



# CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

## RECONCEPTUALIZING TURKEY'S ROLE AS A RISING POWER IN REGIONAL POLITICS

*Sinan Ülgen*

**T**URKEY is approaching a critical electoral threshold. By mid-2023 at the latest, the Turkish electorate will go to the polls for a combined presidential and legislative elections. Recent polls indicate that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is losing support and the electoral race is now wide open.

In other words, it is becoming increasingly likely that Turkey will witness political change, which could have significant implications not only for domestic politics but also foreign policy.

It will therefore be important to evaluate the nexus of change and continuity for Turkish foreign policy in the years to come. This evaluation will firstly require a stock taking.

### FROM A HOPEFUL BEGINNING ...

**T**he past two decades of AKP rule was marked by three different foreign policy proclivities. The first decade is properly viewed as a continuation of Turkey's legacy foreign policy outlook, as the newly established political leadership espoused similar goals as previous administrations. For instance, the strengthening of Turkey's ties with its transatlantic partners was a core objective—in particular, a focus was maintained on EU membership.

Consequently, in the wake of a series of critical domestic reforms, Turkey was finally granted the green light to initiate accession negotiations with the EU in 2004. Regionally, Turkey strove to leverage its position as a reliable, geo-strategic, partner acting as a bridge between the West and constituencies in the



*Today's architects of Turkish foreign policy: Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan*

Middle East. It is during those years that Ankara engaged in careful diplomacy to nurture improved ties with Syria, and also acted as a mediator in long standing divisions between Israel and Syria.

Furthermore, in this period, the country's foreign policy outreach was helped by a burgeoning economy and, as a result, Turkey could contemplate enriching its soft power instruments. Gradually, the country was able to become a more important actor in international development and humanitarian assistance. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) became engaged in a growing number of regional assistance

projects. Turkish Airlines initiated its ambitious journey to grow its international network, gradually transforming Istanbul into a global air transport hub. The success of Turkish soap operas enhanced Turkey's international image. And, thanks to the leadership of three successive foreign ministers (Abdullah Gül, Ali Babacan, and Ahmet Davutoğlu), during this period the Turkish diplomatic network expanded, eventually becoming the fifth largest in the world, overtaking even France and Germany.

In short, in the first decade of this century, the Turkish leadership was able successfully to combine the continuity

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in the main tenets of its foreign policy with elements of change and innovation in its diplomatic practice. The end result was the transformation of Turkey into a more visible and potent actor on the world stage.

Two examples best illustrate this phenomenon. After a 48-year absence, in 2009 Turkey was elected to term membership in the UN Security Council. Moreover, Turkey's transformation rekindled global interest in the "Turkish model." As a country that had successfully combined democracy, modernity, economic growth, and Islam, Turkey became a source of inspiration for the Arab states that, it was predicted, were well-positioned to accomplish a seamless transition to democracy in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Paradoxically, it was that same Arab Spring, which was triggered in late 2010 by events in far-off Tunisia, that ultimately upended Turkey's foreign policy strategy. The Turkish leadership saw in the Arab Spring an unalloyed opportunity to elevate the country's regional influence. This vision provoked a clear break with Turkey's past behavior and marked a new beginning for its international diplomacy.

Thus began the second era of the AKP-led Turkish foreign policy, shaped firstly by a reconceptualization of Turkey's identity and its potential role as a diplomatic actor. During much of his time as Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu led this intellectual effort and received the backing of then-Prime

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Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in this challenging, ambitious, and yet, ultimately unsuccessful endeavor.

The main driver of this change was ideology. Namely, Turkey's ruling political elites wanted to redirect the country's foreign policy to reflect the changing

nature of the domestic political landscape. At the core of this thinking was the understanding that since the early Republican years, Turkey had been forced to follow the West in ways that were inimical to its national interests. Such a one-dimensional alignment was largely due to the geopolitical circumstances of the Cold War, but also because Turkey's generations of then-secular leaders wanted the alliance with the West to work. They envisioned this alignment with the West as a tool to complete the transformation of Turkish society and the adoption of Western social norms. These included secularism and gender

equality, and constituted part of the core of Kemalism and a legacy of the Atatürk-era reforms.

Yet, from the perspective of the AKP leadership, this categorical and virtually unconditional alliance with the West was antithetical to centuries of the country's heritage. As the successor nation of a great empire, an economically emboldened Turkey should have been able to move beyond these limits and adopt a more independent foreign policy that was more aligned with its Muslim and Ottoman heritage.

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In contrast to the ideational role of foreign policy in the Republican years, Turkey's new foreign policy—which came into life after the first decade of AKP rule—was to support a societal ideal that was more influenced by religion and socially conservative values. In addition to this more domestically-shaped narrative, changes in the international system had also seemingly provided an opening for a more ambitious Turkish foreign policy. The geopolitical consequences of the end of the Cold War, combined with the prospect of democratic upheavals in Turkey's southern neighborhood, supported the option

of a more strategically autonomous foreign policy. Thus was the Turkish leadership enthused by the potential of being in the driver's seat of what it perceived as being an inevitable historical transformation of the region.

### **...TO THE CHALLENGE OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY**

The second phase of the AKP era was thus characterized by more ambitious foreign policy goals that were to be pursued in increasingly confrontational theaters. Despite this difficult backdrop, the new narrative of an influen-

tial Turkey becoming a cornerstone of the new regional order captivated the imagination of the country's domestic audience. After years of accumulated frustrations in the country's dealings with the West—in part stemming from the perceived duplicity and double-standards of the EU—the domestic constituency was ready to embrace the espousal of a more ambitious rhetoric defining the new Turkey and its international role.

The first radical departure from the traditional tenets of Turkish foreign policy was Syria. After having unsuccessfully striven to convince the regime

headed by Bashar al-Assad of the need for political reform, Turkey changed tack and embraced an agenda of regime change. The case of Syria represents the first time in history that Ankara used its power to attempt to oust a regime in a neighboring state.

The Turkish government became part of a large campaign that involved support to civilians but also armed opposition groups in Syria. The hope was that the Assad regime would quickly succumb to a combination of domestic and international pressure and would, in short order, be replaced by political actors benefiting from the support of the majority Sunni population of Syria. It was on the basis of such an understanding that led the Turkish authorities also to adopt an open-door policy to Syrian refugees. After all, the thinking went, Assad had only a few weeks left in power. The more the Syrian regime proved resilient—thanks in no small part to the provision of support by Iran and Russia—the more Turkey became a safe haven for a growing number of refugees from Syria. As a result, Turkey today hosts the largest number of refugees in the world.

The second manifestation of Turkey's abandonment of its traditional foreign policy principles was the

newfound willingness of its leadership to better position the country in the middle of internal political struggles taking place in foreign states. The ruling AKP had established close relations with various political movements in the region that all traced their roots back to some form of political Islam—with the Muslim Brotherhood being a case in point. The hope was that these movements would rise to power in their respective countries, leading Turkey—as their strong backer—to become the dominant external actor in each of them.

In hindsight, what should have remained a political party strategy was transposed full-on into state policy. Consequently, Turkey found itself a party to the internal disputes of foreign countries. In Egypt, for instance, Turkey was seen to be very supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood-led Mohamed Morsi government. Once Morsi was ousted after little over a year in office, Turkey's relationship with the succeeding Egyptian government, headed then and now by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, was deeply tainted. Furthermore, the evident support to political movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood was also at the core of Turkey's damaged relations with the Gulf states (except for Qatar).

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The third point of departure relates to the nexus between domestic politics and foreign policy. For a long time, foreign policy in Turkey was viewed as being almost hermetically sealed from domestic political considerations. Foreign policy decisionmaking had been under the prevailing influence of the Foreign Ministry, which was staffed almost exclusively by professional career diplomats. The military was also an influential actor in areas of strategic relevance. The political leadership had the final say, sure, but it was essentially swayed by the calculations, assessments, and recommendations of these two powerful, professional institutions.

Under the AKP, the balance of power shifted to politicians—to the detriment of the institutional players. In many ways, Turkey lurched from one extreme to the other. In the olden days, the body politic was heavily influenced by institutional thinking, with little interest in the domestic impact of their calculus. In the new Turkey, the body politic wanted no institutional pressure. Foreign-policy-making disassociated itself from the “weight” of these institutions and increasingly became guided and even led by domestic political concerns.

The shift away from a parliamentary system and back to a presidential one as a result of a April 2017 constitutional referendum accentuated these negative changes and further usurped the institutional underpinnings of Turkish foreign policy. Decision-making became opaquer and increasingly driven by a close set of presidential advisors.

As a result, Turkish foreign policy became less predictable, changing its agenda in accordance with fast-moving domestic objectives. This shift was accentuated by a change in the foreign policy

rhetoric as well. The highly-polarizing and combative language of Turkish domestic politics began to permeate the country's foreign policy discourse. The public speeches of the Turkish leadership had made foreign countries and leaders just as much of a target as domestic opposition figures.

Unsurprisingly, the end result of these radical departures from the traditional tenets of Turkish foreign policy proved to be detrimental to Turkey's aspirations to project its prestige, influence, and power in its neighborhood(s). In fact, Ankara became more isolated and its relations

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with established partners in the West became increasingly antagonistic.

All this finally compelled the current leadership to recalibrate its approach to Turkish foreign policy. The rhetoric towards the United States and the EU

became less incriminating and combative. Ankara has also undertaken de-escalation measures in the Eastern Mediterranean. Diplomatic openings were initiated with a view to improving bilateral relations with the region's countries including Israel, Egypt, and the UAE—even some type of normalization with Armenia appears to be on the horizon. It is the form and longevity of this recalibration that will determine the future trajectory of Turkey's diplomacy.

**LOOKING TO THE NEXT DECADE**

Turkey's foreign policy inclinations in the next decade will essentially be determined by how its political leadership will decide to conceptualize the country's role as a rising power. A major element of continuity in Turkey's international relations will therefore be its self-perception of its new role. Regardless of whether Turkey ends up with a different constellation of political leadership after the critical 2023 elections, Ankara's self-assessment of being

a rising power in a multipolar world will be a permanent fixture of Turkey's future diplomacy.

As briefly examined in this essay, this identity has been interpreted over the past decade in a way that encouraged

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unilateralism. Turkish policymakers intended to demonstrate both domestically and to outside actors that the country had acquired the capability to conduct an independent foreign policy. The tensions inherent to this type of accentuated unilateralism further complicated policymaking and undermined the traditional alliances of a country already exposed to the many instabilities stemming from the Middle East. But these tensions also played an important role in nurturing a domestic narrative about Turkey's indomitable rise and the negative reactions of outside powers that wanted to constrain and contain Turkey's foreign policy activism and autonomy.

The end result of Turkey's tarnished ties with its traditional allies in the West and its neighborhood(s) have demonstrated the limits of the illusion of Ankara's strategic autonomy. Indeed, despite its aspiration, Turkey remains firmly anchored in the Western community of nations. In addition to being

a NATO member, over 40 percent of the country's exports are destined for EU member states and another 6 percent or so each to the UK and the United States. In addition, Turkey gets most of its foreign direct investment (FDI) and technology from Western countries. EU member states account for almost 70 percent of all incoming FDI, with another nearly 10 percent accounted by the United States.

Against this backdrop, the 2020 economic downturn, compounded by a sharp drop in FDI, a negative foreign investment balance sheet (excluding real estate), and a lowering of credit risk scores—and, more recently, a spike in inflation and a downturn in the value of the national currency—are to be associated with these frail political relations.

The next phase of Turkey's foreign relations paradigm will therefore be marked by how well the country's growing capabilities—but also its ambitions—can be reframed to allow for a more cooperative foreign policy pattern. This objective will in turn require three fundamental changes.

The *first* is the decoupling of foreign policy from domestic political considerations. A new balance will have to be

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found between the need for a democratic government that is accountable to its electorate and the need for a more mature and predictable foreign policy. This new understanding should be instrumental in containing the proclivities of the ruling elites to instrumentalize foreign policy for domestic goals.

This objective will be greatly facilitated by a *second*, namely the re-institutionalization of foreign policy. As discussed above, the transition back to a presidential system has led

to the erosion of the role of traditional institutions (e.g., ministries) in the policymaking process—to the benefit of the presidential administration. This is also true of foreign policy, where the role of the Foreign Ministry has been diminished. This domain requires rebalancing, which would reempower the traditional institution of policymaking. Such a rebalancing would improve the predictability of Turkey's foreign policy, as the heavier weight of the relevant institutions could more effectively counter the tendencies fueled by exclusively domestic political considerations.

*Third*, the country's foreign policy re-transformation will be more effective if Turkey's partners respond positively to such an agenda of change. The United

States and the EU—Turkey’s strategic allies in the domains of security, defense, and economy—can help Ankara in its bid to develop a new understanding of how Turkey, as a rising power, can prioritize positive sum scenarios. For instance, Washington will need to alter its approach and start to engage constructively with the Turkish leadership to tackle the corrosive set of bilateral problems, including the ongoing U.S. relationship with the PKK-linked Syrian PYD and the dysfunctionalities in defense industry cooperation. At the same time, the EU will need—at the very least—to cease its obstructionism regarding the launch of an ambitious trade agenda and endorse the start of the negotiations for a modernized Customs Union between Turkey and the EU. The outcome of new nego-

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tiations to reach a fair and lasting model of cooperation on the refugee issue will be of equal importance.

At bottom, what is at stake in the next decade is the identity of Turkish foreign policy. A departure from what marked the past decade—unilateralism inspired by a strong yearning for strategic autonomy—is already under way. This change in approach is evident in the more recent efforts at diplomatic rapprochement with allies and regional partners. Ultimately, the success of this transformation will be conditional on a clear demonstration of intent by the country’s leadership that Turkey, as a rising power, needs to establish a more constructive and cooperative relationship with its main allies. ●