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THE FOREIGN POLICY OF TURKEY – BETWEEN TRANSATLANTICISM AND ORIENTALISM

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ABSTRACT: The article explores the transformation which the Turkish foreign policy has been undergoing in the last decade since the post-Islamist Justice and Development Party had come to power. Whereas in the cold-war era Turkey concentrated its foreign policy on bolstering the alliance with the United States and on efforts to join the European Communities, last couple of years have seen the country diversify its international engagement. Turkey has been using 'new' instruments, such as soft power, to build up its regional status. Yet, the ambitious foreign policy is constrained by the regional developments, the Arab Spring turmoil being the prime example.

KEYWORDS: Turkey, foreign policy, Arab Spring

INTRODUCTION

FOR OVER FOUR decades of the Cold War era, Turkey was part of the Western bloc. The Soviet threat made Turkey turn its back on the neighbourhood and imposed a close, yet not untroubled partnership with the United States, with American soldiers and nukes deployed on Turkish soil. Having contributed soldiers to the Korean war, Turkey soon became member of NATO. Since the

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early 60s, Ankara has been striving to join the European Communities. Hence, the bipolar order unambiguously defined Turkey's transatlantic credentials.

After the demise of the bipolar order, Ankara had to reinvent its foreign policy and redefine its strategic interests regarding its closest neighbours. As noted by Gülnur Aybet, when the Cold War ended, Turkey struggled to determine its place within the transatlantic community (Aybet 2010: 141). The 90^s are often dubbed the "lost decade", both as far as Turkish domestic and foreign policy is concerned. Turkey was hit by internal crises – political (the velvet *coup d'état* in 1997, frequent government turnover) and economic dire straits. In external relations, it was punching well below its weight, experiencing extremely tense relations with its neighbours.

Under the government of the Justice and Development Party which took office in 2003 (and has been governing the country ever since, which is an extraordinary situation in the modern history of the country), Turkey has been trying to purse a more active policy *vis-à-vis* the neighbouring regions, the Middle East being the most striking example (AKP Parti Programi 2002). For the last ten years, Turkey has been seeking the status of a regional power. Thus, it is important to explore what foreign policy tools this state is leveraging to enhance its international clout; and looking from the transatlantic perspective – how the geopolitical outcomes of the Arab Spring reshape Turkey's regional policies. The article attempts to address these questions.

TURKEY AS A 'NEO-GAULLIST' STATE

The 'new' Turkey under the rule of the post-Islamists has been trying to manage a multi-dimensional policy, which means that it has a comprehensive perception of its foreign relations – a good rapport with one country does not preclude a strategic alliance with another – this is a departure from the Cold War era, in which Turkish foreign policy was monopolized by transatlantic, Western outlook. Graham Fuller, describing the Turkish foreign policy, states that today it is at once, "independent, nationalist, Islamist, pan-Turkish, global and Western, and the challenge lies in the integration and reconciliation of those varied interests" (Fuller 2008: 169). Turkey cherishes, on the one hand, the alliance with the United States, on the other – intensifies relations with Russia. It is active in the post-Soviet area, increasingly visible in Africa and, last but not least, tries to bolster its status in the Middle East. As justly noticed by Ayşe Zarakol, the post-imperial states attach huge importance to building of their prestige and status in the international arena and to gaining of recognition and respect among other players. Whereas for several decades Turkey had been attempting to build its international prestige by closely affiliating itself with the European Union, today it falls back on more sophisticated strategy of increased activity in the region, presenting itself as the leader of the Middle East (Zarakol 2012: 739–745).

Thus, recent years have seen Turkish foreign policy adapting to the new, post--Cold War, more flexible international context, which does not ascribe Turkey to only one strategic option. Turkey is no longer a "prisoner of a narrow concept of geopolitics", which characterized its relations with the US for many years (Lesser 2006: 83). In other words, the West lost its sanctified place in Turkish strategic considerations (Ülgen 2010: 11). As a result of transformation of its internal politics, Turkey has engaged in increasingly independent, assertive, 'non-aligned' and sometimes even challenging foreign policy. In one of his television interviews, Prime Minister Erdoğan recalled his conversation with Vladimir Putin, in which he expressed the readiness for Turkey's membership in the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, in lieu of integration with the European Union. Of course, as commented by Sami Kohen, a seasoned Turkish journalist, today such pronouncements should be perceived as a tall story (Kohen 2012). However, they aptly illustrate the state of mind not only of the post-Islamic government circles, but also of the wider Turkish political elite. The Cold War 'no alternative' for western orientation in foreign policy was replaced by Turkey intensifying relations with Russia, Brazil or China. The example of the latter - the tentative decision made by Turkish defense industry authorities to purchase Chinese missile defense system - has perplexed Ankara's Western allies.

Therefore, one needs to agree with Ömer Taşpınar, who, recalling the French experience of the 60s, writes about "Gaullist Turkey". Turkey which is aware of its own potential and independent of the USA, rejecting the role of a "strategic protectorate" of the West. The activities undertaken by Ankara on the international arena are sometimes concurrent with the goals set by Washington and Brussels, and sometimes divergent, but the issue is not that Turkey is becoming more anti-western, more Oriental or Islamic, or that it implements a *neo-Ottoman* vision of its foreign policy. As stated by Ahmet Davutoğlu – the country's foreign minister – in his *Strategic Depth*, the oft-quoted seminal work on the 'new' Turkish foreign policy, "Turkey is unable to cut itself away from Europe, neither geographically nor historically" (Davutoğlu 2008: 550). An alternative for the Kemalist, a pro-European, secular Turkey is not an Islamist, theocratic, anti-

-European and anti-western one – such a false dichotomy was presented several years ago by Zbigniew Brzezinski (2005: 62). The binary, zero-one schemas which assume that Turkey can be either pro-western or anti-western are anachronistic in the era when new powers arise. It is true, however, that Turkey is becoming increasingly "ideologically agnostic", and its international identity is more and more multi-dimensional.

No doubt that in the new international order the USA and the European Union will find it increasingly difficult to manage relations with the emerging, less predictable "*neo-nonaligned*" powers (Lesser 2011a: 8). In this new era, a partnership between Turkey and the West will be more of *á la carte* and frequently *ad hoc* style. It shall be, as one of the researchers stated, fuelled by convergent (national) interests of both sides, and not by the amorphous notions of geopolitics and identity (Lesser 2010). Integration with the EU structures is no longer perceived in terms of identity. For those who rule Turkey today, the European identity is only one of many identities that the country holds. The policy adopted by the AKP towards the EU is the result of sensible calculation of profits and losses, and not of unconditional attachment to the idealized West. For the Justice and Development, membership in the EU is only an instrument that would enable Turkey to anchor its internal reforms and facilitate integration with the increasingly globalized world. This, in turn, is expected to bring measurable economic benefits.

TURKEY AS A SMART POWER

Paradoxically, as relations with the EU and the United States cooled off, Turkish foreign policy and instruments used by the state have become more western in nature. Ahmet Davutoğlu, formulating the objectives of foreign policy of the 'new' Turkey and prospects of normalizing relationships with the country's neighbours, recalled the example of the post-war reconciliation between France and Germany, which, by intensifying their economic and cultural contacts, managed to overcome political and military crises and restore peace on the shell-shocked continent (Davutoğlu 2011: 144–145). Until 2011, Turkey attempted to treat its Middle East neighbours in European style, and replaced the hard power elements of its foreign policy – confrontation and containment – with instruments of dialogue, engagement and *soft power*. In other words, instead of *securitizing* relations with its neighbours, which was the case in the 90s, Turkey wanted to build stability zone in the Middle East region. A renown Turkish scholar Kemal Kirişçi notes that the goals that Turkey wanted to achieve in its relations with neighbouring countries and the instruments used do not differ much from EU ambitions pursued under the European Neighbourhood Policy (Kirişçi 2011: 27). Juliette Tolay sees Turkey as the embodiment of the new, idealistic concept of post-modern, borderless world (2011: 134). By promoting the free flow of people (thanks to the liberalization of the visa regimes with neighbouring countries), as well as trade (TUIK 2013), Turkey relinquished the realistic perspective of the regional balance of power and the perception of international relations in binary, zero-sum categories, and adopted a more liberal concept of openness and interdependence.

One of the Turkish journalists characterized the new image of the Turkish foreign policy in the following way: "[...] significant steps were made to turn Turkey into a regional power. One of the fundamental elements of this policy [after AKP came to power] are the friendly relations with neighbouring countries. The other one is the proactive strategy in foreign policy. An example of that policy was initiative taken as regards the Cypriot and Aegean issues" (Çevikalp 2007). The active and initiative-taking Turkey became one of the most important players in the region. This new activity of Turkish foreign policy is displayed primarily in the intensification of economic relations with Middle Eastern countries. "AKP's victory can help solidify Turkish self-confidence in foreign affairs, as the country assumes a less defensive and more active, and in many ways a more constructive role regionally and internationally" (Barkley, Çongar 2007).

TURKEY AS A 'LONELY PLANET' IN THE REGION

A cold shower for Turkish ambitions and dreams of a "global superpower" came along with the Arab Spring and the subsequent geopolitical shifts taking place in the Middle East. The Arab revolutions have clearly shown how constrained Turkey's potential to influence the regional politics really is. Turkey's weaknesses have already been noticed and elaborated upon by the US Ambassador to Ankara, who in a cable dated January 2010, disclosed by *Wikileaks*, stated that "Turkey has the ambitions of a Rolls-Royce, but the capabilities of a Rover" (Yeni bir Ortadoğu doğuyor 2010). Today Turkey, just as in the 1990s, is surrounded by hostile countries, such as Cyprus and Israel. Relations with Syria, which have improved significantly over the past decade and were a testing ground, or even a textbook example of the new foreign policy of the new Turkey, turned out to have very fragile foundations. Today both countries are, in fact, again at war, as they had been back in 1998. In the last couple of years, rising tensions, or indeed hostility, marred Turkey's relations with Iran, and the divergent interests of the two countries' regional policies are increasingly overt. The audit of Turkey's and Iran's interests in the region shows that in most areas these two are rivals, not allies. Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, reaction to regional developments in the wake of the Arab Spring, relations with the West – on all these issues the interests and goals of both parties are irreconcilable. This should come as no surprise – after all, it is hardly possible for two post-imperial states, with different identities and with regional ambitions, to remain allies in the long run. The same could be said of the deteriorating relations between Ankara and Baghdad.

The Arab Spring led to a radical re-evaluation of Turkey's geopolitical setting. The "zero problems with the neighbours" paradigm, being the idealized concept of peaceful but unrealistic foreign policy, was replaced by the reality – "zero neighbours without problems". Ivan Krastev concluded that there is "zero chance for zero problems" (2011). Some pundits of the Turkish foreign policy note that the Davutoğlu doctrine boiled down to "zero problems with authoritarian regimes" and point out, as evidence, to the fact that in 2010 – shortly before the wave of changes in the region took off – Prime Minister Erdoğan accepted the Human Rights Prize, granted by Muammar Gaddafi (*sic*!) (Vatan 2011; Milliyet 2011). Turkish politicians did not find it appalling to mingle with authoritarian leaders of the Middle East.

The Arab revolutions have illustrated the tension between the two dimensions of the Turkish foreign policy – the normative and the *Realpolitik* one. When economic interests were not threatened, Turkey would spoke loudly of the need for democratic changes in the region. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the first foreign politician who, broadcast by Al-Jazeera television, called president Mubarak to step down. The case with Tunisia is similar. But when the interests of Turkish businessmen were closely linked to the regime in force, Turkish authorities were much more reserved in their "pro-democracy zeal". A good example is the Turkish position on Libya, where Turkish businessmen invested billions of dollars; or the case with Syria, where the additional factors defining Ankara's policy were border issues, and the Kurdish problem.

Changes occurring as a result of the Arab Spring have demonstrated that the neighbourhood is not a place where Turkey can engage in idealistic, unilateral and independent policy. Co-operation with the West, which had been optional

for Turkey over the past decade, has now become an imperative. Turkey has realized that its strategic role it plays in the Middle East does not stem from the fact that it is a Muslim power – there are plenty such countries in the region – but from the fact that it is a Muslim power with strong ties with NATO and the EU. The influence exerted by Turkey in the Middle East results simultaneously from its Western, European identity and from the Muslim, Middle Eastern one. Without the European – or, more broadly, Euro-Atlantic anchor, Turkey would have been one of the many prosperous, large Muslim countries, but with no added value for the region's security and stability.

At the same time, Turkey has made efforts to build its attractiveness for the Arab societies through rising autonomy in the international arena, and through the ability to oppose the interests of Western countries and Israel in order to defend its own national goals. Closer relations with Israel in the 1990^s should be perceived as an abnormal, unreal process, not fitting in the geopolitical reality and contradictory to the identities of both countries – especially given the fact that Turkey is governed by a post-Islamic party, while a nationalist party co-rules Israel. The anti-Israel moods of the Turkish public add to the picture. As Turkish society gained subjectivity and more influence on the decision-making processes, a breakup of the Turkish-Israeli relations was inevitable. Çengiz Çandar was, therefore, right to say that Turkish-Israeli relations in the 1990^s – despite being called strategic – in fact were opportunistic, given Turkey's ambitions regarding the region (2010: 10).

The post-Arab Spring geopolitical setting again pushes Turkey into closer co-operation with the USA, NATO and the European Union. As noted by Emiliano Alessandri and Joshua W. Walker, the post-Ottoman area is too large and too unstable for a single state to be able to shape it – and such ambitions have beendemonstrated by Turkey over the past decade (2012). Several years ago, Turkey was punching well below its weight, but recently it has overestimated its capacity and potential. Hence, the analysts are right to speak of overblown ambitions, while the capacities and potential of Turkish foreign policy remain limited.

The events of the past two years have laid bare not only the administrative, organizational and financial constraints of Turkey, but also the geopolitical limitations of managing a "Turk-centric" policy in the Middle East. Turkey simply cannot afford to remain in a "not-so-splendid isolation", to recall the term which characterized British foreign policy of the late 19th century. We currently see the growing convergence of strategic interests of Turkey, the USA and Europe. Turkey remains very strongly integrated into the transatlantic structures and institutions – not only through its NATO membership. Turkish leaders have understood that with the dynamic changes occurring in the region, "the benefits of NATO are more important than the image of a non-aligned state" (Outzen 2012); and it was one of the reasons why they agreed to station the elements of the American missile defense shield on Turkish territory. This led to discontent with Turkey's neighbours, mainly Iran and Russia. The same countries protested when the transatlantic allies – the USA, Germany and the Netherlands – deployed Patriot missiles in Turkey. Teheran even accused Ankara of getting ready for a military invasion on Iran.

Periodic discrepancies in Turkish-American relations do not mean that Turkey intends to break up the alliance with the US, which has been in force for decades. The same can be said of the relations with the European Union. Even if accession negotiations proceed as slowly as they do now, the alliance that has been formed over many years is too strong, and the benefits for both parties too large, for a breakup of the partnership between Turkey and the EU, or more broadly, with Europe.

After ten years of using new instruments of foreign policy – dialogue, mediation, promotion of trade relations and the faith that *soft power* does indeed work miracles – it becomes unavoidable, due to vital geostrategic interests, for Turkey to turn again towards the *hard*, power-based policy instruments. Mehmed Ali Birand wrote in one of his columns that, "in this region [the Middle East] *soft power* is not enough" (Birand 2011). Soli Özel stated, in a similar vein, that the use of the soft instruments has "hid the paradox that Turkey's entire strategy was predicated on, and its popularity was a function of, the existing status quo in the Arab world. Turkey could balance its dual goals of working with regimes and insinuating Turkey into all regional problems, including inter-Arab politics, while endearing the country to Arab populations and perhaps inspiring them, only as long as the Arab world remained stagnant" (Özel 2011: 73).

We are currently witnessing the third wave in Turkish foreign policy (Yenigün 2010: ^{63–86}; Lesser 2011b). The first one was the period of Cold War and the 1990s. The second – the decade of the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) with its idealized, sometimes grotesque rhetoric and the *zero problems* mantra, which symbolized the policy of 'love' in relationship with neighbouring countries, whereby the *securitized* policy was replaced by trade interests and bonds with the transatlantic partners – the USA and Europe – by increasingly closer ties with the region's regimes. Today, the third wave of changes in the

region and the destabilization of close neighbourhood force Turkey to resort to hard instruments, including brinkmanship. As stated by Emiliano Alessandri and Meliha Benli Altunişik, the events of the Arab Spring forced Turkey to use instruments of *smart power* instead of *soft power* (Alessandri, Altunişik 2013: 4). Indeed, if Turkey wants to be an influential actor, it needs to use both hard and soft instruments. The idealistic, long-term vision must be coupled with pragmatic and reactive actions, undertaken in the short-term perspective. In other words, Turkey must learn how to balance its historical and cultural, idealistic vision of the foreign policy with a larger dose of pragmatism and *Realpolitik* (Kahraman 2011: 706).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Second decade into the government of Justice and Development Party, Turkey has moved from being a peripheral country to a more central player. For many years, Turkey has been perceived as a satellite of the West, a flank in the Cold War, or a buffer holding back the expansion of Soviet influences in the Middle East. Nowadays, it engages in more autonomous, independent policy, and is thus becoming a frontline state. Turkey is striving to emancipate itself from the limitations of the international system which for years determined its position in the international order – making it not the subject, but rather the object of 'big game' played by the superpowers in Cold War rivalry. The re-discovered, multi-faceted or hybrid cultural and geographical identity – location in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus all at once – makes Turkey a key partner, albeit not always an easy one, for the West – the European Union and the United States. It can no longer be passed over in geopolitical calculations.

Turkey should be perceived by the EU and the USA as an important strategic ally – especially as the USA gradually withdraws from the broadly defined North Africa and Middle East and the centre of gravity of its politics *pivot* to the Pacific. Turkey is key to filling this gap and an important factor in stabilizing the Middle East. The developments in the Middle East, with Syria and Iraq actually being failed states today, mean that Turkey holds geopolitical and strategic sway and is an important element of the geopolitical shifts occurring in the region. This is important in times of shaping the new paradigm of relations in the Middle East, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and with new regional set-up. The *orientalization* or, put differently, the *re-ottomanization* of Turkish foreign policy does not imply Turkey is abandoning its pro-western orientation. The West should not be taken aback by the fact that Turkey is engaged on many fronts – in political and economic terms. Washington and the European capitals have to come to terms with the new reality in place whereby the rising powers – and Turkey certainly is one of them – become autonomous players and their foreign policy is no longer a simple function of American or Western interests. Mustafa Akyol rightly notes that Ankara is not abandoning the West, but rather the xenophobic foreign policy which characterized the self-contained Turkey for decades (Akyol 2008). Replacing the Cold War policy of self-inflicted isolation in the region, Turkey is attempting to act as a regional leader. It no longer wants to react to changes occurring in its neighbourhood – it wants to shape that neighbourhood. From an introvert state, it has changed into an extravert one, open to co-operation not only with partners from the region, but is also endeavoring to tighten ties with other rising powers.

From the Turkish perspective, relations with the United States and the European Union remain key, both from the standpoint of its internal policy and international relations. If the EU accession process becomes more dynamic, this will allow Turkey to anchor and consolidate the on-going, albeit bumpy, democratization processes. Moreover, the image of Turkey as a modern democracy and functioning economy in the Middle East is to a large extent dependent upon its affiliations with the EU. In one of the interviews, Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that, "integration with the EU is the strategic, historic choice of the Turkish nation [...]. Our involvement in other regions is an advantage in our relations with the EU, and not an alternative for the EU". Looking at the other side of Atlantic, relations with the USA and NATO will remain the main pillar of the security policy of Turkey, which today is a lonely planet in an unstable region of the Middle East.

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