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The Foreign Policy of the “New Turkey”: Priorities, Challenges and Contradictions

Nikos Christofis*

Abstract

Turkish foreign policy making under the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule has been at the centre of scholarly debates since the party first came to power in 2002. Interest to the subject maximised in a way during the 2010s, raising serious concerns over its manifestation in the field – not only in the Middle East, but also in other parts of the world. Contrary to what was initially believed, mostly by Western scholars, the AKP did not shift Turkish foreign policy away from Turkey’s westernization vision. The AKP rather adapted to the changing global conditions of our time, affected by and being in constant dialogue with, the socio-economic and political aspects of the party’s vision of founding the “New Turkey”. The collective goal of the present collection of articles in this special issue is to show how – and in what complex ways – Turkish foreign policy has changed over the years, and discuss the nature of the changes through three distinct themes: priorities, challenges and contradictions.

Keywords: Foreign Policy Analysis; Turkish Foreign Policy; Kemalism; Westernization; Middle East; Turkey; AKP; 15 July 2016 Coup Attempt

Introduction

Turkish foreign policy making during the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule has been at the centre of scholarly debates since the party first came to power in 2002. Interest to the subject maximised in a way during the 2010s, raising serious concerns over its manifestation in the field – not only in the Middle East, but also in other parts of the world. The collection of articles in this special issue take as their main focus the period before and after the attempted coup d’état on 15 July 2016 and discuss whether Turkish foreign policy was affected and in what respect by the attempted coup. Furthermore, as the title of the issue suggests, the articles are also concerned with the priorities, challenges, and the inherent contradictions that shape the Turkish foreign policy behaviour of our time.

Mostly Western scholars, being preoccupied with the AKP government’s Islamic character which would supposedly distance Turkey from the Western world and bring it closer to the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, have raised concerns over the shifts in Turkey’s foreign policy-making and emphasised the AKP’s divergence from the

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Kemalist westernization vision. The authoritarian/illiberal shift of the ruling AKP and that of its leader and Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as Turkey's intense interest to Middle Eastern affairs in the early 2010s following the 2011 Arab uprisings were seen by some observers as legitimization of the so-called "Eastern shift" argument regarding Turkish foreign policy. However, such a claim should be evaluated through a much more detailed study and with great caution as Turkey's ruling party puts forward a foreign policy agenda affected by both domestic and international events – forcing Turkey to adapt to ever-changing political conditions. Over the years, it has become clear that the foreign policy vision of the AKP has been multi-faceted even in its most radical manifestations.

This article offers a synoptic overview of Turkey's foreign policy and discusses a number of factors that are considered to have shaped the country's foreign policy making throughout various administrations. Firstly, it briefly presents some basic characteristics of Turkey's foreign policy during the formative years of the Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's rule, as well as during the Cold War period. Then, the article moves to the AKP rule and focuses on the changes of the AKP's priorities based on each electoral period since 2002. Thus, the article attempts to present a historical background and contextualise the contributions included in this special issue – focusing in particular on the AKP's "authoritarian turn" and Turkey's spiralling political crisis in the wake of the 15 July 2016 failed coup and the post-coup state of emergency. The article concludes with a brief summary of the contributions included in this special issue.

Turkish Foreign Policy during the Kemalist Period and the Cold War

Turkey's new borders following the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 marked the end of a protracted and complicated process that began on the eve of World War I and proceeded more dramatically in the aftermath of the Great War. During its formative years, the new republic had to cope with two major issues: firstly, how to conduct and re-adjust the Turkish foreign policy from an imperial past to a secondary power status in international affairs; and, secondly, a key factor that shaped decision making was that the Kemalist Turkey perceived itself as a part of Western civilization, albeit most of its outlook and upbringing was still largely Ottoman (Deringil 1992: 1). "The struggle for survival and the play of realpolitik in the international arena, together with an imperial past and a huge cultural heritage left strong imprints on the national philosophy of Turkey and the character of its people" (Aydin 1999: 156).

In the early Republican period, Turkey generally enjoyed good neighbourly relations even though some problems with neighbours such as Greece persisted. Regardless, post-war realities – economic under-development in particular – pushed Turkey to seek neutrality both before and during World War II and abstain from a multi-dimensional involvement in international politics. Before World War II, this position of neutrality provided notable opportunities for Turkey to restore its sovereignty over the Turkish Straits and, in 1939, to ensure the former Ottoman provinces (*sancak*) of Antioch and Alexandretta to join the Turkish territories (Uzgel 2001: 283-285; Zürcher 2017: 203). Notably, in this period, Turkey had problems with Britain regarding Ankara's territorial claims over the Mosul province in

the British Mandate of Iraq; with France concerning the aforementioned Hatay/Alexandretta province in Syria; and with Italy because of the latter's expressive imperialistic/expansionist tendencies towards the eastern Mediterranean area during the 1930s. Greek-Turkish relations passed to a peaceful stage in 1930 with the agreement between the two countries putting an end to hostilities – albeit a temporary one as mutual animosity would revive in the following decades. After World War II, the number of Turkey's neighbours dropped to six, leaving Greece, Bulgaria, the Soviet Union, Iran, Iraq and Syria – and later the Republic of Cyprus joined them in 1960 – a composition of neighbours that left Turkey in a constant state of insecurity (Aydin 1999: 167).

One of the deep-rooted principles in Turkish foreign policy was that its sizable and powerful northern neighbour presented the primary threat to the country's national security; a threat that was dated back to the seventeenth century and the numerous Russian-Ottoman wars fought since then. Russia's expansionist policies in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe led it to become the “arch enemy” of the Ottoman Empire, and later, during the late 1930s and 1940s, that of Turkey, as the Soviet Union severely pressured Turkey to jointly administer the Turkish Straits which controlled access to and from the Black Sea, to establish Soviet military and naval bases around Turkey and the return of Kars and Ardahan provinces (re-taken by Turkish forces during the chaotic atmosphere and the civil war that followed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia) to the Soviet Union (Christofis 2015: 259).

The Kemalist ideological re-orientation of Turkey towards Europe and the Western civilisation in general also resulted in a re-orientation of the country's foreign policy agenda. In the context of the westernization vision of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and that of his followers, Ankara “did not hesitate to accept American aid when the Soviet Union placed great pressure on Turkey after the Second World War for territorial concessions and special privileges on the Straits” (Christofis 2015: 165). The beginning of Turkish-American relations, however, dates further back, first established in the late nineteenth century. Though the Americans did not have regular diplomatic ties with the Ottoman Empire, the High Commissioner Admiral Bristol of the US was one of the first Western observers to grant legitimacy to the Kemalist nationalist movement in the early 1920s and maintained regular contact with it in order to support American economic interests in the region and maintain good working relations with the Turks (Yılmaz 2015: 44). Apart from the Kemalist vision of westernization in the 1930s, the dominant Cold War narratives in the historiography of Turkey and that of the modern Middle East consensually de-emphasized Turkey's engagement with the Middle East, mainly due to the radical changes in the local, regional, and international circumstances of Turkey and the Middle East in the wake of World War II. It was during this period that official alienation, disengagement, and formal hostility became a feature of Turkey's relations with many of its Middle Eastern neighbours. Although, Turkish foreign policy in the inter-war period suggests that Turkey abstained from encouraging a multi-dimensional involvement in international politics, its “engagement with the Middle East in the interwar period was in fact much more multifaceted, intricate, purposeful, and intriguing than the dominant narrative of disengagement and disinterest allows” (Bein 2017: 6).

Turkey's “active neutrality” during World War II was seen as “egotistic” and unreliable by Western powers. Turkey's contradictory diplomatic and economic agreements with

various competing powers such as Nazi Germany, Soviet Union and Britain highlight that its top foreign policy priority at the time was “survival” through any means necessary (Deringil 1989). Turkey, in order to qualify as a founding member of the United Nations and to attend the conference, officially declared war on Germany on February 23, 1945 – a purely symbolic act as the war was already decisively won by the Allies and coming to an end at that date (Zürcher 2017: 205). Following the end of the war, the political choices of the US regarding the Middle East including its relations with Turkey, were solely shaped by the protection and expansion of the American interests in the petroleum industry in the region. Turkey’s location next to the Soviet Union, its geo-strategic importance as a “bridge” between Asia and Europe, Europe and Middle East, as well as its potential to act as a “barrier” between the Soviet Union and the oil-rich Middle East, placed it high in the priority list of the US foreign policy. That said, throughout the Cold War, the US-Soviet non-direct conflict entailed intense political struggles in the “peripheral areas” of the globe – which were often considered testing sites for the Western ideal of capitalist modernity (Christofis 2015: 258). The global rivalry between communism and capitalism also produced scepticism in the world about the possible replication of Western modernization experience in non-Western societies with Turkey’s political twists and turns between liberal democracy and state-authoritarianism to be deeply rooted in the context of this scepticism (Atasoy 2005: 60).

Turkey, on its part, made extensive efforts to persuade the Western Allies that it was threatened by the Soviet Union, which eventually paid off. From 1949 onwards, Turkey began to receive US financial support via the Marshall Plan, along with Greece, and in 1952, again along with Greece, Turkey became a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), celebrated by both the government and the opposition as it was considered as a crucial step towards the fulfilment of the westernization vision originally put forward by Mustafa Kemal and his followers. In this way, the Adnan Menderes government showed that Turkey was ready to accept and execute the military obligations that could be requested from Ankara in the future, and additionally present itself as a “staunch” ally of the West and a “bulwark” against communism (Criss 2008: 572). From the early 1950s onwards, American influence over Turkish politics and socio-economic life tremendously increased to the point (IISG n.d.) that many began to characterize the country as the “small America” (Bozarslan 2004: 50). This trend can also be seen in numerous diplomatic and economic agreements Turkey signed with the West (Tunçkanat 1975), as well as the international organizations it joined. For example, during the Cold War, Turkey – apart from joining NATO – also joined the Council of Europe and the OECD (initially the OEEC); the Treaty of Association in 1963 and the Additional Protocols of 1970 which set the pace for full membership after a period of preparation; while, later, although with Turkey and the EEC (EC, EU) to fail to deliver their commitments, a customs union between the two sides came into effect in 1996 (Turan 2015: 135).

The end of the Cold War in 1991 and the tragic events of 9/11 in 2001 brought about radical shifts in the international political landscape and led to a re-making of the world order. In the field of foreign policy-making, it is these “major changes in the geopolitical context generally [that] bring the reformulation of geopolitical visions, a re-articulation of geographical representations that is necessary to acknowledge and justify foreign policy changes” (Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006: 357). By then, two distinct factors seem to have

radically changed Turkey's foreign policy: firstly, a decision by the Council of Ministers on 24 January 1980 to remove many of the foreign currency controls, that came under the banner of "Regulations to Protect the Value of Turkish Lira", turned out to be one of the leading factors that fundamentally transformed Turkish economy over time; and secondly, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Turan 2015: 135-136). As expected, Turkish national security concerns waned as the bi-polar Cold War division of the world disappeared – leading to Ankara's increasingly enthusiastic pursuit of the development of close ties with countries in its surrounding regions, such as those in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans and with the newly-established Russian Federation.

A New Actor in Turkey: The AKP

Since 2002, Turkey has been ruled single-handedly by the liberal/conservative-turned-authoritarian/conservative, deeply populist and pragmatically nationalist AKP. Its foreign policy agenda, goes hand in hand, broadly speaking, with the domestic and international issues shaping the party's successive terms in power – evolving in three stages until the failed military coup attempt on 15 July 2016.

Continuing the Conventional Kemalist Turkish Foreign Policy

Many observers concluded that the emergence of the AKP would also mean the party's departure from the conventional Kemalist Turkish foreign policy followed throughout most of the Republican period. As briefly mentioned above, the conventional foreign policy position had always insisted on the need to keep close ties with the Western world, particularly the US and Europe, via membership to "Western clubs" such as NATO, Council of Europe, and the EU (European Union). However, the AKP's narrative – commonly employed by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in his public speeches – seemingly implies that the time of Western hegemony over the globe is coming to an end; hence there would no longer be any need to ally with them (Eyal 2016). However, there are no indications whatsoever to apply such a narrative to the actual making of Turkish foreign policy.

The overall foreign policy direction of the AKP reveals that the so-called "new" Turkish foreign policy follows roughly the same guidelines with the previous regimes and that the Western alliances of the country remains intact despite all the anti-Western rhetoric employed for the purpose of obtaining the support of Islamist and ultra-nationalist voters. Furthermore, the Turkish government has continued to cooperate closely with many countries, both Western and Middle Eastern, as for example participating to the so-called Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative launched by the then US President George W. Bush in the early 2000s (Laçiner 2004). Even today, the party still wishes to preserve its alliance with the US and enhance cooperation with Washington in the Syria-Iraq crisis. In addition, initiatives such as the peace negotiations (i.e., the "Astana Process") with Russia and Iran to end the Syrian Civil War do not necessarily imply that Turkey is in search of a shift away from the West; rather they suggest that a pragmatic approach has been followed to minimize the damages inflicted by Middle Eastern conflicts on Turkish national security. By

the end of the party's first term, the party also demonstrated positive attitudes towards long-term issues, and in particular regarding the Cyprus Question, and played an active role in order to provide a sustainable and viable solution to the issue. Although the issue has not been resolved, and still persists to this day, the reasons of which go beyond the scope of the present article, the AKP's policy during the first years of its regime had been constructive and indeed contributed to the shared enthusiasm of the two communities in the island of Cyprus (Christofis 2018a: 133-149).

A New Historical Vision for Turkey

The second term of the AKP coincides with a reformulation of both the domestic politics and the country's foreign policy. Within this context, the re-structuring of the cabinet and the emergence of Ahmet Davutoğlu was instrumental. Although Davutoğlu was serving as foreign policy adviser to the Prime Minister since 2002, he began to assume a more critical role in the making of foreign policy after the 2007 elections and was finally appointed in 2009 as Foreign Minister without holding a parliamentary seat. According to Turan, three impulses seem to have been prominent in the formulation and implementation of Turkish foreign policy from 2007 onwards. Firstly, the continuation of the country's tradition of maintaining its ties with the transatlantic community, i.e. NATO and the EU; secondly, to become a regional leader, a country that maintains the regional order and peace, and one that helps resolve intra-regional conflicts; and thirdly, to challenge the current global distribution of power and the global system of governance (Turan 2015: 139).

Since 2007, the AKP has undertaken a complex political reform process to radically transform Turkish society and politics – boosted by the end of the Kemalist military tutelage (Göksel 2016) – which at the same time resulted in a re-configuration of attitudes within foreign policy making circles. The “strategic depth doctrine”, conceptualized by Davutoğlu (2001) in his widely known work with the same name, constitutes a strong critique of the Kemalist foreign policy tradition and intends to offer an alternative strategic vision to not “de-Westernize” Turkey's orientation but rather to create “an autonomous, self-regulating, and self-confident foreign policy agenda that would remedy the hitherto crisis-driven Turkish foreign policy-making” (Birdal 2013: 98-99). Although, the AKP governments have not refrained from having close relations with Western countries, the party's high interest towards the affairs of the Middle East is unprecedented in the history of the Republic, which further increased and expanded after the beginning of the 2011 Arab uprisings (İşıksal and Göksel 2018; Tür 2015).

Turkey's increasing involvement in Middle Eastern affairs can be explained, if not fully, to a large extent by the application of the above Strategic Doctrine approach. Contrary to the foreign policy pursued by President Turgut Özal in the early 1990s which was based on positioning Turkey as a “bridge” between the West and the East, the so-called Davutoğlu doctrine has been presented as a grand strategy for Turkey to rise as a great power in the international political arena, “restoring the lost glory” of the country's Ottoman imperial past (Christofis 2018b). As such, Turkey would regain its rich historical, cultural, and strategic potential in terms of shaping Middle Eastern politics (Yavuz 2009: 204). According to Davutoğlu, “Turkey will act not as a peripheral but as a central country” (Davutoğlu 2004)

with multiple regional identities, and that it would assume key strategic roles, both in its region and the globe. In other words, Davutoğlu's position is that Turkey should become an independent "pivotal" state in the region for its own benefit rather than for the purpose of spreading Western values.

Alongside aspirations for regional leadership, Turkey began expressing its dissatisfaction with the global system of governance that was established and sustained by the US following World War II (see the contributions in this special issue by Göksel 2019 and Tetik 2019). It was believed that Turkey's role as a leading regional power would allow Ankara to exert a pro-active strategic influence on global affairs (Turan 2015: 141). It is within this context that Turkey has enhanced its relations with Brazil and China, as well as making inroads into Africa by opening embassies in almost all African capitals. Turkey's global outreach and pro-active foreign policy bear considerable fruits. For example, Turkey has developed closer ties with other rising powers and it has become a more visible country in world politics, but the chaotic and largely negative consequences of the 2011 Arab uprisings combined with domestic developments would not allow Turkey to fulfil its foreign policy aspirations, falling short of successfully exporting the so-called "Turkish Model" to the Middle East and beyond (Tuğal 2016).

The Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings and the AKP's Third Term

The Arab uprisings that started in December 2010 dominated to a large extent the Turkish foreign policy agenda as the former have shifted the balance of power in the wider Middle East region as well as impacting on the region's relations with international actors. Soon after the protests began, many countries' regimes drastically changed: the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the Mubarak regime in Egypt were toppled within a few weeks, while Libya's de facto ruler, Muammar Gaddafi, was killed and a civil war followed. Within this context, the so called "Turkish model" of the AKP was highlighted by many as the "best example" for the economic development and democratization of the Middle East region (Aras 2014: 5).

The influence of the Turkish model, however, has started to become obsolete along with international developments taking place. In particular, the close relations between Turkey and Syria that were developing in amicable terms since the end of the 1990s, after a long hostile environment, started to deteriorate again when the Turkish President Erdoğan decided to support the opposition forces (i.e. the Free Syrian Army) against the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. As the opposition to the regime grew in numbers throughout 2011, it was believed at the time that al-Assad's days in power were numbered. After the opposition proved ineffective in toppling the regime and a long and bloody civil war ensued across Syria, however, Western powers have gradually reduced their commitments, and Turkey decided to join the Saudis and the Qataris to bring a regime change – with very little success (Turan 2015: 142). At the same time, new foreign powers such as Russia (see Çoskun 2019 in this special issue) and Iran got heavily involved in the Syrian affair by providing thousands of soldiers, weapons and financial support to the Damascus regime – further complicating the Syrian Civil War (see Tetik 2019 in this special issue). Sadly the Syrian tragedy, which has so far claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and forced millions away from their homes, continues to this day (see Coşkun and Nielsen 2018 for more details).

The post-2011 situation in the Middle East clearly highlights the vulnerabilities of Turkey in terms of national security, foreign policy and economic development, although Ankara failed to acknowledge that by defining its weakened regional position as “precious loneliness”. At the same time, the Gezi uprising started in Istanbul in the summer of 2013 and later spread to almost all over the country. The protests challenged the government’s hegemony and the government answered with extensive oppression towards the demonstrators at the Gezi Park, as well as escalating the already burgeoning authoritarian and populist character of the regime. The attempted coup d’etat on 15 July 2016 by the former ally of the AKP, the Gülen movement, and most probably other opposition segments of the society, only escalated the aforementioned authoritarian character of the Turkish regime – which launched an intense witch hunt against all kinds of opposition after the defeat of the 15 July 2016 coup, from the Gülenists to the Kurdish movement, and to the critical academics, journalists, judges, and many others. In total, nearly 200,000 people have lost their jobs; their passports have been confiscated while a state of emergency was imposed in the country (recently revoked after the AKP’s victory in the 24 June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections).

In practice, the revocation of the state of emergency by the Turkish government makes no real difference as the country continues to be ruled by decree with minimal checks and balances on the executive and legislative power (Göksel 2018: 76-77). After the April 2017 referendum on constitutional amendments, which was marginally voted in favour, the Turkish President has now gathered in his hands all the executive power – single-handedly dominating the decision-making arena. On the other hand, although foreign policy making can be evaluated as a legitimization strategy for the AKP's hegemonic project of the “New Turkey” (Coşkun et al. 2017), the attempted coup has presented new challenges and priorities for Turkish foreign policy, putting Greek-Turkish relations again to a test (Christofis et al. 2019), as well as Turkey’s relations with other countries such as the US and the EU governments (see Göksel 2019 in this issue). This special issue, although not exhaustive, tries to answer some of the questions shaping the post-coup attempt period in Turkey, as well as analysing the new priorities, challenges and contradictions of Turkish foreign policy in our time.

The Contributions in the Special Issue

The contributions to this special issue entitled *The Foreign Policy of the “New Turkey”: Priorities, Challenges and Contradictions* cover some of the most important cases in which Turkey’s foreign policy agenda has been tested before and after the attempted coup in an attempt to grasp some of the priorities, challenges, contradictions that currently beset Turkish foreign policy making.

The special issue begins with Oğuzhan Göksel’s article, entitled “Foreign Policy Making in the Age of Populism: The Uses of Anti-Westernism in Turkish Politics”, which focuses on the rising anti-Western character of Turkish foreign policy in recent years. Accordingly, anti-Westernism has become an effective discursive tool to garner domestic support under what is termed the “illiberal populism”. Contrary to liberal democracies,

Göksel argues that contemporary Turkey constitutes an illiberal populist regime where foreign policy making is subjugated to domestic policy concerns, and an assertive anti-Western foreign policy rhetoric is often systematically employed to generate public support to the incumbent AKP administration.

The following article by Bezen Balamir Çoşkun, entitled “Turkey’s Relations with Russia after the Failed Coup: A Friend in Need of a Friend Indeed?”, focuses on recent developments in Turkish-Russian relations. The aim of the article is to analyse the resolution of the diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Russia – which had erupted when Turkey shot down a Russian warplane over its border with Syria on 24 November 2015, followed by an extensive Russian economic embargo on Turkish exports. The article puts a special emphasis on how the failed 2016 military coup in Turkey constituted a decisive turning point in terms of completely altering the trajectory of Turkey-Russia relations.

The third article by Anthony Derisiotis, entitled “Erdoğan, Turkey’s Kurds and the Regionalisation of the Kurdish Issue”, focuses on the Kurdish issue in the country and the policies employed by the Turkish government. It analyses the AKP government approaches towards Turkey’s Kurdish population from the early years of the party’s rule in the 2000s to the Kurdish independence referendum in northern Iraq, and the effects of the regionalisation of Turkey’s Kurdish issue. Derisiotis focuses on two main questions in his analysis: to what extent the ongoing Syrian Civil War is responsible for the failure of the AKP’s “peace process” with the Kurds and the subsequent shift to Ankara’s old aggressive/confrontational approach towards Kurdish political organisations? How much of this could be a pre-determined political decision related to Ankara’s domestic politics, rendering the peace process with the Kurds expendable?

In the fourth and final article of the special issue, entitled “The Construction of Containment Anxiety: A Critical Geopolitical Analysis of Turkey’s Military Intervention into Syria”, Mustafa Onur Tetik discusses the rationale behind the two recent Turkish military interventions in northern Syria (i.e. the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations) following the failed coup d’état in 2016. The article anchors its theoretical basis in the “critical geopolitics” approach in order to put the Turkish interventions into a broader geopolitical context. By focusing on the case of Turkey’s national security approach towards Syria, Tetik’s article proposes that Turkish military incursions into northern Syria are reflective of a broader identity-driven geopolitical perception; an approach, that according to the author, provides more holistic insights on Turkey’s security policy and attempts to explain Turkey’s cognitive horizon for its possible future actions in surrounding areas.

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