

More than 53,000 companies have INVESTED IN **TURKEY**



how about you?

average annual real
GDP growth rate

5.6%

2003-2016

13th largest
economy in
the world

GDP at PPP prices, 2016

University graduates

800,000

per year

average annual real GDP
growth rate forecast in OECD

4.9%

2015-2025

\$857 billion
of GDP at
current prices

Population

79.8 million

with half under the age of 31



INVEST IN TURKEY



COMMENTARIES

Turkish Foreign Policy under the AK Party?

MESUT ÖZCAN

Reforming Turkey's Democracy

MEHMET UÇUM

Anti-Turkey Sentiment in Europe during the Referendum Process

KEMAL İNAT

Deciphering the Mindset behind the anti-Turkey Bias in European Reporting

KLAUS JURGENS

Asia Heading Rightward: Embarking on a New Era

MOHAMMAD MAKRAM

Turkish Foreign Policy under the AK Party

MESUT ÖZCAN*

ABSTRACT *In its 15 years as Turkey's ruling party, the AK Party has left its imprint on foreign policy. Besides bringing its own style to bear in dealing with Turkey's long-standing issues of foreign policy, the AK Party has also diversified both the areas and the tools of Turkish foreign policy. In its early years, after dealing with the very urgent issues in Turkey's immediate vicinity, the party focused its agenda on increasing Turkey's engagement with neighboring regions. It also worked to diversify the nature of Turkey's relationships with traditional allies and started to use international aid, conflict resolution, mediation mechanisms, and Turkey's presence in international organizations as tools of foreign policy.*

Introduction

Several important developments stand out in terms of Turkey's foreign policy orientation during the rule of the AK Party to date. In general terms, we can say that during the AK Party rule (2002-2017) Turkey has increasingly focused on neighboring regions along with the traditional alliance relationships. AK Party governments have aimed to increase their contacts in political, economic and cultural terms with neighboring regions, namely the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. In tandem with the will on the side of the political authority, the economic development of the country during

the last 15 years enabled the AK Party governments to pursue their projects of engagement with those regions. In that regard, beginning with neighboring countries, Turkey established High Level Strategic Dialogue mechanisms with 20 countries and signed 513 agreements, i.e. memoranda of understanding to further relations in different issue areas.

If we divide the AK Party rule of 15 years in two, we can easily say that in the first half, the European Union (EU) was an important priority and hence had an influential impact on Turkish foreign policy. This trend began right after the AK Party came to power in 2002 and continued un-

* Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey

One of the most important contributions of the AK Party rule in foreign policy was Turkey's increasing relations with some remote regions which were neglected before

til the blocking of some of the negotiation chapters, along with negative signals from some members countries like France and Germany about Turkey's eligibility for full membership. Turkey's 'EU vacation' accelerated during the early years of the AK Party rule and then stalled in the last couple of years.

In addition to increasing engagement with neighboring regions, one of the most important contributions of the AK Party rule in foreign policy was Turkey's increasing relations with some remote regions which were neglected before. These areas are namely Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and East Asia. Although there had been several Turkish diplomatic initiatives in these areas in the past, diplomatic representation was very limited. By increasing diplomatic relations with these regions, Turkey not only widened its horizons in foreign policy, but also aimed to benefit from economic relations with these regions. The economic benefit of these relations became more obvious in overcoming the negative impacts of the global economic crisis of 2008-2009.

In addition to widening the scope of Turkey's foreign policy, another important development during AK Party rule has been the diversification of the tools of foreign policy. New institutions under the office of the Prime Ministry contributed to different aspects of foreign policy, especially in terms of soft power. During the rule of the AK Party, Turkey increasingly used international forums and international humanitarian and developmental aid in its foreign policy. This policy is in line with the expanding scope of foreign policy, and also with the economic performance of the country in the last 15 years.

Early Years, Urgent Issues

When the AK Party came to power, there were some very urgent foreign policy issues, namely the Cyprus issue, Turkey's accession process to the EU, and the invasion of Iraq by the U.S.-led coalition forces. In the early days of AK Party rule, American policy makers were determined to topple the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq; they had already had some talks with Turkish officials about Turkey's possible role in achieving this aim. The first challenge for the new government was to manage Turkey's relationship with the U.S., its long-time NATO ally and the world's only superpower, given the questions about the legality of an Iraq invasion and the unpopularity of such a possible operation both internationally and in Turkish public opinion.

The two other urgent foreign policy issues were affecting one another.



These were the Cyprus issue and Turkey's EU vacation. Turkey had been declared a candidate to the EU in 1999, and Turkey had introduced some constitutional and legal changes to start its accession negotiations with the EU. By the end of 2002, Turkey expected to have a date to start accession negotiations. One of the first priorities of the new AK Party government was to secure this date for its domestic and foreign policy initiatives.

At the same time, UN-sponsored talks were going on between Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders to find a settlement to end the conflict on the island. There was an urgency to find a solution to the problem before the enlargement of the EU in 2004. In the long history of the conflict, negotiations did result in a plan of settlement, named the Annan Plan after then Secretary General Kofi Annan. Although the plan was rejected by the Greek Cypriots and did not lead to a final solution, the plan brought to the

referendum, owed much to the support of the foreign policy of the AK Party government. So, the early years of AK Party rule mainly involved dealing with these challenging issues; the new government worked to improve relations with the EU and not to antagonize the U.S. given the unpopularity of the latter's decision to invade Iraq.

Beginning with 2005, the AK Party government aimed to reach out to areas such as Africa and Latin America, which had not been high on the agenda of Turkish foreign policy. Although there had been earlier attempts to increase the presence of Turkey in these areas in the post-Cold War international environment, political and economic instabilities had prevented Turkey from pursuing these long-term goals. In the early years of the post-Cold War era, Turkey had aimed to increase its outreach to different regions; its first priority was Central Asia and the Bal-

A family photo of the state leaders who participated in the 25th Anniversary Summit of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation held in İstanbul, May 22, 2017.

AA PHOTO / KAYHAN ÖZER

kans, which in the past had been under Soviet influence.

Turkey wanted to benefit from the liberal environment of international relations in the post-Cold War era. However, the political and economic crises of the 1990s, compounded by a series of short-term coalition governments and successive economic crises, in addition to a lack of knowledge and expertise on these areas, created setbacks. In addition to Central Asia and the Balkans, Turkey also aimed to increase its diplomatic relations with African and Latin American countries to diversify its foreign policy options. The urgency of other foreign policy issues, along with the above-mentioned problems, however, meant that programs for these regions could not be immediately materialized.

The Middle East

As stated above, one of the most important priorities for Turkey was to diversify its relations with neighboring countries. In that regard, relations with the Middle East increased dramatically. In order to improve relations with the region, Turkey first aimed to enhance its relations with the political elites of the regional states; without having the consent of the political elite, it is not possible to increase economic and cultural relations with these countries. In order to complement these political contacts, Turkey aimed to develop economic relations, particularly to sign free trade agreements, if possible. The complementarities between Turkey

and the Middle Eastern economies led both sides to develop economic relations. To contribute to these political and economic developments, Turkey also aimed to increase cultural relations by abolishing visas and increasing transportation opportunities between Turkey and the Middle East. In that regard, Turkish Airlines played an important role by flying to different destinations in the region. Increasing the number of tourists from the Middle Eastern countries was an outcome of these developing social relations. We can say that Turkey's goal of improving and increasing relations with the neighboring regions during the AK Party rule was best exemplified in the case of the Middle East.

Turkey's increasing engagement with the Middle East went well during the second half of the 2000s. Beginning with the Arab Uprisings, there was a new environment in Turkey's neighborhood. Up until the military coup in Egypt in 2013, there were hopes of transformation in the region towards better governance and economic development. Turkey believed in these demands for change and tried to support the transition with its own political and economic capabilities. After the coup in Egypt and the ensuing security challenges in different parts of the Middle East, Turkey's priorities started to change and Ankara had to focus on security challenges.

In regard to security challenges, threats emanating from Syria now top the agenda of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's efforts to solve the

problems in Syria by benefitting from bilateral, regional, and international mechanisms have not been fruitful. The transformation of the conflict in Syria and the increasing number of displaced Syrians both inside and outside of the country have created enormous social, economic and security challenges for Turkey. Besides hosting a huge number of refugees, in order to overcome security problems emanating from the north of Syria, Turkey carried out the 'Euphrates Shield' operation.

Russia

The transformation of relations with Russia during the AK Party rule requires a closer look and analysis. For several historical and geographical reasons, relations with Russia were problematic until the 2000s. During the 2000s, we witnessed an important transformation in Turkish-Russian relations. The change in these relations started in the economic sphere and spilled over into other areas. Thanks to energy relations, Russia became Turkey's largest trading partner. The establishment of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council and the abolishment of visas contributed to improving the political and social dimensions of the relationship.

There have been differences between Ankara and Moscow regarding several geopolitical issues, such as security in Caucasus and Ukraine; but there are also some common concerns such as security in the Black Sea area. We can say that geopolitical

During the 2000s, we witnessed an important transformation in Turkish-Russian relations. The change in these relations started in the economic sphere and spilled over into other areas

differences and economic opportunities have set the general framework of Turkish-Russian relations.

The differences between Turkey and Russia over specific geopolitical issues have led to some problems recently. The transition in Syria transformed into a kind of civil war, and Russia's increasing presence in Syria after the autumn of 2015, have had a significant impact on the Turkish-Russian relationship. Russia wanted to use the Syrian case as a tool to show the U.S. and other players its superpower role in international relations. Russia's increasing intervention in Syria and Turkey's security concerns led to a problem with the violation of Turkish airspace and the shooting down of a Russian military aircraft. Currently, steps are being taken to restore relations to their prior level.

The U.S.

The early years of the AK Party rule in terms of Turkey's relations with the U.S. mainly fell under the influ-



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was welcomed by Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani with an official ceremony in Doha, February 15, 2017.

AA PHOTO /
KAYHAN ÖZER

ence of the developments in Iraq. The Turkish parliament did not allow the transfer of American soldiers to Iraq via Turkish territory, and this development represented a serious blow to Turkish-U.S. relations. Although most of the U.S. authorities blamed the Turkish Army for not playing the role they were expected to, tensions between Turkish and American politicians remained high for the next couple of years until the meeting between then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then President George Bush in 2007.

Despite early success in terms of toppling the Saddam regime in Iraq, U.S. forces faced serious problems in Iraq due to the ensuing instability and the emergence of al-Qaeda. From the U.S.' point of view, having the support of regional actors like Turkey represented a positive factor in the pro-

cess of bilateral reconciliation. From Turkey's point of view, the ability to affect conditions on the ground acted as an incentive for reconciliation with the U.S. As a result of such an environment, beginning with 2005, there were signs of improvement in Turkish-U.S. relations.

The election of Barack Obama as president of the U.S. heralded a new era in international politics and in Turkish-American relations. After the problematic years of relations during the Bush era, mainly because of differences regarding Iraq, there were hopes of proximity regarding bilateral and regional issues. In order to improve the U.S.' relations with countries in the Middle East, President Obama initiated a tour of the region. Obama's first visit off of the American continent was to Ankara; this visit was interpreted as a sign of will of the

U.S. to eliminate negative images in bilateral relations. This positive image was labeled as a 'model partnership'; it continued until the early phases of the Arab Uprisings.

Even during those years, there were some differences of opinion between Washington and Ankara on several issues, the most prominent being the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Iranian nuclear program. Turkey's aims of pursuing an independent foreign policy created some concerns in Washington and there were talks of a 'shift of axis' in Turkish foreign policy in the second half of 2000s. These criticisms were mainly voiced by those accustomed to interpreting Turkish foreign policy with a Cold War mentality. But from the point of view of the AK Party governments, Turkey was in search of room to maneuver in its foreign policy, and aiming to diversify its foreign policy options. During the second half of the Obama administration, relations between Turkey and the U.S. began to decline.

Currently, contacts are taking place between Turkish and American officials in terms of settling the differences of opinion in some issues and finding common points of cooperation. Earlier signals show that the policy of the Trump administration in regions close to Turkey will be different from the policy pursued by the Trump administration and that there might be some common points between Turkey and the U.S., especially in the Middle East. Despite points of common concern, however, there are

Obama's first visit off of the American continent was to Ankara; this visit was interpreted as a sign of the will of the U.S. to eliminate negative images in bilateral relations. This positive image was labeled as a 'model partnership'; it continued until the early phases of the Arab Uprisings

also disagreements between the AK Party government and the Trump administration, especially in the cases of Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Cyprus Problem

Cyprus has been on the agenda of Turkish foreign policy for nearly half a century. The prospects for reaching a solution on the island emerged in the early period of the AK Party rule. Before the inclusion of the Greek Cypriots in the EU in 2004, there was hope for a solution, thanks to Turkey's attitude and changes in the regional atmosphere. The AK Party government seemed ready to take risks, and the UN-sponsored talks led to referenda on both sides of the island. Although the results of referenda did not lead to a solution, the attitude of change on the side of Turkey was obvious, as was the effort of Turkish policy makers to be 'one step ahead'

In addition to the aims of diversifying the areas of interest of Turkish foreign policy, the AK Party governments have also aimed to diversify their tools of foreign policy

in terms of reaching a solution on the island. This stance continued despite the fact that Greek Cypriots tried to block the Turkish EU membership process for a solution in their favor. In the last couple of years, new momentum for a solution has emerged. Talks in 2016 and 2017 were positive, although several issues continue to delay the settlement of the conflict.

The EU

The EU membership process was one of the most important foreign policy issues for Turkey during the AK Party rule, especially in the first half of it. Turkey was declared a candidate to the European Union in 1999 and governments prior to that of the AK Party had introduced some reforms to meet the criteria for the start of membership talks. The AK Party governments continued this process with the belief that it would enable the government to have room to maneuver in both domestic and foreign policy. Despite lagging behind the expectations of the government in terms of timing, the start of accession negotiations for

membership in 2005 was an important step in Turkey's EU vacation.

The tone of Turkey-EU relations started to sour with the decision to block 8 negotiation chapters at the end of 2006, because of the Cyprus issue. In addition to the Cyprus issue, the changes of government in France and Germany negatively affected Turkey's EU vacation. The Sarkozy government in France and the Merkel government in Germany opposed Turkey's membership, and this fact drastically changed the mood of the membership process. The Sarkozy government blocked an additional 5 chapters with the argument that these would lead to full membership for Turkey, which his government opposed. Beside these changes, the global financial crisis and the failure of the EU to effectively answer the political and economic challenges related to the crisis led to an environment of blackening the star of the EU. As a result of this new environment, we witnessed a decline in Turkey's interest in joining the EU, and a decrease in the leverage of the EU institutions on Turkey, due to this decline and the EU's stance of questioning Turkish membership on the basis of cultural differences.

Diversification of the Tools of Diplomacy

In addition to the aims of diversifying the areas of interest of Turkish foreign policy, the AK Party governments have also aimed to diversify their tools of foreign policy. Besides

the already active institutions like Turkish Coordination and Coordination Agency (TİKA), new institutions like the *Yunus Emre* Foundation and the Presidency for Turks and Related Communities Abroad (YTB) were established to contribute to different aspects of foreign policy.

During the AK Party years, TİKA expanded both its institutional framework and its global outlook. Formerly, TİKA was mainly active in Central Asia and the Balkans, but in a gradual way TİKA added African and Latin American countries into its area of activities. The *Yunus Emre* Foundation aims to promote Turkish language, history, and culture, and provide services abroad for those who are interested in Turkish language and culture. The Presidency for Turks and Related Communities Abroad aims to coordinate Turkey's relations with the Turkish diasporas and related communities. The party also re-organized the scholarships of Turkish government to foreign nationals, increased the number and the scope of these scholarships, and made the process of applying more competitive and orderly. Lastly, the *Maarif* Foundation was established to coordinate Turkish style education programs abroad, from primary schools to universities.

International Organizations: Mediation and Conflict Resolution

Another important aspect of foreign policy during AK Party rule has been increasing Turkey's role in interna-

tional organizations, and the use of international platforms. After nearly fifty years, Turkey was elected to a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for 2009-2010. This enabled Turkey to bring its foreign policy priorities to the attention of the international community and increase its image in international politics. The election of a Turkish citizen to the position of Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation was also an example of Turkey's rising profile.

After the attacks of 9/11, there were other instances of terror in the UK, Spain, Turkey, and elsewhere. As a result of these shocking attacks, the need to address the reasons behind this terror and to fight against it in a global way dominated the agenda of international politics. Turkey, along with Spain, led the UN initiative of the 'Alliance of Civilization' in order to eliminate misperceptions about 'other' civilizations and also to find common grounds among different countries from different civilizations. This initiative gained international attention and played an important role in diminishing the tensions, and addressing the problems emanating from Islamophobia.

In relation to Turkey's increasing standing and role in international politics, Turkey played important roles in mediation and conflict resolution, leading to the peaceful settlement of disputes. Turkey acted as a mediator between countries in the Balkans, the Middle East and Asia in processes of confidence-building

In the near future, we can expect Turkey to first focus on the security challenges emanating from neighboring regions, to maximize its national security against all kinds of terrorist threats, to strengthen initiatives in areas like Africa, Latin America and East Asia, to tune up its relations with the EU, and consolidate gained grounds in regions like the Balkans and Central Asia

and decreasing tensions. The establishment of trilateral mechanisms in the Balkans and Asia contributed to efforts to decrease tensions in former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

In the realm of mediation, Turkey, along with Finland, initiated the group of countries at the UN called 'friends of mediation.' The nature of conflicts is changing in today's world and the number of conflicts within states is increasing. Most of these conflicts are ethnic, religious, or sectarian in nature. In contributing to the solution of these types of conflicts, cultural factors and personal contacts play an important role. In that regard, Turkey has been working to use its cultural affinity in neighboring regions to decrease tensions and contribute to the

solution of problems. Beside these regional initiatives, Turkey has also aimed to contribute to the solution of intra-state conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, and Kyrgyzstan.

International aid and donations became important assets of Turkish foreign policy during AK Party rule. Beside Turkey's neighboring regions, countries in Africa, East Asia and Latin America have also received Turkish aid. In line with its policy of increasing international aid, Turkey hosted the United Nations Least Developed Countries summit and also the First World Humanitarian Summit. Turkey became the leading country of international aid according to the amount of aid in ratio to per capita income. There are several success stories in Turkey's international aid policy, such as that of Somalia. Turkish contribution to this civil war-torn country attracted world attention and brought hope to this case. In the case of the Middle East, most Turkish aid went to the Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

In Lieu of Conclusion

In its 15 years of rule in foreign policy, AK Party governments have attempted to increase Turkey's engagement with neighboring regions, to expand foreign policy horizons to new areas, and also to diversify the tools of foreign policy. We can talk about a certain degree of success in these initiatives. The uncertainties in Turkey vicinity in several areas are a big challenge for Turkey today. The political instabilities of the Mid-

dle East, the economic and political challenges facing the EU, the future of Turkey-EU relations, the future direction of the nature of Turkey's relationship with the U.S., relations with Russia and other neighbors, and the strengthening of Turkish presence in areas like Africa, Latin America and East Asia are the main challenges for the current AK Party government to overcome.

Taking into account these challenging issues, we can rely on the ini-

tiatives started by Turkey in the last decade and a half to diversify the areas and tools of foreign policy. In the near future, we can expect Turkey to first focus on the security challenges emanating from neighboring regions, to maximize its national security against all kinds of terrorist threats, to strengthen initiatives in areas like Africa, Latin America and East Asia, to tune up its relations with the EU, and consolidate gained grounds in regions like the Balkans and Central Asia. ■

LOCAL VIEWS ON GLOBAL NEWS.

READ DAILY TO KEEP UP WITH CHANGING
TURKEY AND THE WORLD.



www.dailysabah.com