

## **Reflections on Turkish Foreign Policy under Davutoglu: From Status Quo to a “New” Grand Strategy?**

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**Bulent Gokay<sup>81</sup>**

The basic principles that guided Turkey’s foreign policy since the founding of the Republic in 1923 were caution and pragmatism. The lessons emerged from the way the Ottoman Empire ended at the end of the First World War convinced the leaders of young Turkish Republic to be cautious – they believed that there was very little to gain and much to lose from entering into the unfriendly and unpredictable conflicts in Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood. For most of the period until the last 10- 15 years Turkish foreign policy was almost always cautious, and merely reactionary to the events happening within its close neighbourhood, and from the end of the Second World War onwards strictly followed the lead of the US and NATO.

In the past decade, however, Turkish foreign policy appeared to have undergone an important transformation putting Turkey in the map of nations as a relatively more influential actor. In this recent change towards a more active, even pro-active, foreign policy most of the credit has been given to Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey Foreign Minister from 2009 to last month, and currently Tayyip Erdogan’s chosen Prime Minister. Davutoglu had previously served as Chief Advisor to both the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister ever since the AKP came to power in 2002, and was considered the architect of Turkey’s new foreign policy activism. A policy, which popularly came to be known as “zero problems with neighbours”, has been the centrepiece of Davutoglu’s so-called new foreign policy agenda. This policy was welcomed widely in the region. Accordingly, Ankara first developed relations with the Syrian government to the level of a strategic partnership. Also closer economic and political ties with Iran and Russia were being cultivated. Davutoglu’s long-term aim was explained, in his masterpiece *Strategic Depth*, as making Turkey a central

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<sup>81</sup> • Bulent Gokay is Professor of International Relations and Head of School of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy, at Keele University.

player in world politics, within a stable regional atmosphere and a pluralist international order. Strategic Depth calls for an active engagement with all regional systems in Turkey's neighbourhood, the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Based on Turkey's geostrategic position, its size and history, Davutoglu argues that Turkey should act as a "central state" in all these regions and become a global actor as a result. His formulation of principles and mechanisms of foreign policy provided him with recognition as a man of vision in shaping Turkey's foreign affairs.

Even though Davutoglu managed to pronounce the new more active foreign policy and sharply increased confidence in foreign affairs more explicitly and analytically in detail, probably because of his academic background, the change in Turkey's foreign relations had started long before Davutoglu appeared in the picture, even before the AKP government's initial electoral success in 2002. Indeed, building regional influences of the type to which Davutoglu aspires is a long process that takes place gradually and incrementally over decades, and obviously not just as an immediate result of Davutoglu's so-called new vision, and hyperactive diplomacy. One can identify certain building blocks put in place under Turgut Ozal leadership from 1983 to 1993, and also under Ismail Cem's long career as the country's Foreign Minister from 1992 to 2002. But more than anything else, all this new activism and increased confidence could only be possible within a significantly changed regional and global environment.

The end of the 1980s not only witnessed the end of the Cold War, but also the early indications of a global shift in the power positions in the world, with very significant long-term consequences, happened around the same time. In the words of Joseph Nye, "wealth and power" started to be "shifting from the West to the rising economies of the East". In a world of complex interdependence, this power shift has hugely significant consequences, even though it is still too early to clearly identify all these.<sup>(1)</sup> In political economy terms, this is a shift from a unipolar dollar-based system to a multipolar system. This was explained in 2010 in the pages of Foreign Affairs in the following words: "The dramatic growth of Brazil, China, and India – and the emergence of middle-tier economies such as Indonesia and Turkey – is transforming the geopolitical landscape and testing the institutional foundation of the post-World War II liberal order." <sup>(2)</sup>

All this shows us that there are more models and roads to development than the model represented by the post-Second World War Western system. The success of the so-called BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries and the MIKT countries (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey) shows that the West is now declining and that the world is changing rapidly. It is no longer up to a handful of countries in the northern hemisphere to decide what the world looks like. (3) The emerging countries are, however, by no means an undifferentiated mass. There are huge differences between them and these differences shape not only the pace of their progress, but also the way they locate themselves in the global map regarding recent conflicts.

Turkey's economic growth has been extraordinary during the last 10 years by historic standards. As Europe's, and US's, economy contracted Turkey's economy has expanded to nearby markets. So, it was this increased economic strength which made a more active and dynamic foreign policy possible. The significant trade and investment linkages characterised Turkey's foreign relations with all neighbouring countries, which enabled Turkey to deploy its soft power resources much more effectively.

Therefore, it should be recalled that the course of Turkish foreign policy followed the growth of Turkey's economy and its increasing role and space in the world economic map. The way the policymakers responded to this also started long before Ahmet Davutoglu. First with Turgut Ozal and continued with Ismail Cem. Even under the AKP regime, it was first Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gul, two dominant leaders after 2002, who share some responsibility for steering Turkey into new waters of more active foreign policy and diplomacy.

Probably the turning point in Turkey's foreign affairs came in 2003 when the Turkish Parliament refused to allow the US to use Turkish territory to stage an invasion of Iraq. In retrospect, this opting out of the invasion of Iraq came to constitute a transformation moment for Turkey. With that decision Turkey demonstrated to its neighbours and the world, and even to itself, that Turkey could and would think and act for itself when it comes to foreign policy, and that the hierarchical alliances of the Cold War period were over, and that the US should no longer take Turkey's collaboration for granted. Yet, the significance of

this step shouldn't be exaggerated; it shouldn't be interpreted as a complete u-turn toward Islam and away from the Western security arrangements. Even during the Iraq War, Turkish government allowed the Incirlik Air Base to be used by American combat aircraft for bombing missions.

During the initial years of the AKP government, there were some success in achieving the position of a significant regional power contributing to peace and stability in the region. Turkey encouraged peace talks between Syria and Israel. Turkey also played or attempted to play a constructive role as a peacemaker in the Balkans and the Caucasus, bringing Bosnia and Serbia together and taking some steps towards normalising relations with Armenia. In a more ambitious way, Turkey collaborated with Brazil, as late as May 2010, to persuade Iran to accept an arrangement for the storage of a large portion of Iran's enriched uranium in Turkey, thus providing a practical, peaceful and more sensible alternative to the sanctions and warmongering of the US/ Israeli positing against Iran. Even with Israel, Turkish leadership did its best to restore normalcy to the Turkish-Israeli relations.

But then Turkey lost its way, first in Libya and then in Syria. Erdogan and Davutoglu initially opposed UN sanctions on Qaddafi regime and rejected calls for NATO operations. They eventually approved the NATO operations, with some reservations, and called for Qaddafi's resignation. The Libyan fiasco, however, was short-lived even if no less traumatic for the Libyan people. The situation in Syria proved much more complicated and difficult for Ankara to handle. Soon Turkey's Syria policy has become an unmitigated disaster, and Davutoglu's nicely drafted analysis turned into a mess: strategic depth turned into a great strategic mess.

When Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan quite aggressively took sides with the opposition forces against the Assad government, Turkish authorities provided the so-called rebels in Syria an unchecked and poorly overseen support base in Turkey. It provided space for the mobilisation of armed men crossing the border to kill Syrian soldiers and civilians, and backed the establishment of the Free Syrian Army and the so-called Syrian National Council. In this way, Turkey has effectively become a side in the bloody civil war in Syria. As long as the rebels can count on the unconditional support of Ankara, as well as Saudi Arabia and

Qatar, they could keep fighting a war that has become increasingly more brutal. In reality the gap between so-called moderate Syrian opposition and Islamist extremism is much more limited than presented by Turkey's policy makers. (4) As a whole, the Syrian crisis has exposed weaknesses in Davutoglu's, and Erdogan's, initial claims of presenting Turkey as a significant regional power for peace and stability. So-called new turn in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East simply corresponded to joining a Sunni axis together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia as opposed to the Shiite bloc led by Iran.

Just over two years ago, Ahmet Davutoglu had famously declared that Esad was about to fall in a matter of weeks. More than 100 weeks passed, Esad did more than just holding his ground and even gained the upper hand in the civil war. And now we have the so called Islamic State on Turkey's borders. In Syria, Turkey has become a prisoner of its enmity towards the Assad regime. Turkey is one of the countries with primary responsibility for the existence, growth and spread of the IS. Radical Islamic fighters have been used as proxy forces against Bashar al Assad's regime. The Turkish state now faces a Frankenstein's monster, as the growth of IS in Syria and Iraq is increasingly seen by the Turkish state as a potential threat to its internal stability. Within such a charged situation, an atmosphere of looming unrest predominates. While a return to open armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army still remains unlikely at this stage, as none of the parties would gain from such a course, events can take on logic of their own. All this is putting, once again, the credibility of the regime's, in particular Davutoglu's, foreign policy under serious strain. In a situation of increasing desperation and fears on the ground, repeated calls for the West and Turkey to 'intervene' militarily are understandable, but the supposed 'humanitarian' motivation of the West to intervene militarily in the region is just not convincing. It is, of course, true that IS is a deeply reactionary force. The US-led military strikes launched on IS targets, however, rather than assisting the Kurdish population under the threat of IS have only made matters worse. In fact, more than anything else it was the US-led interventions of the last 20 years that provoked current sectarian fighting both in Iraq and Syria.

"Since March 2003, when 'we supported' the Iraqis in overthrowing Saddam Hussein, 140,768 Iraqi civilians have lost their lives in bombings and shootings. ... As for this year, 7,665 civilians have been killed since January, 617 of them killed in Falluja by government

forces. They are the victims of our support. Direct victims, killed by our military, or indirect, killed by the insurgency and the terrorism that followed the invasion and occupation of Iraq, as well as the ‘democratic elections’ also held with our support. More recently, direct victims of Iraqi government forces.”(5) The most likely future is a prolonged civil war, in both Iraq and Syria, for the foreseeable future, thanks to “our support”.

**To conclude** this brief overview of the foreign policy of the last 12 years under the AKP, first point one can observe is that there are too many contradictions to claim that there is a clear new direction. In other words, a simple doctrine such as Davutoglu’s strategic depth cannot describe the direction of Turkish foreign policy as the policies put forward in practice do not point out a clear new direction even though the official propaganda makes this claim. Many Turkish initiatives have been less well-prepared, suggesting a top heavy approach rather than serious and realistic planning. A second point to mention is that there has been a clear continuity in the foreign policy, at least since 1983, rather than a strong new direction under Davutoglu as claimed by many pro-AKP sources. Finally, the general direction of Turkey’s foreign policy has changed very little in this period. It has been Western-oriented and closely linked to the US interests in the region, as it always has been since the end of the Second World War.

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**NOTES:**

1. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=1893>
2. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66793/stewart-patrick/irresponsible-stakeholders>
3. <http://www.albertoforchielli.com/2013/04/03/after-the-brics-is-now-time-for-the-mikt/>
4. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19124810>; <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-cia-operatives-training-syrian-rebels-secret-bases-jordan-turkey-latimes-1318563>;  
<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/07/27/us-syria-crisis-centre-idUSBRE86QoJM20120727>;  
<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-training-syrian-rebels-at-secret-bases/>
5. Lily Hamourtziadou, “The Casualties of Support”, Iraq Body Count (IBC), 16 June 2014, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/casualties-of-support/>