

Turkey's Rise as a Regional Power and its Role in the European Neighbourhood (ARI)

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Theme: Turkey has a growing strategic role in its overlapping neighbourhood with the EU.

Summary: Recent developments in the southern and eastern European neighbourhood have led to a new perception of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Turkey –on the one hand negotiating for EU membership, while, on the other, an important regional player in the common neighbourhood (the Caucasus and Mediterranean)– is increasingly being perceived as a crucial geopolitical partner for the EU. Turkey's role in relation to the EU's existing initiatives –such as the Union for the Mediterranean, the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy– and its own Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform represents a challenge for the future shape of the European neighbourhood. This ARI outlines Turkey's relevance to a successful outcome of the EU's initiatives, its role for political stability on the EU's borders and the possibilities for cooperation or synergies between the Turkish and EU initiatives.

Analysis:

'A paradigm shift – where Turkey's international position from being a wing country becomes a pivotal state and finally a global actor'
Ahmet Davutoğlu¹

Turkey's New Geopolitical Role: Stepping out of the Euro-Atlantic Shadow

When the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, asked for one more minute to speak at the final debate in the Davos World Economic Summit in January 2009, nobody could have expected the words that followed. Turning to the Israeli President, Shimon Peres, the Turkish Prime Minister said: 'When it comes to killing you know very well how to kill. I know very well how you hit and kill children on beaches'. Never before had Turkey –traditionally a Euro-Atlantic ally and a reliable partner of Israel– expressed such harsh words against Israel. Today, Turkey seems to be stepping out of the old Euro-Atlantic shadow.

For decades, Turkey's foreign policy agenda has been marked by the political configurations of the Cold War. Turkey's clear western orientation is not just a temporary phenomenon. It is a tradition going back to the 1920s, when the founder of the Republic of

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¹ In his book *Strategic Depth*, Ahmet Davutoglu, chief foreign policy advisor and Foreign Minister of the Republic of Turkey since May 2009, provides an outlook on Turkey's new international position.

Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, initiated the country's so-called *westernisation* by introducing important reforms on the Western European model.

After World War II, Turkey played an important role in the bi-polar world as geostrategic ally of the western powers. Since Turkey's membership of the Council of Europe (1949) and its active participation in NATO (1952), its western orientation has constantly developed. The Association Agreement (Ankara Agreement) between the European Community (EC) and Turkey was signed in 1963, showing Turkey's strategic long-term goal to become a full member of the European Community. Twenty-five years later, in 1986, Turkey officially applied for EC membership. Since the early 2000s, Turkey has implemented several reform packages and, after the mildly Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) won the elections in 2002, it took a major step on its way to EU accession, and negotiations started on 3 October 2005.

For decades, EU-Turkey relations had largely been marked by Turkey's membership aspirations and its foreign policy agenda was very much oriented towards the EU's. However, Turkey's recent engagement in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region indicate a certain shift from an EU-shaped agenda towards a more emancipated Turkish foreign policy. The end of the bipolarity of international politics after 1989 and the Central and Eastern European states' rapprochement with the EU, followed by their accession in 2004, has had an important impact on Turkey's geopolitical orientation and on the overall international perception of the country. The change in government in 2002 implied not only an important reform package in preparation for future EU accession, but also re-oriented Turkey's vision of its own regional and international role. As an important player in its neighbourhood, especially in the South Caucasus and the Middle East, in parallel to its EU membership aspirations Turkey strengthened its position in the region, expanding its sphere of influence.

The lack of active Turkish support in 2003 for the invasion of Iraq by the US and certain EU Member states marked the beginning of Turkey's new approach. Since then, Turkey's foreign policy is increasingly becoming more emancipated from the US and EU in international politics and has gradually moved towards a more independent approach. Turkey currently appears to be seeking a greater scope for manoeuvre and developing a multidimensional vision of its geopolitics in the region, establishing multiple relations with its neighbours and enhancing its position in its immediate neighbourhood.

Turkey's EU Accession versus an Active Role within the European Neighbourhood

As a candidate for EU membership, Turkey has always been cautious about being involved in the general framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), fearing that its participation could compromise its already much-disputed status as a candidate. The ENP covers the overall framework for the relations between the EU and its neighbours and is meant to provide an opportunity for close, privileged relations, especially in political and economic terms. Within the ENP framework the degree of integration should go beyond the usual bilateral cooperation for those countries not having a recognised European perspective² –which is not the case for Turkey–. Turkey has had a very deep political and economic integration with the EU since the Customs Union of 1995, hence its involvement in the ENP does not imply any further added value.

² European Commission (2003), 'Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours', COM (2003) 104.

Recently, the European neighbourhood has been marked by a period of political instability in Georgia, the Gaza Strip and Moldova, and the EU has given renewed attention to its southern as well as to its eastern dimension. There are currently different, parallel and complementary initiatives, initiated by the EU as well as by actors in the region itself, with the overall aim of strengthening bilateral and/or multilateral relations.³ For its southern partners, the EU established the so called Union for the Mediterranean (UFM) in July 2008. After the military escalation in South Ossetia between Georgia and Russia in the summer of 2008, special attention was also given to the EU's eastern neighbours. The conflict at its south-eastern borders gave the EU not only the impetus to accelerate the negotiations on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and re-opened the question of regional cooperation within the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) but has also inspired Turkey to launch the idea of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP).⁴

Turkey, bordering the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, plays an important role in the EU's neighbourhood policy. When the French President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed the creation of the UFM in 2007 he invited Turkey to take part in the initiative. However, the latter was initially reluctant as it was concerned that its involvement could hinder its EU candidacy.

In view of recent developments, and given Turkey's geographic position, it is especially interesting to take a closer look at its role in the eastern and south-eastern European neighbourhood. Turkey's membership of the Union for the Mediterranean, its involvement as a crucial player in the Black Sea Synergy and the invitation to participate in the Eastern Partnership underlines its political importance in the EU's political activities with the common neighbourhood. Given the existing framework of the ENP, the EU's new regional initiatives and Turkey's status as a candidate country, there is a need to re-assess Turkey's position in foreign and regional policies and the possible impact on the ENP's strategic orientation.

Europe Goes East: Competing Voices in an Overlapping Neighbourhood

In order to maintain good and stable relations with its neighbours in the east and south-east and to secure a 'Ring of Friends' around its external borders, the EU is paying increasing attention to its eastern neighbours. Since the accession of Bulgaria and Rumania in 2007, the EU has become an integral part of the Black Sea region and is therefore particularly interested in its security and stability. As a complement to the bilateral projects already initiated by the ENP, the Black Sea Synergy promotes stability in the countries of the littoral, foreseeing cooperation in areas such as energy security, border security, transport, environmental protection and water management. The time for an initiative devoted to the EU's eastern neighbours had come by May 2008 and the idea of an Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched based on a Polish-Swedish proposal.⁵ Following the military conflict in the South Caucasus, the Commission accelerated its work on the EaP proposal and presented a Communication⁶ leading to its official

³ The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) was launched in 1992 by 11 countries on the Black Sea littoral.

⁴ The geographical scopes of the initiatives differ. The EaP covers the EU-27, three eastern European ENP countries plus three South Caucasus countries (EU-27 + 3 + 3). The CSCP excludes the EU but includes three South Caucasus countries plus Turkey and Russia (3 + 2). The BSS covers five EU member states on the Black Sea littoral, five ENP countries, including three South Caucasus countries, plus Russia and Turkey (EU-5 + (3 + 2) + 2).

⁵ <http://www.msz.gov.pl/Polish-Swedish,Proposal,19911.html>.

⁶ Council of the EU (2009), Joint Declaration, Eastern Partnership Summit, Prague, 8435, 7/VI/2009.

inauguration on 7 May 2009 in Prague.⁷ The Partnership aims to intensify and upgrade the EU's relations with its eastern and south-eastern European neighbours within the existing ENP framework.⁸

Empowering Turkey's Regional Role: The Revival of an Independent Foreign Policy

The conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 brought the South Caucasus back to the international agendas. It reminded western countries that the region is still the home to unresolved conflicts. Ever since the independence of the three states of the Southern Caucasus –Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia– in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region has been subject to various territorial disputes, including Nagorno-Karabakh (between Armenia and Azerbaijan), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (both between Georgia and Russia). Additionally, relations between Turkey and Armenia have also been problematic. In order to address the region's problems, not only the EU –with its EaP– but also Turkey, as an important regional actor, have given a new impulse for enhanced engagement. Turkey's commitment to the region is exemplified by its Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP).

The CSCP aims to involve the three South Caucasus states and the two regional powers, Russia and Turkey. Its goal is to strengthen regional peace, stability and security as well as to defuse tension and develop neighbourly relations. In addition, it aims to secure the vulnerable energy export routes running from the Caspian Sea to Europe. Turkey's objective is to contribute as a regional power to the stability by proposing its own vision on how to tackle the region's problems. In order to re-build confidence, a platform creating a forum for dialogue between countries in conflict is an important starting point. However, the development and future effectiveness of the Turkish initiative will depend on the perception and approval of the countries in the region. In addition to this, the view of the EU and its member states concerning Turkey's engagement in the eastern European neighbourhood should have a crucial impact on the international perception of the CSCP.⁹

Finding Synergies between the EU and Turkish Initiatives

As the geographical scope of the EU and Turkish initiatives overlap, it is important to analyse their similarities, synergies and complementarities. The focus of the initiatives is different; therefore it is possible and necessary to develop both processes in parallel. Whereas the EaP concentrates on a more pragmatic approach and aims to upgrade relations on the basis of a bilateral and multilateral approach, the CSCP could be complementary in the sense that it tries to establish trust and dialogue between the South Caucasus countries, Turkey and Russia. As Turkey is part of the tensions in the region, it has to be involved in any initiative aimed at conflict resolution, which is a necessary first step to establishing neighbourly relations.

Not only does the political focus of the EaP and the CSCP differ, but also their geographical scope and political centre of gravity. Whereas the centre of gravity of the EaP lies in Brussels and does not include regional players such as Turkey and Russia as full participants, the CSCP includes both countries as prime components. In the CSCP the centre of gravity clearly belongs to the two regional powers –Turkey and Russia–, as both are crucial to finding a solution to the existing conflicts in the region. In the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) the centre of gravity is neither the EU nor the two regional powers, but the Black Sea region itself. Therefore, the BSS –that includes the EU's Black Sea member

⁷ Council of the EU (2008), Presidency Conclusions, 1/IX/2008, 12594/08, Point 7.

⁸ European Commission (2008), 'Communication, Eastern Partnership', 3/XII/2008, COM, 823/4.

⁹ European Commission (2008), *Turkey 2008 Progress Report*, SEC(2008) 2699, 5/XI/2008.

states, the EaP countries¹⁰ plus Russia and Turkey– could be a structure through which consultation mechanisms aiming to find synergies and to exchange best practices can be established.

There is a need to coordinate the parallel development of all initiatives launched in the European neighbourhood, as they cover a similar geographical scope. For the future success of these initiatives it will be important to assess whether the CSCP will have an impact on the BSS and the EaP and on shaping the European Neighbourhood Policy in general. An evaluation of the added value of the parallel development of the initiatives is important in order to get on board all the concerned stakeholders in the region. This coordination will be a particular challenge for the future development of the ENP and implies an important role for Turkey.

From the Mediterranean to the Middle East: Turkey's New Approach to Bridging Regions
In addition to the eastern dimension of the ENP, Turkey's enhanced profile as a regional player is also true as regards its geopolitical impact in the EU's southern neighbourhood. Especially in the Middle East, Turkey has played an active role in mediating between conflicting parties in recent years. Turkey's activities include the offer to mediate between the US and Iran, to stabilise Iraq and to establish direct talks between Syria and Israel, while also promoting the reconciliation of the Palestinian factions.

While the political scenario after World War II prevented Turkey from playing a significant role in the Middle East for a long time, today Turkey's geo-political considerations are changing. Its refusal to actively support the US invasion in Iraq in 2003 was one of the first significant measures to step out of the shadow of Euro-Atlantic politics in the Middle East. Especially since the early 2000s, Turkey's relations with the countries in the region have been redefined.

Recently, Turkey's approach to Syria has been distinct from that of the EU and US. Until the end of the 1990s, Turkish-Syrian relations were marked by a controlled tension. For the last 10 years, however, Turkey started to invest in its relationship with Syria. Turkish-Israeli relations –after having been at a minimum for decades– were intensified in the 1990s when several economic, military and educational treaties were signed between the two states. The perception of a 'common enemy' (Syria, Iraq or Iran) led to the Turkish-Israeli Strategic Partnership. Having strong relations with Israel enabled Turkey to play a crucial role in establishing the beginning of direct talks between Syria and Israel and also to act as a broker in the talks over the Golan Heights.

Turkey's position on Hamas also differs from the EU and US approach of classing it a terrorist organisation. At a time when almost all countries shut their doors to Hamas, Turkey kept on trying to bring Hamas into the political mainstream, supporting the idea of including it in any further peace talks in order to create a basis for reconciliation between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Turkey has established contacts with Hamas, allowing high level visits to Turkey that were perceived as a provocative move in Washington and Israel. After the Gaza crisis in December 2008, Prime Minister Erdoğan even irritated many governments when he harshly criticised the Israeli attacks on Gaza.

¹⁰ With the exception of Belarus, which is not a Black Sea littoral state.

Turkey within the Union for the Mediterranean

Nicolas Sarkozy, who proposed the *Mediterranean Union* in 2007, underlined that Turkey should participate as a crucial Mediterranean power. For the French President, who is openly opposed to Turkey's EU membership, inviting it to participate in an initiative in the ENP framework was a way of diminishing Turkey's political status as a candidate country, questioning its aspiration to join the EU as a full member, while lumping it together in a Union with any other ENP partner country. Being a candidate country, Turkey initially had a very hesitant attitude until just before the summit that established the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) on 13 July 2008. The UfM received wide attention when it was launched in 2008, although progress stalled following the Gaza crisis of 2008. For the time being, Turkey's potential impact for ending the deadlock has not been taken sufficiently into consideration by the EU. Turkey could indeed make use of its position, its experience and know-how in the Middle East to mediate in the UfM. In order to make the initiative a success, the EU should take advantage of Turkey's expertise.

Crucial Players in the European Neighbourhood: Turkey as Russia's Mirror Image in the South-east

Turkey is currently aspiring to have a problem-free relationship with its neighbours. Indeed, Russian-Turkish relations have improved, Turkey's relations with Georgia, Greece and Syria are positive and relations with Iran are balanced. If Turkey manages to reach a *détente* concerning its existing problems –such as its relations with Armenia and the Cyprus question– its international importance should increase even more.

With its new independent foreign policy approach, Turkey has made evident its ambition to set the political agenda for its own neighbourhood. Under the new AKP government, Ahmet Davutoğlu –the chief foreign policy advisor and Foreign Minister since May 2009– has been the architect of a new foreign policy vision. Davutoğlu argues that Turkey is uniquely positioned to play a constructive role in international politics, straddling the geopolitical lines that unite Euro-Asia and having a cultural affinity with the EU's eastern and southern neighbours as well as with the EU itself.

However, Turkey's role in the eastern European neighbourhood differs from its role in the southern neighbourhood. In the eastern neighbourhood it is part of the tension (eg, as regards Armenia). Nevertheless, its new foreign policy approach could open a window of opportunity for a further *détente* in this bellicose region. In the southern neighbourhood, Turkey is not part of the tensions and it has the potential to play an important role in achieving a lasting peace. Considering Turkey's geopolitical position, it may well succeed in imposing its conciliatory approach. Actively seeking solutions to the existing conflicts in the South Caucasus and in the Middle East would lay the foundations for successful multilateral cooperation. In order to achieve a stable neighbourhood, the EU needs Turkey's active support and involvement in the eastern as well as in the southern neighbourhood.

It is a significant paradigm change that Turkey is now setting its agenda independently from the US and the EU and is pursuing a foreign policy directed at multiple stakeholders in the region. This new *multidimensional* policy approach could be explained by Turkey's disappointment with the EU –its traditional western ally–. The offensive language used regarding Turkey's aspirations towards full EU membership by some of the EU member states has undermined the Turkish public's belief in the credibility of the EU accession process. Today it is not ideology that drives Turkey to choose a multi-dimensional approach but rather geopolitical necessity.

It could be argued that with Turkey's growing geopolitical importance, its status as an EU candidate country is losing strategic interest. Nevertheless, if Turkey's role as a regional player is heightened internationally, the EU's interest in Turkey should again intensify. Turkey's new strategic outlook and its enhanced regional profile might further increase its attractiveness for its western partners. Recent developments in the eastern European neighbourhood, including the growing importance of energy supplies and transit routes, has paved the way for a new perception of Turkey as a crucial strategic player in the region.

Conclusions: In order to achieve its proclaimed target of peace and stability on the European continent, the EU needs to cooperate with other important players on the periphery of Europe such as Turkey and Russia. While Russia maintains its traditionally powerful position in the eastern European neighbourhood and is a key player as regards energy supplies, Turkey could be characterised as Russia's mirror image in south-eastern Europe. Turkey as a candidate country negotiating for EU accession and sharing an overlapping neighbourhood with the EU in the Balkans, the South Caucasus and the Mediterranean is a crucial strategic partner. Turkey acts as a complementary bridge in Eastern Europe between the EU and the South Caucasus as well as in the southern neighbourhood and the Middle East.

The EU aims to achieve a stable and peaceful neighbourhood and so does Turkey. Therefore, their policies should be understood to be complementary. Concerning the eastern Neighbourhood, a specific step by the EU could be to propose a common consultation mechanism in order to identify possible synergies between the Black Sea Synergy, the Eastern Partnership and the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. For initiatives that cover conflictive regions to be effective, it is essential to solve existing tensions by addressing all the parties involved. The region as a whole, including Russia and Turkey, as well as the EU would benefit.

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