

# LOOKING FOR A NEW STRATEGIC IDENTITY:

30

IS TURKEY EMERGING AS AN INDEPENDENT REGIONAL POWER?

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IS TURKEY EMERGING AS AN INDEPENDENT REGIONAL POWER?



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## Summary

- The recent flurry of Turkish diplomatic activity appears to be projecting an image of a dynamic and assertive international actor. The various moves that the Turkish leadership has made of late in the international arena, however, seem to have created some confusion among Ankara's partners and neighbours.
- The perceptions of Turkish international behaviour vary. The spectrum of opinions appears to be exceptionally broad, ranging from seeing Turkey as turning its back on the West to viewing Ankara's foreign policy as being well balanced *toutes directions*, to characterizing Turkey's conduct as being essentially "directionless".
- In reality, Turkish behaviour is shaped by both domestic and external factors. It is being influenced by the shifts in the country's international identity and the changes in Turkey's vision of its new geopolitical role, which themselves are the result of the powerful forces that are bringing about deep transformations within Turkish society and politics.
- At the heart of the current Turkish foreign policy is a quest for a new strategic outlook and action that would enable the country to pursue an independent path on key regional issues and maintain balanced interactions with all its neighbours.
- Turkey's increasingly independent course, while undoubtedly possessing a significant positive potential, is likely to encounter formidable challenges. Furthermore, Turkey's ambitions might well be constrained by the lack of resources needed to pursue a genuinely independent and assertive foreign policy.
- For Turkey's Western allies, a still bigger question is whether Ankara is able to balance the nationalistic public attitude and the need to continue working closely with Europe and America.

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Prime minister Erdoğan storms out of a debate on the Middle East in Davos  
Photo: World Economic Forum

## Debating Turkey

Turkey is a country that appears destined to provoke debate. Ankara's recent foreign policy activism is a case in point. For quite some time, the Turkish top leadership has been tirelessly criss-crossing the globe – from Algeria to Saudi Arabia and from Russia to Azerbaijan. Everywhere they go, the Turks tend to air new diplomatic initiatives, offer mediation, advance blueprints for new regional security regimes and, last but not least, seek to boost trade ties. There is one feature, though, that cannot fail to catch the eye: almost all of Turkey's foreign policy moves over the last couple of years have a pronounced Eurasian and/or Middle Eastern bent.

This remarkable shift in the emphasis and orientation of Turkish foreign policy has generated a wary response on the part of Ankara's traditional Western allies – the United States, the European Union and NATO. The Western attitude to what appears to be Turkey's change of direction can be characterized as a mixture of cautious encouragement and serious concern. The key questions that trouble Western analysts would appear to be these: To what extent will Turkey's new assertiveness and ambitions

remain compatible with the West's strategic objectives? How independent is Ankara prepared to be in crafting good neighbourly relations with the countries that the West regards as "problematic"?

There appears to be a wide range of opinions with regard to the present-day Turkish international conduct. There is a growing concern among at least some of Turkey's Western allies that Turkey is increasingly moving away from its pro-Western orientation and the Euro-Atlantic institutions in which it has been anchored for half a century. Instead, this outlook holds, Turkish foreign policy's centre of gravity is shifting towards other regions, mostly the Muslim Middle East. Such a shift is explained by the markedly increased role Islam has come to play in shaping Turkey's foreign policy – the result, the argument goes, of the coming to power in 2002 of the mildly Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP).

According to a more benign view of Turkey's recalibration of its foreign policy priorities, Ankara's aspirations to play a more assertive and independent role in its immediate geopolitical neighbourhood should be seen as complementary

(rather than contradictory) to its more traditional Western strategic alignments. For the proponents of this view, Turkey's growing regional role is not necessarily incompatible with U.S. or EU policies. On the contrary, the adherents of this position contend, Ankara's enhanced regional profile might well be regarded as an asset value that potentially increases Turkey's strategic attractiveness for its Western partners. What the EU is aiming at is a stable and peaceful neighbourhood with which to develop increasingly close ties. For the U.S., too, what matters is the pacification and resolution of conflicts in the region, also as a way of preventing terrorism from growing. Furthermore, as the U.S. is looking to withdraw troops from Iraq, Washington would welcome Ankara's help in creating a stable environment in the war-ravaged country. In the Caucasus, where Russia appears intent on bringing the ex-Soviet republics back into its orbit, the U.S. seems to be encouraging Turkey's enhanced posture. Turkey is well able to contribute to reaching these goals while pursuing its regional agenda – provided it reinvigorates efforts to realize its European bid. President Obama's two-day visit to Turkey in April at the end of his European tour appears to be a sign of Turkey's growing regional prominence.

However, a wholly unflattering view is also harboured by both the external critics of Turkey's conduct and the domestic detractors of the AKP government, who basically accuse Ankara of pursuing a highly contradictory foreign policy devoid of any clear-cut conceptual or strategic underpinnings. For these critics, the AKP's foreign policy outlook is at heart a highly unprincipled one, being influenced mainly by populist considerations, naked opportunism and the desire of the AKP elite to retain political power. The result is chaotic policies and a "directionless Turkey".

### **New strategic identity taking shape**

To be sure, it would be a gross oversimplification to believe that the shifts in Turkey's strategic orientation are driven solely by the AKP elites' religious affiliation, greed or the lust for power. The electoral victory of Turkey's "moderate Islamists" back in 2002 and the steady popular support that the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül – almost 39% of the vote

in the local elections in March – has been enjoying since then are themselves the result of the powerful processes that are reshaping the socio-political life of the country. Among the historical forces driving change are:

- a) the spectacular economic development in the Anatolian hinterland;
- b) the broadening of the elite through the emergence of the new ambitious provincial social actors, who are economically dynamic and culturally conservative;
- c) the increasing role of elected officials and thus also a stronger government.

These changes generate important shifts in national identity, leading (among other things) to the rise of religious sentiment, which paves the way for identification and affinity with Turkey's Muslim neighbourhood.

These factors serve to strengthen the already strong nationalist attitudes and the notions of Turkish exceptionalism. As a result, Turks are less inclined to perceive their country exclusively through the Western (European) prism and are becoming more confident in their current geopolitical status. Moreover, they are enthusiastically embracing their pre-republican history, particularly the imperial Ottoman past. All these changes cannot fail to reshape Turkish views of the contemporary world and of their country's place in it. The key elements of this new vision are, on the one hand, a relative weakening of the "Western dimension" of Ankara's international strategy (including the relations with the U.S., the accession to the EU and the membership of NATO) and, on the other hand, a relative strengthening of the "regional vector" (including Turkey's ties with its Middle Eastern neighbours and the countries of the post-Soviet Eurasia).

Remarkably, it was only recently that the trend towards greater strategic independence acquired solid conceptual underpinnings advanced by the new Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's former foreign policy advisor. In Davutoğlu's strategic vision, Turkey's geopolitical position is drastically revised. Instead of being perceived as a perennially peripheral country that sits on the outer margins of the European Union, NATO or Asia, Turkey, Davutoğlu and the



Map: Ville Hulkkonen

like-minded theorists contend, should be seen as being located in the very heart of Eurasia. This location links Turkey directly, both geographically and historically, with such strategically important regions as the Middle East, Caucasus and the Balkans.

These multiple ties (the valuable “strategic depth” – the notion so close to Davutoğlu’s heart) open up a golden opportunity for Turkey to build its foreign policy not along one strategic axis (for example, a Western one) but along several alternative axes. It is this (re)conceptualizing that has underlaid Turkey’s activist foreign policy over the past several years. Ankara’s new strategic vision, in the words of one astute Western commentator, “is at once independent, nationalistic, Islamic, pan-Turkist, global, and Western”. However, the true challenge, the commentary continues, “is to integrate and reconcile these various interests with specific policies”.

### **Middle Easternization of Turkey’s foreign policy?**

Over the past several years, Turkish foreign policy has become more diverse, both geographically

and strategically. Ankara’s new, and seemingly more ambitious international outlook appears to be driven by three main factors: the shifts in Turkey’s own international identity, new threat perceptions, and an acute awareness of the intimate interconnectedness between external and domestic developments.

Turkey’s growing strategic interest in and involvement with the troubled region of the Middle East is a perfect illustration of those important factors at work. First, revisiting certain historical and cultural dimensions of the Ottoman identity led Turkish policy elites to reshape the country’s self-perception as well as the vision of its regional role. The territories (mostly the Arab lands, formerly incorporated into the Ottoman imperial realm) which had long been seen by the republican Kemalist thinkers as lying beyond Ankara’s geo-strategic ambit, now came to be viewed as being within the sphere of Turkey’s geopolitical responsibility. Moreover, seeing themselves as the proud successors of the Ottoman overlords who ruled the Arab Middle East for half a millennium, AKP’s top policymakers prefer to regard themselves as being not just politically but also morally responsible for what is transpiring in the region. The regional mediation



Armenian Church of the Holy Cross, recently restored by the Turkish Ministry of Culture

efforts can be seen as an example of such a self-perception.

Second, in the Turkish view, it is the Middle East and not any other adjacent region that currently poses the greatest number of threats to the country's security. These threats stem mainly from the still highly volatile situation in Iraq, the uncertainties and risks associated with Iran's nuclear programme, and the whole gamut of conflicts fuelled by the unresolved Palestinian problem.

Finally, seeing the direct linkage between the domestic situation and external developments, AKP's strategists and politicians, being, as they are, both shrewd populists and calculating pragmatists, tend to be well attuned both to the fluctuations of public attitudes in Turkey and to the possible impact that the events in the country's neighbourhood might have on internal stability.

It is the combination of these three factors that is behind what is generally labelled as Turkish activism in the region or even the "Middle Easternization" of Turkey's foreign policy. The latter term appears to encompass the whole range of Ankara's multifarious endeavours in the Middle East, including such activities as helping stabilize Iraq, offering Turkish facilitation in opening the dialogue between Washington and Tehran, mediating in repairing Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the one hand and with Israel on the other, and nudging the warring Palestinian factions towards reconciliation.

Yet it would be naïve to simply attribute Ankara's growing preoccupation with the Middle East to Turkey's frustration with its Western allies, amplified by the vainglorious neo-imperial ideology sometimes referred to as "neo-Ottomanism." Rather, Turkey's robust and assertive policies in the region seek to attain a two-pronged, and essentially pragmatic objective. Ankara wants to stabilize its volatile strategic environment and make sure that negative developments in the dangerously combustible region don't affect domestic stability. As pragmatists, AKP politicians see regional stability as a win-win situation both in political and economic terms. For Ankara, a stabilized Middle East is a secure geopolitical neighbourhood and a valuable market for Turkish goods – not an unimportant consideration, particularly at this time of global economic downturn and the dramatic contraction of European demand.

### **Ankara's Caucasus gambit**

The South Caucasus presents yet another case study of Turkish activism and its enhanced regional role. The strategically located swathe of rugged mountainous terrain sandwiched between the Black and the Caspian Seas is of the utmost geopolitical importance for Ankara. The region directly abuts Turkey's north-eastern frontier; it is a strategic corridor connecting Turkey with the energy-rich and ethnically Turkic nations of Central Asia; finally, the South Caucasus is the main energy conduit for the Caspian hydrocarbons on their way to Turkey and beyond to the European markets.



Abdullah Gül in Moscow  
Photo: [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)

Maintaining stability of the volatile region rife with a number of bitter intra- and inter-state conflicts, and guaranteeing security of energy flows constitute Turkey's twin strategic objective in the South Caucasus. In the aftermath of the recent Russia-Georgia war, which threw into doubt both the region's stability and energy security, Ankara has been pursuing – through vigorous diplomatic activity – a two-pronged goal: reaching a major breakthrough in the settlement of regional conflicts and securing alternative energy transportation routes.

Ankara's ultimate ambition is to attain what might be called a grand Caucasus bargain at the heart of which lies the resolution of border disputes between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey and the normalization of the Turkish-Armenian relations. If such a bargain can be crafted with Turkish facilitation, the whole geopolitical and geo-economic equation of the region will be drastically changed and Ankara will emerge as a clear strategic winner.

However, being pragmatists, AKP's policymakers understand all too well that whatever their Caucasus ambitions, they can pursue their objectives only through finding accommodation with Moscow – the South Caucasus being of course Russia's and Turkey's "overlapping neighbourhood." Thus, Ankara's immediate reaction to the Georgian war was to advance a new regional security blueprint – the Caucasus Security and Cooperation Platform – that sees Russia together with Turkey as the two main pillars of any viable regional security regime.

This, however, does not mean that we are witnessing the emergence of an anti-Western "Russo-Turkish axis." True, the Turkish-Russian relationship is extremely important both in the regional (South Caucasus) context and of itself, particularly given its massive energy dimension. Officially, the bilateral relations are characterized as a "strategic multidimensional partnership". Yet, the pattern of actual interaction between Moscow and Ankara is infinitely more complex. In reality, Russia and Turkey – the two post-imperial and fiercely independent international actors – are engaged both in cooperation and strategic competition, also in the geopolitically pivotal South Caucasus. The competition is not only over pipelines, it is also over neighbours. With Turkey being entrepreneurial in normalizing its relations, Yerevan, for instance, might be drifting away from Russia, to the great concern of the latter.

#### **What should the West make of it all?**

The Turkey that Europe and America are likely to deal with in the foreseeable future is a different kind of geopolitical animal – one that the Western allies appear to find difficult to get used to. Unlike in the 1960s or even in the 1980s, when Turkey was a lacklustre developing country and a supplicant of the West, depending on its rich patrons both economically and strategically, the present-day Turkey is the 17th largest global economy, a member of the G20 and, as of late, a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. In short, the Turkey of today is more self-assured, assertive and strategically

independent than during the whole of its republican history. At the same time, the country is still a very “modern” state – in contrast to a very “post-modern” EU – whose outlook is deeply anchored in the notions of indivisible sovereignty and nation-state.

All these factors, coupled with the pronounced tendency to act independently where and when it sees fit, including in those regions the U.S. and the EU also view as key to their own interests, make Turkey a difficult partner. At least two aspects of Ankara’s international stance are unlikely to change: 1) from now on, Turkey will not allow anyone to take it for granted; 2) the Turks will continue cooperating with the West but, whenever possible, they will seek to engage partners on their own terms. Remarkably, the EU, Turkish political thinkers now contend, should no longer be perceived as an indispensable institution confirming Turkish European identity; it should rather be viewed, they argue, as a useful instrument contributing to Turkey’s regional (if not global) stature. With a clear identity of its own, Turkey can profit from being seen as part of a larger whole – such as the Union – in furthering its own agenda.

Yet, fundamentally, Turkey’s ultimate strategic interests and those of the West largely coincide. The Turks want to see their immediate strategic environment – be it the Middle East or the South Caucasus – stable and open for business, being fully aware of the close linkage between political and economic dimensions. Europe and America want the same thing – and for the same reason. The exact ways to attain the goal may indeed differ, but ultimately Turks and their Western partners are, thus far, on the same page and moving in the same direction.

What causes concern – in the West but also among critical thinkers in Turkey – is Ankara’s ability to pursue its ambitious international conduct, maintaining both the depth and the breadth of its foreign policy course. Given the sheer number of problems, enormity of the tasks, complexity of the regions, tangled nature of conflicts, coupled with Ankara’s limited resources and the new constraints imposed by the current economic recession, a certain downsizing of the Turkish foreign policy agenda appears to be inevitable. Will Turkey not be compelled, the critics argue, to scale down its ambitions, and prioritize and zero in on a carefully

selected set of problems, instead of pursuing an all-azimuths policy?

A more serious reservation is voiced by those who are not sure whether AKP leaders, prone to populist policies, will be able to harmonize increasingly nationalistic (and hence potentially anti-Western) public attitudes with the stated goal of working closely with the Western partners. After all, the West knows all too well how tricky and messy democracy might be. It is the rise of anti-Turkish sentiment among the ordinary Europeans in some EU member countries that dims the prospects of Turkish accession to the EU. Such a sentiment pushes the governments towards policies that are counterproductive for the bloc’s strategic interests. By the same token, Turkey’s democratically elected leaders cannot ignore the public outcry at home caused, say, by the Gaza war – which explains Erdoğan’s lashing out at Israel’s President Shimon Peres in Davos last January.

Consequently, the bottom line is this: All of Davutoğlu’s inventive mental mapping notwithstanding, the Turkey that wants to really become an influential regional player has no other way to go but to “Europe,” signifying above all the continuation of the EU-inspired reforms. The jury is still out on whether the AKP-ruled Turkey will manage to stay the “European course” or whether it may veer from it.

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