

## Multiple Faces of the “New” Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique

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### ABSTRACT

*The “axis-shift” discussions on Turkish foreign policy activism over the last couple of years have attracted remarkable international attention. Some pundits have attempted to place Turkey’s increasing relations with its neighbors within the context of an ideological and identical reshuffling of Turkish foreign policy principles. While finding the “shift of axis” argument a rather crude characterization, the paper nevertheless argues that there are subtle shifts in Turkish foreign policy orientation. In this context, the paper aims to identify both the elements of continuity and rupture in the style and behavior of Turkish foreign policy. In fact, there are solid political economy fundamentals and legitimate reasons for Turkey to pursue a multi-dimensional and more assertive foreign policy in the emerging multi-polar world system. However, the present paper underlines that Turkey’s multi-dimensional foreign policy activism with no firm axis may have potentially counterproductive consequences regarding Turkey’s long-term national interests as well as its ability to play a stabilizing role as a pro-active and benign regional power.*

The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, the AKP) government’s foreign policy activism is not a new phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the changing nature of the foreign policy activism during the second term of the AKP, especially with Ahmet Davutoğlu assuming direct responsibility as the new foreign minister in May 2009, has attracted widespread attention, has become a topic for vivid public debate both in domestic and international circles and has already generated a large literature. In domestic discussions of the AKP’s recent foreign policy approach, frequent references are made to “a shift of axis”, suggesting a drift away from the predominantly Western orientation which has been the hallmark of Turkish foreign policy throughout the post-World War 2 period, toward a more “eastern-oriented” pattern of foreign policy behavior. This present paper examines the validity of the claim that there has been a striking shift in the main axis of Turkish foreign policy in recent years.

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From a long-term perspective a multi-dimensional foreign policy activism with no firm axis may have potentially counterproductive consequences

While finding the “shift of axis” argument a rather crude characterization of recent foreign policy behavior, this paper nevertheless argues that subtle shifts in Turkish foreign policy orientation can indeed be identified.<sup>3</sup> There are certainly new and distinct elements in the post-2007 era that contrast sharply with the

earlier wave of the AKP’s foreign policy activism. Certainly, Turkish foreign policy has become more independent and assertive in recent years, raising the question of whether Turkey is moving in the direction of the BRICs (the country group that includes Brazil, Russia, India and China) which are increasingly assuming a more active role in the changing global environment, particularly in the aftermath of the recent global financial crisis.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than arguing that there is a totally new line of foreign policy, this paper aims to identify both the elements of continuity and rupture in the style and behavior of Turkish foreign policy. While the emphasis of this paper is on discontinuities and ruptures, it is important to state from the outset that there are striking continuities that should not be disregarded. For example, it would be simply wrong to claim that the country’s Western orientation has been entirely reversed during this era. The fact that relations with the European Union (EU) are currently at a stalemate should not be interpreted as the termination or the reversal of Turkey’s European integration process. Turkey is already deeply integrated into the EU in the economic, political and cultural realms and the integration process is an-ongoing process.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Turkey’s Europeanization route, in the sense of the continuation of the domestic reform and democratization process, is very much alive, as the September 2010 constitutional referendum clearly shows. Similarly, relations with the United States have been steadily improving in recent years following the serious disagreements that emerged as a result of the March 2003 Iraq war. Turkey and the United States continue to co-operate, although there are serious differences on a number of controversial issues, notably relating to Iran’s nuclear program and the resolution of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

This paper also attempts to underline the various factors that have contributed to the observed shifts or discontinuities in recent Turkish foreign policy. Economic, security and identity factors have to be collectively considered to provide a coherent explanation. This paper also evaluates the effectiveness of the new style of foreign policy behavior by focusing on the dichotomy of short-term gains ver-

sus long-term consequences. There is no doubt that the new-style foreign policy activism has helped enhance the popularity of the AKP in domestic politics. Similarly, the new policy stance has been greeted with enthusiasm in many countries of the Middle East and the Arab world. From a long-term perspective, however, a multi-dimensional foreign policy activism with no firm axis may have potentially counterproductive consequences regarding Turkey’s long-term national interests as well as its ability to play a stabilizing role as a pro-active and benign regional power. Moreover, certain dimensions of the new-style Turkish foreign policy raise some ethical questions which need to be explicitly addressed. For effective foreign policy making it needs to be recognized that there are trade-offs associated with different choices, and that a multi-dimensional foreign policy has to rest on a set of priorities. A related criticism of recent Turkish foreign policy concerns its over-confidence and over-assertiveness without taking into account the trade-offs and the possible long-term negative ramifications of decisions made in the current international environment.

### **Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-2007 Era: Elements of Continuity and Rupture**

An active foreign policy approach has been a central feature of the AKP government and in certain respects there is a strong degree of continuity between its first and second terms in office (Table 1). To some extent, this continuity is inevitable given that two key individuals, Abdullah Gül and Ahmet Davutoğlu, continue to play important roles in Turkey’s foreign policy initiatives, with the qualification that there was a dramatic shift in the roles of these two individuals in the post-2007 era (Table 1). A degree of continuity was also evident given that EU membership and a commitment to the Western alliance were long-established state policies which would be very difficult to reverse by a single government. Moreover, it would be wrong to equate foreign policy activism exclusively with the AKP government. Elements of an active foreign policy approach in Turkey could be discerned throughout the post-Cold War era starting with Turgut Özal’s presidency in the early part of the 1990s. The foreign minister of the coalition government between 1999 and 2002, Ismail Cem, also favored a multi-dimensional, pro-active foreign policy, yet with a firm Western commitment.<sup>6</sup> The early foreign policy of the AKP clearly represented a continuation of the pattern established during the coalition government that had as its principal partners the left-of-center Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*, the DSP), the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, the MHP), and the right-of-center Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, the ANAP). Indeed, relations with

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the Middle East started to improve from 1999 onwards and important initiatives designed to build economic and diplomatic links with Russia and the post-Soviet republics can be traced to the early 1990s.

Throughout the AKP era, there has been a constant emphasis on the use of soft power, an improvement of relations with all neighboring countries, aptly summarized by the motto “zero problems with neighbors,” as well as the vision of a more ambitious role for Turkey as an active regional and global power extending well beyond the realm of favorable bilateral relations (Table 1). In addition to the Europeanization drive, the greater Middle East has also become a focal point of Turkey’s diplomatic efforts in this period. Perhaps the term the “Middle Easternization of Turkish foreign policy” might be somewhat exaggerated given that there has been a very strong impetus throughout this period to develop bilateral relations with, in particular, the Russian Federation, as well as other key countries in the Caucasus and opening up to the African continent and Latin America.<sup>7</sup> The Middle East and the Arab world nevertheless have become the focal point of Turkish foreign policy efforts (involving both formal initiatives as well as the informal activities of the NGOs) which is quite extraordinary by the standards of previous Turkish governments.

A closer inspection of the second phase of the AKP government, however, reveals certain ruptures in the style of Turkish foreign policy activism. Arguably, what has distinguished the second phase from the previous phase has been a pronounced weakening of the commitment to EU membership—if not in rhetoric, in reality—and an increasingly assertive and confident foreign policy which reflects a desire to act as an independent regional power (Table 1). To be fair, Turkish foreign policy has continued to be framed and implemented in a spirit of multilateralism in line with established international agreements and institutions. Yet there has been a clear tendency to act independently of the Western alliance, especially in relation to major regional and international conflicts. In retrospect, three key episodes could be identified which adds substance to the claim that there has been a subtle shift in Turkish foreign policy during the recent era, or, at least, a rather different style of foreign policy activism as compared to the previous patterns.

The first episode which clearly constituted a striking turning point was the Davos episode in January 2009 where the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offered a vocal critique of the Israeli actions during the war in Gaza and stormed

Table 1: Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-2007 Era: Elements of Continuity and Rupture

	<b>Elements of Continuity</b>	<b>Elements of Rupture</b>
<b>Foreign Policy Style</b>	Multi-dimensional foreign policy with an emphasis on soft power.	A more independent and assertive style of foreign policy. There is an unprecedented increase in the scale of diplomatic activity. In line with the underlying global shifts, notably during the global financial crisis, following the footsteps of BRICs is seen as an increasingly attractive option.
<b>Western Orientation and Commitment to the EU</b>	A commitment to Western a orientation and EU membership, with the qualification that there is a pronounced decline in enthusiasm for EU membership, parallel to the striking decline in public support for EU membership which started between 2005 and 2007.	Continued commitment to a Western orientation and EU membership in rhetoric. But, in reality, a tendency to act independently on a number of key foreign policy issues has become more visible even though this may result in direct confrontation with Western powers.
<b>Regional and Global Role</b>	Attempts to play a more active regional and global role with particular emphasis on helping to promote cross-cultural dialogue and performing a mediating role in major regional and international conflicts.	Turkish foreign policy is more active in regions such as the Middle East where there is ample scope to play a regional leadership role. Turkish foreign policy is less active in regions such as the Balkan and the Central Asia where the scope for regional leadership is more limited and would be contested by powerful rivals. This suggests that the quest for regional leadership has become a major motive underlying the new Turkish foreign policy. The Middle East (including North Africa) has become a focal point in Turkish foreign policy efforts suggesting that there is a strong identity dimension implicit in the new Turkish foreign policy. Similarly, Turkey has become a more active actor in peacekeeping operations and humanitarian interventions, especially in Afghanistan and in the Balkans.
<b>Style of Mediation</b>	Zero problems with all neighbors strategy; a serious attempt to “an attempt to maintain neutrality/impartiality” in regional conflicts.	A tendency to take sides in regional conflicts such as a pro-Palestine position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a pro-Iranian position in the conflict involving the West over the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear program. This aspect of Turkish foreign policy arguably places limits on Turkey’s role as a referee or mediator in major international conflicts.
<b>Leadership Style of Foreign Policy and Ownership</b>	Leadership is important with Abdullah Gül playing an important role as the minister for foreign affairs, complemented by Ahmet Davutoğlu as the intellectual force behind the scenes.	Even stronger leadership and ownership of foreign policy with Ahmet Davutoğlu in the driving seat and Abdullah Gül as an unusually pro-active president in external affairs.
<b>Linkages between Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy</b>	Civil society involvement in foreign policy initiatives becomes increasingly important and parallel to the democratization of foreign policy; public opinion assumes greater weight in shaping key foreign policy decisions.	The linkages between foreign policy and domestic politics have become more striking. The government is much more willing to use foreign policy initiatives as a strategic tool for consolidating and extending its domestic coalitional base.

out of a meeting at the World Economic Forum. The episode clearly marked a shift in the sense that Turkey came out openly in favor of the Palestinian cause at the expense of jeopardizing long-entrenched bilateral economic, diplomatic and security relations with Israel.<sup>8</sup> Following Davos, Turkey's more cautious mediator role seems to have been replaced by a new policy line which involved taking active sides in major disputes (Table 1). The Davos episode was clearly not a one-shot affair. After Davos, Turkey has continued to be progressively more vocal of Israeli actions resulting in unprecedented decline in bilateral relations. The Davos episode also illustrated the fact that the traditional secular foreign policy elites of Turkey, in other words the traditional foreign policy bureaucracy, were increasingly marginalized in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. Turkish-Israeli relations further deteriorated with the infamous "Mavi Marmara (or Flotilla) crisis" on May 31, 2010, when, in international waters, fully equipped Israeli soldiers stormed a passenger ship, the Mavi Marmara, the largest of a flotilla of six boats carrying humanitarian aid to besieged Gaza. The operation left nine activists dead, eight of whom were Turkish citizens, and over 30 activists wounded.<sup>9</sup> Immediately after the crisis, Turkish officials openly condemned Israel for carrying out "state terrorism" and Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations were reduced to the lowest point in history.<sup>10</sup>

The third episode when a similar line of activism was evident was Turkey's attempts to find an internationally acceptable solution to the dispute involving Iran and the Western alliance over the Iranian nuclear program. Turkey displayed an unusual degree of pro-activism during the course of 2010 in its quest to find a diplomatic solution to the problem. During this period, Turkey along with Brazil emerged as key countries pushing for an agreement that would replace the need for sanctions on Iran. Accordingly, Tehran was convinced by Turkey and Brazil to sign an agreement on a low-enriched nuclear fuel swap in May 2010. With the agreement signed by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim, and Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Motaki, Iran committed to send 1,200 kg of 3.5% enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for 20% enriched uranium from Western countries. However, the Vienna Group, the EU, and the Obama Administration were skeptical of the Tehran Agreement and United Nations Security Council subsequently approved the fourth sanctions package on Iran.

Turkey's active rejection of the proposed sanctions on Iran at the United Nations Security Council in June 2010 marked the ultimate episode in this dramatic chain of events.<sup>11</sup> While Turkey was genuinely seeking an alternative solution to

an international conflict, this was clearly a case where Turkey was acting independently and against the interests of the Western alliance. Indeed, the negative vote at the Security Council created the grounds for significant criticism from US President Barrack Obama. Although the episode did not lead to a breakdown in relations with the United States and the EU, it certainly was an important episode in the growing perception in the Western community that Turkey was progressively moving in a different direction.

A more independent and IMF-free path in the economic sphere appeared to constitute a natural counterpart or corollary of a more independent and assertive style of foreign policy

### **Explaining the Subtle Shift in Turkey’s Foreign Policy Orientation: A Multi-Dimensional Approach**

Several influences collectively explain the more independent and assertive style of Turkish foreign policy associated with the post-2007 era. Leadership and ownership of foreign policy could be a natural starting point. Although there is no doubt that Ahmet Davutoğlu was a key figure in the formulation of the AKP’s foreign policy during the party’s early years in office, his influence has become much more prominent as he has become the person directly responsible for the formulation and implementation of foreign policy during the second phase. His “strategic depth” perspective, which highlighted the pivotal regional and global role of Turkey as a “central country”, has become the guiding principal of major foreign policy initiatives during this period. In addition, one needs to take into account that Abdullah Gül, as the new president, has also played a critical role in Turkey’s pro-active foreign policy initiatives, of which the opening up of negotiations with Armenia constitutes a striking example. In a way, Abdullah Gül has contributed to Davutoğlu’s initiatives by acting as a complementary *de facto* foreign secretary. Indeed, Abdullah Gül’s interest and activism in foreign affairs is in sharp contrast with the previous president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, whose activism was primarily confined to issues of domestic politics.<sup>12</sup> In addition to Gül and Davutoğlu, Prime Minister Erdoğan has also played an important role in Turkey’s foreign policy initiatives in this period. It would not be possible to explain the scale of activism in Turkish foreign policy during this period without taking into account the roles played by key personalities in terms of shaping the new foreign policy vision.

It is also clear that the disappointments encountered on the path to EU membership played a decisive role in the rethinking Turkey’s foreign policy priorities. The ongoing debate in Europe on the European identity of Turkey and the



Photo: AA, Salih Zeki Fazlıoğlu

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blockage of key chapters during the accession negotiations process due to deep-seated differences between Turkey and the EU in relation to the Cyprus dispute has raised major question marks concerning the feasibility of Turkish membership.<sup>13</sup> The negative signals coming from the core of the EU, such as Germany and France, and frequent pronouncements by influential leaders such as Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy concerning the obstacles to Turkish membership purely on the grounds of culture and identity have helped to precipitate a serious nationalistic backlash in Turkey. Certainly, enthusiasm for EU membership has been significantly dampened both at the elite level and at the level of the public at large. Opinion polls have clearly indicated a sharp swing involving a dramatic decline in public support for EU membership.<sup>14</sup> In a way, the AKP government has been reacting to the changing nature of public opinion. If EU membership was not on the cards, then Turkey would need to search for serious geo-political alternatives.

The dramatic changes taking place in the broader global context has also exercised a crucial influence over the perception of policy makers. The global economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009 was ultimately a “crisis of the center”, in



contrast to the frequent crises which had occurred in the semi-periphery of the global system during the course of the 1990s. From this point of view, the global financial crisis presented a major political economic challenge to the American- or Western-dominated globalization. The crisis, moreover, accelerated the shift which had already started, namely a shift of the economic axis of the global system from the “west” to the “east” or from the “north” to the “south”. BRIC countries in general and China in particular, emerged even stronger from the global financial crisis.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the EU appeared to be a major loser of the global economic crisis, at least from a short-term perspective. Many countries in the European periphery, notably Central and Eastern European countries and Greece, encountered drastic economic turmoil and downturns in economic performance. The West, especially the EU, turned out to be a less attractive destination in terms of purely economic benefits while the rising “East” or “South” appeared to be increasingly more attractive in terms of future trade and investment.

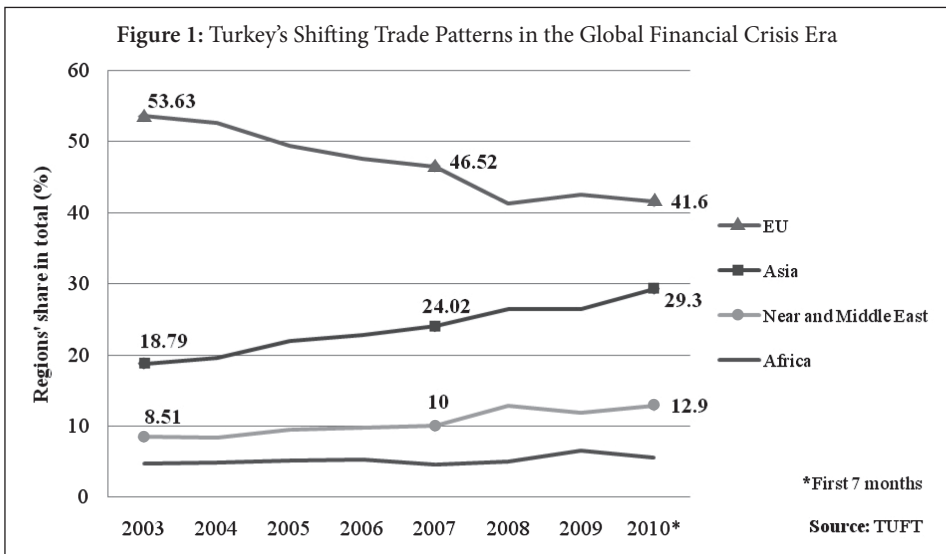
Foreign policy in Turkey is no longer the monopoly of politicians and diplomats. It has been increasingly driven from below by key economic and civil society actors

Furthermore, two important developments closely associated with the global financial crisis helped enhance the confidence and assertiveness of Turkish policy-makers. First, the global crisis created an impetus in favor of the broadening of the global governance structure. The G-20 replaced the G-8 as the key organizational nexus in debates concerning the future of global finance and global economic governance. Turkey, as a member of the G-20, now had the opportunity to be an active participant in the process of shaping the new rules and institutions of the post-crisis global economy, as opposed to its previous role as a peripheral partner and the passive complier of the rules imposed from above by the powerful core countries of the north. Second, Turkey, with a much better regulated banking and financial system in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, managed to avoid the typical financial and balance of payments crisis which it had frequently experienced in the past. Consequently, it was not in direct need for the IMF assistance. The AKP government capitalized on Turkey’s new found economic strength. While negotiations with the IMF continued as a tool of expectations management, the final new deal between Turkey and IMF was continuously delayed and eventually no agreement was signed. The government used this as a sign of national strength and autonomy. Indeed, a more independent and IMF-free path in the economic sphere appeared to constitute a natural counterpart or corollary of a more independent and assertive style of foreign policy.<sup>16</sup>

The AKP's foreign policy activism has proven to be a major asset in domestic politics. It has helped the party maintain its popularity at a time when the country was clearly exposed to the negative effects of the global financial crisis

The global crisis has also strengthened efforts in the search for new markets at a time when the EU as Turkey's leading trade and investment partner was experiencing major difficulties. Clearly, Turkey's new regional initiatives, especially towards the Middle East, North Africa and the post-Soviet region, have had strong economic motives. Active foreign policy towards neighboring

countries has been clearly motivated by the desire to reach new markets. Arguably, the global financial crisis has helped to accelerate the *transnationalization* of small- and medium-sized business in Turkey, notably from the rising centers of Anatolian capital.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, key civil society organizations representing the aforementioned rising centers of industrialization and capital accumulation in Turkey, such as TOBB, MÜSİAD and TUSKON, have emerged as central actors in Turkey's foreign policy initiatives. Foreign policy in Turkey is no longer the monopoly of politicians and diplomats. It has been increasingly driven from below by key economic and civil society actors.<sup>18</sup> In other words, economy and trade has turned out to be the practical hand of Turkish foreign policy. The impact of new foreign policy initiatives aimed at a diversification of Turkey's external relations is clearly reflected in the changing pattern of foreign trade, pointing towards a decline in



the share of the EU countries and a striking increase in trade with Asia and the Middle East. For instance, the EU’s share in Turkish foreign trade declined from 53.63% in 2003 to less than 42% in 2010, whereas Asia’s share skyrocketed from 18.8% to almost 30% in the same period

(Figure 1). It is vitally important to note that the shift in trade started well before the global financial crisis, which implies a structural transformation.

Moving beyond the sphere of economics, considerations relating to culture and identity, which are seen as a crucial part and parcel of Turkey’s “historical depth” by the Turkish foreign minister, have also been seen to be important elements in Turkey’s new policy orientations. The AKP, with its Islamist roots, was naturally receptive to developing strong cultural, diplomatic and economic links with the Arab Middle East and the Islamic world in general. Likewise, Arab countries were more welcoming of developing closer relations with Turkey under an AKP government with its brand of conservative modernization. Arguably, a more secular government led by the Republic People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, the CHP), for instance, would not have experienced the same degree of popularity in the Arab or Muslim worlds.

The AKP’s foreign policy activism has proven to be a major asset in domestic politics. It has helped the party maintain its popularity at a time when the country was clearly exposed to the negative effects of the global financial crisis, which was inevitably transmitted to the Turkish economy in terms of a contraction of output and rising unemployment. The assertive and independent style of foreign policy making has had an appeal to nationalistic sentiments going well beyond the religious conservative core which had previously constituted the backbone of the AKP’s support. Prime Minister Erdoğan’s championing of the Palestine cause and his criticism of the atrocities of the war in Gaza echoed the sentiments of a large majority of the Turkish population. The AKP’s foreign policy approach was therefore in line with the changing mood of public opinion. Hence, what we observe in the recent Turkish context is that domestic politics has become heavily intertwined with foreign policy, and foreign policy has emerged as a major instrument for gaining a competitive edge in domestic politics. The AKP leadership has been particularly effective in using pro-active foreign policy as a tool for projecting its “globalist” and progressive image and thereby gaining advantage over its principal “defensive nationalist” rivals, the CHP and the MHP. The two principal opposition

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parties, with their limited and inward-oriented policy visions, have not been in a position to contest the ambitious foreign policy agenda which has also brought the governing party considerable popularity in the domestic political sphere.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Consequences of Turkey's More Assertive and Independent Line of Foreign Policy: Short-term Gains versus Long-term Ramifications**

It should be stated at the outset that many aspects of Turkey's foreign policy activism in recent years is a positive development and represents a perfectly legitimate response to the changing domestic and global environment. A more confident Turkey, which is stronger in terms of its economic and democratic credentials, is trying to come to terms with its multi-dimensional historical heritage and desires to play a more active role in shaping regional and global developments. In addition, it is a perfectly rational strategy to develop close ties with neighboring countries and to develop ties on the grounds of common economic and security interests as well as cultural proximity. The changing contours of globalization, especially in the economic realm, also calls for a more diversified set of relationships. A totally opposite version of the current strategy would be focusing on the West at the expense of the rest. This would be an inappropriate response and involve a major failure to capitalize on Turkey's significant geo-political assets. Indeed, following the end of the Cold War, successive Turkish governments have attempted to develop a pro-active strategy towards Russia and the post-Soviet region, the greater Middle East and the Balkans. From this point of view, foreign policy activism in Turkey is not a novel phenomenon and certainly predates the AKP and the Davutoğlu era. Turkey clearly possesses the economic, political and the cultural elements necessary to perform the role of a benign regional power and serve as a role model for many of the countries in neighboring regions.

With these qualifications in mind, there are nevertheless certain aspects in the style of foreign policy activism practiced especially during the later years of the AKP government that merit close inspection and deserve critical judgment. There are certain inconsistencies in the way that foreign policy activism is practiced which may have significant positive pay-offs for the government in the domestic political arena, but which nonetheless may be counterproductive in terms of Turkey's long-term national interests.

The first major criticism is the absence of a firm axis around which the multi-dimensional and pro-active foreign policy is structured and anchored.<sup>20</sup> The commitment towards a Western orientation and, as a naturally corollary, to EU membership has lost much of its momentum in spite of the frequent rhetoric on the

part of key policy makers that EU membership still remains a key priority of Turkish foreign policy. As argued earlier, this is to some extent understandable given the negative mood in Europe and the backlash to this in Turkey both at the elite level and among the citizens at large.

There is a need to adopt a long-term per-

spective on this issue and maintain commitment to the EU membership process in spite of the manifold problems that are likely to be encountered on the way. It needs to be recognized that there is a fairly strong pro-Turkey coalition at the elite level within the EU and this coalition may grow over time in line with Turkey’s economic development and democratic consolidation. There is also a need to recognize that a major part of the attractiveness of Turkey to its various neighbors derives from its potential EU membership and its on-going Europeanization process. In the final analysis, both the transformation of the Turkish economy and the consolidation of democratic credentials in Turkey over the last decade were facilitated and catalyzed by the EU membership process, which has in turn underpinned Turkey’s role as a model in the eyes of neighboring countries.<sup>21</sup>

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 rather reminiscent of the democratic members of the BRICs, namely Brazil and India, in their respective regions. The same kind of foreign policy activities could be framed in a different language and could be promoted as a common agenda for the EU by a future member state. Turkey’s ambitions to play the role of a benign regional power in its neighboring environment could be perfectly consistent with a Western orientation and future EU membership. Indeed, Turkey’s cultural and economic assets could allow it to play a central role as part of the European neighborhood policy in the Middle East, the Balkans and the post-Soviet world which the EU would be far less equipped to play in Turkey’s absence. If there is a commitment to EU membership on the part of Turkish politicians or policy makers, there should also be a commitment towards acting with the rest of the world on issues of common concern. This, in turn, requires a more multilateral, as opposed to unilateral, approach and a certain degree of self-restraint in the way that foreign policy activism is put into practice.

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To make the argument more concrete, one may consider Turkey's self-imposed referee role in major regional and international conflicts. Two critical points deserve emphasis in the present context. First, Turkey has the potential to play an important mediating role in key international conflicts.<sup>22</sup> However, its ability to play this role in a unilateral manner is considerably limited given the economic and diplomatic resources at its disposal. Second, and more significantly, its ability to play a mediating role rests on adopting a neutral position with respect to contending parties. A country cannot claim to be a mediator and take sides in a major conflict at the same time. In the post-2007 context, this is exactly the problem that Turkish foreign policy faced. By adopting active pro-Palestine and pro-Iran positions in these respective conflicts, Turkey progressively lost its ability to play a constructive role as a mediating power. Indeed, by taking sides in key regional and international conflicts, Turkey could contribute to further instability as an unintended consequence of its actions.

Consider the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here, many of Turkey's concerns are shared by European elites and the public opinion at large. Indeed, there has historically been a notable divergence in the European and American approaches to the conflict with the Europeans expressing considerable sympathy to the Palestinian position. Much of the criticism concerning the human costs of the war in Gaza voiced by Prime Minister Erdoğan at the Davos Summit could have been framed in a different language. A different style of foreign policy activism by calling for joint action with European and international actors would have been much more consistent with Turkey's aspired mediator role. There is no doubt that the Davos episode helped to enhance the popularity of the prime minister in Turkish domestic politics, in the Arab world, and even among segments of the public in European countries. However, his explicit championing of the Palestinian cause as part of an anti-Western, third world-leader style rhetoric did not help the cause of mediation efforts. At the same time, it inevitably led to a significant deterioration in the historically robust Turkish-Israeli relationship. After the recent "Mavi Marmara crisis" was added to the wobbling relationship, Turkey's mediating role further deteriorated. This point is underlined by the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, who said that "if the relationship between Turkey and Israel is not renewed, it will be very difficult for Turkey to play a role in negotiations."<sup>23</sup>

Even more problematic was the approach towards the Iranian nuclear program, a policy which may have significant long-term negative repercussions for Turkey's relations with the West, taking into account the fact that there is a far greater degree of convergence among the American and the European positions as far as the security threats posed by Iran's nuclear program are concerned. Again, it would have been quite legitimate for Turkey to propose a different style of engagement with Iran while remaining firmly within the Western alliance. Instead, Turkey preferred to act more independently and pro-actively by going along with Brazil and signing a trilateral agreement with Iran. Leaving aside the technical merits of the agreement, which is beyond the scope of the paper, the agreement and the subsequent “no” vote against the proposed sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council were clearly interpreted as obvious signs of Turkey's shifting course away from the West. The costs of signing such an agreement for Brazil might be minimal. Yet, given the regional context in which it is located and the nature of its organic ties to the Western alliance, the costs to Turkey might be considerable. In the medium-term, Turkey may find itself increasingly squeezed between Iran and the West, which may lead to a state of isolation, again an unintended consequence of an excessively assertive and over-confident foreign policy.

Turkey's foreign policy towards Iran raises an even deeper problem concerning the ethical basis of its foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> It is perfectly legitimate for Turkey to engage with an important neighbor such as Iran on economic, security and cultural grounds. Yet this has to be conducted in a more balanced and reserved manner, especially taking into account the authoritarian nature of the Iranian regime which is at the same time facing major tests of its legitimacy in the domestic sphere. If Turkey happens to be one of the first countries to congratulate President Ahmedinejad for its electoral victory, this raises important question marks concerning its commitment to international norms and democratic values. A similar concern was voiced during the visit of the Sudanese leader, Omar al-Bashir, to Turkey, given his notorious background in terms of human rights violations.<sup>25</sup> These highlight the important point that there are certain trade-offs in foreign policy. A multi-dimensional foreign policy needs to be based on a clearly defined set of principles; otherwise major inconsistencies are likely to arise which in turn may be detrimental to the country's long-term national interests.

### **Concluding Observations**

From a global perspective, recent changes in Turkish foreign policy highlight two striking developments. First, the changing nature of globalization in the direction of a multi-centric, more pluralistic global order—a pattern that was acceler-

Over-assertiveness and over-confidence in international affairs can have significant pay-offs in the short term but can also be detrimental to national interest and to lead to isolation in the long term

ated by the global financial crisis which has represented a clear challenge to American and Western hegemony—has paved the way for the BRICs or the near BRICs like Turkey to play a more active role in regional and international affairs. Second, the distinction between foreign policy and domestic politics has become increasingly blurred. This has two major

implications. Foreign policy has become a heavily contested issue in domestic politics and can turn into an important tool for a political party to gain a competitive advantage over its rivals. Identity conflicts in domestic politics can have far-reaching repercussions on the conduct and orientation of foreign policy. Both of these general points apply neatly to Turkey. There is no doubt that the AKP has capitalized on its pro-active foreign policy to maintain and consolidate its broad electoral success in domestic politics. Likewise, the AKP's underlying conservative-religious identity has also been reflected in the spirit of the new Turkish foreign policy in the context of deepening relations with the Arab Middle East and active support for Palestine and Iran in major regional and international conflicts.

Turkey's willingness to pursue a pro-active foreign policy rests on legitimate foundations. During the post-Cold war era, Turkey has been rediscovering its neighbors and trying to capitalize on its geo-political position in three distinct, yet interlocking regions. This process of re-discovery has been proceeding at an increasingly faster pace during the AKP era. Furthermore, there are solid economic reasons for a pro-active foreign policy strategy. Turkey has clearly been responding to the changing global context which involves a diversification of economic relations and the opening of new markets, especially at a time when Europe is faced with deep stagnation and the global economic axis has clearly been shifting in the eastern direction with the global financial crisis. What we currently observe is a process involving the transnationalization of Anatolian capital which has been trying to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Middle East and the North Africa as well as Russia and the broader post-Soviet space. Moving beyond narrow self-interest in economic and security terms, Turkey has the soft power, given its stage of economic and political development, to perform the role of a benign regional power, and to take an active role in global affairs. Turkey has, indeed, been unusually pro-active in recent years in terms of attempting to play a mediating role in regional and international conflicts, contributing to humanitarian aid and peacekeeping operations, as well as taking part in discussions relating



to the future of the global economic and security order in the context of global fora such as G-20 and the UN Security Council.

At the same time, however, certain aspects of Turkey’s recent pro-active foreign policy are open to serious criticism. What is at stake is not a pro-active foreign policy *per se*, but the nature and style or the language of the pro-activism. There is a need for a more balanced and cautious style of foreign policy activism which would still be a multi-dimensional and multi-regional but structured around a firm Western and EU anchor. Over-assertiveness and over-confidence in international affairs can have significant pay-offs in the short term but can also be detrimental to national interest and to lead to isolation in the long term. This is not to say that Turkey is wrong in drawing attention to the plight of the Palestinians or in seeking a diplomatic solution to the dispute involving Iran’s nuclear program. However, Turkey, as a rising middle power, would be much better positioned to draw attention to these issues and to play a constructive role in the resolution of long-standing disputes by situating itself firmly within broader international coalitions and acting collectively with Western powers, with which it has long-established historical links, as opposed to taking an over-ambitious independent line.

## Endnotes

1. The author would like to thank Gamze Evcimen and Mustafa Kutlay for their able assistance.

2. The present articles represents a sequel to an earlier contribution, Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era,” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No.1 (March 2009), pp. 7-24. For broadly favorable assessments of AKP’s foreign policy initiatives, see in particular, Bülent Aras, “The Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2009), pp. 127-142; Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya-Polat, “Turkey and the Middle East: Frontiers of the New Geographic Imagination,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2007), pp. 471-488; Bülent Aras and Aylin Görener, “National role conceptions and foreign policy orientation: The Ideational bases of the Justice and Development Party’s Foreign Policy Activism in the Middle East,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2010), pp. 73-92; İbrahim Kalın, “US-Turkish Relations under Obama: Promise, Challenge and Opportunity in the 21st century,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2010), pp. 93-108. For a critical assessment see Tarık Oğuzlu, “Middle Easternization of Turkey’s Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2008), pp. 3-20.

3. The overwhelming majority of the Turkish experts studying Turkish foreign policy find the “axis shift” argument an exaggeration and crude characterization. For detailed interviews conducted with 47 Turkish foreign policy experts, see *Mülakatlarla Türk Dış Politikası* (Ankara: USAK Publications, 2010), 3 volumes.

4. On the rise of BRICs, see Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, “Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050,” *Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper* No. 99 (2003); Leslie E. Armijo, “The BRICs Countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) as an Analytical Category: Mirage or Insight?” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2007), pp. 7-42.

5. Concerning the problems encountered with the EU the path to accession negotiations and the weakening enthusiasm in Turkey's domestic politics for EU membership, see Ziya Öniş, "Contesting for Turkey's political 'Centre': Domestic Politics, Identity Conflicts and the Controversy over EU Membership," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 18, No.3 (September, 2010), pp. 361-376.

6. İsmail Cem's foreign policy vision is extensively analyzed in his multi-volume study, İsmail Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya: Strateji, Yunanistan, Kıbrıs* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi, 2005); İsmail Cem, *Türkiye, Avrupa, Avrasya: Avrupa'nın 'Birliği' ve Türkiye* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi, 2005).

7. See in this context, Tarık Oğuzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2008), pp. 3-20; Bülent Aras, "Turkey and the Russian Federation: An Emerging Multidimensional Partnership", *SETA Policy Brief*, Brief No. 35, 2009.

8. For a detailed account of Turkey-Israeli relations with a focus on recent developments, see Tarık Oğuzlu, "The Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations: A Structural Realist Account", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2010), pp. 273-288.

9. Glenn Kesner, "Turkish Foreign Minister: Israeli raid on Gaza aid flotilla 'like 9/11' for his country", *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2010.

10. Steve Bryant, "Erdogan Calls Israeli Gaza Ship Raid 'State Terror'", *Businessweek*, May 31, 2010.

11. For the details of the tripartite agreement involving Brazil, Turkey and Iran, see the report of the International Crisis Group, "Turkey's Crisis over Israel and Iran," *International Crisis Group Europe Report*, No. 208 (8 September, 2010); Graham E. Fuller, "Brazil and Turkey Shift Global Politics," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Summer, 2010), pp. 23-25; Taha Ozhan, 'Multilateralism in foreign policy and nuclear swap deal', *Foreign Policy*, June 3, 2010.

12. Ahmet Necdet Sezer during his presidency between May 2000 and August 2007 paid 58 official foreign visits. On the other hand, Abdullah Gül paid 69 official foreign visits with more than 2,000 businessmen even though he has recently completed the first three years of his presidency.

13. Due to Turkey's policy of not extending the Additional Protocol to ten new member countries, and Cyprus Republic inter alia, the European Council decided to freeze the eight negotiation chapters and not to close the others. Moreover, the French decision-makers veto the opening of five other chapters on the ground that "they may pave the way for full membership". The Greek Cypriots also threatens to veto six other chapters due to similar reasons. If one takes into account that there are 35 chapters and Turkey has negotiated 13 of them, there remains just three chapters to be negotiated in the existing conjuncture.

14. The popular support for EU membership process was 73% in 2004, which declined to less than 40% in 2009. For evidence on the decline of public support for EU membership, see Transatlantic Trends 2010 Survey of The German Marshall Fund of the United States available at <http://www.gmfus.org/trends/2010/countryprofiles.html>; Ian Traynor, "Turks believe focus should be on Middle East and away from Europe," *Guardian*, 15 September, 2010, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/15/turkey-eu-integration-survey-iran>.

15. For a broad discussion of the impact of the global financial crisis, see Ziya Öniş and Ali Burak Güven, "The Global Financial Crisis and the Future of Neo-liberal Globalization: Rupture versus Continuity," *Koç University GLODEM Working Paper*, no. 10-01 (2010).

16. For a detailed discussion of the Turkish response to the global financial crisis, see Ziya Öniş and Ali Burak Güven, "Global Crisis, National Responses: The Political Economy of Delay and Divergence in Turkey," *New Political Economy*, Vol. 18, No. 5, (November, 2011, forthcoming), Fatih

Özatat, “Europe: Counter-Cyclical Policies in Light of the Global Financial Crisis: The Case of Turkey,” *Journal of Globalization and Development*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010).

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19. On the nature and peculiarities of the Turkish political party system and the continuing weaknesses of the principal opposition parties, see Ziya Öniş, “Conservative Globalism versus Defensive Nationalism: Political Parties and Paradoxes of Europeanization in Turkey,” *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (December, 2007), pp. 247-262; Sabri Sayarı, “Towards a New Turkish Party System?” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2007), pp. 197-210.

20. For a parallel critique and a proposal to define Turkey’s foreign policy priorities at a regional scale, see: Şaban Kardeş, “Turkey: Redrawing the Middle East Map or Building Sandcastles?” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 2010), pp. 115-136.

21. For a detailed analysis, see Serap Yazıcı, “The Impact of the EU on the Liberalisation and Democratisation Process in Turkey”, in Richard T. Griffiths and Durmuş Özdemir (eds.), *Turkey and the EU Enlargement: Processes of Incorporation*, (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 2004), pp. 91-102; for the role of the EU on Turkish democratization, see Zeki Sarıgil, “Europeanization as Institutional Change: The Case of the Turkish Military”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2007), pp. 39-57.

22. For critical accounts and limits of Turkey’s effective mediating role in the Middle East, see Meliha Benli Altunışık, “The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey’s Soft Power in the Middle East” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2008), pp. 41-54; William Hale, “Turkey and the Middle East in the ‘New Era,’” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2009), pp. 143-159.

23. For the details of Bashar al-Assad’s speech, see “Syria warns of Mideast instability amid Israel-Turkey crisis”, *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, July 6, 2010.

24. For a strong emphasis on the ethical basis of Turkish foreign policy in the new era, see the speech of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Changing Balances and the Rising Importance of Turkey”, a speech delivered at the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK), available at: <http://www.turkishweekly.net/article/341/the-changing-balances-and-the-rising-importance-of-turkey.html>. At this speech the prime minister defends Turkey’s ethical foreign policy as follows: “...this is what we have emphasized in our foreign policy. We defend justice, peace, law, and democracy in every area. We, as a conservative and democratic party, are struggling to hold both real and normative policy together.”

25. Carol Migdalovitz, “Turkey: Selected Foreign Policy Issues and U.S. Views,” *CRS Report for Congress*, August 29, 2008. Available at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34642.pdf>; for a supportive account on Turkey’s Darfur policy, see Mehmet Özkan and Birol Akgün, “Why Welcome Al Basheer? Contextualizing Turkey’s Darfur Policy,” *SETA Policy Brief*, No. 45 (July, 2010).



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