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### **Turkey's Foreign Policy Preferences and the Impact of First Direct Presidential Elections**

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#### **Abstract**

This article takes into account internal and external factors which shape Turkey's foreign policy. Vibrant developments dramatically challenge established patterns and country's role in the region. First direct presidential elections held in 2014 August brings uncertainty and the possibility that more powerful president might have a considerable impact towards Turkey's foreign policy. Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyze Turkey's foreign policy trajectories in general and the possible changes after first direct presidential elections and the formation of new government.

**Keywords:** Turkey's foreign policy, presidential elections.

#### **Introduction**

Turkey for a long time was a strategic ally of US and its integration into EU was one of the most important foreign policy aims. There were not much initiatives to change Western based foreign policy. However EU remains reluctant to accept this Muslim majority country with the population over 80 million people. Seeing EU as a distant success Turkey in the beginning of last decade started increasingly assertive foreign policy in the region, under the vision of Ahmet Davutoglu claiming an increased role in regional issues and ambition to become a global power, some argues in the expense of its traditional Western based policy. However, Arab Spring and later activities by Islamic State dramatically changed Turkey's region by making it unstable and insecure, therefore Turkey's foreign policy revision is required.

In August 2014 Turkey had its first direct presidential elections and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan won landslide victory. Before these elections the functions of the president office were more or less symbolic but the new president now has ambitions to take over executive powers. As new domestic political developments in Turkey are taking place, the question whether Turkey will have energy and will to keep up its assertive foreign policy remains open.

The aim of this research is to analyze Turkey's foreign policy trajectories in general and the possible changes after first direct presidential elections and the formation of new government.

The research is based by three parts. First of all there will be a presentation of traditional Turkey's foreign policy. Secondly, a revelation of Turkey's new directions and activism under the era of Ahmet Davutoglu as Minister of Foreign Affairs. This will be done by analyzing the essence of

his strategic vision and success of its implementation into practice. And finally there will be an attempt to determine possible changes of Turkey's foreign policy and vision's relevance today by analyzing current foreign and domestic events.

### **The concept and origins of traditional Turkey's foreign policy**

When talking about traditional Turkey's foreign policy, Yelen Aktas singles out these features: conservatism, cautious, protectionism, isolationism, autonomy, balance of power [1]. Baskin Oran argues that since the formation of modern Turkish state in 1923 its foreign policy was based mainly by two principles: maintaining the status quo and Western orientation. [2]. Turkey after the First World War had to fight for its independence and territorial integration, therefore its wish to preserve its lands and maintain the status quo is understandable. Whereas foreign policy based by orientation towards West was predicated by two reasons. Firstly, the Middle East region was thought to be extremely backward and underdeveloped, certainly not the direction that Turkey wanted to follow and waste its energy on. That's why Turkey for a long time had abandoned its relations and active foreign policy with Middle Eastern region and Muslim world. For the founding member of Turkey's Republic Kemal Ataturk to modernize his country meant to westernize.

Secondly, after the World War II, when the bipolar international system emerged, Turkey found itself under the threat of Soviet Union's territorial claims and communism expansion. Western countries, especially US, seeing the strategic importance of Turkey moved quickly to integrate it into its security structures. In 1952 Turkey became a member of NATO and started to receive military and financial aid from US. After long years of being casualty to Western imperial aspirations, Turkey managed to reach protection under the Western security system [3]. After couple of years it started to work closely with EEC- the precursor of EU. Turkey initially wanted to become a member but was proposed an alternative instead-associated membership. This was institutionalized in 1963, when the "Ankara agreement" was signed. To become a full member of this organization became the strategic aim of Turkey's foreign policy [4].

Turkey's traditional Western oriented foreign policy was formed after the establishment of modern Republic in order to modernize the country and stepped up during the geopolitical realities defined by the conditions of the Cold War. It is worth to mention that till the end of the Cold War Turkey maintained mono-dimensional, security based international orientation and had not experienced influential alternative paradigms, and with few exceptions (Cyprus issue being the most prominent one) it was compatible with the interests of Western countries especially with that of the US.

### **New directions of Turkey's foreign policy**

#### **Theoretical framework**

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of bipolar international system brought new challenges and opportunities. The emergence of Islamic root Justice and Development party (AKP in Turkish) in government marks new Turkey's activism and the objective to develop multidimensional foreign policy. Contemporary Turkey's foreign policy can be best understood by analyzing the vision and ideas of Ahmet Davutoglu. Davutoglu's strategic vision refers to a series of his scientific articles and books in which he determined new directions of Turkey's foreign policy. Professor of international relations, later appointed as a Chief Adviser to Prime minister and in 2009 as Minister of Foreign Affairs, now he became a Prime Minister. So he has a special opportunity to implement his ideas and theories into practice [5].

In his writings Davutoglu stresses that what determines the capabilities of country's foreign policy is its history and geography. Turkey as a legitimate heiress of Ottoman Empire, who once controlled vast territories of many different regions, has rich history and finds itself in very strategic place. Therefore he argues that Turkey, with only few countries in the world, can be determined as a pivotal state with multiple identities and could not be geographically determined or culturally related with only one region [6]. This kind of position is not just a privilege but also a responsibility, therefore Turkey because of its historical and cultural links should not be satisfied with the role only in particular regions but should try to reach global influence. Basically he challenges the popular notion of Turkey as a bridge between continents, culture and religions and wants to see and reveal Turkey as a center in itself, a center of power, a center of influence.

Important feature of Davutoglu's foreign policy vision is the belief, that Turkey can't any longer pursue one-sided, Western-based foreign policy which might hinder the potential of the country and might not necessary represent the best interests of Turkey [7]. Instead, Turkey should develop its own foreign policy and stop being a tool for other countries strategic interests. In other words, one of the most important aims of the doctrine was to redefine Turkey's role in the region and the globe and provide a framework in order to make it more influential. Davutoglu also provided new image of Turkey as a source of soft power [8]. For a long time Turkey was identified with its militaristic nature, with military having a strong grasp over decision making. But this started to change with Turkey's democratization, liberalization and decreasing military's influence over politics. Because of this experience and shared interests, Davutoglu stated that Turkey should be active in solving regional conflicts, mediate in major regional issues and promote economic cooperation [9].

Yeghig Tashjian states that the most important principles of "Davutoglu's strategic vision are zero problems with neighbors policy, proactive diplomacy and multidimensional policy [10]. Zero problems policy refers to Turkey's aim to solve disputes and issues in its troubled neighborhood, establish friendly relations with close countries and maintain peace and stability. According to Davutoglu this is the precondition to Turkey in order to play global role in world affairs. Proactive diplomacy is determined to prevent conflicts before they rise. This includes active diplomacy, high level diplomatic meetings and promoting deeper understanding between different cultures, traditions and religions. The principle of multidimensional foreign policy contradicts with traditional, Western oriented Turkey's foreign policy. This principle stresses that Turkey at the same time can have cordial relations with different countries from different regions and that its rapprochement towards Middle Eastern countries shouldn't hinder its Western ties. As Davutoglu argues: "While Turkey pursues a policy of constructive engagement in its neighborhood and beyond, full integration with the EU is and will remain the priority" [11]. In other words Turkey does not prefer to unite with its neighbors at the expense of EU and is consistently implementing these policies together.

### **Implementation into practice**

Turkey's foreign policy under the leadership of Tayyip Erdogan and his adviser Ahmet Davutoglu underwent significant transformations. The first visible example of growing Turkey's independence in regional affairs emerged in 2003 when Turkey did not let US to use its territory to invade to Iraq. This event strengthen Erdogan's image in Arab world. He was seen as a leader of Muslim country, which is capable to resist US imperialist ambitions.

New Turkish foreign policy based on the ideas of Ahmet Davutoglu underwent two cycles. First cycle was between the years 2007-2010. From his appointment as a Minister of Foreign Affairs he was really active to implement his ideas and vision into practice. His principal of zero problems with neighbors reached its peak in 2010 when Turkey managed to improve its relations with Iraq and its Kurdish regional government (KRG), Iran and even with Armenia. Rapprochement with Syria was seemingly the best model of progress towards the region. Long-time enemies developed constructive economic and political relations. During this time Turkey did not hesitate to use its soft power when dealing with regional issues. It mediated between Syria and Israel as well as between Iran and US over Iran nuclear program. Turkey indeed became more active with opening new embassies in Latin America and Africa and had its own opinion about almost every issue of the regional affairs. It criticized the policy of Israel in Gaza, pledge international community to act rapidly in the regional crisis and accused the West of applying double standards by trying to stop Iran nuclear program but at the same time not disturbing Israel to develop its nuclear facilities. This kind of stance provided Turkey a lot of credit in the eyes of Arabs and for the short time it earned the reputation of the country which drives its foreign policy by moral values. But at the same time Turkey distanced itself from EU with accession negotiations being frozen since 2010. Turkey's foreign policy during these years radically shifted from traditional policy, when its regional interests overlapped with that of US and when it expected to gain recognition by becoming a member of EU to new assertive foreign policy by which the status of the country is expected to rise by becoming the leader of the region [12].

Second cycle took its place in 2011 during the Arab Spring. When people from Egypt and Tunisia went to the streets demanding the change of regime, Turkey was quick to support popular demands. This activism and attention to the region was in sharp contrast to its traditional cautious and nonintervention policy. The perception of Turkey as role model to Arab countries reached its peak in the beginning of the revolutions. Turkey as the only Muslim majority population with representative democracy by many was seen as an example that Arab world should follow. Later on Turkey adopted confrontational stance against Syria's and Libya's regimes and believed that it is capable to achieve the desired outcomes. But in the aftermath of Arab spring Turkey came up from no problems with neighbors with having problems with almost every neighbor irrespectively if the regime changed (Libya, Egypt, Tunisia) or remained the same (Syria). By pledging Syria's president Bashar al Assad to resign and international community to take actions against him and stop brutal civil war, Turkey lost its ally and the tensions in its eastern border increased significantly. Finding itself in extremely troubled and insecure neighborhood Ankara was no longer able to pursue its independent foreign policy and was forced to ask for assistance from its most important NATO ally US to help protect its border with Syria. Besides, seeing that crisis in the Middle East became deeper, Turkey once again made considerable efforts to renew accession negotiations with EU in 2013.

This is no doubt that gradually Turkey lost much of its influence in the Middle East and Davutoglu vision and ideas for the future of Turkey were not fulfilled at its finest. And it became extremely visible after Islamic State occupied large territory of Iraq along the border with Turkey. Suddenly Turkey that not long ago claimed leadership in the region and was active in organizing international action, became extremely silent. While it is true that Turkey was not able to predict such radical changes in the Middle East and control the outcomes, at the same time Turkey's foreign policy's capacities were harmed by rising issues and unrests at home.

There was this tense political situation at home and abroad when Turkey was about to have its first direct presidential elections. The last chapter will try to answer what impact it might have to foreign policy.

### **Turkey's foreign policy under the new president**

During his presidential campaign Erdogan made no secret that he will not be satisfied with ceremonial president role and will push country's parliamentary political system for the change into presidential or semi-presidential one. One of his arguments behind this change is that parliamentary system is rigid and too slow to react to rapidly changing foreign events. After becoming president he appointed Ahmet Davutoglu, his former Chief Adviser and Minister of Foreign Affairs as a Prime Minister. Davutoglu is considered to be faithful to the new president, therefore this step would suggest that premiership would further imply that the Erdogan wants to control the party and the cabinet. In this regard the main actors of Turkey's foreign policy should not change. But what many analysts suggest that in this fragile domestic and regional political situation is unlikely that Turkey will pursue its assertive foreign policy, previously advocated by Ahmet Davutoglu. As Ozgur Unluhisarcikli says: "Turkey now has security concerns it didn't have two years ago, therefore its own security is the number one foreign policy aim, rather than transforming the region" [13].

As mentioned before, just few years ago Erdogan was very vocal in demanding the intervention into Syria and criticizing Egyptian military's overthrown of Muhammad Mursi and Israeli's actions on Gaza.

However, at this moment Turkey seems indecisive about what direction should its foreign policy follow. It is reluctant to join US led coalition to fight Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Even though this policy can be explained as a governments concern of the fate Turkey's hostages which were taken in June, this isolationist foreign policy indicates decreasing Turkey's influence towards the region. Former Turkey's ambassador Murat Ozelik told that "Three years ago Turkey was considered a wonderful regional power working inside Iraq using its soft power. All of our brothers in the Middle East were looking up to us" [14].

However now Turkey is not willing to participate in major regional crisis and is patiently waiting for the US to take actions.

President Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu is now more constantly talking about their will to move EU accession negotiations into the new level than taking new regional initiatives. The fact that Mevlut Cavusoglu, former Minister of EU Affairs was appointed as new Minister of Foreign Affairs, may suggest that EU agenda now could take greater priority. However, the moment does not look favorable. In European Parliament elections nationalist and radical rightist parties strengthened its share significantly. More, the leaders of leading EU countries are still keeping negative attitude towards Turkey's full membership. At this moment Erdogan is also concerned about how to strengthen its power and it may lead to more limitations on personal freedoms and media censorship. Being on the road to EU requires significant reforms which in current domestic situation are not likely to happen. Given this scenario it will be very unlikely that EU accession negotiations move any further but economic cooperation should remain high.

What these developments abroad and at home suggest, is that Davutoglu's vision about more influential Turkey in the region will not be implemented. Turkey is now moving from its ideological based foreign policy, which it exercised before the regional crisis, to rational, based on its pragmatic, economic interests. It is likely that new Turkey's president will spend much of his time to solve domestic problems and exercise moderate foreign policy with US being the most important strategic ally.

### Conclusions

After the creation of modern Turkey Republic, it for most of the time maintained security-oriented, pragmatic foreign policy with Western orientation. Close cooperation with US and EEC and non-interference in regional affairs became main features of traditional Turkey's foreign policy. New paradigms emerged after AKP took power in 2002. Turkey started to claim more assertive role in its region and even global influence under the vision of Ahmet Davutoglu. In his writings he stressed that country as Turkey with its rich history and favorable geographic situation has all the characteristics needed to become a pivotal state. For a short period Turkey managed to become one of the most influential powers in its region and establish constructive relations with its neighbors. Its unique way of development was seen as a model that Arab countries should follow. However when radical political developments (Arab Spring) in the region took place, Turkey's influence and good neighboring relations did not take long to fade. Eventually Turkey saw that left alone in the region, it is not so powerful. New president Erdogan after three consecutive terms as a Prime Minister is facing many problems at home and near his borders. The growing threat of Islamic State and Turkey's unwillingness to act decisively indicates that Turkey may once again turn to its traditional isolationist foreign policy and let other countries, mainly US, to take major initiatives towards regional issues. At the same time integration into EU is not likely to speed up. As new president is concerned how to strengthen his powers, reforms needed to fit EU entrance criteria will not be implemented. Practical issues like security concerns in its neighborhood and the need to solve domestic problems will occupy much of Erdogan's agenda with little space to new initiatives to transform the region once so desired by Ahmet Davutoglu.

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