



# THE RISE AND FALL OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

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WHEN my esteemed friend Vuk Jeremić, Editor-in-Chief of *Horizons*—a journal I follow closely and from whose articles by distinguished contributors I have benefited from the very first issue—asked me to write an essay on the foreign policy of Turkey, I immediately thought that it would be very easy. It would contain only one short sentence: “Turkey has had no considered foreign policy since 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) first came to power.” What follows is an elaboration on this one sentence—an explanation of sorts for those who might wonder what the above sentence is really about. My essay ends with an earnest challenge to those who might disagree.

## THE RISE

After 44 years, including 15 years as ambassador who actively served at the Ministry of Foreign Af-

fairs of Turkey until 2011, I was sure that I had come to grips with at least the basic principles of the foreign policy of the country I was representing. Some of these principles were: peace at home, peace in the world; non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs; seeking regional and worldwide cooperation, if and when possible, through regional and global pacts and organizations to advance peace and stability.

These and some other guidelines I will have occasion to discuss in what follows had always been kept in mind by those who conducted Turkish foreign policy since the Republic of Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Grand National Assembly in 1923, following the War of Independence.

The “National Struggle” (Milli Mücadele), as it is known to us Turks, was a

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unique war that represented a fresh start for Turkey—one that had risen from the ashes of an empire when the victorious Allied Powers of World War I brought to an end to the Ottoman period of our history. During this period, lest we forget, the UK had attempted to take over control of the Turkish Straits, the main bone of contention between the British and Russian empires for several centuries. France, Italy, and Greece, for their part, had tried to take hold of

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parts of Anatolia and Thrace. We should also not forget that the Armenians and the Kurds, with the encouragement and support of the Allied Powers, each also expected to be able to carve out a state for themselves, most of the time claiming the same territory in the east and southeast of Anatolia. All this went against the new republic’s commitment, made at the very onset of its existence, what imperative to keep as its homeland, declaring this in a “National Pact” (Misak-ı Milli) adopted by the Grand National Assembly. In this way, the state made a public commitment that it would not opt for irredentism but would also not give up what was its own.

One last word on the main pillars of the Turkish foreign policy: the War of Independence was the first uprising in the world against imperialism, and, as a result of this, the foreign policy of

the Republic of Turkey was founded on anti-imperialism, too.

A few words on the republic’s political system are also in order. The Turkish political regime had opted for true democracy even during the

years of the War of Independence, with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk always working with the Grand National Assembly, the members of which were freely chosen by the people. The 1921

Constitution declared that sovereignty belonged unconditionally and with no restrictions to the nation, and the 1923 revision made it clear that Turkey was a republic. The Constitution as revised again or rewritten in 1924, 1928, 1937, 1961, 1982, and so on further stipulated that the Republic of Turkey was a democratic, secular, and social state, governed by the rule of law.

Empires die hard and very slowly: such a death leads to many recriminations and claims that might not disappear for centuries. To this we can add that the Ottoman Empire was one of the longest-lasting and most-widespread of all the empires in human history. Despite all this, the foreign policy principles and the political system of the republic that I have summarized above made it possible and even easy for Turkey to develop in a very short time friendly relations with all



*Unveiled in 1964, Antalya's famed National Ascension Monument features a likeness of Atatürk*

its neighbors, including Russia; prepared the ground for the establishment of the Balkan Pact in 1934 and the Saadabad (Sâdâbad) Pact in 1937 (the former was a treaty signed in Athens involving Greece, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia; the latter was a treaty signed in Tehran involving Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey); resulted in Turkish membership in the League of Nations and then the United Nations, but also the Council of Europe and NATO; and ensured the launching of negotiations on accession to what became the European Union.

To the surprise of many, Turkey established good relations with Greece

as soon as the War of Independence was over, even though it was that same Greece that, with the encouragement of the UK, had attempted to occupy western Anatolia in the hopes of making the Greek dream of the *Megali Idea* come true. This irredentist idea turned out to be a grave mistake for the Greek nation: it dearly cost Greece, the Greeks of the mainland, and the former Ottoman citizens of Greek descent that had for centuries lived in peace and harmony with Turks in Anatolia.

The bottom line is that from 1923 to 2002, Turkish foreign policy was based solely on the national inter-

est and was independent at all costs. It used to be planned carefully, looking ahead twenty or thirty years into the future; we had foresight, predicted events correctly, and acted when the time was right and circumstances were ripe. And since it was widely understood that the achievement of foreign policy targets was predicated on a strong economy and a strong military—two elements that are, in fact, very much mutually-dependent—for decades Turkey did its utmost to have a growing economy and a reliable military to discourage any potential adversary from exercising its ambitions against our country.

The achievements of Turkish foreign policy between 1923 and 2002 are too numerous to get into in detail. But we can say that, overall, Turkish foreign policy proved its value for eight decades and served the best interests of the country. A few of the colossal achievements during this period can be mentioned: the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) which annulled for good the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and made peace possible between Turkey and the Allied Powers; the Montreux

Convention (1936) that established full Turkish sovereignty over the Turkish Straits and was beneficial to both the Black Sea coastal states and the world at large as one of the first confidence- and security-building measure ever formulated; the fact that Turkey kept itself out of the devastating Second World War; and, last but not least, the Cyprus Peace Operation (1974) that was launched when Greece attempted to annex the now-defunct Republic of Cyprus created by the London and Zurich Agreements (1959).

Of course, one might argue that taking part

in the Korean War, in which Turkey fought side-by-side with the United States, and the Cyprus Peace Operation do not seem to be too compatible with a country claiming to have an anti-imperialist foreign policy. However, one should keep in mind that Turkey fought in the Korean War in order to be admitted to NATO (this happened in 1952), a reorientation that was the result of a unilateral decision by the Soviet Union in 1945 not to renew its Friendship and Cooperation Agreement (1925) with Turkey, while at the same time laying claim to the two easternmost cities of

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Turkey (Kars and Ardahan) and asking for a high hand on the Turkish Straits. The Cyprus Peace Operation, on the other hand, had to be launched when Greece once again tried to expand its territory at the expense of Turkey by attempting *Enosis* or the unification of Cyprus with Greece, and only after Turkey had explored all other options for a joint action with the two other guarantor powers, the UK and Greece, to no avail. Here we also need to mention that in this period, any Turkish involvement in a military operation outside its borders was based on adherence to instruments of international legitimacy, such as a UN Security Council decision and/or an international agreement.

#### SNAPSHOT IN TIME

Thus, when the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey was a reliable and predictable partner in NATO. With its strong armed forces (fourth in NATO after the U.S., France, and the UK), Turkey was a country to reckon with for any adversary and reliable power when a need arose to form peacekeeping forces, fighting global terrorism, and so on.

In 2002, Turkey was also an active member with a good reputation in all pan-European and global organizations like the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the OECD, UNESCO, and the UN due to its wide-ranging political, economic, and cultural assets.

At the same time, Turkey as an “associate member” had a Customs Union Agreement with the EU and was expected to enter full membership negotiations. Turkey’s Western orientation and shared values would have made this last mutually beneficial in many aspects—above all, to meet the challenges of our times that had been grouped together under Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” moniker.

Moreover, Turkey had friendly relations with all the Balkan countries. It played an important role in the region in the wake of the Yugoslav civil wars and helped to make possible in many ways the soft transition for Bulgaria and Romania from membership in the Warsaw Pact to their joining NATO.

In addition, as a majority Muslim country with its secular democracy and its place in European and world politics, Turkey was a role model for nearly all Arab countries. The fact that Turkey was on excellent terms with Israel and all the Arab countries—except Syria (due to its support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan)—was also useful: its unique diplomatic posture enabled it to play an important role in the Middle East Peace Process in the wake of the Madrid Peace Conference (1991), especially in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Group.

Lastly, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Turkey was able to establish close and fruitful relations with Azerbaijan and the Central Asian ex-Soviet republics, many of which had Turkish descendance or, in one way or another, held an affiliation to the Turkish nation. Turkey was able to show the way and assist these newly-independent states to come into contact with Western institutions and organizations, including NATO.

Now, this too needs to be said. Turkey in those days had a carefully planned strategy and it handled its diplomatic initiatives and its cooperative relationship with the West in a professional manner, especially in the context of the Balkans and Eurasia. As a result, this posture did not prevent Ankara from having friendly and close relations with its powerful neighbor and historic adversary, Russia. This was the case even with regards to delicate issues, such as the 1990 Treaty on the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)—one of the landmark documents of the end of the Cold War. Truth be told, Turkey had better cooperation and understanding on the part of the Russian Federation than with its NATO partners in the course of the CFE negotiations.

I am afraid all this is now history.

#### THE FALL

When the AKP came to power in 2002, everything that constituted and governed Turkish foreign policy decisionmaking for nearly a century was put aside. If I were to describe the foreign policy of Turkey in the AKP era in one sentence, then it would be sufficient to say that it is decided, adjusted, and altered on a daily basis—sometimes even a few times in the course of a single day—according to the needs of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: the AKP leader, former prime minister, and current (starting in 2014) President of the Republic of Turkey.

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Since 2002, Turkish foreign policy decisions have been based on assessments made by people with insufficient knowledge and experience in the field of foreign relations. Such people are neither able to properly read events and trends nor understand what is going on in the world; most of the time, they have a false perception what is the purpose of a country’s foreign policy.

Even worse, most of the time foreign policy decisions and the initiatives that follow have been formulated and executed above all to satisfy and boost the ego of Erdoğan’s domestic followers, under the guidance of Islam in general and one specific sect in particular (Sunni Islam).

In other words, since 2002, an influential and respected regional player has become “proactive” in foreign policy—in the words of Ahmet Davutoğlu, a former AKP foreign minister and prime minister. This led to Turkey oftentimes directly interfering in the domestic affairs of various countries in its neighborhoods, which almost always produced disastrous results—both for the countries in question and for Turkey itself.

Take the case of the Muslim Brotherhood. Especially after the Arab Spring, Erdoğan decided that the time had come for Turkey to lead the Middle East, thinking that the Muslim Brotherhood would come to power in most if not all Arab countries and that it would in turn accept Turkey under Erdoğan as its leader.

It did not take long for this surrealist dream to turn into a disastrous reality. Just about a year after Mohamed Morsi came to power following Hosni Mubarak’s removal from office, the United States in particular and the West in general, which had for years promoted “moderate Islam” as an alternative to dictatorships in much of the Arab world, turned its back on Morsi by supporting Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s military coup d’état against him. This brought to an end the short-lived rule of the Ihvan-Muslim Brotherhood in the most important and influential of all Arab countries.

Moreover, the negative attitude of Saudi Arabia and most of the other GCC countries towards both the Muslim Brotherhood and Erdoğan’s support for that Islamist movement led, in the end, to souring of relations with virtually every Arab country and Turkey’s isolation in the Middle East.

Lastly, Erdoğan’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood, coupled with his occasional comments in favor of jihad, did not help his reputation in either the East or the West. Suspensions of Turkey’s intentions in both quarters grew, given the negative feelings and fears towards radical Islam were on the rise in important capitals around the world.

Then, of course, there is the Israel-Palestine question. Now, the State of Israel is a lasting reality in the Middle East as well as a crucial actor as far as peace and stability in the region is concerned. So is the State of Palestine. Even during the first few years of AKP rule in Turkey, Ankara was able to maintain balanced relations both with Israel and the Arab states. Such a relationship had many advantages—not the least of which was the ability to draw on what we can call its “convincing power,” which was beneficial to both Israel and Palestine and perhaps more so to the latter.

However, as soon as Ankara adopted a foreign policy based on religious sectarian principles and opted for a

one-sided approach to the Palestine question, Turkey’s relations with Israel quickly deteriorated and the country lost its leverage with the Jewish state. When this attitude was coupled with Erdoğan’s stand vis-à-vis Hamas, which defines itself as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, it afforded an opportunity for those that wanted to label Turkey as a country that supports terrorism to do so. In the meantime, Israel entered into new engagements with Arab states like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain whilst relativizing its ties with Egypt and Jordan, both partners in the bilateral peace treaties with Israel. This had the consequence of further isolating Turkey in the region.

And then, of course, there is the Syrian affair. When President Bashar al-Assad was faced with the Arab Spring and his regime was destabilized on purpose by the United States, the AKP government made another crucial mistake: it joined the Obama Administration in order to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish entity in Syria after Iraq. This decision defied basic geopolitical logic, as Assad was the guarantor of the territorial and national integrity of Syria, which meant that he had a vested interest in keeping the Kurds under control, just as Saddam Hussein once did in Iraq. A united Syria under a strong central government was in the interest of Turkey and this had been proven when the PKK’s Öcalan

was obliged to leave Damascus and was captured in Kenya by Turkey before being tried and convicted of various crimes and jailed in 1999.

Contrary to the AKP’s expectations, joint U.S.-Turkish intervention in Syria created a number of serious problems for Turkey. *First*, it precipitated the rise of ISIS. *Second*, it led to the de facto dismemberment of Syria. *Third*, it resulted in the YPG—seen by Turkey as a mere extension of the separatist PKK—becoming America’s favored and highly-protected partner. And *fourth*, it contributed to the establishment of a Kurdish zone in northern Syria, east of the Euphrates River.

As time went by, Turkish military operations against Kurds in this zone created new difficulties in Turkish-U.S. relations, as these operations were seen by America as acting against its interest in Syria. Moreover, the Turkish military presence in northwest Syria—centered around Idlib—soon evolved into a thorny subject between Turkey and Russia and, to some extent, with Iran (Moscow and Tehran are Assad’s two staunchest foreign supporters).

The Syrian affair also revived the historical rivalry between Turkey and Syria’s best regional ally, Iran. At the same time, in an episode that surprised even most seasoned observers, Turkey and Brazil (at the time, both were UN

Security Council term members) tried to broker a nuclear fuel swap deal with Iran in an action that was perilously naïve at best or, as the West saw it, constituted an act supportive of Iran's clandestine nuclear activities that, I could add, should have been seen as a grave security risk by Turkey too, given its shared border with the Islamic Republic.

The Turkey-U.S. joint venture in Syria also gave a much-wanted opportunity to Russia to realize its centuries-long desire for unimpeded access to a warm sea. In this particular case, Russia's strong comeback to the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean ought also to have been seen more clearly for what it was from a national security perspective: the attempted encirclement of Turkey from the south.

The disastrous Syrian affair proved once again the veracity of the most basic rule of a foreign policy: to keep a country's options open. The AKP's failure to do so represents a further stinging indictment against the manner in which it has conducted Turkish foreign policy since 2002. Erdoğan's recent futile efforts in New York and Sochi to mend ties with both the U.S. and Russia in September

and October 2021, or at least to play these two against each other without any success, clearly showed that AKP's foreign policy had left Turkey with no option at all. And thus, alas, Turkey could be said now to be helpless—certainly

no longer a master of its own fate.

### NEO-OTTOMANISM AND THE WEST

Another aspect of Turkey's new approach to foreign relations is predicated on the idea that harking back to its Ottoman imperial past, which purposefully had not been done since 1923, provided it with a sort of "strategic depth"—based on an accumulation of

necessary knowledge and experience—to enable it to play a determinant role in the Middle East and the Balkans.

This approach was also introduced by Davutoğlu. In a 2013 speech, for instance, he indicated that

the last century was only a parenthesis for us. We will close that parenthesis. We will do so without going to war, or calling anyone an enemy, without being disrespectful to any border; we will again tie Sarajevo to Damascus, Benghazi to Erzurum to Batumi. This is the core of our power. These may look like different countries to you, but Yemen

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and Skoplje were part of the same country a hundred and ten years ago, as were Erzurum and Benghazi.

Again, this approach, introduced by Davutoğlu to the Turkish public even before he entered politics, was readily adopted by Erdoğan. The problem was that the Ottoman period was perceived and termed by the countries of the aforementioned regions—nearly all of which had spent centuries under Ottoman rule—as "Neo-Ottomanism."

Thus, the problem with this aspect of AKP foreign policymaking is that it overlooks the simple fact that both in the Balkans and the Middle East, the Ottoman legacy does not have a good reputation: this period is, by and large, deplored and even detested in the historical narratives of the relevant nations; they believe that the Ottoman period is a principal reason for why they now lag behind the developed world. This may or may not be true, but the fact is that, just like old habits, old beliefs and old perceptions die hard.

One final point on this: when Ankara tried to use local muftis and the President of the Directorate of Religious Affairs of Turkey (the state institution is known as the Diyanet) to conduct its foreign policy in the Balkans, eyebrows were raised even in those parts of Bosnia in which the Ottoman heritage is positively perceived.

Things have also not gone well for Turkey in the West. When Turkey purchased S-400 air defense systems from Russia in 2017—it is believed to have been a compensation for the Russian fighter jet downed by the Turkish air force at the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015—the United States reacted negatively, irrespective of the fact that the system has never been made operational. Turkey was then left out of the U.S.-led F-35 Fighter Project notwithstanding the fact that it was a joint producer of the aircraft; Turkey was also made subject to sanctions by the U.S. under its 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Russia did not miss the opportunity and tried to drive a wedge between Turkey and the West, thus weakening NATO solidarity while keeping Turkey under constant pressure in theatres like Syria.

Even though Turkey, as a NATO partner, had in the past tried to obtain cutting-edge Western air defense systems—for instance, America's Patriot system—but had been refused, still the acquisition of S-400 air defense systems led to an even deeper questioning by NATO. The handling of this issue by Erdoğan and the AKP—notwithstanding the fact that Turkey actually had a good and defensible reason for acquiring the Russian system—was so far from being professional that some NATO allies even went as far as to claim

that Turkey was departing from her NATO allegiance. This perception—no matter how false it may be—was counterproductive, to say the least, in instances in which Turkey needed to have NATO partners by its side. A good recent example of this the delimitation of the continental shelf and the exclusive economic zone in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Relations with the EU did not fare better either. During its first years in power, the AKP gave the impression that it was for “democracy,” adhered to “European values,” and would cooperate with the EU on various issues. It did indeed, certainly at the onset, but primarily to solidify its power and to, if not totally eliminate, at least weaken the country’s longstanding institutions. Special emphasis was placed on the Armed Forces, so as to avoid the possibility of a coup against the AKP.

At the onset, certainly, the EU happily gave its full support to this and similar AKP policies, which had as their effect the distancing of Turkey from what the new leaders in Ankara most feared, namely Kemalism. This was a two-way game deliberately played by the EU on one side

and the AKP on the other: the AKP used the EU as a leverage to change the secular and democratic political system of Turkey whilst the EU uses these same changes as

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a pretext to block Turkey’s EU accession process while fully supporting Kurdish separatist ideas in order to make Turkey more “digestible”—a term frequently mentioned even in official EU circles since 2015.

#### **PRECIOUS SOLITUDE? VALUABLE LONELINESS?**

The record of the AKP’s conduct of Turkish foreign policy

since 2002 is clear: deteriorated relations countries, both East and West, coupled with the posing of challenges to leaders of the major powers. This was done for no apparent logical strategic reason save for acquiring and maintaining domestic popularity.

The cumulative result of all this is that Turkey now finds itself in a state of “precious solitude” or “valuable loneliness,” as Davutoğlu once put it. However, no matter how romantic and attractive the label may be in some domestic circles, Turkey is more and more isolated; this has made defending even its most vital national interests more difficult.

Take for example the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, as mentioned briefly above. The United States and the EU openly took the side of Greece

against Turkey on the issue of the continental shelf in the Aegean. Similarly, despite the fact that Turkey has the longest coast in the Eastern Mediterranean, nearly all the coastal states of the region (Syria, Israel, and Egypt) signed

continental shelf and exclusive economic zone delimitation agreements with Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of South Cyprus. Turkey was able to reach a disputable deal only with Libya.

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The effectiveness of the foreign policy of a country can be measured; and the most relevant measuring stick is the rate of success a country has

in achieving its national interests. In this short evaluation, I have tried in earnest to tell the story of the rise and the fall of Turkish foreign policy since 1923. I leave it to the readers of *Horizons* to decide whether Turkey under the AKP has conducted a con-

sidered and successful Turkish foreign policy. To provide an affirmative answer, the reader would need to explain what exact national interest Turkey has achieved since 2002. ●