

## TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY – CURRENT CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES

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**Abstract:** The foreign policy of Turkey experienced a tremendous change with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party in the government. Together with gradual stabilization of his power since 2002, Turkey moved from its EU aspirations towards isolation and from the cautious and passive foreign policy making towards risky decisions and adventurous actions aimed as a tool of domestic politics. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the foreign policy of Turkey in the broad context while arguing that the search and creation of a new paradigm is currently a basic challenge for Ankara.

**Keywords:** Turkey, foreign policy, AKP, EU, paradigm

### INTRODUCTION

The current foreign policy of Ankara is a subject of unprecedented considerations among Turkey's traditional partners, and questions about its future trajectory and eventual strategic choices remain opened. Together with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in power one can indicate tremendous shifts and recalibration of long-established alliances, especially with the Western world in general and partners such as the United States and the European Union in particular. One can also observe an evolution of Turkish foreign policy since 2002 with a slight but constant reverse from its traditional paths, established by the Kemalist and post-Kemalist political elite of the 1980s, to new and often adventurous actions in various regions.

The "Strategic Depth" paradigm shaped Turkish foreign policy in the Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) era basically since 2009. This brave conception was to strengthen Turkey's international position and was an emanation of country's "regional power" aspirations. At the same time, it

reoriented Turkey towards such regions as the Middle East while Turkish aspirations towards EU membership started to have a secondary role.

The final failure of this paradigm resulted in Turkey's isolation in foreign policy and overlapped with the worst ever relations with the European Union and the United States. Thus, this paper aims at indicating political implications of this situation for the future of Turkey's foreign policy. It also analyzes the context of Turkish domestic politics linked with the sole rule of Erdoğan and its impact on the Turkey's bilateral relations with country's traditional partners. With a view to achieve this, the difference between traditional foreign policy of Turkey and current one will be underlined, while arguing that Turkey's future commitment to the Western alliance and general personalization of foreign policy are two basic points of attention. At the same time, the pursuit for new paradigm seems to be the main challenge for Turkish foreign policy makers in the context of country's growing international isolation, especially in the relations with Western countries.

#### FOREIGN POLICY OF TURKEY BEFORE THE AKP – AN OVERVIEW

The Republic of Turkey was created in 1923 by the new, secular elite named “the Kemalists”, after the father of modern Turkey – Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. From the very beginning, the new elite had one particular aim, i.e. modernization of the country; Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his political followers believed that the newly created state should be secular and similar to the countries of Western Europe in terms of its political regime and the whole social construction [Parla 2001: 62–78]. They accused the Ottoman Empire of being archaic and weak in comparison with its neighbors who finally contributed to its collapse in the aftermath of the First World War. Thus, the broad modernization was perceived as a response to the requirements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The establishment of the Republic, new political system based on a single political party, i.e. Kemalist Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and tremendous social, political and cultural reforms caught the attention of the then policy makers in Turkey. The new regime was definitely focused on domestic issues since it had to struggle not only with existing conditions, but also with huge segments of the population which rapidly had been excluded from vital political processes, mainly the religious establishment, so powerful in the former Ottoman Empire [Ahmad 2007]. Thus, the foreign policy of Turkey at that time cannot be described as a really active one since the country's rulers were focused rather on domestic issues instead of getting involved in adventurous international actions; this perception of foreign policy making differs from modern Turkey's predecessor, i.e. the Ottoman Empire – Kemalist Turkey managed to establish quickly rather good relations with its neighbors. The exchange of populations with Bulgaria and Greece in the 1920s and 1930s was an important step in that process [Gallagher 2001: 80–85; Dayıoğlu 2005: 108–111]. The new Republic also had

rather proper relations with the Soviet Union and the other Balkan states. Unlike the Ottoman Empire's political elite and governments, the Kemalists remained focused on the domestic problems and issues, thus despite the Balkan Pact, which soon proved to be rather useless without Bulgarian access to it, Turkey was not an active player in the international arena due to its internal weakness that the rulers were conscious of.

The Second World War was a turning point for Turkey both at the domestic and international level. While the former meant a transition to multi-party politics, the latter meant new challenges for Ankara within the post-war international order. The aggressive politics of the Soviet Union in the various areas of the world, especially in Eastern Europe, and its territorial claims towards Turkey overlapped with the creation of NATO envisaged as a counterbalance in the aftermath of the previous conflict. Despite the initial reluctant attitude towards Turkey's accession among some NATO members countries, together with the growth of Soviet threat in other parts of the world like the Korean Peninsula of which Western elites had been clearly aware, Turkey was admitted to NATO in 1952 together with Greece and also became a part of Marshall Plan [Hale 2003]. This had a double effect on Turkish foreign policy; first, it was a huge step towards country's integration with the Western world and so it was perceived by its political elite which still, despite its multi-party politics, was gathered around the Kemalist establishment backed up by the bureaucracy and the military. Second, it anchored Turkey in the Western camp not only in terms of ideology, but also in practice since during the Cold War the country remained a crucial ally so important for counterbalancing an influence of the Soviet Union. Within this structure the Turkish foreign policy in general shall be described as a rather passive one – Ankara was committed to NATO activities, the relations with the Soviet Union, the Balkan and Middle East countries were subjected to the logic of Cold War proceedings.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union was to be a new challenge for Turkey. Since the logic of the former conflict was gone, the question about future directions became vital. This overlapped with the raising challenges for NATO in the post-Cold War international reality and the vacuum of power in several regions around Turkey due to USSR's collapse. The search for a new paradigm resulted in Turkey's commitment to the Central Asia region which Ankara considered as close due to ethnic, linguistic and religious similarities with newly created Central Asian republics. These calculations soon proved to be wrong. Despite the development of trading relations with those states, Turkey did not manage to establish proper political influence over them, so desired at that time by the US which considered Turkey as a model country due to its more or less democratic structure combined with the Muslim population. In the 1990s, Ankara's economic capabilities were limited due to permanent economic crisis. Turkey was simply not able to compete with several Western states also active in the region [Aras, Findan 2009: 200]. What is more, the political elites of the Central Asian republics considered trading with Turkey as beneficial, unlike the

political influence. Simply to say, democratic principles were far behind their point of interest within post-Soviet authoritarian state structures.

The failure of Turkish foreign policy towards Central Asia was symptomatic for country's overall activities in the 1990s. The search for a new paradigm, thus, became focused on the accession process to the European Union. However, this was to be intensified by the Justice and Development Party which has been ruling Turkey since 2002.

### THE AKP'S PERIOD

One can indicate three basic periods in Turkish foreign policy during the AKP's era. The first one is strictly linked to the EU accession process and covers the years 2002 to 2007. The second one is somehow transitional. Since 2007, Turkey seemed to lose its commitment to the EU and implemented the "Strategic Depth" paradigm aimed at strengthening its position in, first of all, country's neighboring regions like the Middle East and the Balkans. The failure of this soft power-based conception overlaps both with the Arab Spring that proved the limitations of Turkish foreign policy, and with the growing authoritarian tendencies in the domestic political life that finally led to the personalization of Ankara's strategic choices by current President Erdoğan.

The accession to the European Union and its predecessor had always been a key issue for the Turkish political elite. While joining NATO in 1952 anchored Turkey in the Western camp militarily, the political and economic linkage was still to be achieved together with the EU membership. In 1997, the Luxembourg Summit decision refused a candidate status for Turkey. However, in 1999 in Helsinki, Ankara was officially granted a candidate status. The task of adjusting Turkish legal system to the Copenhagen Criteria was to be realized by the political force that in essence had opposite ideological views when compared to the ones expressed by the Kemalist elite, namely the Justice and Development Party, established just in 2001 by Erdoğan.

The 2002 elections shook Turkish domestic politics – the traditional and well established political parties suddenly became marginalized by the pro-Islamic AKP, the first political organization ruling Turkey without the coalition government formula since 1983. It is interesting to notice that despite his political background Erdoğan and his followers were aware that they functioned in a definitely hostile political environment with the Kemalist establishment and military still powerful enough to close down any political party in Turkey with accusations of anti-secular activities and stance. In 1998, this was the fate of the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) whose leader (and Erdoğan's political mentor), Necmettin Erbakan, was forced out of power in 1997 under the strong military pressure [Kamrava 1998].

The adoption of cautious measures was done with accordance to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria and became a vital part of AKP's political appeal. While underlining the postulate of *hizmet* ("service"), the AKP claimed that it wanted to change the nature of political relations in Turkey with the state perceived as subjected to the will of the people instead of the state that is simply implementing its decisions from the top to the down [Erdoğan 2004: 192–195]. While the integration with the EU was perceived by the military as proper, as the step towards the modernization, hard to negate, the AKP was initially free to change the Turkish legal system with a view to adjust it to the EU's requirements. This change, simply to say, reduced an influence of the Kemalist establishment (both judiciary and the military) on political system of Turkey, thus, opening the way for Erdoğan to expand his power. The formal reduction of army's involvement in politics combined with purges within it since 2007–2008 made it possible to easily win the next 2007 elections and meant a shift in Ankara's foreign policy. From that period onwards, the EU was no longer the priority for Turkish political elites.

According to the "Strategic Depth" paradigm created by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey's historical and geographical potential is also strengthened by its close civilizational links to neighboring regions, and all of them constitute the core of the "Strategic Depth" conception which can be considered as a normative strategy with a clear purpose of transformation of Turkey's regional and global role. What is more, Davutoğlu created five principles to guide Turkish foreign policy making, namely: 1) Balance between freedom and democracy, 2) Zero problems with the neighbors, 3) Multi-dimensional and multi-track policies, 4) A new diplomatic discourse based on firm flexibility, and 5) Rhythmic diplomacy [Davutoğlu 2011]. This soft power paradigm was to transform Turkey and its role in the international relations. However, it failed together with the proceedings after the Arab Spring. At the same time, one can observe the growing authoritarian tendencies in Turkish domestics. Electoral success of AKP in 2011 only strengthened Erdoğan's power together with a later struggle in 2013 with the Gülenists.

The basic current question is about the future paradigm of Turkish foreign policy in general. While the country's relations with the EU are actually frozen, the relations with Turkey's traditional partner, i.e. the United States, have seriously deteriorated due to Erdoğan's adventurous foreign policy. Donald Trump's victory only accelerated existing tensions and led to the situation when Turkey is described as a "frenemy" – neither a friend nor a foe. As Steven Cook argues:

(...) the basic assumption that should guide Washington in its approach to Ankara is that while Turkey remains formally a NATO ally, it is not a partner of the United States. Two countries are linked to each other by the Cold War, but with few common interests three decades after that conflict came to an end, the bilateral relationship is marked by ambivalence and mistrust. [Cook 2018: 2]

The mentioned mistrust is even enhanced by President Erdoğan's harsh rhetoric as he often blames the US for supporting Fethullah Gülen and alienating Turkey in general and also by his political choices. The 2016 coup attempt and transformation of Turkey with regard to its presidential system in 2017, without almost any checks and balances mechanisms, stabilized his power and heavily personalized country's foreign policy. Within the new constitutional structures, the traditional institutions like, for instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, lost their importance and became replaced with institutions dependent on the Presidency like, for example, the Security and Foreign Policy Committee. What is even more important is his rapprochement in relations with Russia together with the decision to buy Russian S-400 air defense missiles which strongly undermines Turkey's status as a NATO member.

The use of foreign policy with a view to mobilize his electorate is a common feature of Erdoğan's political discourse. His harsh rhetoric and slogans like "The world is bigger than five" ("five" refers to the five permanent UN Security Council members) often find the fertile ground in Turkey. They are a sufficient tool to mobilize AKP's electorate and reveal Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman power aspirations. On the other hand, it is not enough to overcome the isolation of Turkey in the international arena.

## CONCLUSIONS

The search for a new paradigm is undoubtedly a major current challenge for Turkish foreign policy makers. After the successful concentration of power in his hands, Erdoğan became a sole ruler of Turkey and contrary to the Turkish traditional attitude, he changed country's foreign activities from rather cautious and passive to the adventurous ones. The failure of the "Strategic Depth" paradigm in the aftermath of the Arab Spring proved that Turkey does not have sufficient resources to become a concrete regional power. Gearing foreign policy towards the domestic issues resulted in several risky and adventurous actions that frozen Turkey's relations with the EU and also deteriorated its relations with the United States. The rapprochement with Russia should be considered as rather temporary. The country remains heavily dependent on Russian supplies of natural resources to Turkey, which makes any long-term partnership rather artificial and uncertain. While current foreign policy of Ankara seems to be chaotic and oriented towards short-term purposes, the need for long-term plan seems to be more relevant than ever.

**Tytuł:** Turecka polityka zagraniczna: obecne wyzwania i priorytety

**Streszczenie:** Dojście do władzy Partii Sprawiedliwości i Rozwoju wiąże się z jakościową zmianą tureckiej polityki zagranicznej jako całości. Wraz ze stabilizacją władzy Erdoğan od roku 2002 dostrzegalny jest odwrót od tradycyjnych wartości i zasad tureckiej polityki zagranicznej na korzyść podejmowania ryzykownych działań, które są tak podporządkowane wewnętrznym celom ideologicznym, jak i wiążą się z izolacją Ankary. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje turecką politykę w szerszym kontekście, zakładając, że współcześnie potrzeba wypracowania nowego paradygmatu jest najważniejszym wyzwaniem, przed jakim stoją jej twórcy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Turcja, polityka zagraniczna, AKP, UE, paradygmat

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