

COMMENTARY

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New Turkish Rhythmic Foreign Policy under the AKP

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The geopolitical school of international relations emphasizes discussion of the *Realpolitik* and makes “realistic” assessments of alternative policies, based on clear analysis of benefit versus opportunity costs. In the 1990s, Turkish geostrategic thinking had undergone the process of militarization, culminating in a policy of containment, deterrence and even regional competition. Turkish military potential was seen as the main counterweight to any threat. This second approach was a proactive geo-strategic one but, in fact, it was still tied to the status-quo posture associated with the perception of Turkey being a remote garrison guarding the democratic West from Soviet expansionism. The Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, however, denied that Turkey has an inherent role of being the geopolitical “bridge” between the Islamic world and the West.”

The Hoca and His Teaching

The current Turkish Foreign Minister was born in a lower middle class provincial family in the conservative city of Konya in Anatolia. He had a distinguished academic career and became a professor of international relations at the University Beykent, Istanbul. Davutoglu worked as a foreign policy adviser of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and in 2009 he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Before Davutoglu came to the pinnacle of Turkey’s foreign policy and began to implement his doctrine, Turkey’s foreign policy strategy was dominated by two geopolitical doctrines. The first school viewed Turkey in the context of the static paradigm of the Cold War. Due to Turkey’s geographic location next to the Soviet frontier, Turkey’s sole function was to bog down 20 Soviet divisions and house Western intelligence bases and military facilities that ensured the security of Europe. Turkey was no more than an advanced garrison guarding the democratic West from Soviet expansionism.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkish strategists suddenly found themselves in the "bad neighbourhood" - surrounded by weak or failed states and facing the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which, for different reasons, supported the dictatorial regimes of Iran and Syria, as well as Greece and Armenia. In this context, the surrounding regions - the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East were seen as a source of threat.

The new concept, advanced by Recep Tayyip Erdogan-Ahmet Davutoglu, regarding Turkey's role in the modern world is often referred to as "neo-Ottomanism." Its predecessor, Ottomanism or *Osmanlilik* was the liberal movement of the late 19th century Ottoman Empire. The classical Ottomanism strove to create a kind of "Ottoman identity", which was to submerge and fuse all the other identities of Ottoman subjects—religious, national and cultural—in order create to social cohesion in the Empire. This term was briefly revived during the term of Prime Minister Turgut Ozal in the early 1990s. Some identify this vision with Davutoglu's policy in the "Ottoman" neighbourhood.

In his 2001 book, titled *Stratejik Derinlik (Strategic Depth)*, Ahmet Davutoglu recapitulates his strategic view of Turkey and its place in the world. The book gives an idea of how the current Turkish government sees the world. According to him, the country has a unique feature—the "strategic depth." The book characterizes a very limited number of states which Davutoglu called the "Central Powers." In the 20th century, these central powers were the German empire, Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. Therefore, Turkey cannot limit itself by its historic destiny to its regional role in the Balkans and the Middle East. Turkey is capable of influencing events in several regions, and this will be a reward for its global strategic significance.

Davutoglu wrote: "Turkey was fortunate in its history, and it possesses a number of regional identities, and therefore it enjoys the possibility, which is also a historic duty—to pursue an integrated multi-dimensional foreign policy. Our unique combination of history and geography endows us with a responsibility. A sense of duty is raised from the depths of the history of Turkey and calls for actively contributing to the resolution of conflicts, the maintenance of international peace and security."

Turkey set about strengthening its relations with Arab nations. It distanced itself from Israel, without breaking ties of trade and cooperation. It criticized Israel's 2008 Gaza war unambiguously. But it realized that a critical key to peace lay in the amelioration of its own antagonisms with its neighbours. This was, given the emotions attached to the past, difficult.

But Turkey signed historic protocols with Armenia, warmed icy relations with Syria to the point where visa has been abolished, lifted ties with Iran and become a vital partner of Iraq in the reconstruction of the country. In October 2009, Erdogan signed 48 MoUs covering energy, commerce and security among other things with Baghdad. In August 2012, Davutoglu paid a visit to the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, which is equivalent to an Indian foreign minister dropping in on Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Not too long ago, Turkey's air force was bombing this Kurdish region as punishment for being a base for terrorism.

Turkey, America and Iraq are working together to bring the long and bitter Kurdish war against Turkey to an end—another sign of Washington's new respect for Istanbul.

Pakistan has recognized the change as well, but done so in its India-centric manner. It has asked Turkey to help solve the Kashmir problem. Istanbul is not so green as to try and do so; and certainly New Delhi will be frosty towards any such misguided initiative. But Turkey has found its role on the world stage.

In his book, Davutoglu criticized the former Turkish geopolitical schools for seeing in geopolitics only a tool for maintaining the status-quo rather than seeking a rightful place for Turkey in the world system. Davutoglu said that Ankara before the AKP was "virtually inactive" in the international arena, and it is time for a "dynamic interpretation" of foreign policy that will result in a sharp increase in the global impact of Turkey.

From Davutoglu's perspective, Turkey possesses the Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean and Black Sea identities, the phenomenon that enables it to play a strategic role in all these areas simultaneously, and thus qualify for a global role. In principle, a dangerous term- "dynamic interpretation of geography"- offers a new reading of the political map, based on the "geo cultural community." Theoretically, it is supposed to symbolize the rejection of traditional Turkish militant foreign policy in favour of greater attention to the historical and cultural community.

The centre of this paradigm was the famous policy of "zero problems with neighbours." *Stratejik Derinlik*, by improving trade relations with neighbouring countries, focuses on the historical and cultural ties between the Middle Eastern societies and idealizes a "post-national state" in the territory of the former Ottoman Empire. Some critics even say that through the implementation of such concepts Davutoglu "makes national borders meaningless."

The rethinking of Turkish foreign policy in the 1990s had lead to a policy of containment, deterrence, even regional competition, with the military viewed as the main counterweight to any threat. As a counter to this geostrategic approach, Davutoglu claimed that the Turkish nation was torn, alienated from its historic "self," and, furthermore, identified with the false, an alien entity. Prime Minister Erdogan and Foreign Minister Davutoglu rejected the 1990s as the era of foreign policy inertia; Turkey began to delineate the scope of their global interests. It included, first of all, Africa and Latin America. Turks organized a series of summits with African leaders. In 2009, Turkey opened seven new Turkish embassies in Africa and Latin America, and another 26 in the following years. Davutoglu said on a diplomatic occasion: "By 2023, when the country is celebrating the centennial of the founding of the Republic, I see Turkey as a full member of the EU, having met all the prerequisites, enjoying complete peace with all its neighbours, Turkey integrated into the economic system and security in the region, Turkey - an effective leader in the identification of regional priorities, Turkey - an active player in the international arena, a country whose economy is among the top ten economies of the world. "

Thus, at the heart of a new doctrine of the "strategic depth" was Davutoglu's understandable and justified response to an earlier one-sided Turkish foreign policy. The earlier Turkish strategy

considered the country as a geopolitical strategic cog in other systems. Davutoglu's attempt is to ensure a bigger and more significant role for Turkey in the international and regional systems. Meanwhile, the "zero problems" policy implementation hinged upon a peaceful and safe environment in which AKP's imperial vision was possible to implement. The Arab Spring and a consequent militarization of the region have reduced the possibilities of wielding such an influence, which is based on the historical and cultural ties. Any member of the current Middle East Great Game would prefer security guarantees and show of force, but would not be deserving of respect and nostalgia for the ideals of the "Golden Age."

Focusing on the national identity, this romantic vision of geopolitics led to two main outcomes. First, Turkey's foreign policy has become assertive and aggressive, and the Republic began to actively expand its influence in the Islamic world and the former Ottoman territory. Second, in the framework of the new geopolitical vision, Davutoglu considers the Turkish-Israeli partnership of the late 1990s as the "agent of alienation" of the national and international "Turkishness", and acts accordingly.

Despite the high degree of instability in the region, it is clear that the trajectory of the Syrian collapse will provide the final verdict on *Stratejik Derinlik*. Whether a seedling planted in the Cold War greenhouse will flower in the fresh air of the Arab Spring remains to be seen.

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