

The New Turkey: A Rival to the West in the Near East?

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KUBILAY YADO ARIN, JUN 5 2014

Debate on Turkey in the West is sharply divided between those who see Turkey moving away from the West and toward a more Oriental and Islamic orientation, and those who see Ankara's improved ties with Iran as a natural progression toward balance and diversification – and a potential boon for the US. American neoconservatives have seen these deepening divergences on regional issues as proof by Turkey's ruling party, AKP, of distancing the nation from its traditional close allies, the US and Israel. The article examines the question whether the new Turkish foreign policy leads to a challenge to US interests in the Near East.

The Ottoman Empire was a committed regional power – actually, the hegemon – in the Near East [1]. After the First World War, the Near East was mainly beyond reach for Turkish foreign policy. With the foundation of the Republic, Turkey practically left the Near East to its fate, which constituted a historic exception. Apart from a short interlude in the 1950s with the Baghdad Pact, Turkish diplomacy portrayed wariness and reservation from profound participation in oriental issues. For the Turkish leadership, support for Western plans in the Near East was ultimately interwoven with the approval of Turkey's "Western" nature by its Western allies.

Kemalism considered the Near East as a menacing and hostile environment from which Turkey has to be shielded. In fact, over the Cold War, Turkey was assessed as mostly marginal to the political issues in Europe, the Near East, the Caucasus, or the Balkans (Park 2011). Ahmet Davutoğlu portends that Turkey had neglected its national interests while trying to preserve the status quo. For a long time, Ankara stayed inactive on regional issues, and thus became estranged both from the region's culture and from its economies (Davutoğlu 2011, 73). In its region, Turkey rejected to discontinue diplomatic ties with Israel, although they remained "at a low level" to avert Arab suspicion.

In his book *Strategic Depth*, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu indicated the negative sides of the Israeli-Turkish alliance. Despite its five-centuries-long history in the Middle East, Turkey gave the impression of aligning its strategies with Israel [2], a country that was merely in existence for fifty years. While Turkey was turning its back on the Near East, it had to face the economic impacts of the allocation of resources and power in the region. What made things worse was that Ankara had grown apart culturally from its neighboring states and their ruling elites, and thus was not able to exert influence on their policies. Instead of enhancing its prestigious history, Turkey became a representative of the western world powers and, therefore, was increasingly alienated from the region (Davutoğlu 2011, 57).

An outline on Turkish foreign policy remains incomplete by confining itself to the neighboring states. One of the primary objectives of Turkey depicts its EU accession bid. 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 the EU reforms, the question is raised whether the alignment to the USA should not be given preference before the EU integration. The United States has, for its part, strongly backed Turkey's bid for European Union (EU) membership. As EU member, Washington hopes for the backing from "its ally in Ankara"; Turkey would implicitly support US plans for the Near East. For assuming the positive part of "a bridge and a hub", Turkey had to be rooted in the EU, therefore Americans encouraged Turkish efforts to join the EU (Lesser 2006).

Anyhow, not all foreign policy priorities of Turkey coincide with Western policies: toward the national movement of the Kurds, Ankara does all in its power to prevent the creation of an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq, which

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led to a direct cooperation with Iran and Syria. At the same time, Turkey is concerned with the possible intensification of the confrontation between Iran and the West, since Turkey's economic and security interests would be harmed. The US invasion in Iraq in 2003 has proven to Turkey that Washington can be both a menace and a partner; the war in Iraq and danger to Turkey's territorial integrity from northern Iraq formed a main component of deteriorating US-Turkish relations. This disenchantment with the US, accompanied with the stalled EU accession process, resulted in the Turkish perception as if Ankara was attempting to "westernize despite the West" (Terzi 2010, 122).

As an Islamic country, Turkey is portrayed as a bearer of hope by some Western politicians, serving as a model for democratization in the Near East. On its part, Turkey tries to promote the dialogue between Islamic and Western societies, but repudiates against the characterization as a model for a moderate Islamic state. For the secular establishment, the US, in particular, has an unreasonable attachment for the AKP administration and – falsely, in Kemalist opinion – trusts to spread "moderate Islamism" as a "model" that may be embraced by other Islamic countries. These critics contended "that the Americans failed to see the true nature of the Islamist threat" (Gordon and Ömer Taşpınar 2008, 35).

With a view to US-Turkish relations after the Cold War, the article explores the notion of neo-Ottomanism and the strategic depth doctrine in Turkish foreign policy. Does Turkey strive to overcome the Cold War order and the dependence on US foreign policy? Is the West "losing" Turkey? A crucial factor here has been the determination by some neoconservatives to present Turkey's independent foreign policy as directed against US interests. Therefrom, I discuss the relations between Turkey and the European Union. I conclude why the West is not "losing" Turkey.

US-Turkish Relations

After 9/11, the US counted on Turkey to be a reliable ally in the war on terror, to support US war efforts in Iraq, and to proceed to be a permanent embodiment of secularism. But American anticipations failed. The decisive factor was the Turkish concern that the invasion could spark the destabilization and the division of Iraq. The Turkish leadership recognized a 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. Furthermore, Ankara was rightly afraid of the increasing Iranian influence. The parliamentary ruling in Ankara hindering US troops to cross Turkish territory for the Iraq invasion might have led to a turn in the bilateral relations with the USA. The American invasion in Iraq undermined and thwarted Ankara's strategic freedom of action (Gwertzman and F. Stephen Larrabee 2010).

For Ankara, the regionalization of the Kurdish issue after the Gulf War stood out as the most burning issue. Its regionalization caused controversial outcomes for all neighbors. The creation of the state of Kurdistan in Northern Iraq brought Turkey, Iran, and Syria together in search of countermeasures. The Iraq invasion converted the Kurdish question and anxiety about the "territorial integrity" of Iraq into a matter of alignment between Turkey, Iran, and Syria. A lot of critics in the West, especially in America, were worried about Turkey's perceived move away from the partnership. Some of them accused the AKP of Islamization in foreign policy, which would effect "privileged relations with Turkey for Near Eastern countries, most notably Iran" (Özel 2008). Others maintained that the American political elite had to recognize that the roots of anti-Americanism in Turkey lay in the US military inaction against the PKK in Northern Iraq.

In general, the incoming Obama administration avoided Turkish-US misunderstandings, and the stalled negotiations with EU facilitated the reconciliation: anyhow, the US does not solely view any longer "the geo-strategic importance of Turkey", but has realized the advantages of Ankara's "good neighborly relations" with the countries of the Near East and the Caucasus, demanding "Turkish-Armenian dialogue" and democratic reforms in Turkey.

Neo-Ottomanism

The reordering of the Near East, and a nouveau constellation of power in the Persian Gulf and the Caucasus, indubitably effectuate for Turkey new "strategic" openings. The relative steadiness of its "politics" and the example of its economic boom laid the "geopolitical" foundations for the implementation of neo-Ottomanism in foreign policy. The

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assumption for the new thinking in foreign policy was the belief that Ankara's "interests" were no more in harmony with those of its main partners. Although Ahmet Davutoğlu rejects the notion of neo-Ottomanism for his foreign policy, his idea, resting on the strategy of erstwhile President Turgut Özal, tries to build a broad consent in the nation on "its multiple identities".

As Özal proposed an innovative perception of "neo-Ottomanism" in the 1980s, Davutoğlu added to this vision a preeminent conception of Turkey as "soft-power". Davutoğlu scorched past Turkish administration for repelling close relations with its neighboring states. In lieu of the classic cognition of menace from nearly the entire surroundings, he outlined a "policy of zero problems" which would permit Turkey to take advantage of "its geo-strategic location and historical ties" with the neighborhood.

In this regard, the AKP has brought forward a high-level diplomacy with the elites and populace of its region, underlying the significance of the close connection "between security and democracy" in the search of Turkish foreign policy for its own diplomatic alternative to the policies of the US and the EU. The AKP leaders have been accentuating Turkey's Muslim features and its Ottoman legacy. In the range of foreign policy, neo-Ottomanism is not directed against the West, but its advocates hold that Turkey constitutes "a bridge" to former Ottoman lands in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.

Neo-Ottomanism does not mean a return to imperialism, its promoters claim. Besides the Ottoman "political and cultural tolerance", these argue that "the economic ties with the nations of the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East" will be deepened (Terzi 2010, 34). Zero problems with neighbors is mostly confined to the Muslim states in the region and is trying to conceal the "Middle Easternization of the foreign policy agenda" instead of improving relations with the entire neighborhood, most notably Armenia and Cyprus (Ibid., 94).

Davutoğlu blames past Turkish foreign policy for imbalanced links to the West while disregarding Turkish interests in other nations, in particular in the Islamic World. The "neo-Ottoman" concept intends to expand foreign relations with the neighborhood to add to the relations with Western allies, not substitute them. According to adherents, this new recollection of the Ottoman heritage does not emanate from "Islamization", but rather from counteracting adverse effects of Kemalists' over-emphasis on Turkey's Western belonging. In opposition, the majority of "Turkey's secular elite" considers the vision of neo-Ottomanism a cloak "for an Islamist agenda" that would marginalize the army as custodian of "secularism" (Gordon and Taşpınar 2008, 51).

For his distance to US designs for the Near East, North Africa, and Central Asia, and a push away from a US-oriented foreign policy, some American opinion-makers have denounced Davutoğlu as "being anti-American". The practice of the strategic depth doctrine brings about a major paradigm change in Turkish foreign policy, since the traditional foreign policy has always been pro-Western and estranged towards the Near East. Through this doctrine, the perceived over-emphasis of Ankara's western orientation should be mitigated. The Foreign Minister boasts 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 neighboring states, and the merits of "multi-dimensional diplomacy". In doing so, Ankara does not dissociate itself from its Western partners, but it puts "a less exclusive emphasis" on Western alignment which may result in a weakening of its allegiance to Washington (Park 2011).

The Strategic Depth Doctrine

Since the EU accession recedes into the distance, Turkish officials implement the strategic depth doctrine, which may not dare Turkey's Western affiliation, but when rebuffed by Europe implies "a Middle Eastern engagement" instead of integration into the West. This doctrine and its planned soft-power appeal to the region are intimately interwoven with Turkey's "EU prospect". Alternatively, the AKP leaders will emphasize the "Middle Eastern/ Muslim identity" of Turkey and apply "hard power" when confronted "with a security threat" (Teri 2010, 134). In this context, Davutoğlu gives weight to the use of hard power when a threat to Turkey's strategic interests requires its preparedness to act (Davutoğlu 2011, 149). Turkey's relations with the Near East were mainly aimed to realize "defense or short-term diplomatic needs", while the Turkish governments kept the region at bay. On the contrary,

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Davutoğlu asserts that Turkey must diverge from its outdated “threat assessment approach” whereby the Islamic world has been conceived to endanger the politics and culture of secular Turkey. He highlights Ankara’s involvement in the Islamic world for becoming “a regional force” (Ibid. 43-44).

As proponents of a broad and independent foreign policy for Turkey, the AKP leaders point out their desire to create “good relations” with the Muslim world and to abandon isolating and radicalizing them. The AKP expresses its wish to take “a leadership role” in its neighborhood without ending the relations with Western allies. Under the AKP, Turkey essayed to mediate between Iran and the US. Thus, Turkish policy towards the Middle East conflict has been altered under the Erdoğan government. While he has shown an affinity to the Palestinian cause, Erdoğan has vigorously condemned Israeli occupation of Palestine. In Turkish eyes, America’s solid backing of Israeli policies assiduously complicates the solution of the “Palestinian problem” and infuriates the Arab street against the US – damaging “Turkish interest”.

In its foreign policy, the AKP offered to play the intermediary in the unresolved conflicts of the region, especially those that affected Israel. When Israel installed “a siege on Gaza” in 2007, the Turkish administration demanded its raise and renewed dialogue with Hamas. The Turks believed that creating peace would introduce “political stability” and that “economic integration” would safeguard the process of reconciliation. The “reconciliation” between Hamas and the PLO could enhance Turkey’s mediation efforts and its standing with the Arab public.

After the deadly Israeli attack on the Gaza flotilla with humanitarian aid from Turkey, Ankara ended military and intelligence cooperation with Israel. Meanwhile, the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu made an apology for the raid on the Mavi Marmara and offered to pay damages to the victims of the Mavi Marmara. A Turkish court issued arrest warrants for the Israeli top-brass hold responsible for this raid.

Turkey a role model in the Near East?

Turkish officials, especially the military, have been uncomfortable with US attempts to portray Turkey as a model for Muslim countries in the Near East. The military and the secular political establishment fear that such emphasis on Turkey’s connection to the Middle East could weaken Turkey’s Western identity and strengthen the role of Islam in Turkish society. It was a disturbing point that the US defined Turkey as a moderate Islamic country, since it contradicted Turkey’s secular identity. This move by the US was also seen as the support of the US administration provided to the new AKP government and its potential policy of further (moderate) Islamization of Turkish society.

Differences between Washington and Ankara have emerged over the issue of democracy promotion in the Near East. Turkey’s policy towards Iran and Iraq has been to preserve the status quo. The US policy of regime change and pre-emptive intervention had challenged Turkey’s traditional approach towards the Near East. Ankara takes the line that a US military option towards the Iranian nuclear program will cause regional destabilization and harm “Turkish interests”. The role as regional power in the Near East constitutes a reason for Turkish self-dependence at the identification of national interests in opposition to the USA, NATO, and the EU, but primarily for Turkey’s neutrality in conflicts where its security is not immediately threatened.

Many of the US neoconservatives who had been most bitter at Turkey’s March 2003 “failure” to support US military planning were inclined to accuse the ruling AKP of “Islamization” or even “Islamofascism” (*Washington Times* 2006). As relations with Washington deteriorated, the neoconservative press in the US launched a series of articles asking “who lost Turkey?”. It blamed Turkey and the AKP for anti-American emotionalism. Americans criticized the EU, ascribing Turkey’s perceived ‘loss’ to the East, not least to the stalled negotiations with the EU. Turkey need not to be ‘lost’ to the West, but it will be unless there are coordinated efforts from the United States, the EU, and mainly Turkey itself.

Turkey and the EU, a rapprochement in foreign policy?

Each setback in Turkish-European relations would push Ankara in the US camp, while each EU-centered foreign policy initiative would harm Turkish-US relations, forcing Turkish leaders to recalibrate their relations with both

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camps, Davutoğlu brings forth. The field of foreign policy, he asserts, constitutes one of the main areas of the EU integration; that is why Turkey must attune its positions to the EU's regional policies by developing a common strategy referring to past close relations of Europe with Syria and Iran (Davutoğlu 2011).

Turkey has seen that if chaos and instability in the Near East continues, this would diminish Turkey's chances of acceding to the Union, since the EU does not wish to border conflicting regions. So Turkey has attributed a greater importance to the emergence of a stable environment in the Near East. It reflects the growing recognition on the part of the Turkish leadership that stability on the country's eastern border requires Turkey's active engagement with its Near Eastern neighbors and deeper participation in regional peace efforts.

The Iraq invasion enabled Turkey's mounting cooperation and aimed accommodation with its Near Eastern neighbors, yet Turkish policies, especially with regard to Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Iran, were independent from the United States. Citing European reservation on expanding its borders to the volatile region, Brussels would opt to reject Turkey's membership. Rather than regarding Ankara's stance on Iran's nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the sign of a more independent "European" Turkey, many European conservatives have seen in Turkey's new foreign policy the distressing proof of its creeping Islamization and distancing from the West.

Because of the strained relations with the EU that make membership in the short-term impossible, Davutoğlu points out that a complex regional strategy to the Near East had to be introduced as a viable option for Turkish foreign policy. Turkey had to overcome peacefully the mutual distrust with its neighbors by developing economic and cultural ties, Davutoğlu emphasizes. The risks in foreign relations with the neighborhood had to be reduced to enlarge Turkey's diplomatic room for maneuver. Interdependent relations would create a positive atmosphere in Turkish foreign policy. Free movement of goods, capital, and persons, and cultural exchange would facilitate the 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 neighborhood, this would promote its economic weight in its EU accession bid (Davutoğlu 2011).

Turkey's engagement in the Near 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 the United States and the European Union at the same time.

Washington fears that the influential Islamic circles in Turkey's ruling party, AKP, might pursue a renunciation of the western alliance for an alignment with western rivals Russia and Iran. Ankara has increasingly developed new strategic openings to the Muslim world, Eurasia, Russia, and China that offer alternative political and economic options to the country. Not surprisingly, Prime Minister Erdoğan has recently declared his government's willingness to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Russia, China, and the Central Asian countries, instead of the EU.

The rapprochement between Turkey and Russia has been facilitated by increasing trade among them and Turkey's receptiveness for Russian interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In fact, on several issues concerning "Central Asian and Caspian security", Ankara consents to Moscow, not to Washington. For instance, Ankara withheld support for Bush's democracy promotion in Russia's backyard. Like Moscow, Ankara apprehended that the US push for democratization might unsettle the authoritarian regimes and cause rising turmoil and "political unrest" in the region.

Turkey joined in the growing global opposition to US hegemony. Davutoğlu underlines that Turkey's role as a pivotal ally of the US and Israel had damaged its image and reduced its influence in the Arab world (Davutoğlu 2011). To gain credibility and access in the Middle East, Turkey abandoned the role as US proxy; it did not want to be seen as an instrument of US policy and power any longer. For instance, the refusal to participate in the Iraq war immensely produced Near Eastern interest and respect for Turkey. It also opened serious new dialogue between Turkey and the Islamic world, which felt angry over the use of US military power.

Conclusion

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Since the AKP came to power in 2002, Ankara has adopted a more consensus-seeking and engaged diplomatic approach, particularly towards its Middle Eastern neighborhood and the wider Islamic world, in contrast to the Kemalist Republic's regional isolationism and indifference towards its own Islamic heritage. The AKP government will probably continue to reorient itself to an increasing independent foreign policy that stresses good neighbor relations and substantive engagement in the Near East and Eurasia. 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, serve US interest in regional stability. In this instance, Turkey would form "an anchor of stability" in the crisis region of the Near East. Turkey knows that the primary actor in the region is the US and that Turkey should devote particular energy to the coordination of its Middle Eastern policy with that of the US, especially in matters concerning the Kurdish question in Iraq. Although US involvement in the Near East also entails risks for Turkey, on balance, Turkey benefits from the US military presence in adjacent regions. To attain the status of world power, Davutoğlu notes that each nation must imperatively gain hegemony over the Near East (Davutoğlu 2011).

Washington has treated with caution the idea of Turkey as an independent actor in its neighborhood, 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, on the whole, it views Turkey as a critical ally and the importance of the EU anchor to embed and consolidate Turkey's belonging to the West. By distancing itself from the West and the USA, in particular, Turkey attempts to enhance its appeal. In its foreign policy, Turkey's soft power, through economic relations, entails 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 contributes to serving US and Western interests.

The Turkish foreign policy based on "zero problems with neighbors" to achieve economic prosperity, while augmenting Turkey's influence and attraction in the Islamic societies, missed its impact, particularly in Syria. The designs of Turkish foreign policy were taken aback by the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring made Ankara change its regional policies, altering its reaction to the protesters several times. While, in Egypt, Turkey asked Mubarak to step down, Ankara first disapproved of the humanitarian intervention of NATO in Libya and then joined ranks with its allies. Similarly, in Syria, Turkey vainly tried to convince Assad to parley with the Syrian opposition, when the ongoing civil war coerced Erdoğan to switch sides and join the anti-Assad camp in 2011. The Arab Spring changed everything. Turkey first gained international prominence as a role model, attracting the approval of the Arab protesters and their political representatives, but soon afterwards Turkey's image began to fade.

In the context of the Syrian civil war, 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. Ankara and Teheran have openly backed opposing camps in the Syrian civil war. Turkey's decision to support the rebels did not necessarily stem from sectarian sentiment, but it has been widely interpreted as such by its opponents. Similarly, Turkey backs the Sunni Arabs and Kurds in Iraq against the Shiite Maliki government in Baghdad. Turkey has answered Iran's challenge for regional hegemony by building influence in the northern parts of both Iraq and Syria. This new constellation makes for a more contentious relation with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. On the other hand, Turkey has forged close ties with Sunni regimes, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, to oust Assad and counterbalance Iran. This Sunni axis is coming to embody the sectarian polarization of the Near East; Sunni-Shiite rivalry is shaping the region again.

Nonetheless, Turkey's relations to the Arab monarchies have been hurt due to Ankara's support for ousted President Morsi in Egypt and his Muslim Brotherhood. This has led to a growing sense of isolation from its Muslim neighbors and has caused Ankara to reorient its foreign policy to the United States and the European Union. Ankara has once again turned to the west, seemingly considering Washington and Brussels as indispensable allies in containing Iran's regional influence and protecting itself from the instability in Iraq and Syria. Thus, the regional landscape of the post-Arab Spring has upended many of Turkey's regional ambitions.

In the meantime, the AKP has carried out a reversal in its foreign policy. In this change, its policies were brought into line with US positions on Iran and Syria. Consequently, Turkey decided to participate in "NATO's twenty-first missile defense project". The moderate Islamists seem to have realized the strategic assets of close ties to the US and

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“access to NATO technology” as an Islamic power in the Near East. Guaranteeing security in a region in uproar was the reason behind Ankara’s foreign policy turnaround. On the whole, Ankara had to refashion its foreign policy to the new political realities in the region. Nonetheless, the recent Turkish announcement that it would procure a missile-defense system from a Chinese company under US sanctions for its dealings with Iran has been a particularly surprising blow to Turkey’s NATO allies. Last but not least, the corruption probe in Turkey highlights the divergences in the bilateral relationship between the US and Turkey.

Notes

[1] In this article, the term Near East is used instead of the broader term Middle East to describe the immediate neighborhood of Turkey, whereas the Middle East encompasses the Arabian Peninsula and comprises the zone from North Africa to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

[2] Prior to the peace talks, Davutoğlu alleges that “the Jewish leaders committed arbitrary ethnic cleansing in Palestine” (Davutoğlu 2011, 376).

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