



Policy Brief

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Turkish foreign policy – between East and West?

By Amanda Akçakoca

Background

Over the past decade, there has been a fundamental shift in the way Turkey's political elites shape the country's foreign policy. Ankara has become more proactive, assertive and independent; less focused on traditional hard power and more on a 'diplomacy-first' approach.

This new reality is based on Ankara's innovative 'strategic depth' and 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. This approach aims to "end disputes and increase stability in its neighbourhood, replacing disagreement with cooperation; seek innovative mechanisms and channels to resolve regional conflicts; encourage positive change in the region; and build cross-cultural bridges of dialogue and understanding". At the same time, Turkey is expanding its economic and political influence in its surrounding neighbourhood.

This represents a considerable shift not only from the days of the Cold War but also from the 1990s. Then, Turkey's foreign policy priorities and goals – as a crucial NATO member in an unstable but strategically important part of the

world – were determined by the powerful military and the Kemalist establishment. This relied on classic hard-power tools, reactive rather than proactive actions, and pressure from outside powers, with the US having a particularly overwhelming influence.

The first signs of change emerged in 1999, following the earthquakes that took place in Turkey and neighbouring Greece. These opened the door to a political *rapprochement* between the two historic enemies which had been on the brink of war just a few months earlier. It was also in 1999 that Turkey's EU membership prospects were given a boost when it was granted candidate country status at the December European Council. Anchoring Turkey in the EU accession process gave it the confidence to develop a less hard-security and more democratic foreign policy.

Ankara's own neighbourhood policy

This intensified following the landslide election victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, when Turkey

began to improve and deepen relations with its neighbours, including those to its East and South. Further reforms carried out at the EU's behest began to affect the military's role in Turkey's political and public life (including foreign policy), although it still remains far from EU norms.

This foreign policy reorientation has already delivered tangible results, with Turkey improving relations with some neighbours with which it had somewhat hostile relations only a short while ago, including with Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

In Iraq, although Turkey has repeatedly conducted cross-border military operations against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), it has combined this with a new approach towards Baghdad and the autonomous Kurdish local administration in Northern Iraq. More recently it launched its own 'Kurdish Initiative' designed to better integrate its own Kurdish population by improving economic and social conditions in the south-east of the country as well as granting

it increased cultural and linguistic rights. Lately, Ankara has also made considerable efforts to resolve its historical difficulties with Armenia, starting with 'football diplomacy' and now through direct bilateral talks.

It has also begun to play a mediating role in a range of conflicts

to demonstrate that, thanks to its multiple regional identities and ramifications, it is in a unique geopolitical position and bound to become an all-round regional player. These include mediating between Lebanese factions, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, Hamas and Fatah, Syria and Israel, and most recently – following Iraqi

accusations that militants based in Syria were responsible for bomb attacks in Baghdad – Iraq and Syria.

Such diplomatic activism also helps to explain why Turkey succeeded in being elected to a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2009-10, for the first time since 1961.

State of play

However, some aspects of this reorientation – particularly Ankara's increasingly close ties with some regimes in the Middle East – have not been particularly welcomed by many in Turkey. They have also often been perceived by the West as a sign that Turkey is turning away from its traditional allies, especially since they were shaped at a time when Ankara's relations with both the US and the EU have been strained.

There can be little doubt that under the AKP, Turkey has become more sympathetic to – and engaged with – its Muslim neighbours than previously. The somewhat erratic, unpredictable and occasionally naïve behaviour of its leadership has also caused concern.

The ill-conceived visit of Hamas leader Khaled Meshal after the AKP's election victory in 2006 is a good case in point, as was Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's behaviour at the World Economic Forum in January 2009, when he stormed off the stage during a debate in which President Shimon Peres defended Israel's offensive in Gaza. Although widely praised by countries in the region – where Mr Erdogan's popularity soared for saying what nobody else dared to – for some in the West, this seemed to represent something of a watershed moment in Turkish foreign policy.

Mending fences with the US

This trend was particularly strong during the final months of former US President George W. Bush's administration, when Turkey's relations with Washington reached an all-time low as a result of US policy in the Middle East. In fact, however, this perceived 'shift' has been less to do with Turkey turning away from the West and more to do with keeping pace with the new realities of post-Cold War geopolitics in its own neighbourhood, as well as coping with US policies in the region, a resurgent Russia and the evolution of Turkish democracy itself.

Since Barack Obama took office, the US has moved quickly to try to turn this around and relations have improved, not least with the President's visit to Turkey early on in his term of office, when he clearly underlined that Turkey was a key ally for the US by accepting it as a crucial regional player and stakeholder. In return, Ankara has used every opportunity to offer Washington its services as a mediator or to liaise on a whole host of issues, including Iran's nuclear programme.

Turkey, which has 900 troops in Afghanistan and will take over NATO's Regional Command Centre covering the Kabul area in November, has also been one of only a handful of countries to

respond positively to President Obama's request to send additional troops to Afghanistan – although, admittedly, it started from a very low level, particularly given the overall size of its army (and especially its infantry forces).

Still, it is becoming evident to Turkey that promoting regional stability and good regional relations may sometimes have to take precedence over relations with Washington. Ankara is discovering that many of its strategic geopolitical aims are incompatible with those of the US. Its initial strong opposition to Anders Fogh Rasmussen's appointment as NATO Secretary-General because of his stance during the Muhammad cartoon dispute also caused considerable friction between Ankara and its NATO allies. It is therefore not surprising that, as the latest Transatlantic Trends survey shows, America's 'image' has not improved in Turkey as significantly as elsewhere since President Obama's election.

Russia – a new strategic partner?

While the West remains an important partner, Turkey is no longer content to put all its eggs in one basket. A visible sign of this is Ankara's upgraded relationship with Moscow. Relations between the two countries have been improving over the last few years principally

because of the increased tensions with Washington and difficulties with the EU over Turkey's membership hopes.

This new-found friendship with the Kremlin often results in potential conflict of interests between Ankara and the West. For example, like Russia, Turkey opposes a large-scale US presence in the Black Sea; it has never been overly supportive of the NATO ambitions of Georgia and Ukraine; and its criticism of both Russia's invasion of Georgia and its subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was relatively mild. Turkey, which is heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies, chose instead to engage with the Kremlin, and this has significantly boosted their bilateral relations in recent months.

Moscow and Ankara also have increasingly important economic ties, with trade volumes amounting to some €26 billion in 2008 – and set to more than double in the next four years, making Russia Turkey's biggest commercial partner. Turkey is also currently Russia's second largest outlet for natural gas and is viewed by Moscow as a possible new transit country for its energy resources, rather than simply an export market. Bilateral energy ties are set to increase further with the construction of the Blue Stream II project and Turkey's decision to join the South Stream gas project. Furthermore, on a trip to Turkey in August, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin offered Turkey an energy deal worth some €27 billion.

Playing the game in the Southern Caucasus

This increasingly close relationship with Russia has also allowed Turkey to play a greater role in the Southern Caucasus, a region where it has strong ties but has only been able to assert limited influence, in part because of Russia's strength and in part because of its own closed border with Armenia.

The war in Georgia, which exposed the West's inability to act, left a vacuum which Turkey has partially filled, using it as an opportunity to expand its own influence.

First came the creation of Ankara's Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which excluded the US and the EU and has declared that its main goal is to resolve all regional issues (especially conflicts, frozen or not) through Russian-Turkish mediation.

To accomplish this, however, Turkey needs to normalise relations with Armenia while at the same time maintaining its strong relationship with Azerbaijan, which may prove a difficult balancing act. Intense diplomatic efforts have been underway between Ankara and Yerevan, under Swiss mediation, for more than a year. On 31 August, Turkey and Armenia announced the details of a Roadmap for normalising bilateral relations, including opening the border. The parties initialled two protocols setting out the steps to be taken towards resolving contentious issues, including a reappraisal of Yerevan's views on the Armenian genocide during and just after World War I.

To allay concerns among domestic opposition parties and in Azerbaijan, the Turkish government emphasised that the final decision would rest with parliament and that Baku's views would be taken into account during the parliamentary process. However, strong nationalist opposition in both countries makes ratification far from guaranteed.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan argues that the border – which has remained closed since 1993, following Armenia's war with Azerbaijan and Armenia's subsequent occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding regions – should only be opened once Armenia withdraws from the occupied territories.

Turkey has been quick to reassure Baku that it will not proceed without some movement on this, even though there is no mention of Nagorno-Karabakh in the agreement reached with Armenia. If Turkey were to go ahead, it is hard to predict exactly what Baku would do, but gas projects planned to transit Turkey from the Caspian Sea could be further delayed – although not abandoned, as it would not be in Baku's interests to cut back on its export options. At the very least, the special relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan would, in the short term at least, be damaged.

Nonetheless, as a result of its new approach, Ankara has gained the right to discuss the Southern Caucasus and Nagorno-Karabakh both bilaterally and regionally – something it was unable to do before.

Prospects

Nagorno-Karabakh is now one of the main issues on both the Turkey-Russia and the Turkey-US agendas. With a number of meetings due to take place in the coming days, including within the

framework of the OSCE-Minsk Group it is therefore not impossible for there to be simultaneous movement on Nagorno-Karabakh in the near future coinciding with the Turkey-Armenia *rapprochement*.

However, although Russia seems to be playing ball now and supporting Turkish efforts, the Kremlin's unpredictability means historic rivalries could surface once again, replacing the current climate of cooperation, at some

point in the future. Given Russia's own 'resurgence', it will only continue to play a constructive role as long as its own interests are taken into account: in this region, this means security and energy. The on-going competition between the West and Russia over rich Caspian (particularly Azerbaijani) gas reserves may therefore impinge on what Turkey is able to achieve.

Furthermore, the black cloud of the 'Armenian genocide question' could still derail the process and hamper Turkey's bigger ambitions in the region. The efforts of the Armenian diaspora and the support it receives from key US politicians will ensure that this issue will not go away anytime soon, and will continue to cast a shadow over the progress made by today's Turkey.

Consolidating its objectives

This new multi-faceted approach has put Turkey on the path towards becoming a sizable regional power and a stakeholder in its neighbourhood, by consolidating its clout in its traditional Ottoman-era sphere of influence: the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia, and the wider Europe. The old notion that Turkey is a country linked exclusively to the West has been set aside. The common vital interests that tied Ankara and Washington together during the Cold War have significantly weakened, and Turkey will no longer toe the US foreign policy line when this goes against its own strategic interests.

Neither will it feel obliged to align itself to every EU foreign policy action or statement as long as Brussels persists in its ambiguous

attitude towards Turkey's eventual membership. Ankara has already demonstrated this in its energy policy, by frustrating the EU with its approach towards the Nabucco Natural Gas Pipeline: here Turkey's goal is to make the most of its unique geostrategic position by becoming the world's largest energy hub, transporting natural gas and oil from many different sources.

At the same time, however, it is unlikely that Ankara will adopt an anti-Western foreign policy any time soon, given the solid economic, political and military links built in recent decades with both the US/NATO and the EU. Ankara will pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy which reflects its own interests both in and beyond its own neighbourhood and continue to build strong ties with its neighbours, even if this means raising a few eyebrows in the West from time to time.

Turkey was one of the first countries to congratulate Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his re-election. On the other hand, Ankara's careful mediation with Iran has helped its European allies and partners by, among other things, securing the recent release of British embassy staff in Tehran.

Furthermore, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu recently proposed an increase in the number of dialogues between Turkish and EU officials to discuss common foreign policy concerns and issues in their neighbourhood(s), and ensure both sides are better informed about each others' initiatives and plans.

The EU needs to keep Turkey strongly anchored in the process

because any further deterioration in relations may push Ankara further away. The increasingly close contacts between Turkey and Russia in the 'post-Soviet space' over the last few years demonstrate the possible consequences for the Union of worsening relations. This could include pushing the EU further and further out of the Black Sea region, which is already dominated by the Turkey-Russia duo.

Yet again, however, Turkey will have to be careful not to spread itself too thinly in its efforts to be everything to everybody everywhere. The AKP would also be well-advised to build more consensus within the country on foreign policy decisions, rather than being perceived as having a parochial agenda or being liable to external pressure.

Finally, there is the key question of whether such a successful reorientation of Turkish foreign policy – in terms of strategic goals, political means, and diplomatic partners and interlocutors – is an asset or a liability in its EU accession process. Stressing Ankara's special geopolitical position and ties could play either way: it could highlight Turkey's unique value-added for an ever more ambitious EU 'power', or it could underline its structural diversity and emphasise the divergence of interests between Brussels and Ankara.

Amanda Akçakoca is a Policy Analyst and Programme Executive at the European Policy Centre. The issues raised in this paper are discussed within the EPC-TUSKON Turkish Insights Project.

European Policy Centre ■ Résidence Palace, 155 rue de la Loi, 1040 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 (0)2 231 03 40 ■ Fax: +32 (0)2 231 07 04 ■ Email: info@epc.eu ■ Website: www.epc.eu



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