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Report

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➤ Introduction: The Sources of Turkish Grand Strategy - 'Strategic Depth' and 'Zero-Problems' in Context

Joshua W. Walker

The dramatic changes in Turkish foreign policy and strategy in its regional and international relations in the first decade of the new century stands in sharp contrast with that of its immediate past. After the end of the Cold War, Turkey was a prickly power in a tough neighbourhood, one that included two major zones of instability, the Balkans and the Middle East. On three separate occasions, Turkey came to the brink of war with its neighbours: Armenia in 1992, Greece in 1996 and Syria in 1998. Regular military incursions were launched into Northern Iraq; in the Aegean, continuous tactical military provocations between the Greek and Turkish air force took place. Little movement was evident with regard to Cyprus and at one point Turkey even threatened to annex the northern part of the island. Relations with post-Cold War Russia were tentative and burdened by a long history of tension and conflict. Relations with Iran were soured by the Kurdish conflict and political Islam. Turkey's overall approach to its neighbours was characterised by confrontation, mistrust, and the use of threats and force. Yet, despite tensions over domestic issues such as human rights, widespread use of torture, and the situation of the Kurdish minority, Turkey remained a strong transatlantic partner.¹

The contrast with the current situation is striking, as over the last decade Turkey has sought rapprochement with Greece, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, Iran and Russia. Turkey's active foreign policy aimed at 'zero problems' with its neighbours, which first aimed at improving bilateral relations and regional cooperation in the Balkans and among former Soviet states, has now been extended to the Middle East, the Gulf, and North Africa as well.

THE ARCHITECT OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: PROF. DR. AHMET DAVUTOGLU

Accounting for these developments on the domestic, historical, and international level is critical in order to understand Turkey's foreign policy orientation, marked by the concepts of 'zero problems' and 'Strategic Depth,' elaborated by the current Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Professor of International Relations Dr. Ahmet Davutoglu.² 'Strategic Depth' seeks to reposition Turkey from the periphery of international relations to the centre as an actor sitting at the intersection of multiple regions. Having emerged from the shadows of isolationism pre-World War Two and dependency during the Cold War, Turkey is now asserting itself to play a greater role in its region, particularly the Middle East, with the prestige associated with playing an active regional role driving the resurgence

1 For more on this see 'Introduction' *Getting to Zero*. Ed. Evin, Ahmet, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker (Lynne Rienner Press, Forthcoming Spring 2011).

2 Ahmet Evin, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker, *Transatlantic Report 'Getting to Zero.'* (Washington DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2010).

in foreign policy activism. Turkey recalls the Ottoman Empire, which straddled the frontier between the civilisations that best defined East and West for a millennium. Since the end of the Cold War, memories of that empire are most closely associated with efforts to reposition Turkey in a renewed struggle between the 'modern' Western world and a resurgent Muslim world centred in the Middle East.

Turkey today is courting new alliances in order to maintain optimal regional and global independence and influence,³ by specifically taking on a larger role in its former Ottoman territories, and by prioritising 'dialogue and cooperation' over 'coercion and confrontation.'⁴ This approach has rallied favor with business and civil society, which are eager to develop closer ties with the neighbours in the economic and social domains.⁵ In other words, the doctrine of Strategic Depth provides a normative chapeau to the plethora of state and non-state interests that concomitantly push Turkey to develop deeper and stronger ties to its neighbours. It also conceptualises a foreign policy trend which has been in the making since the days of former Turkish Prime Minister and President Turgüt Özal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ismail Cem in the late 1990s.⁶

Davutoglu's proclaimed grand strategy and theory emphasises that Turkey is uniquely endowed both because of its location in geopolitical areas of influence, particularly its control of the Bosphorus, and its historical legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire.⁷ While traditional measures of Turkey's national power tend to overlook the cultural links fostered by a shared common history, Davutoglu emphasises Turkey's connections to the Balkans, the Middle East, and even Central Asia. In the same vein, Davutoglu argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a trans-regional power that helps to once again unify and lead the Muslim world.⁸ Accordingly, Turkey is not simply an 'ordinary nation-state' that emerged at a certain point due to the play of circumstances or the designs of the outside powers – like, for example, many new states in Central Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. Rather, Turkey is a regional power in its own right, having strong traditions of statehood and broad strategic outreach. Thus, Davutoglu concludes, 'it has no chance to be peripheral, it is not a sideline country of the EU, NATO or Asia.'⁹ Davutoglu contends that Turkey is a centrally positioned international player, 'a country with a close land basin, the *epicentre* of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the *centre* of Eurasia in general and is in the *middle* of the Rimland belt cutting across the Mediterranean to the Pacific. [Emphasis added]'¹⁰ Such geo-strategic vision reflects the newly-acquired self-confidence on the part of newly empowered Turkish leadership who are supportive of a more proactive foreign policy – particularly in what they call the 'Ottoman geopolitical

3 For further discussion on this doctrine, see Joshua Walker, 'Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine,' *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (2007), 32–47.

4 For more see the original text of the book Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre, 2001), further expansion in an interview with a Turkish newspaper Ahmet Davutoglu, 'Türkiye merkez ülke olmalı,' *Radikal*, (Winter 2004), and in an academic piece for an international audience Ahmet Davutoglu, 'Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007,' *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2008), 77-96.

5 Author Interviews conducted with representatives from each of these organisations and also with Hakan Fidan former advisor in prime minister's office who managed economic portfolio, Ankara August, 2009.

6 Meliha Altunisik-Benli, 'Worldviews and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East,' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, (2009), 171-194.

7 Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position) (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001).

8 Ahmet Davutoglu. Interview with Author, August 18, 2009 in Foreign Ministry Ankara.

9 Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, see also his article 'The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (Dis)Order,' *Perceptions* 2:4 (December 1997-February 1998).

10 Alexander Murinson, 'The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 42, Issue 6 (November 2006), 945-964.

space.¹¹ This orientation is highly critical of Turkey's Cold War strategy for its myopic reluctance to embrace the country's obvious advantages – namely, its rich history and geographical location.

CATALYST FOR CHANGE: THE AKP

The emergence of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 as a political force has turned Turkish foreign policy on its head, articulating a vision for improving relations with all its neighbours, particularly by privileging its former Muslim space in the Middle East, such as Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. As a result, the debate over Turkey's historical roots and its legacy as a successor state to the Ottoman Empire has been rekindled.

Central to this revival of Ottoman legacies has been the expanding economic interests and regional dynamism represented by the rise of new rural Anatolian businesses led by devout Muslims competing with traditional metropolitan Aegean businesses. These Anatolian businesses have emerged as strong advocates for further Turkish expansion into emerging Middle Eastern rather than European markets. It would be hard to make sense of Turkish foreign policy towards countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria without taking into consideration these new business interest groups. Consequently the economic interests of these groups has played an important role in AKP government's efforts to promote greater trade and economic cooperation with the Middle East in the context of Turkey's new foreign policy agenda.

As a result of its central Anatolian roots and more conservative Muslim outlook, the AKP has focused on the unifying character of the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim values inherited by the Turkish Republic. Articulating a new vision for Turkey that is not dependent upon the West, while actively seeking ways to balance its relationships and alliances, the AKP harkens back to the days of the Ottoman Empire but more importantly of a self-confident regional power.

The shift in Turkey's policies towards its neighbourhood are stark and can be explained by a confluence of international, regional and domestic factors. At the international and regional levels, these factors range from the power vacuum left by the 1991 Gulf war and the 2003 war on Iraq, to the changing dynamics in the Kurdish question and the deterioration of the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza during 2008 and 2009. They include the waning influence that the EU now has on Turkish foreign policy,¹² as well as the US by first aggravating Turkey's sensitivities on the Kurdish question in 2003-2007 and then diffusing them by cooperating with Turkey in the fight against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK.)

11 Here the distinction between the academic discussions surrounding where the Ottomans had actual control and whether these areas should be considered 'colonies' given the Orientalist narrative of Western imperialism matters less than how policymakers incorporate a vision of cultural, historic, and religious affinity.

12 Some of this literature includes Mustafa Aydın and Sinem A. Açıkmeşe, 'Europeanisation through EU conditionality: understanding the new era in Turkish foreign policy,' *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (2007), 263-74.. Ziya Önis, 'Turkey and the Middle East after September 11: The Importance of the EU Dimension,' *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4, (2003), 84-95. Mesut Özcan, *Harmonising Foreign Policy: Turkey, the EU and the Middle East* (Adlershot: Ashgate Press, 2008) and Burak Akçapar, *Turkey's new European era: foreign policy on the road to EU membership* (Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

However, without Turkey's domestic transformation and most pointedly the willingness of the AKP to transform Turkey's traditional detachment from the region on the basis of Ottoman glorification and 'zero-problems' with neighbours, any explanation of contemporary developments in Turkish foreign policy would be impossible. The domestic contours of Turkey's foreign policy establishment are notoriously fractious, consisting of institutional actors such as the military and bureaucracy that must work with the democratically elected legislature. Given Turkey's political history of highly unstable coalition governments and corruption scandals, it is unsurprising that political parties have commanded far less public trust and support than the military, which is seen as the ultimate caretaker of Atatürk's secular republic.¹³ In addition, the constitutional courts and presidency have checked the power of any parliamentary majority. While Turkish foreign policy was traditionally entrusted to the military and other state bureaucracies, the changes and reforms within Turkey have changed the actors responsible. Foreign policy is now increasingly coming under civilian control and the democratically elected government is seen as having the legitimate mandate to exert Turkey's influence globally.

It is with this backdrop that the AKP came to power in 2002 on the heels of a major economic crisis and series of corruption scandals. As the historical successors of Turkey's right-leaning Islamic conservative movement, the AKP had many domestic hurdles to overcome. After its surprise electoral victory, the AKP enjoyed popular support for most of its term. This popularity was fueled by the fact that the AKP was seen as being untainted by the corruption and cronyism of Turkey's traditional parties. Following the pattern of two-level games,¹⁴ Erdogan and the AKP began using their foreign policy agenda to placate domestic opposition and expand areas of possible cooperation with Turkey's liberal elites. In particular, the AKP focused on the EU accession process to broaden its domestic support and weaken its opponents during 2002-2005. As part of this strategy Turkey began to use its rising regional influence to support its foreign policies in the Middle East, particularly since 2004-2005 as the European process came to a virtual standstill as a result of domestic politics in Europe and Turkey. Attempting this feat in the context of the ongoing Iraq crisis was complex, yet the AKP pushed for cooperation with the Middle East by relying on Turkey's historical legacy and its modern 'soft power' resources to fulfill its ambitions.¹⁵

In a country that has experienced four military coups (one being the 'soft' *coup* in 1997 that forced the closure of the *Refah* party)¹⁶, and one so-called 'electronic *coup*' that triggered the 2007 elections, attempts to discredit and ban the AKP through anti-democratic means are a new twist in an old plotline.¹⁷ The AKP speaks for a large portion of the Turkish people who want to see changes made in the approach and character of both their Republic and its international relations. With a majority of the Turkish parliament and municipal administrations controlled by the AKP since 2002, the very structure of the secular Turkish Republic is beginning to change.

13 Garith Jenkins, *Context and Circumstance* (London: Routledge, 2005).

14 Robert Putnam 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,' *Double Edged Diplomacy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

15 Kemal Kirisci, *Getting to Zero*. Ed. Evin, Ahmet, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker (Lynne Rienner Press, Forthcoming Spring 2011).

16 The Refah Party or the Welfare Party is an Islamist political party that emerged into politics in 1983. It is the predecessor of today's AKP or Justice and Development Party.

17 There were several coups during this period which signified the military exerting influence. For more on Turkey's non-overt coups see Steven Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

TURKEY'S POTENTIAL ROLE

Beyond the academic discussions surrounding Turkey's potential and place in the world, the AKP has sought to counterbalance Turkey's dependencies on the West by courting multiple alliances to maintain the balance of power in its region. The premise of this argument is that Turkey should not be dependent upon any one actor and should actively seek ways to balance its relationships and alliances so that it can maintain optimal independence and leverage on the global and regional stage.¹⁸ The approach exhibited by Davutoglu's foreign policy doctrine is perfectly suited for the prime minister's personality and his political rhetoric has resonated in Turkey as a whole. It also stems directly from the political power accumulated by his party. Given the AKP's unrivalled position domestically, its foreign policy doctrine of 'Strategic Depth' has become hegemonic within the country.¹⁹

Presenting Turkey as a regional power and 'model' in the Middle East was made possible by Turkey's broader democratisation since the end of the Cold War and in particular since September 11, 2001. As articulated in recent scholarship, there is a relationship between greater democratisation and Eastern oriented foreign policy initiatives throughout Turkish political history.²⁰ The three longest serving prime ministers (Adnan Menderes, Turgüt Özal, and Recep Erdogan) all implemented at least one Eastern oriented initiative (Baghdad Pact 1955, Central Asian Initiative 1991, and 'Strategic Depth' 2004) along with their domestic democratisation efforts. These same prime ministers commanded the largest percentage of the parliament and were among the most responsive to public opinion given the often tenuous relationships they had with Turkey's traditional purveyors of foreign policy, namely the military. There is something electorally attractive about Eastern initiatives even if they are less institutional or formalised in the same way that Western initiatives have tended to be (NATO 1952, EC Application 1987, and EU candidate status 2004). Within the democratising Turkey of the last decade, civilian leaders cannot ignore where public opinion stands on critical foreign policy questions as easily as the military leaders that previously dominated Turkish foreign policy decision-making.

Turkey's 're-engagement' with the Middle East has been greatly initiated by the AKP's domestic constituencies' historical memory and ideas about Turkey's 'rightful' place as the heir to the Ottoman Empire both in and of the region. The rise of the AKP has subsequently meant a de-emphasis of the 'othering' and 'Islamic threat' in Turkey's view of the region. Closer Middle Eastern relations are not seen as being dichotomous or detrimental to Turkey's western orientation, at home or abroad, as had been trumpeted under military rule in the 1980s. Hence, a more 'Islam-friendly' approach that focuses on economic opportunities and shared heritage has come to permeate Turkey's policy towards the region.

18 Ahmet Davutoglu, Interview with Author, August 18, 2009. Also see Ahmet Davutoglu, *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994).

19 For further discussion on this doctrine, see Joshua W. Walker, 'Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine,' 32–47.

20 Joshua Walker. *Getting to Zero*. Ed. Evin, Ahmet, Kemal Kirisci, Ronald Linden, Thomas Straubhaar, Nathalie Tocci, Juliette Tolay and Joshua Walker (Lynne Rienner Press, Forthcoming Spring 2011).

Alongside this, Turkey's economic growth has also played into the country's developing ties to its neighbours, building economic interdependence with formerly hostile countries like Syria and Iraq, while hoping to draw others closer into Ankara's orbit. Rather than seeing Iran, Iraq or Syria as former enemies or 'others,' Turkey increasingly sees its eastern neighbours as potential markets for their goods and partners in a neighbourhood that can benefit from an actively engaged regional stabiliser. A growing Turkish economic interest in the Middle Eastern neighbours in turn has led to a growing influence of business and civil society actors in foreign-policy-making, insofar as non-state actors press the government and bureaucracy to develop cooperative ties. More specifically, growing commercial interests in the region have raised Turkish stakes in a peaceful and stable Middle East, consolidating Turkish foreign policy objectives to promote peace and regional integration in the Middle East.²¹

The change in Turkish foreign policy hinges on Turkey's domestic transformation and democratisation, kick-started, *inter alia*, by its EU accession process, and propelled by the rise of the ruling AKP under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkish foreign policy has traditionally been the exclusive domain of the military and the ministry of foreign affairs. In the course of the last decade not only have these institutions been transformed but others have acquired a growing role in foreign policy making. These include state bodies such as the ministries of energy, environment, interior and transportation and the under-secretariat for foreign trade.²² In addition, civil society, and in particular businesses associations including the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) and the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM) among many others, constantly lobby the government on foreign policy questions.²³ It would be hard to make sense of Turkish foreign policy towards countries such as Russia, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Syria without taking into considerations these economic interests.²⁴ Similarly, economic interests played an important role in efforts to improve relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as well as Armenia. These factors all push toward the same direction of greater regional integration and cooperation.

TRENDING TOWARDS DEMOCRATISATION AND POPULISM IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Turkish democratisation has made the government more accountable and sensitive to public opinion. Past governments were not as concerned with public opinion, however, the current government feels obliged for electoral as much as populist reasons to take public opinion into account. Indeed the backdrop to, though not necessarily the result of, the parliamentary vote in March 2003 not to allow the US to attack Iraq through Turkish territory was the massive public mobilisation against the looming war. Similarly, without a more responsive public and greater freedom of expression it would have been difficult to imagine the debates that made it possible for Turkey to reverse its policy towards Cyprus in 2004 and Armenia in 2008-9. Somewhat ironically it could also be argued that without democratisation it is doubtful that Erdogan would have been as critical as he has been of Israel since the Gaza operation, whereby the government and especially the prime minister responds to the public outrage over civilian casualties in the region.

21 Kemal Kirisci, 'The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy,' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, (2009) pp. 29-57.

22 Author Interviews with ministers, officials, and high-level ministers who requested to be left anonymous in Ankara, Turkey August, 2008.

23 Author Interviews conducted with representatives from each of these organisations and also with Hakan Fidan former advisor in prime minister's office who managed economic portfolio, Ankara August, 2009.

24 Kemal Kirisci, 'The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: the rise of the trading state,' 29-57.

The upshot and irony of this increasingly democratic Turkey is however a growing readiness to diverge and say 'no' to the US or the EU when the latter's policies have been perceived as countering Turkish interests. Unlike during and in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when Turkish army generals and diplomats could be counted on to support the West even when policies harmed Turkey's national interest, Turkish leaders are now being held accountable for their foreign policy decisions and at times give in to populism. In other words, like any other democracy, Turkey today responds to the public, including its nationalist segments, as well as to powerful business interests. Turkey's new self-awareness as a regional power means that rather than simply being able to rely on Turkey as an instrument of Western power projection in the Middle East, the West is now facing a stronger and more assertive Turkey that can and will disagree on key foreign policy issues. ■
