

## THE CONCEPTUAL ARCHITECTURE OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: An update in light of regional turbulence

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Words matter. Concepts such as strategic depth, rhythmic diplomacy and multidimensional foreign policy have been popularised by the current minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and are broadly used when analysing Turkish foreign policy. But what happens to these words when reality changes suddenly? Since 2011, Turkish foreign policy doctrine has been challenged by the political changes and growing instability in the Middle East. One of the flagship initiatives of the current government, the zero-problem approach to its neighbours, no longer corresponds to the situation on the ground. And Turkey, forced to take sides, is not hiding any more behind the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. In his victory speech in June 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promised to adapt Turkey's foreign policy to a changing regional environment and announced Turkey's support for democratic forces across the Middle East and North Africa<sup>1</sup>. In a recent article, Ahmet Davutoğlu (2011: 1) also said that po-

**Abstract:** This document examines the way in which Turkish foreign policy has adapted to a turbulent regional context. The author carries out this examination by reviewing some of the concepts that are commonly used in political discourse and academic analysis on this country's foreign policy. The lexicon of Turkey's current foreign policy reflects the systemic changes made since the end of the Cold War, as well as the doctrinal contributions of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the current foreign affairs minister. This evolution took place at a time in which Turkey has made great efforts to improve its relations with its neighbours and to diversify its priorities in terms of international alliances. The speed and virulence with which the regional context is evolving – especially since the Arab spring and the conflict in Syria – has forced Turkey's diplomacy to revise not only its priorities but also its conceptual architecture.

**Keywords:** Turkey, foreign policy, European Union, Middle East, democracy

litical transitions in the Arab countries were natural and inevitable and that the “best course of action is to develop a sound understanding of the causes of this transformation and develop suitable strategies to cope with the change”.

This is not the first time that Turkey has had to reinvent its foreign policy as a result of changes originating beyond its borders. In the early 1990s, following the disintegration

of the Soviet Union, relations with Turkey's neighbours (the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Black Sea) gained in importance, and Turkey added to its traditional foreign policy toolbox soft-power instruments such as trade and cultural co-operation. Turkey also tried to make its Western and European aspirations compatible with increasingly diversified foreign policy priorities. It is premature, and perhaps disproportionate, to draw parallels between the impact of the Arab Spring and the disintegration of Soviet Union. However, seen from Ankara, Istanbul or Diyarbakir, the fall of autocracies in its southern vicinity, the rise of Islamist parties, the growing regional competition for leadership in the Middle East and the risk of sectarian conflicts spreading near Turkey's borders raise many concerns. Moreover, the coincidence of

1. Susanne Güsten “Mandate for a new Turkish era” in *The New York Times*, 15 June 2011.

these regional turbulences, with transformations on a global scale (featuring the rise of re-emerged powers), in Europe (with the multiple crisis affecting the EU), and in domestic politics (mounting tension on the Kurdish issue) magnify the challenge to Turkey's foreign policy.

On the one hand, these factors are accelerating Turkey's evolution from a status-quo power, as defined by Philip Robins (2003) in his book *Suits and Uniforms*, to a more assertive and interventionist actor. On the other, they are also paving the way for a more pragmatic foreign policy<sup>2</sup>. Turkish diplomats, when asked about the validity of the principles that guided Turkey's foreign policy until 2011, argue that the values, the vision and the doctrine of Turkish foreign policy are uncontested but they acknowledge that actions on the ground have to take into account the profound changes in the regional context. To put it in a nutshell: an idealist long-term vision is coexisting with pragmatic and reactive actions on the short term.

The aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly, to assess whether, and in which direction the current government is updating its foreign policy. Secondly, to decode the terms which are either unknown to those who do not follow Turkish politics closely or which have a specific meaning when applied to the Turkish context<sup>3</sup>. Thirdly, to reinterpret the meaning of these terms in accordance with the changes that are taking place in the global, regional and domestic arena. This paper argues that the revision of priorities and instruments will also alter Turkish foreign policy vocabulary.

The following pages analyse the terms most often used in the political discourse and academic analysis of Turkish foreign policy, emphasising to what extent the current context modifies their meaning or, in some cases, increases or diminishes their relative importance. The obvious starting point for this exercise is Strategic Depth, a concept that encapsulates Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy vision (Aras, 2009, Grigoriadis, 2010, Kramer, 2010). It is followed by the recurrent characterisation of Turkey as an emerging power and by the changes in the decision-making process. The analysis continues with four attributes that have defined the current foreign policy approach: multidimensional, autonomous, multilateral and rhythmic diplomacy. The paper then focuses on the analysis of Turkey's EU aspirations and the possibility of increasing dialogue with the EU on foreign policy issues. It also tackles concepts which are central to Turkey's relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours: the zero-problem approach, the emphasis on soft-power instruments, the role of the Kurdish issue, the criticisms of Turkey's neo-Ottoman ambitions, and the discussions over the attractiveness of a Turkish model for the Arab countries. Finally, Syria is presented as a case in point in which

2. According to Şaban Kardaş (2011a:1) Turkish officials may stick to an idealist vision of regional order in their rhetorical parlance, but pragmatism and *realpolitik* considerations are likely to prevail when reacting to crises in the Middle East.  
3. According to İbrahim Kalın (2011: 6), chief advisor to the Turkish Prime Minister, there is a new "geographic imagination" and "it is possible to produce its own concepts and build a new vocabulary". He adds that "the new vocabulary and concepts of Turkish politics and foreign policy should be noted as indicators of a profound mental transformation".

the vocabulary of Turkish foreign policy reflects the changes in Turkish foreign policy discourse and acts as a litmus test for a dynamic country that has successfully multiplied its influence in global and regional affairs.

## Strategic depth

In military literature, strategic depth means the distance between front lines and densely-populated and industrial areas. This term has a completely different meaning when applied to an analysis of Turkish foreign policy. Strategic Depth (in Turkish, *Stratejik Derinlik*) is the title of Davutoğlu's masterpiece, and according to Heinz Kramer (2010: 4), this concept provides the intellectual underpinning for a certain vision of contemporary Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu argues that Turkey should not content itself with being presented as a bridge between regions and, more specifically, between Islamic countries and the West. Nor should Turkey perceive itself as a mere regional power. Due to its history, its size and its geography, Turkey is and should act as a central state, a country with interests and influence in multiple regions (the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Black Sea, etc.)<sup>4</sup>. In itself, the outcome of becoming a "central state" is distinctly consensual among Turkish elites, and it pleases Turkish public opinion. The debate, therefore, is how to achieve this goal and what

price Turkey is prepared to pay.

## Emerging power

Erdoğan and Davutoğlu claim that Turkey's goal is to be among the tenth largest economies by 2023, the year Turkey will celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its republic<sup>5</sup>. Despite the fact that in 2012, Turkey's economic growth could fall to 2 per cent, Turkey has been growing at rates similar to those of China during the last decade and has become the world's 16<sup>th</sup> largest economy. Due to both its economic and political assets, Turkey is often described as an emerging power, even if it does not fall into the same category as the BRICS. Some claim that Turkey is part of a second generation of emerging economies, which the Economist Intelligence Unit coined "CIVETS", and Goldman Sachs referred to as the "Next Eleven"<sup>6</sup>. Turkey also aspires to be recognised as a power with global influence. To reach this goal, Ankara

4. This idea is central in Davutoğlu's articles and speeches. Davutoğlu (2007: 78) argues that "Turkey's new position has both an ideational and a geographical basis. In terms of geography, Turkey occupies a unique space. As a large country in the midst of Afro-Eurasia's vast landmass, it may be defined as a central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one unified character. Like Russia, Germany, Iran and Egypt, Turkey cannot be explained geographically or culturally by associating it with one single region. Turkey's diverse regional composition lends it the capability of manoeuvring in several regions simultaneously".  
5. See Davutoğlu's speech entitled "Vision 2023: Turkey's Foreign Policy Objectives", delivered to the Turkey Investor Conference: The road to 2023 organised by Goldman Sachs, London, 22 November 2011.  
6. CIVETS stands for: Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa, while the Next Eleven include (apart from Turkey): Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, South Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and the Philippines.

has pursued a threefold strategy. Firstly, it has emphasised its attributes as a pivotal regional power. Secondly, it has diversified its foreign policy priorities to include areas such as Latin America and the African continent, which were marginal in previous foreign policy agendas<sup>7</sup>. Thirdly, it has multiplied political and economic links with the first division of emerging powers. For instance, in 2008 Russia became Turkey's top trading partner, while a timetable has been set with China to increase the country's trade volume to \$50 billion by 2015 and, in the second phase, to \$100 billion by 2020<sup>8</sup>. It would not come as a surprise if, in the future, Ankara pleads for its inclusion into the BRICS club, as President Gül already suggested in an interview with the *Financial Times* in 2010<sup>9</sup>. In the meantime, its strategy is to behave as if it were already included.

## Foreign policy agency

As in many other countries, for almost two decades now, civil society organisations, think-tanks, business associations and public opinion in general have become more interested in foreign policy, and thus are more influential in what used to be the monopoly of diplomats and security personnel<sup>10</sup>. In parallel, the prime minister has also become more active and has increased his power and influence in foreign affairs. This process, which in other countries is called "presidentialisation", has taken place at the expense of the role of the Presidency of the Republic, the armed forces and even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, the views or even more explicitly the likes and dislikes of the prime minister have an immediate and visible reflection on the country's foreign policy<sup>12</sup>. On a different scale, Ahmed Davutoğlu, first as a chief adviser to the prime minister's office and then as a minister of Foreign Affairs, has also had a strong personal influence on the definition of Turkish foreign policy doctrine<sup>13</sup>. The confluence of these two trends: the democratisation of foreign policy-making and Erdoğan and

## The diversification of priorities and the possibility of disagreeing with traditional Western allies have increased the visibility of Turkey's Foreign Policy

Davutoğlu's actorness in defining Turkish foreign policy is producing two distinct and mutually reinforcing effects. The first is that foreign policy has become important in electoral campaigns, and Erdoğan has built on his international image for domestic consumption. The second is that foreign policy discussions are increasingly politicised, making consensus on foreign policy more difficult.

## Multidimensional foreign policy

This idea was already popular in the 1990s and particularly during the time of the late foreign affairs minister Ismail Cem. This term was at that time associated with a deliberate attempt to put an end to Cold War confrontation and thus promote an opening-up towards the former Soviet space and to a lesser extent to its southern neighbours. Under the AKP, the accent is placed on the refusal of a predetermined hierarchy among foreign policy priorities, in an attempt to put an end to Turkish foreign policy subordination to a "threat perception which tended to securitize relations with all "non-Western neighbours" (Kramer, 2010: 24). Turkish officials argue that none of Turkey's top priorities, including the EU accession process or

Turkey's Western alignment, are by nature more important than the rest. From this perspective, all priorities are compatible and should adapt to a changing and dynamic environment. Indeed, the diversification of priorities and the possibility of disagreeing with traditional Western allies have

increased the visibility of Turkey's Foreign Policy and have enjoyed much support among AKP's constituency, in addition to other segments of Turkish society. Nevertheless, opposition parties, as well as some academic circles, claim that such a strategy leads to inconsistencies and could be counter-productive for Turkey's long-term national interests<sup>14</sup>. This debate is likely to intensify if there is an escalation of tensions between Western countries and Iran, or between the latter and Israel.

## Autonomy

The quest for what Şaban Kardaş (2011) has defined as strategic autonomy emerges the ultimate goal of this multidimensional approach. In the Turkish context, autonomy is understood as the capacity to pursue policies in areas that are of vital interest which could eventually contradict the priorities and diverge from the strategies of the Western allies. Recent examples include the Brazilian-Turkish-led negotiations on the Iranian

7. For instance, in 2009 Turkey announced the opening of 15 new embassies in African countries.

8. "Turkey, China hail 'strategic cooperation' amid protests", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 October 2010.

9. "It wouldn't be surprising if we start talking about Bric plus T," suggested Gül in this interview, published in *The Financial Times*, 8 November 2010.

10. According to Meltem Müftüler-Baç (2011), the attempt to join the EU has been critical factor in broadening the actors that are influential in the decision-making process.

11. This was a recurrent idea in the interviews with Turkish foreign policy experts.

12. The best example is the deterioration of Turkish-Israel relations since 2009. The Prime Minister's positions regarding Israel policies got tougher as he had felt personally betrayed by his Israeli counterparts when in December 2008 he continued to mediate between Syria and Israel while the latest was preparing the Operation Cast Lead. The Prime Minister was particularly disappointed as he had received Ehud Olmert in Ankara few days before the attack and, not only he was not informed but was asked to continue mediating with Damascus. Some incidents and declarations, particularly regarding the Gaza Flotilla raid, continued to poison bilateral relations.

13. Bülent Aras (2009: 139) argues that, before being appointed minister, Davutoğlu was more than an adviser as he became the "intellectual architect of Turkey's new foreign policy".

14. See, for instance, Ziya Öniş (2011:59) when he says: "At the moment, there is a certain inconsistency in Turkey's style of foreign policy activism which is clearly noted by foreign observers. In spite of the inherent problems in the negotiation process, Turkey is still formally a candidate country. At the same time, it seems to be implementing a unilateral foreign policy style and behaving as a kind of independent regional power". Ioannis Grigoriadis (2010: 9) also argues that "there is a serious contradiction in relegating Turkey's EU membership ambition to simply one of Turkish strategic priorities. (...) What this position misses is the importance of Turkey's reform process and EU membership for the management and resolution of its own domestic conflicts".

nuclear dossier in 2010 and the uninterrupted dialogue with Hamas since their victory in the 2006 elections. These controversial decisions triggered debates, in Turkey and abroad, on an eventual axis-shift in Turkey's foreign policy. Some analysts, such as Ian O. Lesser (2011: 61-62) and Ziya Öniş (2011), qualified this stance as being more typical of a non-aligned leader, whereas other analysts follow Soner Çağaptay's (2011) thesis that there is an Islamisation and a de-westernisation process of Turkish foreign policy. In fact, divergence in priorities, alliances and strategies with the country's Western partners represents only one side of the coin. Turkish and American officials have not had – since long ago – such an intense and productive dialogue as they have nowadays, particularly at the highest level<sup>15</sup>. On the ground, Turkey's constructive role in Afghanistan has also been praised by its Western allies, Ankara has announced the deployment of missiles on its soil as part of NATO's missile shield and Turkey's influence in Iraq is widely seen as a counter-weight to the Iranian influence in this country. Moreover, it could be argued that the Arab Spring has somehow induced Turkey to seek greater cooperation with Western countries rather than freelancing in the neighbourhood<sup>16</sup>. Critical decisions such as Erdoğan's calls to Hosni Mubarak to step down, as well as the policy U-turn in the case of Syria, were apparently taken after consultations with Washington. Interestingly, Turkey's collaboration with its Western allies has not watered down the government's assertive and sometimes aggressive rhetoric in foreign affairs, which has earned Erdoğan much applause at home, but also in the streets of the Middle East.

**Trying to keep the balance between resources and expectations, on the one hand, and the identification of which issues matter more than others, on the other, is the key to maintaining Turkey's rising influence in international affairs**

## Multilateralism

Since the early days of the Republic, Turkey has made a great effort to be admitted, as a full member or as an observer, in as many international organisations as possible<sup>17</sup>. Turkey has also supported multilateral consultations as a means to appease tensions in the Caucasus (in 2008, following the Russia-Georgia war, Ankara proposed the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact), in the Middle East (with the series of Iraq's neighbours' conferences and now with the Friends of Syria meetings) or in Afghanistan with the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference. However, when Ankara has considered that its vital interests were under threat, it did not hesitate to move unilaterally. It happened in 1974 in Cyprus and it has been a recurrent trend in extra-territorial activities in Iraq against PKK terrorism. In the years to come, the current government is likely to combine such sporadic unilateral moves

with an even stronger emphasis on multilateral cooperation as a way to resolve conflicts (in Syria and elsewhere) and with Turkey's active participation of in multilateral organisations. For instance, Turkey will continue to promote its candidacy to occupy a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council for the 2015-2016 term, disputing this position with two friendly countries: New Zealand and Spain<sup>18</sup>. The Turkish government will certainly attempt to take advantage of its presence in the G-20 at a crucial moment for global economic recovery and, to a lesser extent, of the fact that a Turkish citizen, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, is since 2005 been the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

## Rhythmic diplomacy

Ahmet Davutoğlu often mentions this idea when outlining his vision of what Turkey should achieve through a renovated foreign policy. The basic assumption is that Turkey should not only have the means but also the mentality to adapt to a rapidly-changing international agenda, to be prepared to act, to be present where critical decisions are being taken, to anticipate the challenges and to be proactive rather than reactive when

problems arise, emphasising the idea of mediation. One of the most visible attempts to put these ideas into practice has been the sustained effort to increase the Turkish diplomatic service, (not only in terms of recruitment but also by opening new embassies)<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, the problem with rhythmic diplomacy is

that by trying to be everywhere, one may risk being less influential where the real interests actually lie. A parallel could be drawn with economics, in that Turkey could face a "diplomatic overheating". Thus, trying to keep the balance between resources and expectations, on the one hand, and the identification of which issues matter more than others, on the other, is the key to maintaining Turkey's rising influence in international affairs.

## EU bid

The critics of the AKP's foreign policy often mention the paralysis in the EU accession process, which contrasts with the country's rediscovery of the Middle East, as an example of the side-effects of this rhythmic diplomacy. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, EU-Turkish relations had its golden age. Recognised as a candidate country in the 1999 Helsinki European Council, Turkey found the right incentives to pro-

15. Soner Çağaptay, in an article in *The Washington Post* put it thus: "Today (...) the United States and Turkey are on a honeymoon, with President Obama and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan having formed what is probably the best relationship between a US president and a Turkish prime minister in decades".

16. The author thanks Nathalie Tocci for this particular idea.

17. This has brought Turkey to achieve an observer status in the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) and the African Union.

18. "Turkey to make bid for new seat on UN Security Council" in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 18 May 2011.

19. A decade ago, Turkey had fewer than 1,000 diplomats. A recruitment strategy, as well as the fact that almost 800 consular and specialised officers (Konsolosluk ve İhtisas Memuru, KİM) are considered part of the Turkish diplomatic service has almost increased the number of diplomats to 2,000.

mote major political reforms and modernise the economy, the EU bid stood out as Turkey's top foreign policy priority, Turkish public opinion overwhelmingly supported membership of the EU and accession negotiations could finally start in 2005. From then on, the situation rapidly deteriorated. As noted by Atila Eralp (2011: 204), conditionality rather than incentives seemed to dominate the negotiations and, consequently, the process became less attractive for Turkey. The results of these negotiations are rather poor, particularly in a comparative perspective: Turkey and Croatia started negotiations at the same time and while the latter is going to join the EU in 2013, many chapters in Turkey's accession negotiations remain frozen due to either the Cyprus conflict or the French veto on opening negotiations on other chapters that could reaffirm Turkey's membership prospects. Moreover, dialogue on visa-liberalisation, a repeated demand by Turkish authorities and business circles, has not made any significant progress<sup>20</sup>. Both Turkey's elites and public opinion still believe that keeping the accession process alive has positive effects, but there is a widespread feeling that achieving its ultimate goal is becoming more and more difficult. Frustration, disappointment and mistrust have become the dominant trend and the political and economic crisis in the EU has given additional arguments to Turkish euro-sceptics. In other words, while the EU is losing its appetite for further enlargements, many in Turkey believe that the EU anchor is no longer as fundamental as it used to be and some policy-makers claim that while Turkey and the EU need each other, actually the EU needs Turkey more than the other way round<sup>21</sup>. In the second half of 2012 the situation could get worse due to Ankara's threat to freeze ties with the EU during the Cypriot term-presidency starting in July. Nobody seems interested in a train-crash scenario but tensions with Nicosia, for instance in relation to gas exploitation rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, could further damage relations with the EU as a whole. Some advocates of EU-Turkish relations, such as former Commissioner Günter Verheugen (2012), claim that the Arab Spring, and the possibility of increasing cooperation with Turkey in this particular domain, should serve as a catalyst to give a new boost to EU-Turkish relations. Notwithstanding, as important as developments in the Middle East might be for both the EU and Turkey, it seems unlikely that this will suffice to restore trust between Ankara and Brussels (and Paris and Berlin), and to create momentum for a re-launch of accession negotiations (Soler i Lecha, 2011). Only a deep and substantive policy-review in France and Germany or real progress in resolving the Cyprus conflict could break this vicious circle<sup>22</sup>.

**While the EU is losing its appetite for further enlargements, many in Turkey believe that the EU anchor is no longer as fundamental as it used to be**

## Strategic dialogue

The accession negotiations on foreign and security policy are paralysed, EU-NATO cooperation is blocked due to the Cyprus conflict and yet, despite all this, Turkey and the EU have many interests in common in international affairs. This is the reason why Turkish and EU analysts have proposed the launch of a strategic dialogue (Grabbe & Ülgen, 2010). That is, a new coordination mechanism between Turkey and the EU in foreign and security matters. This idea is gaining momentum because since the Lisbon Treaty came into force, candidate countries are no longer invited to join European Council discussions, and this has reduced the space for high-level consultation. Traditionally, Turkish authorities were suspicious of any mechanism which could be seen as an alternative to the accession process, or even worse, as a consolation prize after half a century knocking on the EU's doors. Yet, more recently, Turkish authorities have pressed to increase high-level consultations, to be involved in discussions on issues of shared and vital interests, and to lay the basis for regular cooperation with the recently-created European External Action Service (EEAS). Accordingly, Commissioner Füle has proposed the launch of

a "positive agenda" of cooperation, which would include, among other issues, dialogue on foreign policy<sup>23</sup>. If in 2012 the EU is not able to substantiate this idea and cannot offer some sort of response to Turkey's demands, Ankara

will find even fewer incentives to converge with EU policies. Moreover, when Turkey needs to discuss foreign policy matters with the Europeans, priority will be given to cooperation with specific member states rather than with the EEAS<sup>24</sup>.

## Zero problems with neighbours

The AKP government and Ahmet Davutoğlu himself have popularised the idea of the "zero problems principle" as one of the flagships of their Turkish foreign policy vision and a necessary step to upgrade Turkey to the category of a central state. Before the AKP came to power, Ismail Cem had already made efforts to resolve longstanding conflicts with Greece. With the current governments, these efforts attempted to cover all the neighbours of the country. Two of the most important areas of progress were the boosting of political and economical relations with Syria and Iraq, including with the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in Northern Iraq (Hale, 2009)<sup>25</sup>. Less successful were, nonetheless, the attempts to reunify Cyprus and pave

20. Gerald Knaus & Alexandra Stiglmeier "Being fair to Turkey is in the EU's interest" in *EUobserver*, 12 March 2012.  
21. See, for instance, Egemen Bağış's interview in *Today's Zaman* (7 January 2011) and Ahmet Davutoğlu's interview in *Der Spiegel* (6 November 2011).  
22. In the light of political changes in France, ahin Alpay argues that "it seems that Turkey's friends in Europe, alarmed by the stalled talks with Turkey, are exerting efforts to help save relations from total derailment" in his article "Positive agenda' from the EU most welcome" in *Today's Zaman* (20 May 2012).

23. "Positive EU-Turkey agenda launched in Ankara", *Press Release*, MEMO/12/359, Brussels, 17 May 2012.  
24. This trend could be reinforced if, as suggested by Emiliano Alessandri (2010: 15), the degree of convergence in foreign policy between Turkey and specific member states is greater with countries such as France and Germany, which cannot be listed among the vocal supporters of speeding up accession negotiations. Alessandri points out, for instance, that in issues such as relations with Russia, the Iranian nuclear programme or energy infrastructure, Ankara is closer to Berlin and Paris than to London or Washington.  
25. According to Turkish official data, in the case of Syria, trade volume rose to \$2,272,415 in 2010 (it was \$729,507 in 2001), and the balance of trade has been very favourable to Turkey's interests.

the way for reconciliation with Armenia (Pope, 2010). Since 2011 this picture is becoming even less bright: unremitting tension with Israel, new disputes with Cyprus on offshore gas drilling in Eastern Mediterranean; cross accusations between Erdoğan and the Iraqi Prime Minister, the condemnation of Al-Asad's mass repression against protesters in Syria; the deterioration of relations with Iran as a result of Turkey's participation in NATO's missile shield and conflicting strategies regarding Syria and Iraq. Turkish officials repeat that the zero problem vision is still valid (somehow reinterpreted as a zero problem with peoples rather than with governments<sup>26</sup>), but on the ground, Turkey is facing all sorts of problems with almost of all its neighbours<sup>27</sup>. Or, as former MEP Joost Lagendijk nicely put it, nowadays Turkey has "zero neighbours without problems"<sup>28</sup>. Regardless of Turkey's capacity to preserve the "zero problems" label, the relative importance of relations with its neighbours is likely to remain one of the priorities of Turkish foreign policy. What is more, the neighbourhood could be one of the major topics of the aforementioned strategic dialogue, or even the core of a trilateral cooperation between Turkey, the EU and the US<sup>29</sup>.

### Soft power

The destabilization in the Middle East and certain critical decisions such as Turkey's participation in NATO's missile shield is turning back the attention towards Turkey's hard-power attributes. In the last decade, the current government tried to leave behind the days when Turkey regarded its neighbours through a security lens and therefore redefined these relations in terms of opportunity and mutual interests. Qualified as a trading state (Kirişçi, 2009), Turkey presented itself as a benign power, making use of trade, investment, cultural and educational cooperation, public diplomacy and even visa liberalisation to multiply its influence<sup>30</sup>. The Middle East is a region where Turkey has been particularly active in deploying its soft-policy toolbox but also an area where this strategy has found its limits. According to Meliha Benli Altunışık (2008), these limits stem from Turkey's difficulty in solving its

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own problems and the radicalisation and polarisation dynamics of Middle Eastern politics. In its strategy towards its neighbours Turkey is currently combining elements of soft power (for instance, investing in links with emerging political forces and civil society in the Arab countries) with a more hawkish discourse, illustrated by more or less explicit threats to Israel, Cyprus and Syria, warning that Turkey will not hesitate to use force to protect Turkey's national interests.

### Kurdish issue

The government has utilised both soft and hard power instruments to resolve the "Kurdish problem". This issue illustrates at best the linkage between domestic and international agendas and stands as a major deficit in Turkey's democratic consolidation and a burden in its relations with its southern neighbours<sup>31</sup>. After a period in which tensions were reduced thanks to the government's 'Kurdish opening' (later rebranded as a 'democratic opening'), and following the participation of Kurdish nationalists in the debates and consultations to

draft a purely civilian constitution and flourishing relations with Kurdish leaders from Northern Iraq, the situation has now deteriorated. Two major tragedies occurred in late 2011 (the PKK attack committed in October killing 24 soldiers and policemen in Hakkari and the December airstrike killing 35

civilians near the Iraqi border) which triggered massive protests, fuelling social and political tension. Mounting tension in Syria could complicate this picture as parts of the country could become, once more, an operational base for PKK terrorist activities. Should some sort of "Kurdish Spring" erupt in Turkey and should it be violently stifled, Turkey may find itself in a thorny situation, both internally as well as in the Middle East. Avoiding this nightmare situation, in which Turkey would have peace neither at home, nor abroad, should represent a top priority for Turkey's authorities in 2012.

### Neo-Ottomanism

It is commonplace to characterise Turkey's newfound interests in its neighbourhood as the corollary of a neo-Ottoman vision. This neo-Ottoman approach would substitute a decades-old secular Kemalist foreign policy (Taşpınar: 2008). Turkish authorities dislike this concept, arguing that it is easily associated with some sort of imperialistic ambition. This does not prevent them from making references to a "common history" and "cultural affinity" with the territories of the former Ottoman Empire in public discourses. Davutoğlu himself has

26. Davutoğlu (2012: 6) argues that "We developed ties with these regimes because at the time they were not at war with their own citizens. But when they preferred to suppress the demands of their citizens, we sided with the people and still remain committed to the same democratic vision for our region".  
 27. Sinan Ülgen affirms that "for such a country, there is no such thing as "no problems." In an environment that is being reshaped in unpredictable ways by the Arab awakening, Turkey will have to redefine what it means to be a good neighbour" (see "Turkey's "Zero Problems" Problem", in *Project Syndicate*, 15 November 2011).  
 28. Joost Lagendijk "Zero neighbors without problems" in *Today's Zaman*, 1 November 2011.  
 29. Katinka Barysch, deputy director for the Center of European Reform, argues in her article "The Arab spring, a missed opportunity for Europe and Turkey?" that "the revamping of respective neighbourhood policies could be an opportunity for the EU and Turkey to get serious about foreign policy coordination". (*Today's Zaman*, 1 April 2011). Nathalie Tocci, deputy director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali proposes a "trilateral strategy between Turkey, the European Union and the United States" which would take the form of "a joint strategy that could include the establishment of a standing trilateral working group for the neighbourhood, which would in turn determine whether, when and in what policy areas complementary action should proceed separately or simultaneously" (*Open Democracy*, 7 March 2012).  
 30. On Turkey's visa diplomacy see Devrim & Soler i Lecha (2010).

31. Ilter Turan (2011: 4) says that "The AKP (...) is fully aware that without a solution to the Kurdish problem, Turkey will encounter intensifying difficulties in the international arena, which will undermine its aspirations to regional leadership and being an important actor in the global system. For an in-depth analysis of the which are the policy-options for the Turkish government and the Kurdish groups see International Crisis Group (2011).

mentioned the idea of a “Pax Ottomana” and has therefore presented Turkey as an order-instituting country. The idea of rebuilding ties that were artificially broken with the creation of the Republic is also behind the zero problem vision and the AKP’s foreign policy at large<sup>32</sup>. In a post-2011 context, in which Turkey seems ready to play a more visible role in Middle Eastern affairs, where political Islam stands out among the winners of the Arab Spring and where disorder rather than order appears as the short-term dominant trend in the region, the idea of neo-Ottomanism is likely to become popular again. Much to the dismay of Turkish politicians, Turkey’s interference in the domestic affairs of its southern neighbours or even the idea of Turkey (and its Prime Minister) trying to play a leading role in the Muslim world, will be interpreted as neo-Ottoman ambitions by those who distrust Turkey’s growing influence in the region.

### Turkish model

In a recent survey conducted by TESEV, an Istanbul-based think-tank, Turkey enjoys a very positive image in most Middle Eastern countries, and a significant proportion but not all of those that view Turkey’s involvement in the region positively, also agree that Turkey can be a model for their countries (Akgün & Senyücel Gündoğar, 2012)<sup>33</sup>. As Meliha Benli Altunışık (2005) explained, Turkey was already presented as a model for the Middle East in the framework of George W. Bush’s democratisation agenda, and even before then, in the early 1990s, was also perceived as an inspiration for the newly-independent Central Asian Republics. As then, nowadays everyone tends to interpret this model in a different way. Some actors, particularly in the ranks of the Arab security establishments but also among some secular circles, view Turkey as a case in which the army has had a strong influence on domestic politics and has acted as a guarantor of constitutional principles. Others view the country as an example of coexistence between democracy and Islam. The AKP is said to be a benchmark for the leaders of the Ennahda party in Tunisia and the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt<sup>34</sup>. Finally, Turkey is often praised as an

### Discussions on the Turkish model will evolve depending on which aspect of this model is highlighted and by whom

example of a successful economic performance. As Nathalie Tocci (2011: 4) notes, “rather than a black-and-white model of a pro-Western Muslim secular democracy, Turkey may offer a number of different models and ideas to inspire change in its southern neighbourhood”. Henceforth, discussions on the Turkish model will evolve depending on which aspect of this model is highlighted and by whom. Moreover, the attractiveness of the Turkish experience will depend on its capacity to tackle its own political deficits, on Turkey’s economic performance, on the ability to leave aside arrogant and condescending attitudes in its relations with the new political leaders of the region and on the country’s capacity to join forces with other international actors<sup>35</sup>.

### Fine-tuning or comprehensive policy review: The Syrian challenge

Syria is a litmus test for Turkish foreign policy’s capacity to adapt to a rapidly-changing environment, as well as case in which the concepts outlined in this paper acquire a new meaning. Normalisation of relations with Syria was one of the visible facets of the AKP zero problem approach, and an example of its multidimensional foreign policy. Leaving behind the times when the two countries came to the brink of a war in 1998, Erdoğan and Bashar Al-Assad succeeded in overcoming long-standing conflicts (Altunışık and Tür, 2006). The two countries resolved territorial disputes over Hatay, started cooperation on sensitive issues such as the fight against terrorism and the use of water resources, introduced a visa-free regime and promoted an exponential increase in trade relations which mainly benefited border areas and industrial and tourist sectors in cities such as Gaziantep and Aleppo. Soft power was then considered the key to increasing Turkey’s influence in neighbouring regions. These were the days in which Erdoğan treated Bashar al-Assad as a good friend and made multiple high-level visits to the country. Turkey also appeared to be a country pushing hard for the normalisation of relations between Syria and the international community<sup>36</sup>.

When the first protests started in March 2011 in Daraa, Idlib and the suburbs of Damascus, the Turkish authorities did not react with the same harshness as they had in the case of Egypt. Some accused Ankara of double standards and said that their approach reflected the importance of economic interests in Turkish-Syrian relations, as they also

32. Former AK Party Deputy Chairman of External Affairs Suat Kınıklıoğlu (2011) maintains that “one of the main driving forces of Turkey’s new foreign policy is a distinct reconnection with the nation’s history, culture and civilisation”. There is a vivid debate on whether ideology or interests lay behind this policy review. According to academics such as Pinar Bilgin and Ali Bilgic (2011), civilizational considerations are the driving force behind this change of orientation. Others, such as Nicholas Danforth, argue that “scholars have overemphasized the role of domestic identity and ideology in determining Turkish foreign policy”.

33. An average of 78 per cent of respondents said that they had a positive image of Turkey (varying from 93 per cent in the case of Libya to 44 per cent in Syria) while 61 per cent of respondents stated that they looked at Turkey as a model for the countries of the region.

34. AKP’s contacts with emerging leaders in the region are an asset that increases Turkey’s regional role and an area where Turkish and European authorities could cooperate in the future. As said by Ibrahim Kalin, Turkish Prime Minister chief adviser, in his article “Turkey and the Arab Spring” (*Today’s Zaman*, 23 May 2011), affirms that “the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, al-Nahda Movement in Tunisia, and Hamas in Palestine will all play important and legitimate roles in the political future of their respective countries,” and suggests that “Americans and Europeans will need to engage these groups publicly and directly, as Turkey has done.”

35. Sinan Ülgen (2011) argues that “for the Turkish model to continue to provide inspiration, Turkey needs to keep improving itself”, and lists issues such as freedom of the press or the interference of the state in religious affairs as areas where additional reforms are needed. Soli Özel (2011: 74) argues that “its real strengths lie in its functioning economy, secular democratic system and ability to mediate between its Western allies and a region that is at long last joining the 21st-century mainstream”.

36. For instance, in 2008 Turkey mediated a peace deal between Israel and Syria, in April 2009 Syrian and Turkish forces conducted a joint military exercise and a few months later both countries held the first High Level Strategic Cooperation Council involving several sectorial ministries.

did in the case of Libya<sup>37</sup>. Until summer 2011, Turkey sent messages urging Al-Assad to pursue meaningful reforms, while also hosting meetings with the Syrian opposition in Antalya and Istanbul. Ahmet Davutoğlu travelled several times to Damascus, and in August he delivered the message that Turkey was running out of patience<sup>38</sup>. As the situation continued to deteriorate, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and also the President Abdullah Gül stated that Turkey had lost all trust and confidence in the Syrian leadership<sup>39</sup>. Turkey then applied those sanctions that the EU had imposed beforehand, closed the land border with Syria and not only non-violent opposition movements but also the Free Syrian Army found a safe haven in Turkey. Up to now, scenarios remain very open and, as Joshua W. Walker (2012: 6) has said, Turkey's leaders "know that they cannot sit idly by as their neighbour disintegrates into civil war, nor can they afford to intervene unilaterally".

This policy U-turn necessarily implied a change of discourse. Firstly, because it showed the limits of soft power, as Turkish leaders were unable to persuade a presumably friendly government to pursue political reforms. Secondly, because the zero problem approach was reformulated as the absence of problems with societies and, therefore, as the need to confront those governments that were massacring their own people. Thirdly, because Turkish authorities realised that the country could not influence Syrian affairs with autonomous actions, but had to increase consultations with the US, the EU and the Arab League. In a similar token, Turkish diplomacy underlined the importance of multilateral solutions (even if they were to be found outside the framework of the UN)<sup>40</sup>. Fourthly, the situation in Syria began to be presented as an internal affair for Turkey, not only because of geographical proximity and the evident repercussions on the Kurdish issue, but also because the two countries have deep cultural and historical ties, thus reviving the debate on Turkey's neo-Ottoman ambitions. Fifthly, being considered an internal affair and in light of an ongoing politicisation of foreign policy debates, Syria became a fertile ground for partisan confrontation between the AKP and the main opposition party, the CHP, which went so far as to send in September 2011 a high-level delegation to Damascus when the government had started to harden its positions against the regime.

**The evolution of the Syrian crisis is likely to remain the greatest challenge for Turkish foreign policy in the months to come. It will determine whether the current adaptation of priorities and discourses will suffice or, on the contrary, a deeper policy review is needed**

The evolution of the Syrian crisis is likely to remain the greatest challenge for Turkish foreign policy in the months to come. It will determine whether the current adaptation of priorities and discourses will suffice or, on the contrary, a deeper policy review is needed. The Turkish foreign policy is still the result of the end of the Cold War, and as long as the Middle East remains in a period which UK Foreign Secretary William Hague has compared with a new Cold War, the priorities and discourse of Turkish foreign policy are likely to require much more than fine-tuning.

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37. See Pelin Turgut "How Syria and Turkey got to be Turkey's headaches" in TIME, 30 April 2011.

38. "Davutoğlu to visit Syria as Turkey's 'patience is running out'" in *Today's Zaman*, 7 August 2011.

39. "Turkey's Gül says has lost confidence in Syria" in *Today's Zaman*, 28 August 2011.

40. In one of his latest pieces, Şaban Kardeş (2012: 4) suggests that Turkey should "facilitate convergence of regional and global actors around a broad-based coalition that can oversee regime change, preferably short of use of force".



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