

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE AKP ERA: HAS THERE BEEN A SHIFT IN THE AXIS?

Considered to be merely reactionary at the beginning of the past century, Turkish foreign policy has undergone an important transformation in the past decade, making Turkey an influential actor in regional as well as world politics. As a result of this transformation initiated by the AKP government, observers have noticed a shift in Turkey's foreign policy from the West to the East. However, as this article will try to demonstrate, neither is the West an alternative to the East, nor is the East an alternative to the West.

Laura Batalla Adam*



* Laura Batalla Adam is a Turkey Analyst and Policy Advisor to a Member of the European Parliament.

Turkish foreign policy has undergone an important transformation in the past decade. Considered to be merely reactionary in the 20th century, Turkish foreign policy has become more influential in recent years.

Despite this change, the main principles of Turkish foreign policy have remained intact since the founding of the modern Republic of Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. Two principles originating from Atatürk continue to guide Turkish foreign policy today. The first being the consecution and maintenance of peace in its region and in the world –illustrated by Atatürk’s celebrated statement; “Peace at home, peace in the world”– and second, the Westernization as an ideal of Kemalist modernization. These principles continue to be valid today.

World events in the late-20th century transformed and shaped today’s Turkish foreign policy. During the post-Cold War era, Turkey progressively abandoned the passive neutrality that dominated its foreign policy in order to adopt a more proactive stance with an aim of becoming a regional actor. During this period, Turkey’s domestic preferences also played a significant role in defining Turkish foreign policy goals and principles.

Today, Turkey has become an active and visible player in world politics. The key of Turkey’s success in foreign policy lies in its ability to take full advantage of unique opportunities and deal with specific threats posed by its strategic location at the intersection of Europe, Asia and Africa, and its historic and cultural ties with the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Thus, some observers argue that EU accession seems less important in today’s Turkish foreign policy.

Is Turkey actually moving away from Europe? Partly, yes. Indeed, the lack of progress in Turkey’s accession negotiations with the EU is one of the reasons why Ankara started to look for new ways to increase its influence in the international arena. Nonetheless, the EU accession process remains a key objective of Turkish foreign policy in the sense that it stimulates the political reforms, which are still needed in Turkey.

The other reason believed to have drifted Turkey apart from Europe is in fact Ankara’s ability to adapt its vision to contemporary world politics. In response to an international restructuring, Turkey has adopted a multidimensional foreign policy. Especially during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era,

the emphasis on Turkey's global role has become considerably more pronounced. Ahmet Davutoğlu, even before being appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, was considered to be the architect of AKP's foreign policy. "Strategic depth" and "rhythmic diplomacy" are two key concepts in this regard. The former takes its name from Davutoğlu's masterpiece *Stratejik Derinlik* and calls for an active engagement with all regional systems in Turkey's neighborhood, namely the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.¹ Based on Turkey's geostrategic position, size, and history, Davutoğlu suggests that Turkey should act as a central state to all of these regions and become a global actor in the future. The latter responds to the need to adapt to a rapidly changing international agenda by anticipating new challenges and being prepared to act accordingly.

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In order to achieve these objectives, Ankara is conducting a twofold foreign policy. First, Turkey is increasingly relying on multilateralism in order to pursue key national and international interests, thereby taking a more active role in international relations. Second, Turkey is opening up to new areas where Turkish contacts have been rather limited in the past. A good example of both policies are the opening of 15 new embassies in sub-Saharan Africa with an aim to improve the political, commercial, and cultural interaction with these African countries, as well as to secure Turkey's membership in several African organizations.

For the 100th anniversary of the Republic, Ankara has set itself ambitious goals. As recently pointed out by Davutoğlu, Turkey aims to achieve all membership conditions for the EU and become an influential member state of the Union by 2023. At the same time, Turkey will strive to increase its influence in the Middle East in the form of security and economic cooperation, seek to play an influential role as a mediator in regional conflict resolution, participate in global politics, play a determining role in international organizations, and become one of the ten largest economies in the world.

¹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, [Strategic Depth] (Istanbul; Küre Yayınları, 2001).

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To achieve these goals, the deadlock in EU-Turkey relations will need to be overcome and Ankara will need to adapt to the fundamental changes taking place in its immediate vicinity. In the latter case, the ongoing crisis in Syria has demonstrated some of the limits of Turkish foreign policy, and how fragile regional alliances can be in this part of the world.

Turkey’s EU Bid: Is There Still Hope or are Efforts in Vain?

Turkey has been knocking on Europe’s door for more than 50 years and EU accession has always been a strategic choice for Ankara. However, signs of frustration and exasperation are becoming increasingly overt on the Turkish side. Ankara considers EU membership to be a natural outcome of centuries-long relations with European countries, whereas Europe tends to disregard its intertwined relations with Turkey in many aspects, ranging from political, security, economic, cultural, as well as historical ties.

EU-Turkey relations have been in deadlock for a considerably long time. Since the beginning of membership negotiations in 2005, only 13 chapters of the 35 have been opened, with merely one provisionally closed (Science and Research). 18 chapters are subject to political veto by Cyprus, France, and the European Council as a whole. Following the December 2006 summit decisions, the European Council decided to block eight chapters, all relating to the customs union, due to Turkey’s failure to fulfill its obligation of implementing the Association Agreement to all member states, notably Cyprus. For its part, Ankara refuses to open its ports and airports to traffic from the Republic of Cyprus unless the EU lifts the economic isolation to Turkish Cypriots. Moreover, the European Council decided to agree on a solution to the “Cyprus Problem” as a precondition for the provisional closure of all chapters, whereas the same precondition was not made for the entry of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU back in 2004.

The remaining three chapters –competition policy, social policy, and employment– are believed to entail difficult technical opening benchmarks. That is especially the case for the chapter on competition policy, which is usually left until the very end of the negotiation process because it is both challenging and very costly.

One thing is clear; until there is no move on the Cyprus issue, there will be no advancement in the EU membership negotiation process. Turkey faces a trade-off in its foreign policy when it comes to this issue. What is more important for Ankara: protecting the northern part of Cyprus, or the countries' potential membership to the EU? On the contrary, the current *status quo* benefits Greek Cypriots as they are already members of the EU and considered to be the sole representatives of the island.

As Turkey's membership depends on resolving the "Cyprus Problem", Turkey is expected to make a greater effort to promote a solution to the conflict. However, talks are likely to remain frozen until Cyprus' EU presidency term ends –as the Turkish government has decided not to have contact with the current Council presidency– and the (Greek) Cypriot presidential elections will be held in spring 2013.

On the other hand, if political blockages would be lifted, the opening of negotiations on several chapters could be possible in the short term. In light of François Hollande's victory over Nicolas Sarkozy in the last French presidential election, it is hoped that during the Irish presidency of the EU (in the first part of 2013), Paris will lift its veto on a number of chapters. Similarly, the results of the German federal elections planned for 2013 could also open a new era in Turkish-German relations.

Some positive developments are underway. In late 2011, 11 Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the EU countries² expressed their support for Turkey's EU accession in a letter entitled "The EU and Turkey: Steering a Safer Path through the Storms."³ In the letter, the ministers welcomed Ankara's readiness to pursue democratic reforms in order to align its legislation with the EU *acquis* and highlighted the strategic importance of its accession both for the EU and Turkey, at a particularly crucial time for Europe.

On 17 May 2012, the "New Positive Agenda" was launched in Ankara by Štefan Füle, Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy, and Egemen Bağış, Turkey's Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator, with an aim to

2 Audronis Ažubalis, Carl Bildt, Edgars Rinkēvičs, Erkki Tuomioja, Guido Westerwelle, Giulio Terzi, János Martonyi, Karel Schwarzenberg, Samuel Žbogar, Urmars Paet, and William Hague are the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, Sweden, Latvia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, and the UK.

3 "The EU and Turkey: Steering a Safer Path Through the Storms," *EUobserver*, 11 December 2011, <http://euobserver.com/opinion/114473>

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keep the accession process alive and put it properly back on track after a period of stagnation. The agenda includes setting up working groups whose task will be to accelerate Turkey’s process of alignment with the EU legislation in eight chapters. One of the areas where progress has been made is the long-awaited lifting of visa requirements for Turkish citizens, conditional upon whether Turkey successfully implements the obligations that stem from the “Readmission Agreement” for illegal immigrants entering the EU from Turkey. However, the process

risks taking longer than expected if some member states, which are traditionally opposed to giving Turkey a visa-free regime, attempt to delay it.

The conclusions of the Commission’s “2012 Progress Report” on Turkey are not very encouraging either. The report stresses the growing concern regarding both for Turkey’s lack of substantial progress towards fully meeting the political criteria, and the situation regarding the respect for fundamental rights.

In his long address at the AKP fourth congress on 30 September 2012, in which he was elected for a final term as the party leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not mention the EU, despite a small reference in the prepared text of his speech. Critics have raised concern over the apparent decline of the EU on Erdoğan’s agenda and his vision of a new Turkey. Commenting on Erdoğan’s speech, Egemen Bağış stated “[Erdoğan] mentioned our commitment to the [new] constitution and relayed his message on reforms. It is obvious that this commitment will have a positive impact on the process of EU integration. (...) Therefore, Europe’s leaders who lack foresight should read into the prime minister’s speech carefully.”⁴

Turkey’s accession to the EU has been a long journey marked with misperceptions, misunderstandings, prejudices, and misleading expectations. Turkish officials often claim that the EU maintains double standards against Turkey and

⁴ “AK Party drops EU Goal from Long-Term Foreign Policy Outlook,” *Sunday’s Zaman*, 1 October 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-293961-ak-party-drops-eu-goal-from-long-term-foreign-policy-outlook.html>

criticize the excessive slowness of the negotiations. In addition, public support for membership in Turkey has declined dramatically in recent years. In contrast to the situation in Europe, the increasingly important role played by Turkey on the global stage, along with its remarkable economic performance, has somewhat overinflated the country's self-confidence. For this reason, many Turks believe that their country is better off staying outside the Union. However, Turkey still needs to continue its reform path in line with the EU. In this context, raising public awareness to the importance of relations with Brussels is more important than ever. Turkey's accession can lead to a win-win situation for the two parties are increasingly interdependent in a growing number of issues.

Turkey's Expanding Soft Power in the Middle East and its Limitations

In recent years the AKP government has pursued a more active policy towards the Middle East. Davutoğlu's foreign policy motto "zero problems with neighbors" was conceived to remove all sources of tension within Turkey's immediate vicinity. Until very recently, this policy proved to be an effective instrument for normalizing relations with some of the countries in the region.

However, the Arab uprisings –which also caught Ankara by surprise– have complicated Turkey's approach to the Middle East. Nevertheless, Turkey has been supportive of the transformation process in the region, wishing it would result in the establishment of relatively democratic regimes, which would eventually lead to greater peace and stability.

Besides seeking stability in the region, Turkey has actively pursued to expand its regional influence. To this end, Turkey has increasingly relied on new tools of soft power such as trade, economic integration, and conflict resolution. The use of soft power to promote Turkish interests in the region is a direct result of Turkey's democratization process and recent economic growth. These are the indicators of the Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy, as the EU frequently uses its soft power as a foreign policy tool.

The intensification of bilateral relations with the countries in the Middle East has led to a substantial increase in trade and investment. In recent years, Turkey has significantly developed foreign trade with neighboring countries by adopting a number of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). Currently, Turkey has concluded FTAs with seven countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA),

namely Israel, Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. An additional FTA signed with Lebanon is currently in ratification process, and Ankara has recently started FTA negotiations with Libya and Algeria. In a clear effort to increase trade, Turkey has liberalized its visa policy towards the MENA region in recent years. The citizens of Iran, Libya, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Syria now enjoy visa-free entry into Turkey.

As Europe's economy has contracted, Turkey's economy has expanded to nearby markets. Despite the upheavals in the region, Turkey's trade with Arab countries has continued to increase. Data provided by the Ministry of Economy indicates that Turkey's volume of bilateral trade with Middle Eastern countries reached 49 billion dollars by the end of 2011, reflecting a fourfold increase compared to the year 2003.

To mention just one example, regardless of the recent political tension between the two countries, Turkey has become Iraq's biggest trading partner. In 2009, Turkey and Iraq signed a number of Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) in different fields in order to enhance bilateral economic and trade relations. According to Turkish government statistics, Turkish trade with Iraq has climbed from 2.8 billion dollars in 2007, to 8.3 billion dollars in 2011.

Turkey has also made use of its soft power to enhance security in the region by trying to facilitate international dialogue with Iran, and help establish stability in Iraq. Turkey is firmly against the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, as Ankara believes this would lead to tension and destabilization in the region, thereby resulting in repercussions beyond the Middle East. However, contrary to its Western allies –namely the United States and the EU– Turkey has adopted a more cautious stance, arguing that the capacity of Iran's nuclear program is uncertain. Turkey's loyalty to the West has been questioned after having voted against sanctions in the United Nations Security Council. Nevertheless, Ankara continues to look for a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear program.

With regard to Iraq, the Turkish government adopted a constructive mediation and engagement role between all Iraqi parties involved in the reconstruction. However, relations between Turkey and Baghdad have sharply deteriorated in recent years. In 2009, Turkey officially recognized the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil after a long boycott period. Ankara's positive shift toward Erbil is mainly related to the economic opportunities of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI)

in light of its oil and gas resources. Ankara and Erbil have become particularly close in developing KRI's resources and exporting them to Europe via Turkey, fulfilling Turkey's ambitions of becoming a trans-regional energy hub. Nonetheless, the evolution of Turkey's position can also be found in the change in AKP's approach towards Turkey's own Kurdish population, having made a greater emphasis on their rights and freedoms.⁵

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The increasing rapprochement between Erbil and Ankara is closely monitored by Baghdad. The participation of Iraqi Kurdish leaders in AKP's congress is believed to have further deteriorated the relations with Baghdad, as the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, and most of the officials from the central government declined the invitation. Moreover, Baghdad accuses Turkey of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs after Ankara's refusal to extradite Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, who was sentenced to death *in absentia* by an Iraqi court in September 2012. Furthermore, the agreements signed between Ankara and Erbil on oil and gas are another source of tension as Baghdad claims that it is the sole authority to be dealt with.

On the other hand, the Syria crisis has also put Turkey's ambitious “zero problems with neighbors” principle to the test. Turkey's stance on Syria has changed over time. At the start, Turkey stood against intervention as a matter of principle. However, following Ankara's unsuccessful attempt to induce Syria to introduce democratic reforms and elections by means of intensified bilateral engagement with President Bashar al-Assad's regime, Turkey changed its stance. At the same time, international efforts have also proven to be in vain. As Assad's regime escalated its attacks on the people of Syria, Turkey gradually abandoned its policy of engagement and gave its full support to the Syrian opposition.

In view of the deadlock in the UN Security Council over the Syria issue, Turkey is unlikely to intervene unilaterally. At the same time, Ankara cannot maintain this *status quo* any longer. The way in which Turkey manages the outcome of the

⁵ Matthew J. Bryza, “Turkey's Dramatic Shift toward Iraqi Kurdistan: Politics before Peace Pipelines,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.11, No.2 (Summer 2012), p. 57, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/809/turkeys-dramatic-shift-toward-iraqi-kurdistan-politics-before-peace-pipelines-summer-2012/>

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Syria crisis may determine its future position in the region. For its part, the international community must pursue a more resolute course of action or it may risk allowing the crisis to spread across the region.

In order to deal with traditionally difficult neighbors, Turkey has made use of different soft power tools with an aim to bring stability and make the region more interdependent, inspired by the ideals pursued by the founding fathers of the EU. However, recent developments have revealed that the realization of the renowned “zero problems with neighbors” principle might be unlikely in the short term.

Concluding Remarks

Turkey’s foreign policy has always been Western-oriented. However, given the unlikelihood of gaining full EU membership, the AKP government has started to see membership from a further distance. Ankara contends that the EU has lost its credibility through the negotiation process as accession in the near future does not seem feasible. This is not because of Turkey’s domestic developments, but instead due to a wide set of unresolved and politically sensitive issues inherent to the EU, of which the “Cyprus Problem” is the most significant.

The uncertainties surrounding the accession process have led Turkey to look for new *venues* to increase its power. In this regard, AKP has developed a new vision of Turkish foreign policy in general and in particular towards the Middle East. However, the EU should remain at the center-stage of Turkey’s foreign policy efforts in order to ensure the continuation of Turkey’s democratization.

For Turkey, neither is the West an alternative to the East, nor is the East an alternative to the West. Hence, Ankara should simultaneously look to the East and the West in its search for its identity and its place in the world stage.