

COMMENTARY

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Turkish Foreign Policy: More Questions than Answers

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The Turkish foreign policy decision-making has not been easy even during the Cold War period when the international environment was characterised by relative stability. At the time, Ankara more often than not sought to balance as best as it could those of its interests which were served by a close association with the Western powers (and namely the US), with those that were better served by seeking good relations with the Muslim countries east of its borders (and even with Moscow).

In recent years, the foreign policy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has showed that there is a degree of continuity in this fundamental approach. Since his Justice and Development Party (AKP) first came to power in 2002 Turkey has made an effort to manage (though not always very successfully) its relationship with Washington and major European capitals as well as the responsibilities which are born by Turkey's membership of NATO.

At the same time, the AKP government from a position of relative internal strength has tried to capitalize on the opportunities offered by the existing distribution of power changes in the Middle East, in order to position Ankara as a regional power broker. To this end, certainly, the Turkish leaders have been greatly facilitated by the weakening of the international legitimacy of the US and the Europeans' lack of a clear vision regarding the role of the EU in the international system.

However, there has also been an important and noticeable difference with the past. Until the late 1990s the foreign policy orientation of the Turkish leaders remained fixed on a Western course, even when Turkey had serious grievances with the US or with some Western European countries. But since the AKP has come to power the essential orientation of Turkey's foreign policy has been open to interpretation and speculation.

Public statements by senior Turkish officials have not managed to dispel the uncertainties surrounding the course that Ankara is pursuing in its foreign policy. In December 2010 Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu told *Foreign Policy*: '... as a Turk, now I am European in Brussels, or Iraqi in Baghdad, Bosnian in Sarajevo, or Samarkand in Central Asia.' The implied assertion is that Turkey has many identities which are reflected in its foreign policy. This approach essentially however, raises many question-marks that recent political developments in the Middle East cast into sharp relief.

How realistic is such a policy that implies an underlying assumption that the core issues in the areas around Turkey's borders will remain the same? Can such a policy be sustained over a long term? Does Turkey face a real danger of being sucked into clashes of perceptions and interests not only between Western and non-Western actors but also between regional actors in the East?

Davutoğlu vaguely and idealistically asserts that Turkey's foreign policy is based on 'values and principles' (which, however, he fails to define). He contends that Ankara can have 'good relations with different conflicting parties.' As impressive as this assertion may sound it is far too simplistic. Relations among states are guided not only by congruence or clash of interests, but also by congruence or clash of values (which can often differ as much as their interests).

Moreover, how serious such a policy, as described by Turkey's current political leaders, can be? Like any other kind of policy, foreign policy to be effective must have its own political conception of the future. But Turkey's foreign policy, as it is articulated by Turkey's current leaders in public, is devoid of a political persuasion. Is this the result of intellectual confusion? It may well be. But one cannot avoid thinking that it may also reflect the power rivalry that has been taking place in the country.

In the final analysis within the context of the multilateral conflict of values and principles in the current international environment where does Turkey really stand? Now that

Erdoğan has been given the mandate for a second term in office and with his gained experience and his confidence renewed will he be willing and able to offer a clearer response to this fundamental question that will define Turkey's next historical period? It remains to be seen.

Until this question is answered the country's foreign policy will remain transitional between the end of the old international order and the beginning of a new era and in the meanwhile Turkey's role in the international system will be, at least, unpredictable.

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