

Ankara's new foreign policy

Turkey turns the tide

Contrary to what its critics think, Turkey is not 'adrift' but shaken by the pitch and roll resulting from a fundamental rethinking of Turkishness.



Turkey's foreign policy suddenly made the headlines in the world media in May 2010. Ankara's attempt, together with Brazil, to mediate in the Iranian nuclear issue and its outraged reaction to the Israeli assault on a

Gaza-bound flotilla organized by a Turkish Islamist non-governmental organization, seemed to signal a break with the country's traditional alignments.

Many analysts, especially in the United States and in Israel, were quick to denounce a fundamental shift in the foreign policy of a nation that had been seen for decades, especially during the Cold War, as a staunch NATO ally standing guard in front of hostile nations.

'Turkey's foreign policy moves raise concern in the West and at home,' reported the *Washington Post* in June 2010. Turkey had been making the headlines even before the flotilla incident and Iranian nuclear issue. In January 2009, *The Jerusalem Post* wrote of Turkey's 'drift away from the West,' while *Newsweek* in an article from November 2009 on Turkey's 'risky diplomacy' struggled to assess whether Turkey had 'shrugged off Europe and the United States in favour of its Muslim neighbours'.

No yea-sayer

Turkey's initiatives and reactions should not have come as a surprise. Ankara, although described as a faithful ally of the West, has never considered itself a servile yea-sayer. Each time it deemed its core strategic interests at stake, it acted unilaterally. The 1974 invasion of Cyprus to protect the Turkish minority after a pro-Greek coup was a clear manifestation of Turkey's autonomy.

Ankara has been coldly reappraising its role and ambitions since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fading away of the

summary

- The West is concerned that Turkey's foreign policy has shifted away from its traditional allies to open up to its Arab and Central Asian neighbours.
- Some critics fear that the ruling party has a hidden Islamist agenda, but others argue that Turkey is merely adapting to changing developments in its region.
- Indeed, Turkey has to adapt. Conflict is rife in the region, with the Iraq War, the Kurdish problem, the ongoing Georgia-Russia crisis and the nuclear issue in Iran.
- Turkey has now taken on the role of mediator in the region, as was evident in its attempts to mediate, with Brazil, in the Iranian nuclear issue.

Soviet threat. As a Turkish diplomat put it, 'the world around us has changed. Turkey has to adapt to the world as it is'.

The 2003 Iraq War crystallized the urgency of change. Suddenly Turkey had to factor in the upheavals brought about by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the rise of Iranian interests in the region, the surge of al-Qaeda, the creation of a quasi-independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq bordering Turkey's own 'Kurdistan', the war in Afghanistan and the worsening regional impact of the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It also had to integrate the rise of new international actors such as China and India, the renewed assertiveness of Russia, the relative powerlessness of the United States – the pillar of its security system – and the growing confusion of the European Union (EU), the ultimate goalpost of its Western political aspirations.

As the world around Turkey was being reshaped, the country itself was undergoing fundamental changes internally. Once seen as the sick man of the West with an economy burdened by high inflation and inefficiency, Turkey moved into high gear and built itself into one of the most vibrant industrial powers.

Alternatives to Brussels

Turkey has averaged an annual growth rate of 7% since 2001, which has ratcheted it up to the 16th slot in the

By **Jean-Paul Marthoz**, professor of international journalism at the Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, foreign affairs columnist for *Le Soir* and senior adviser to the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York, USA.

Globally Yours



Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, October 2010

ranking of the world's largest economies. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development predicts an average growth rate of 6.7% a year between 2011 and 2017 despite the 2009 downturn, and Goldman Sachs bets that Turkey will be the third largest European economy and the ninth largest in the world by the year 2050.

In a Middle Eastern context characterized by lacklustre economies and politically unstable countries, this impressive performance has turned Turkey into a magnet for foreign investments. Turkish conglomerates, from public works to telecommunications, have become key actors in the region. Bolstered by its powerful Istanbul-based industrialists and traders but also by the rise of a new Muslim bourgeoisie, the so-called Anatolian Calvinists, the country is transforming itself into a regional emporium as well as a strategic transit point between Central Asian and Middle Eastern oil producers and Europe.

Turkish foreign policy naturally reflects this 'Turkish lira diplomacy'. Most economic actors are strong backers of their country's full EU membership. The privileged relationship with the largest world market has already provided Turkey with a powerful lever to increase its exports, develop its production capacities and modernize its business practices. Full integration into the EU is seen as a vital step in Turkey's ambition to reach the top tier of world economies.

However, Brussels is no longer the unique and obsessive objective of the Turkish economic establishment. Confronted

with very difficult negotiations with the EU, many Turkish decision makers have been taken aback by President Nicolas Sarkozy and Chancellor Angela Merkel's proposal to develop a strategic partnership instead of full membership.

Rebuffed by what they see as an affront, leading Turkish voices in government and business underline the need for alternatives to the 'Brussels card'.

Playing the grand game

Ankara has opened up to its Arab neighbours, particularly long-time foe Syria. It has developed intense relations with the new Central Asian republics, partly relying on their common Turkic heritage. It has boosted its economic relations with Iran. It has also turned Russia, its 'historical enemy' both under czarism and communism, into its major energy provider and its second biggest trading partner.

This grand game is being played against the backdrop of fundamental political and social changes inside Turkey. The 2002 and 2007 electoral victories of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gul were not just a conventional *alternance* between parties. They expressed a restructuring of the power configuration at the heart of the Turkish system. 'What would have been an entirely normal step in a Western democracy was seen as a blow against the whole Turkish order,' writes Michael Thumann, bureau chief of Germany's *Die Zeit*. >

The AKP, although some of its members hail from Islamist backgrounds, defines itself as a moderately conservative Muslim party. However, the Kemalists – the political, military and business elites that claim the heritage of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded modern Turkey in 1923 – felt challenged by a ‘new class’ allegedly determined to redefine the tenets of politics and society, in particular state-sponsored secularism and the central role devoted to the military.

The AKP has very deftly played the EU card, proclaiming its attachment to democratic reforms. It has used the EU benchmarks for accession to undermine the military and secularist establishment. Indeed, the Copenhagen criteria that determine the democratic threshold for EU membership require the respect of religious freedom, freedom of expression, non-discrimination against minorities and the submission of the military to the civilian government.

Ironically, the party long decried as less modern and less Western because of its Anatolian and devout Muslim roots became the major backer of the EU integration process. In contrast, the Westernized secularists suddenly discovered that European integration meant a weakening of their own power and concessions of Turkey’s sovereignty that they, as nationalists, could not accept.

The Muslim convictions of the new Turkish leadership and of its electoral constituency pushed at the same time for more attention to the fate of Muslim countries and people. Although the AKP refrained from conducting overtly ‘Muslim diplomacy’ and justified its initiatives on the basis of national and rational interests rather than religious affinities, it actively promoted a policy of engagement with neighbouring Arab countries and increasingly showed its sympathy for the Palestinian cause in the Occupied Territories.

A change of tack

The current foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, has introduced a holistic concept – ‘strategic depth’ and ‘zero problems with neighbours’ – to integrate these new developments. More than a collection of catchphrases, it brings back the idea, drawn from Ottoman times, that Turkey has a ‘manifest destiny’ in the region. It also expresses the conviction that Turkey’s national interest lies in securing peaceful relationships with its neighbours and in mediating for these countries to solve their internal conflicts.

This approach, in turn, is meant to help solve Turkey’s own internal problems, especially the status of its Kurdish minority. A violent insurgency led by the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) has been going on for 25 years, and it has been met by a gloves-off counterinsurgency campaign, backed up by pressures on foreign states accused of supporting the rebellion.

Davutoğlu has radically changed the approach. A policy of controlled openness towards the Kurds has been tried in conjunction with the establishment of improved relations with Syria, a country long suspected of helping the PKK. Intense relations have also been developed between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, not only for business deals but also to deter Iraqi Kurds from providing sanctuary to PKK guerrillas.

AKP diplomacy has tried to systematize this policy. To the astonishment of many observers equating Turkey with militarism, the discourse on conflict resolution, peace building and development has become central to Ankara’s foreign policy.

The military still plays a role in these shifting priorities. Turkish troops have been taking part in a number of peacekeeping operations and are training Afghan security forces. However, the AKP government has emphasized the non-military part of peace building. It has offered its good offices to Syria and Israel, Georgia and Russia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Hamas and Fatah.

The tools of soft power

These exercises of quiet diplomacy were tested in May 2010 by a high-stakes attempt, together with Brazil, to mediate for a peaceful solution of the Iranian nuclear controversy.

These efforts were backed up by other tools of Turkish ‘soft power’. In 2008, the Turkish Development Agency channelled almost US\$800 million to 98 countries, building goodwill for Turkey’s peace initiatives – and business ventures.

Turkey’s powerful media companies have also massively marketed their programmes abroad. Influential religious networks like Fethullah Gülen have expanded to dozens of countries, from Central Asia to Africa, bringing a Turkish version of Islam in direct competition with Saudi Wahhabism. Turkish non-governmental organizations and think tanks have been organizing meetings in many countries, from Central Asia to Africa, promoting the ‘Turkish model’ of democracy.

This flurry of Turkish initiatives has been met with a mix of sympathy, mistrust and scepticism. The ‘Arab street’ has been ecstatic. Many Arabs had kept their distance from their former imperial ruler since the end of the Ottoman Empire. They had mostly seen the Ankara secularists as allies of the West and of Israel in the region. Suddenly they were applauding Prime Minister Erdoğan’s expression of solidarity with the Palestinians and his verbal confrontations with Israeli authorities over the Gaza War.

Arab governments were less positive. Turkey’s surge as a regional player was seen as an indictment of their own economic bankruptcy, of their authoritarian rule and of their impotence and ambiguity in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In Jerusalem, tensions with the AKP government were described as a major blow to a very close economic and military relationship that had helped Israel break from its regional isolation.

In Washington, Turkish moves were observed with concern, especially after Ankara’s refusal in 2003 to cooperate with the United States in the Iraq War and the succession of angry scuffles with Israel.

In Brussels, EU officials disagreed on how to interpret ‘over the longer term’ the development of Turkey’s foreign policy, but their hesitations were a sign of their growing preoccupation.



Turkey's growing international influence: Celso Amorim and Ahmet Davutoglu, foreign ministers of Brazil and Turkey, attempt to mediate on the Iran issue in Istanbul, July 2010. Pictured on the right is Iran's foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki

Shared goals

Experts in Washington and Brussels highlighted major weaknesses in the new Turkish foreign policy: the risk of overreach and political inconsistency. Turkey's own record on the Kurds, religious minorities or free-thinking intellectuals, they insinuated, its schmoozing with Holocaust denier Ahmadinejad or Sudanese President al-Bashir, undermined its credibility when it condemned Israeli discriminatory practices or violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza.

Yet no one could provide a definitive answer to the most nagging question: what are Turkey's 'real' intentions? When Davutoglu claims that Turkey is no longer a peripheral country but a 'central country', does that mean that it is losing its Western moorings and reviving a form of Ottomanism which might also herald a disaffection from the West?

This interrogation of Turkey's foreign policy reflects to some extent the perplexity towards the AKP's political agenda inside Turkey. After celebrating the Turkish 'democratic spring' earlier in the decade, many observers underline that the pace of democratic reform has slowed down. In September 2010, the EU hailed the adoption of constitutional reforms that reduced the prerogatives of the army and the judiciary. However, in its November 2010 Turkey Progress Report – which monitors Turkey's compliance with EU standards – the European Commission expressed substantive concerns, in particular concerning freedom of expression and association, the use of force by police and the protection of religious minorities.

More dramatically, the spectre of a rampant Islamicization of Turkey is being brandished by U.S. and European conservatives or secularists. The AKP's 'Islamic hidden agenda', they argue, will not only affect the balance between religion and society in Turkey but also hamper the

integration of the large Turkish diasporas in Western Europe and weaken the security of Israel.

Most mainstream analysts, however, disagree with this vision and suggest a more serene interpretation of Turkey's policies. 'Turkey shares most of its Western partners' goals in the Middle East,' writes the International Crisis Group (ICG), 'such as halting nuclear weapons proliferation in the region, including Iran; a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian question that respects the full rights of both parties; and the elimination of al-Qaeda.'

In an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Hugh Pope, the ICG Turkey expert, dispels right away the spectre of Turkey playing the Islamic card. 'The ruling party's policies remain essentially nationalist, Turkey-centric, and commercially opportunistic,' Pope writes. 'It is a misconception to think of them as Islamist, or even ideological. Whatever the country's problems, Turkey's principal relationships remain with Europe and the United States ... Turkey's engagement with Iran and other hard-line states is based on a wish to modify these states' behaviour, not on a desire to ally with them. Neo-conservative American and right-wing Israeli commentators who interpret Turkey's engagement as evidence of the AKP's anti-American Islamism are thus mistaking tactics for goals.'

Evolution, not revolution

A leading Arab commentator, Rami Khouri, editor-at-large of the Beirut-based *Daily Star*, does not see a Turkish revolution on the horizon, but instead an evolution that, although less dramatic, should not be dismissed either as futile or marginal.

'Turkey is not boldly moving away from its traditional close ties with the United States, NATO, and Israel in favour of strategic links with mainly Arab-Islamic countries,' he writes. 'It is, rather, balancing its relations with all these parties ... Any one party that thinks it can win Turkey totally to its side is probably engaged in wishful thinking.'

For the European Union and the United States, the challenge will be to recognize that, due to its geography, its history and its society, Turkey has its own goals. The test will be to ensure that these goals 'may align with transatlantic policy objectives, even if they come from a different perspective.'

For Turkey, the first battleground to redefine foreign policy will not be international but internal. Its choices will be forged in the ideological battles currently raging between the old Kemalist ruling class, the new AKP bourgeoisie and a small but vibrant group of pro-European liberals opposed to both authoritarian nationalism and Islamism.

The question gets to the heart of the country's identity. Contrary to what its critics think, Turkey is not 'adrift' but shaken by the pitch and roll resulting from a fundamental rethinking of Turkishness.

That process will require redefining the soul of the nation and the nature of the state. It will imply changing the syntax of a political system built for an age of simple truths, ethnic nationalism and religious uniformity. It will mean proposing a vision and values that coincide with a new era of globalization, diversity and complexity. ■