

Transforming Turkish Foreign Policy: The Quest for Regional Leadership and Europeanisation

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Turkish foreign policy is changing under the AKP government, and particularly under the current Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, an international relations scholar keenly aware of Turkey's central position in the midst of Afro-Eurasia. Davutoğlu's foreign policy line, which parallels his academic writings, is founded on three main pillars: maintaining 'zero problem' relations with the neighbours, pursuing a proactive and multilateral foreign policy in Turkey's wider neighbourhood and utilising the Ottoman heritage as a foreign policy asset. The major goal is to transform Turkey into a strong regional, even global actor through the exercise of soft power. But to what extent is this really happening? Under what conditions might it occur? And how does it fit in with Turkey's EU accession process?

Turkish foreign policy today is undoubtedly far more proactive and multi-dimensional than at any time in the history of the republic. Turkey presents itself as a mediating power in the region, intent on developing relations with all actors to promote peace and regional integration. Turkey played a crucial role in the period from 2002 to 2004 in Cyprus leading up to the Annan Plan, despite considerable opposition from status-quo forces in the country. Since 2006, Ankara has been mediating between Israel and Syria, taking forward negotiations from where former President Clinton left off in 2000. In view of its open political channels to Hamas, Turkey mediated in ending Israel's military offensive in Gaza in December 2008-January 2009. It also attempted to mediate between Lebanon's domestic factions, between Syria and Iraq regarding Iraqi accusations of Syrian meddling in the bombings in Baghdad's Green Zone in August 2009, as well as between the US and Iran in the autumn of 2009. Furthermore, the continued withdrawal of US troops from Iraq has changed Turkey's regional dynamics and allowed Ankara new room for manoeuvre; room that it has seized upon by promoting a Kurdish and regional initiative. The cooperation pacts signed in 2008 with Syria and Iraq allow the free movement of goods and people between the three countries and are even expected to include Iran at some point in the future. Finally, under the principle of 'zero problem' relations with its neighbours, Turkey has signed two protocols with a view to normalising relations with Armenia.

This foreign policy line might be considered an asset in Turkey's prospects of EU membership. The current EU discourse of constructing Europe as a 'global actor' necessitates a strong EU presence in the wider neighbourhood. A Turkey that can use its soft power resources effectively could help to remedy the weakness of the EU's influence in these regions. Furthermore, it could help prevent the region's sources of instability from spilling over into the EU. In many respects, Turkey may be viewed as 'doing

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the European Neighbourhood Policy' for the EU. Nevertheless, this contribution is dependent on three conditions.

First, in order for Turkey's foreign policy to be effective it needs to be consistent. Denouncing Israeli policies in Gaza while warmly welcoming the Sudanese President al-Bashir, who faces indictment for war crimes at the International Criminal Court opens Turkey up to accusations of double standards. Signing protocols with Armenia while making their parliamentary ratification dependent on the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is another instance of inconsistency. As is using the word 'genocide' for the Uighur minority in Xinjiang while banning its use in relation to Armenia.

Second, and related to this, is the question of the drivers underpinning Turkey's foreign policy. For its foreign policy to be effective, Turkey must be seen as acting in the name of universal values and not of ethnic/religious affinities. In the Middle East, there has been an underlying shift in the interest configuration shaping Turkish-Israeli relations. Whereas in the past the relationship had been shaped by two opposing forces – the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Arab-Turkish tension – in so far as the second of the two conflicts is on the wane, Turkish-Israeli relations will inevitably become more conditional on Israel's conduct in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The potential of this conditionality – which neither the EU nor the US is able to implement – is high. Yet it would be squandered if Turkey were to be seen as acting purely according to a 'Muslim' world view. In this respect and to the current government's credit, it is notable that Turkish-Israeli relations were good in 2007-08 when Israel was negotiating with Syria and held a ceasefire with Hamas. Relations have soured since Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, however. That said, Turkey risks going over the top with exaggerated scenes in state-broadcast TV series depicting Israel's deliberate targeting of Palestinian children. While it is healthy for Turkey's relations with Israel to be dictated by 'tough love' it is equally important for Turkey not to fall into the opposing camp, in what may be read as an identity-driven clash that Turkey is supposedly attempting to transcend.

Third and most important, the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy must be an integral part of Turkey's ongoing democratisation, which in turn interacts with Turkey's EU accession process. Some have argued that the shift in Turkey's foreign policy illustrates how the country is moving away from the European Union. Indeed, the EU is no longer a prominent issue on the political or public agenda, and recent measures such as the appointment of a minister (Egemen Bağış) as chief negotiator have not yet led to a decisive acceleration in Turkey's EU-related reforms. Yet the transformation of Turkish foreign policy is not only compatible with Turkey's relations with the West, as many Turkish commentators and the government strive to point out. Most significantly, Turkey's EU accession process and its 'multi-dimensional foreign policy' operate at different yet inter-connected levels, whereby the accession process creates the necessary domestic conditions for an effective multi-dimensional foreign policy to succeed. In other words, in order to develop a credible, effective, consistent and normative foreign policy, Turkey's domestic commitment to the EU should remain firm. Rather than being blinded by ambitions of 'grandeur', Turkey should realise that its 'value added' in the neighbourhood largely hinges on its ongoing domestic transformation, which in turn is highly dependent on its EU accession process. The EU, of course, cannot and is not the sole driver of reform. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep the EU accession process alive as a counter to authoritarian tendencies that flourish in the region, both to the east and to the south. Recent government measures, such as the curtailment of the freedom of press and the lack of any significant democratic reform since 2005 (with the exception of the recently launched 'democratic opening', which is yet to deliver any comprehensive strategy) suggest that this anchor is still urgently needed.

As for the European Union, now that the controversy over the Lisbon Treaty is over, it should become more aware that the world around it is changing and that its influence in its neighbourhood has decreased over the last decade. Whereas Turkey needs the EU for its own domestic and foreign policy project to succeed, the EU needs Turkey in order to meet the numerous regional foreign policy challenges in economic, political and energy-environmental realms. This should open the space for a much-needed 'rational' debate on Turkey, a debate that accounts for both the complex interplay between identity and institutional, political, economic and social interests, but above all a debate that confronts these questions in an open and outward-looking manner. Mixed signals from the Union have for a while had a negative impact on Turkey's domestic transformation. Relations need to resume, both for the democratic future of Turkey and for the EU's chances of becoming an effective global power in the 21st century.