

# The Post-Davutoglu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy

Written by Bezen Balamir Coşkun

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BEZEN BALAMIR COŞKUN, JUN 3 2016

Between 2002 and 2016, seven Justice and Development Party governments were formed in Turkey and the 8th one got approval of Parliament on 27 May 2016. Among all other policy areas, foreign policy has become one of the primary areas that one can observe significant changes in Turkish politics during the JDP's rule. Since 2003, we have witnessed Ankara's attempts to elevate from being a peripheral actor to a central actor in international politics. Until his resignation on 5 May 2016, as chief foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister; as minister of foreign affairs and as prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu was considered as the architect of *new Turkey's* foreign policy. In spite of the different opinions about Davutoglu's eminence in foreign policy decision making and the success of strategic depth doctrine, his name was identified with Turkish foreign policy for the last decade. Even a rich scholarly literature discussing Davutoglu's foreign policy has developed in Turkey and abroad. Given the fact that Davutoğlu played a central role in Turkey's foreign policy orientation for more than a decade, the question of the future of Turkey's foreign policy direction remains as one of the puzzles that foreign policy analysts expected to predict. In this regard, the possible scenarios for the future of Turkey's foreign policy after the rift between Erdogan and Davutoğlu will be discussed in this article.

Throughout the last decade, the JDP government's foreign policy was guided by Ahmet Davutoglu's strategic depth doctrine. In his book entitled *Strategic Depth* (2001) he proposes a new geo-strategy for Turkish policy makers. The main thesis of Davutoğlu is that Turkey possesses strategic depth due to its history and geographic position. Thanks to the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey owns great geographical depth, which places Turkey at the centre of many geopolitical areas of influence. Accordingly Turkey should exercise influence in all these regions to be considered as one of the central powers. The strategic depth doctrine was calling for an active engagement with all regional systems in Turkey's neighbourhood. Hence, Davutoglu's policy was developed to underline Turkey's need to rediscover its historic and geographic identity and to reassess its own position regarding regional and global issues. Within this context Davutoğlu put particular emphasis on the principle of zero problem with neighbours. According to Davutoglu, to become a regional leader and play a global strategic role, Turkey primarily needs to establish friendly relations with all its neighbours. In this regard, between 2007 and 2009 Turkey concentrated in resolving problems with its neighbours.

Strategic depth vision of Ahmet Davutoğlu had changed the course Turkey's foreign policy for the last 12 years' of the JDP rule. The strategic depth doctrine had become the main ideational guide. The most striking implication of strategic depth doctrine for Ankara's foreign policy was the JDP governments' greater identification with former Ottoman space including Africa. Besides emphasizing on Turkey's role in the Muslim world, JDP governments attempted to reach beyond the historical areas of influence and developed close relations with all rising global powers such as China, India, Russia and Brazil. The heydays of Turkish foreign policy were between 2007 – 2010 when Turkey was the star of the Middle East as a reflection of Ankara's zero problem approach, and application of soft power as well as the EU and US' admiration of Turkey as a model democratic Muslim country.

The war in Syria was a litmus test for Davutoğlu's foreign policy doctrine. Because of a series of miscalculations about Arab uprisings and of the problematic Syria policy, Turkey lost its appeal in the international community and the period of precious loneliness has begun. Turkey sidelined from regional affairs and had lost its leverage in the region. Turkey's relations with both its neighbours and most of its strategic partners turned sour. Arab uprisings were a substantial crisis for the role that Turkey had assumed in the Middle East as a regional soft power. The regional

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instability and turmoil together with the outflow of millions of people from Syria left the Turkish ruling elite at a crossroad. There are many foreign policy challenges new government of Turkey has to face immediately: ongoing tensions with Russia, security threats originating from the Syrian civil war, the international community's insistent support of the Assad regime in Syria, continuous flows of refugees, terrorist attacks of ISIL and PKK, the USA's open support of the PYD in Northern Syria and ups and downs with other regional actors. As Suha Bolukbasi stated in his short analysis of Turkish foreign policy for E-IR, Ankara is changing horses. Would changing horses cause the change of pathways too? Now the question we need to ask is how would the replacement of Davutoğlu and his cadres in foreign policy decision making mechanisms affect the future of Turkish foreign policy. The contentious issues that caused the rift between President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu won't be repeated here. Instead possible scenarios about the future of Turkish foreign policy will be discussed.

As the mission of the newly formed government is to lead necessary constitutional changes for the introduction of presidential regime, it is expected that the 65th government's foreign policy actions would complement the domestic project of system change. Hence, in the new government's program, foreign policy is presented as a means for making Turkey a more powerful country. A detailed reading of the program shows that the 65th Government's Program is not very different from previous government programs by PM Davutoğlu, except for a few changes in wording about making Turkey a more powerful and respectful state in international system and bolder statements about Turkey's fight with terror. In the 65th government program, Davutoğlu's conceptual repertoire of foreign policy remains untouched. Concepts identified with Davutoğlu's strategic depth doctrine such as basin of peace, active foreign policy, and coherent relations with global powers, active involvement on the global scale, multi dimensional-multi layered foreign policy, soft power, economic interdependency and historical legacy can be found in new government's program. Moreover, geographically prominent areas of interest that were defined by strategic depth concept find their place in new government's program: the Middle East and North Africa with particular mentions of Libya, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Palestine and the Gulf states; the Balkans; South Caucasus and Central Asia, and Africa. Davutoğlu's economic interdependency, importance of trade in foreign affairs and soft power approach has also found its place in the new government's program. Within this context, conjuncture issues such as economic relations with post-embargo Iran and Turkey's position towards the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and sectoral partnership with ASEAN were included in the program. To sum it up, foreign policy discourse in new JDP government's program repeats Davutoglu's foreign policy vision. Even the stated target of being an EU member by 2023 has been one of Davutoglu's foreign policy vision statements since 2010.

Not just the foreign policy discourse of the 65th government but also President Erdogan's rhetoric and actions point out a continuation in Turkish foreign policy orientation. Foreign policy will likely become an arena for President Erdogan to gain more popularity both in Turkey and abroad. As foreign policy is considered as a means for regime's popularity, President Erdogan is likely to concentrate on a foreign policy path that has already proved to be successful in satisfying JDP's constituency. In this regard, first destination of President Erdogan's overseas trip after the resignation of Davutoğlu is East Africa where no stigma of failure is attached. Just after the conclusion of the 1st Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Erdogan's trip to Africa is understandable. However, this is exactly what a strategic depth repertoire dictates. In *Strategic Depth* Davutoğlu views Africa as the most ignored continental extension of Turkish geo-strategy. According to Davutoğlu a state is deemed powerful only if this state has economic, cultural and diplomatic activities with other regional systems too.<sup>[1]</sup> Hence, Turkey's growing involvement in continent Africa has always become a crucial part of strategic depth vision.

As the most recent grandiose ceremony to commemorate the 563rd anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul illustrates both President Erdogan and Ahmet Davutoğlu share similar passions for the glorious Ottoman past. While Davutoğlu's scholarly interest led him to formulate Turkey's foreign policy with the vision of influencing former Ottoman space, President Erdogan is constructing a new identity for Turkey. Hence, the romanticised attributes to Ottoman past become the main sources of the identity of *new Turkey*. Given the primacy of Ottoman past in President Erdogan's rhetoric, strategic depth is likely to keep its place at Turkey's foreign policy making even after Davutoğlu's resignation.

It could be argued that Turkey's failed policy towards the Arab Spring, Russia and Syria was a consequence of Davutoğlu's bad governance of foreign policy, thus it was fair to replace him. Yet he is a decent international

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relations scholar with a conceptual framework to model Turkish foreign policy based on the country's geo-strategic and historical strengths. As a result, replacing him and his cadres won't end the strategic depth legacy of Davutoğlu. To sum up, in the short run international community won't see any radical shift at Turkey's present foreign policy orientation. However, Ankara has to take all rational decisions to reclaim Turkey's constructive role in the Middle East. Mending ties with Iran and Russia and contributing the mediation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be primary tasks for post-Davutoğlu era. The real challenge for new Turkish foreign policy makers lies elsewhere. Ankara has to prove itself as a crucial partner in the resolution of the civil war in Syria.

## Notes

[1] Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001, 206-208

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## About the author:

**Bezen Balamir Coşkun** received her PhD in International Relations from Loughborough University, UK. She is currently an Associate Professor of International Relations at Gediz University. Her areas of specialisation are theories of international relations, security studies and security and foreign policy. Recently, she has published several articles and book chapters discussing migration from a human security perspective.