mainstream media such as CNN Türk. As the Alevi opening failed, I drew some conclusions which I thought relevant to the topic. In the end, I believe the critics of the unresolved Alevi opening state the reason why this opening was doomed to fail from the beginning.

Turkey has no Western understanding of minority rights despite its large minorities of Alevis and Kurds. The non-recognition of Alevis as a distinctive religious minority in the long run harms the inner stability of the country. The EU Commission asks for certain conditions that Ankara has difficulty satisfying. One of these terms affects the enhanced representation of the religious community of Alevis and the ethnic minority of Kurds in Turkish politics. Alevis and Kurds represent approximately one third of the total population; however, their religion and ethnicity are not recognized by the state. They raise the complaint that the 10-percent threshold in parliamentary elections prevents minority parties from gaining seats.

Moreover, Turkey cannot act as a pioneer of Islamic democracy without recognizing that extreme force, deportations, and ethnic cleansing have built the Turkish Republic. Denying past crimes against humanity not only thwarts democratization but also reconciliation between the ethnic and religious communities. By admitting the mass murder of Armenians and the atrocities against Kurds and Alevis, Turkey may play the role in the field of human rights that she aspires to.

Since the end of the military dictatorship more than thirty years have passed – albeit the process of democratization in Turkey has still not been completed.

For many, the 1982 constitution remains a strict framework. The legislative aim would be to replace the 1982 constitution by a new, civil and democratic constitution. The basic rights, minority rights and cultural rights were denied by the 1982 charter which did not guarantee the protection of civil rights but rather created a structure for their constraint. The Turkish constitution was not enacted to protect the rights and liberties of the citizens but rather to defend the repressive state against its subjects, whom the military legislators in their Hobbesian thinking mistrusted and feared. Consequently, people's rights and freedoms were restricted as far as possible. Can the AKP lead the change or will its Islamist past prevent it from introducing a new and democratic constitution guaranteeing civil rights and liberties to its religious and ethnic minorities? Nevertheless, the military inaction in Kobane and the culture wars between the Gulenists and the AKP have strained relations between Ankara and Brussels.

Initially, the AKP leader introduced on September 30, 2013 a new reform package, the so-called "Democracy Package". Western media focused on the lifting of the headscarf ban in public institutions and for state employees. With regard to minority and religious rights, the reforms failed to convince the affected parties. No concessions were made to Alevis concerning their demands for legal recognition of their religious sites and spiritual leaders. Alevi students are still forced to attend classes on Sunni religion. In addition, neither the European Commission nor the ethnic and religious minorities were convinced by the AKP's long-awaited proclamation. The reforms suffered a setback by the Islamists' rejection of greater participatory rights for the minorities in Turkish politics. In the end, the codification of the so-called "Alevi opening" was not even mentioned by Erdoğan, which does not augur well for the anticipated new Turkish constitution. As a result, Turkey again faces hard power threats from the PKK, Iran, and Syria simultaneously, while struggling to reassess its relationship with the Free Syrian Army as the conflict intensifies. As Turkey aims for influence in Syria and Iraq, Ankara must make peace with its Kurdish minority. If autonomy is the way to resolve the Kurdish question in Iraq and Syria, in Turkey the path to conflict resolution is more federalism. To overcome obstacles in its domestic politics and foreign policy, the Islamic-conservative government must proceed with the project of democratization and encourage its neighbours to follow the path to peace, stability and prosperity.

The EU accession bid has stimulated Turkey's political and legal reforms and intensified the democratization process. However, the accession talks are overshadowed by the Kurdish question which illuminates the divergences in the bilateral relations considering Ankara's maturity and its ability to accede. At the

same time, there is still an active nationalist current in Turkey which considers international organizations from a critical perspective and has from time to time determined Turkish foreign policy: in reference to the Sèvres syndrome, their adherents rate international organizations as a squandering of Turkish resources, as institutions that are often hostile to national interests and therefore as obstacles to a foreign policy oriented towards Turkey's national self-interests, as the international criticisms of Turkey's handling of the Kurdish question and the Alevi issue have amply illustrated.

The non-recognition of Kurds as a distinctive ethnicity harms in the long run the inner stability of the country and those of its neighbouring states Iran, Iraq and Syria, which also have large Kurdish minorities. It is up to the government in Ankara to create the political and economic premises for a lasting agreement with the Kurds. The war on terror requires in the first instance a political solution and not a military one. The AKP should ensure human rights, democracy and the rule of law in its EU accession bid. A negotiated solution to the Kurdish problem could be a reform of the Turkish constitution authorizing the creation of an administrative autonomy in the Kurdish region (bilingual education, local finance) that would be far off from dividing the territorial integrity of Turkey and would rather consolidate the state – defeating both the increasing Turkish nationalism and Kurdish militancy.

## Conclusion

Since the AKP came to power in 2002, Ankara has adopted a more consensus-seeking and engaged diplomatic approach, particularly towards its Middle Eastern neighbourhood and the wider Islamic world, in contrast to the Kemalist Republic's regional isolationism and indifference towards its own Islamic heritage (Larrabee, 2007). Even though this search for alternatives may cause Washington to long for the past amicable relationship with Turkey, the new foreign policy will in all likelihood better serve US interests in regional stability. In this case, Turkey would form "an anchor of stability" in the crisis region of the Middle East (Fuller 2008, p. 180).

Turkey knows that the region's primary actor is the US and that Turkey should devote particular energy to the coordination of its Middle Eastern policy in line with that of the US. Although US involvement in the Middle East also entails risks for Turkey, at the same time, Turkey benefits from the US military presence in adjacent regions. According to Allan Lynch, the main "geopolitical interest"

of the US does not consist in the expansion of “liberal democracy” in the Middle East, ‘but rather [in preventing] any local power from assuming a hegemony that could be hostile to America’s economic and security interest in the region’. He believes ‘that there will be ample opportunity for the US to exercise the role of regional balancer in the years ahead’ (Lynch, 2011).

Washington has treated with caution the idea of Turkey as an independent actor in its neighbourhood, appreciating the value of Turkey’s foreign policy activism, but expressing concern about Ankara’s distancing from the US on matters such as Israel and Iran. However, overall Washington views Turkey as a critical ally and acknowledges the importance of the EU anchor to consolidate Turkey’s belonging to the West. Embedded in the geostrategic discourse is the American idea of the EU as an extension of Western security architecture. (Barkey, 2003).

To conclude, we may say that the ambitious Turkish foreign policy from “the Adriatic to the Chinese Wall” met with resistance from the Arab Spring and faced worsening of relations with Armenia. The Cyprus issue still causes a major obstacle to Turkey’s EU accession bid. Of great concern for American legislators remains the reconciliation between Ankara and Yerevan; the Turkish-Armenian dialogue came to an abrupt end as the national parliaments of both countries refused to ratify the peace agreement mediated by the US and Russia. With regard to the Syrian refugees, the AKP is dependent on humanitarian assistance from its allies. Without the installation of Patriot missiles from its Western partners, Turkey could not protect its own territory from Syrian rockets. On the whole, Ankara has had to refashion its foreign policy to the new political realities it faces in the region.

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