

# Turkey's Foreign Policy in the AKP Era: Has There Really Been a Change?

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YILMAZ KAPLAN, AUG 22 2011

The AKP government came to power after the 2002 elections, and the main concept of their discourse is “change.” By defining “change” in a positive way, they used this concept to get support from the masses and to draw a more powerful picture of Turkey for the future. In this sense, the concept of “change” has been installed at the centre of the AKP’s foreign policy in a concrete manner, and they have developed an active foreign policy model contrary to the previous defensive foreign policy. Today, the AKP government has been in power for 8 years, and their “change” discourse in Turkish foreign policy is still a controversial topic. With regard to the current debates on the axis shift, the issue of “change” in Turkish foreign policy has also become quite popular among foreign politicians and scholars. Therefore, this study will try to answer the questions: how did Turkey’s foreign policy change in the AKP era, and has there really been a change? To do this, the study will be structured in an analytical way. First, the strategic depth doctrine, which is the theoretical framework of the AKP’s foreign policy, will be investigated by putting geo-politics and identity at the centre of the analysis. Later, in line with the strategic depth doctrine, the question of whether the AKP government has achieved soft power status at the regional level will be analysed. Finally, the study will focus on the AKP’s foreign policy towards the EU and Cyprus.

### Geopolitics and Turkish Foreign Policy

#### Before the AKP Era

From the beginning, the geopolitical location of Turkey was one of the main reasons for its modernization. Turkey was located in a tough region, and to survive in that environment, it needed modernity, industrialization, economic dependence, and so forth. In the Cold War era, Turkey’s geopolitical position was mainly used to explain why Turkey was so important for the Western bloc (especially to join NATO) (Bilgin, 2007, p. 747). The Menderes government even tried to show the West that Turkey could play an active role in the defence of the Middle East because of its geographical location and its “frontline” position against Soviet Russia (Sever, 1998, p. 75). Even in regard to the Cyprus problem, Turkey’s geopolitical importance for the Western bloc was implicitly used by the Turkish government as a reaction to Johnson’s 1964 letter. For example, Ecevit, who was Secretary-General of the People’s Republican Party at the time, argued that “we realized that our one-dimensional national security approach [NATO] did not cover all contingencies”[1] (Bölükbaşı, 1993, p. 506). After the Cold War, an important challenge arose, where Turkey could lose its geopolitical importance (Grigoriadis, 2010, p. 53) because “Turkey’s constructed identity as a geographic barrier against communist expansion in the Middle East was now out-dated [in the post-cold war era]” (Walker, 2006, p. 75). However, when the Gulf War broke out Özal perceived it as an opportunity to show the West Turkey’s continued strategic and geopolitical importance by taking an active role. Similarly, while analysing Turkey’s role in the Middle East in the wake of the Gulf War in 1992, Hale points out that there were some brave actors in Ankara who wanted to play an active role in building a more stable, prosperous, and democratic order in the Middle East (Hale, 1992, p. 687). Moreover, Park notes that Özal’s active policy was not in line with Turkey’s traditional preference for non-involvement in the affairs of the Middle East (2007, p. 44).

In the Cold War era, geopolitics sustained their importance to Turkish foreign policy. Particularly, Turkey suffered from political instability in the 1990s because coalition governments and political elites were too weak to develop a

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new foreign policy strategy as a response to new challenges. In this atmosphere, the Turkish military increased its influence in foreign policy.[2] As Bilgin pointed out, the Turkish military has maintained its power over foreign policy issues since the 1960s by arguing that Turkey was located in a dangerous region and needed a strong army (2007, p. 745). Moreover, after the collapse of the communist states, there emerged a power vacuum around Turkey and this was perceived by the bureaucratic, military, and political elites as a threat instead of an opportunity. Thus, the Turkish armed forces sustained their power in the post-Cold War era. Former Prime Minister Ecevit argued that "Turkey is located at the most sensitive geopolitical location in the world...this why the Turkish Armed Forces play a crucial role" (Bilgin, 2007, p. 751).

In the AKP Era

Undoubtedly, AKP era foreign policy is mainly determined by Ahmet Davutoğlu, in parallel with his strategic depth doctrine. By referring to a historical "heartland" concept, Davutoğlu defined Turkey as a "central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one unified character" (2008, p. 78). Therefore, "Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea Country" (ibid., p. 79). As a result of this central country status, "Turkey should guarantee its own security and stability by taking on a more active, constructive role to provide order, stability and security in its environs" (ibid.). Although this doctrine is defined by the AKP government as a new sui generis model for Turkish foreign policy, it is clear that even in this doctrine, geopolitical reasoning still constitutes the essence of Turkish foreign policy. Therefore, it can be argued that geopolitics have always been at the centre of Turkish foreign policy, and only the discourse related to Turkey's geopolitical location has changed, whether as an advantage or disadvantage. The power vacuum emerging around Turkey, then, is seen as a chance to increase Turkey's power in the region by implementing an active foreign policy, unlike the defensive perception of the 1990s.

## Westernization Versus Multi-level Identity

As Hale underlines, Turkey ideologically separated itself from the Middle East after the establishment of the Republic in 1923 mainly because of Atatürk's aim to end the link between the new Turkish nation state and the Islamic world (Hale, 1992, p. 681; Park, 2007, p. 42). At this point, Westernization emerged as the main ideological position for Turkey. It was not only a model to guide Turkey's development (Millman, 1995, p. 490), but also an identity for Turkish foreign policy. That is why Turkey tried, as much as possible, to be part of any organization established by Western countries (e.g. the UN, the Council of Europe, NATO, the European Economic Community, etc.).

In the context of the Cold War, identities were defined mainly according to the ideological stance of countries. Therefore, especially after joining NATO, Turkey did not have an identity problem in world politics, and it was part of the Western bloc. Even Menderes's attempt to establish the Baghdad Pact was generally pro-Western, and pro-American in particular (Sever, 1998, p. 73; Hale, 1992, p.681). However, the situation changed swiftly after the end of the Cold War. In the new era, the importance of other identities (e.g. religious) increased, and Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" is a good indicator of this trend. In this atmosphere, Turkey tried to maintain its pro-Western secular identity, and this perception affected its foreign policy. To illustrate, Turkey developed its relations with Israel, and it was clear that the shared pro-Western identity had an effect on this process (Walker, 2006, p. 73; Israeli, 2001, p. 12). As mentioned above, the strategic depth doctrine defines Turkey as a "central country" with multiple regional identities. If Turkey has multiple regional identities, then, it cannot isolate itself from these regions. Thus, if Turkey is a Middle Eastern country, Turkey should be affected by any change in that region, and should thus react to any change. Therefore, it is clear that this multiple identity argument is an efficient legitimacy tool for why Turkey should be active in the regions in which Turkey is located. Shared identity gives Turkey some responsibility to be active in the region. Erdoğan claims that "our responsibilities are not just internal anymore but in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus [...]" (c.i. Warhola and Mitchell, 2006, p. 139). That is why Turkey could not remain indifferent about the recent governmental crisis in Lebanon. It can be argued that while Turkey defined itself as pro-Western in the previous era, the AKP government has defined Turkey as having multiple identities, and this is an important legitimacy tool for an active foreign policy in Turkey's region. Additionally, as a response to the increasing tensions between the Western and Muslim worlds, due to the War on Terror, the AKP government has tried to play a "bridge role" between different cultures by using this multiple identity concept, and the "alliance for civilization" initiative is a

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good example of this.

## Turkey as a "Soft Power"

To implement the strategic depth doctrine, Davutoğlu mentions about 5 principles to follow: an internal balance between security and democracy, a zero problem policy towards neighbours, increasing relations with neighbouring regions and beyond, a multi-dimensional foreign policy, and rhythmic diplomacy (2008, pp. 79-82). Accordingly, Turkey should implement an active foreign policy as a soft power. Here, the term soft power means that Turkey should take measures that are free of coercion when implementing its active foreign policy. According to this formulation, the most important principle is "a zero problem policy towards neighbours" because this principle epitomizes the discourse change in the security issue. By using Hale's definition, Turkey rid itself of the perception that "Turkey was surrounded by enemies," and now it is trying to resolve problems by adopting a more co-operative diplomatic approach (2009, p. 156). To solve problems, the AKP government follows a functional model, and by increasing dialogue and economic interdependence with its neighbours it tries to establish an efficient background with which chronic problems can be solved. In this respect, President Gul's football diplomacy towards Armenia in 2009, or several trade agreements with almost all of its neighbours, are good examples which show the attempts to put the zero problem policy into practice. Generally, this policy has created a positive atmosphere and has eliminated the "enemy discourse," however the AKP government has not yet solved Turkey's chronic problems with its neighbours. For example, the free trade agreement between Turkey and Syria deepened their bilateral relations, and they have even mutually opened their borders without visa requirements, therefore, these countries do not perceive each other as an enemy anymore. However, the Hatay dispute has been effectively shelved and there has only been progress, but no solution, in the dispute over the division of the waters of the Euphrates (Hale, 2009, pp. 152-153). Additionally, Hale points out that "the 'zero problem' goal was clearly very hard to achieve if the neighbours were in conflict with one another" (2009, p. 151).

In line with this doctrine, the AKP government has also tried to play a mediator role, especially in the Middle East. There is no doubt that the main problem in the region originates from the Israeli-Arab dispute. Thus, Turkey tried to mediate between Israel-Syria and Israel-Palestine. This policy is a new phase in Turkish foreign policy, due to Turkey isolating itself from the region in previous eras. Clearly, Turkey's mediator role deepened its good relations with the parties, however after 2006, the situation started to change after Hamas won the Palestinian election and the Israeli-Lebanon/Hezbollah war broke out. Contrary to its Western allies, the Turkish government recognized Hamas, and this highly irritated Israel and Western countries in general. Moreover, as a response to Israel's strict blockade of Gaza, the Turkish government reacted in a sensitive way and lost its neutrality (Grigoriadis, 2010, p. 64), and actually, after the Mavi Marmara event, Turkey has become a part of the dispute, contrary to its aim of being a mediator. Additionally, Turkey has also tried to mediate the dispute between its Western allies and Iran over Iran's nuclear programme, however, Turkey's recent vote against the UN draft resolution on Iranian sanction's increased the scepticism of Western countries over whether there is a shift in Turkish foreign policy from the West to the East. As a result, the Turkish government's Middle Eastern identity, as part of its multiple identity understanding, started to be perceived by Israel and Western countries as a shift from a pro-Western identity to a Muslim identity. Therefore, it can be concluded that Turkey's plan to become a mediator has collapsed due to its failure to maintain neutrality in the eyes of Israel and Western countries. Additionally, Hale also points out that it is very hard for Turkey to act as an intermediary because it has little leverage over the problems of the parties (2009, p. 150).

## The EU and Cyprus Issues

After the 2002 election, the AKP government has become a vigorous supporter of EU membership. Cizre gives three main reasons behind this ambition: "the AKP hopes that EU membership will bolster Turkey's democracy, which also means its own chance to gain and hold onto office," "joining to the EU would provide Turkey with the means to ensure economic growth and political stability," and "the AKP believes that getting into the EU will provide its conservative vote base with increased religious and personal freedoms" (2003, p. 228).

However, especially in the wake of Greek Cypriots' integration into the EU, the issue of Turkey's accession to the EU was highly interlinked with the settlement of the Cyprus dispute. Therefore, the AKP government restructured

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Turkey's policy towards Cyprus. The new government changed the formal rhetoric on the Cyprus issue. In this respect, the Cyprus issue was extracted from the national security discourse and the "Turkey's defence starts from Cyprus" (Bilgin, 2007, p. 565) discourse has not been used anymore. In parallel with this notion, the AKP government started to support a fair federal system on the island "contrary to the official 'two communities- two separate state' policy" (Çelenk, 2007, p. 351). Thus, the AKP government encouraged Turkish Cypriots to vote "yes" in the recent referendum. As a result of these developments, as Çelenk underlines, "the Cyprus can be considered as a fundamental shift in Turkish foreign policy" (2007, p. 352).

On the other hand, the AKP wished to start accession negotiations in 2005 as a result of intensive reforms in Turkey. However, the situation started to change by 2006 because the EU demanded that Turkey should extend the Ankara Agreement to Cyprus as well, but the AKP government did not have any way to do this because of the stalled peace process in Cyprus after the Greek Cypriots' voted against the Annan Plan. Additionally, Öniş also argues that the AKP government began to lose its enthusiasm for further reforms which are necessary for EU membership (Öniş, 2007, p. 253).

## Conclusion

The study focused on the questions of how Turkey's foreign policy changed with the AKP and whether there has been a real change. By taking the strategic depth doctrine as the main unit of analysis, "change" in the AKP's foreign policy was investigated at the theoretical and practical level. At the theoretical level, it was found that geopolitics is still at the centre of foreign policy formulation in the AKP era, but this time, it is used to explain why Turkey has a multiple regional identity (in the previous era Turkey was defined as pro-Western), and why Turkey should be active in the region (in the previous era the fact Turkey associated itself with the West was used to isolate Turkey from the Middle East). In practice, the AKP government is trying to emerge as a soft power in the region by implementing an active foreign policy. The solution to the problems with its neighbours and playing a mediator role in regional problems are perceived as the main tools to do this. As for the EU and Cyprus, the AKP government initially developed a different strategy towards the Cyprus problem and wished to start the accession negotiation with the EU. However, later on, the Cyprus problem could not be resolved and the accession negotiation process stalled due to the unresolved Cyprus problem and the slowed reform efforts of the AKP. In conclusion, the AKP government created a new synergy in Turkish foreign policy by using the "change" discourse, however, the main problems with Turkish foreign policy have not yet been solved, and disappointments related to the new strategy have increased through time. Therefore, time will show whether the AKP will be successful or not.

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[1] This can also be read as a message such as “we are important for you in the Cold War, and you can lose us by behaving like that.”

[2] As Hale points out, Turkish armed forces even challenged Özal's active Iraq policy (1992, p. 686) but Özal had enough power to somehow appease the military unrest.

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