



FPC Briefing: Turkey's new foreign minister

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President Obama's much-publicised visit to Turkey in April illustrated the extent to which Turkey has emerged as a key regional power at the crossroads between Europe, the Middle East and Eurasia. In his speech, the US president stressed this when describing Turkey as having acquired the ability 'to be at the center of things'. Certainly when observing the range of areas and regions in which Turkey has of late become systematically involved, this would seem to be strikingly true. It is a relatively recent phenomenon of the last decade that has coincided with the evolution of a more autonomous, 'activist' and 'Ankara-centric' Turkish foreign policy. ⁱ

One figure who has been instrumental in this shift and yet remained relatively obscure until recently is Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey's newly appointed foreign minister. In the last 8 years, he has held momentous behind-the-scenes influence in crafting and shaping the outlook of the country's foreign policy. Although he preferred to avoid the limelight, his appointment was pre-announced by his increasingly public persona in international negotiations. For instance, he was sent as Turkey's key envoy to Iraq several times as well as to Egypt earlier this year as Turkey's key envoy to mediate in negotiations between Hamas and Israel. His appointment in May paid tribute to the conceptual debt that the dynamic shift in Turkish foreign policy's re-orientation owes to his thoughts, especially as outlined in his work *Strategic Depth*.

Along with most members of the AKP, Professor Davutoğlu is a representative of the new pious counter-elite that has gradually risen in the last thirty years to challenge the traditional pre-dominance of the old secular, state-centric circles of power in Turkey. Prior to his governmental appointments his background was entirely academic and he taught at Marmara University in Istanbul as well as the International Islamic University of Malaysia. During this period, his writings on international relations gained him a strong following amongst Turkey's conservative intelligentsia. He took a sharply critical view of the 'end of history' post-cold war mindset in international relations, arguing for the right of other alternative global centres of historical and cultural significance to articulate their own destinies rather than being subjected to 'uni-cultural monopolisation' under a universal US-centric model of capitalist liberal democracy. ⁱⁱ

However it was with the publication in 2001 of Davutoğlu's key work, *Strategic Depth* (Stratejik Derinlik), that his ideas started to be noticed and which led him to become the key foreign-policy advisor under the AKP government. Davutoglu is moved by a passionate belief in Turkey's vocation to become a central actor on the 21st century's international stage. Thus, *Strategic Depth* sets out a vision and broad guide to expanding Turkey's actorness in the international arena by framing geo-politics within a discourse of Turkey's socio-cultural history recourse to the historical experience of the Ottoman Empire. In contrast to the cautious, sceptical and confused foreign policy of the 1990s, *Strategic Depth* suggested a new, dynamic and above-all positive engagement in all of Turkey's neighbouring regions drawing on a rich palette of situational, socio-cultural, economic and historical resources. In that sense, rather than shrinking away from the Ottoman



past, Davutoğlu's visionary embraces its historico-cultural depth in its regional peripheries as a key asset that could be instrumentalised to promote Turkey's role in the contemporary world. This approach has therefore often been termed 'neo-ottomanist'. However, stripped of its historico-cultural shell, Davutoğlu's thesis outlined a set of prescriptions that are highly pragmatic and well-suited to guide the foreign policy of an upwardly mobile regional power seeking to break loose from the restrictive shackles of its cold war role and aims to maximise its own flexibility and autonomy on the international sphere.

The strategic depth doctrine consistently emphasised three themes which have prominently emerged in the outlook of Turkey's foreign policy in the last 7 years. Firstly, it advocated a greater multi-dimensionality in Turkey's outlook that would increase its footing in all of its neighbouring regions and improve its relations with all international actors, especially Russia and China, rather than just depending on relations with the European Union and the United States. Combined with this greater multi-directional focus, Turkey's role in regions like Central Asia and the Middle East should be specifically revitalized. Although the Turkish government repeatedly asserted that its relations to the EU and the US were paramount, Turkish foreign policy with the Middle East has undergone a dramatic improvement and strengthening in the last 8 years. Davutoğlu has emphasised this new multi-dimensional quality of Turkey's outlook as a general asset that increases its value as a potential EU member by stating Turkey's ability to be '...European in Europe and eastern in the East, because we are both'.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, the rather stagnant fortunes of Turkey's EU accession process in recent years have also illustrated the need for Turkey to strategically diversify its external relations.

Multi-dimensionality is linked with a second further theme emphasising regional stability and greater economic interaction with the peripheral regions and countries. This has become known as the somewhat simplistically titled 'zero-problems policy'. Again, one has seen the gradual implementation of this aim in the marked improvement with most of its neighbours in the last decade. Whereas relations between Turkey and neighbouring countries in the 1990s had been either characterised by ambiguity and suspicion as with Iran, or outright hostility leading occasionally to the brink of war as with Greece and Syria, there has been a swift about-turn in the last decade. Although preceding governments had started the detente with Greece in 1999, the AK government has maintained and greatly expanded good relations with all three countries by using diplomatic skill and economic soft power. Furthermore, Turkey has become increasingly proactive in playing an intermediary role in regional conflict scenarios. Thus in recent years, it has played a vital role in mediating between Syria, Israel and Hamas, dispatching peace-keeping troops to Lebanon, and proposing a new regional forum in the Caucasus following the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict.

A third interrelated theme that emerged is Turkey's dynamic engagement with the Middle East and the wider community of Muslim nations. This process has been so prominent in Turkey's foreign policy that one scholar argued that the country had effectively 'rediscovered' the Middle East after an 80 year long period of neglect.^{iv} Again this has occurred mostly at the level of diplomacy, political relations and trade. Financial investments flowing from the Gulf towards Turkey, especially in Istanbul business real estate, have greatly picked up. The



Saudi monarch King Fahd made two highly publicised visits to Turkey in 2008. Some critics have described this dynamic shift of focus towards the Middle East as a reflection of the AKP government's supposedly 'Islamist' agenda. Turkey's invitation of Hamas leader Khaled Meshal in 2005 was seen as an indication of this. However, it is simple pragmatic geopolitics that should be seen as the prime cause of this shift rather than religio-ideological concerns. Therefore, Turkey's renewed focus on the Middle East forms part of an inevitable and long overdue engagement with a key neighbouring region holding many threats and opportunities. In that sense, Davutoğlu has referred to the Middle East as 'an unavoidable hinterland'.^v

Nevertheless, this engagement along with other initiatives in international politics have demonstrated that the Turkish government has also showed a greater ease at identifying itself as a part of the wider community of Muslim nations. A notable example is the appointment of a Turkish academic as head of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference for the first time in 2005. The government has frequently raised its voice on behalf of the persecution, mistreatment and repression of Muslim communities across the world as was seen by Erdogan's outburst against Shimon Peres at Davos this year as well as his more recent criticism of China's repression of its Muslim ethnic population in the province of Xinjiang.^{vi} However, this ideational shift has not come at the expense of Turkey's membership of an international community. Since 2003, the Turkish government has co-sponsored the Alliance of Civilizations initiative along with the Spain as a means of disproving Huntington's famous clash of civilizations thesis and encouraging greater inter-cultural cooperation and dialogue. Davutoğlu argued in the 1990s that only 'a civilizational dialogue and a free exchange of values' could resolve ethno-religious conflicts.^{vii}

As can be seen, many of the themes at the heart of Davutoğlu's Strategic depth doctrine later came to underpin key pillars of Turkish foreign policy under the helm government. In parts of course they contributed to processes that were already undergoing such as Turkey's renewed interest in Central Asia since the 1990s. In other parts, external international processes and actors played an equally important role in influencing Turkey's shift towards a more multi-dimensional footing in regional and international politics. Both the stagnation of its EU accession process in the last 4 years and the critical decline of US-Turkish relations during the Bush administration should be noted here. Turkey's committed drive to engage peacefully with its neighbours under the aegis of a 'zero-problems policy' with an emphasis on bilateral relations has sometimes been criticised as being naive and underestimating how the complexities of regional issues can defeat or hamper attempts to establish harmonious relations with all countries on an even-handed basis. Turkey's arduous efforts to normalise relations with Armenia, including perhaps even open borders at some point, can be taken as a good example here. Despite the many encouraging contacts and developments along this path in the last year, Turkey's unwillingness to jeopardise relations with Azerbaijan have hobbled this process and revealed the limitations of a 'zero-problems' policy

The appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu, author of the strategic depth doctrine, to the post of foreign minister signals the confidence that the AKP government has acquired in engaging with regional and international issues of magnitude. It can



be seen as Turkey's coming of age as an independent multi-regional power that can comfortably and interchangeably interact with a variety of regional and international actors. Some have read Davutoğlu's appointment as another disquieting sign of Turkey losing its Atlanticist moorings and drifting further eastwards. However, given the current stagnation in the accession process on both sides however, it is only too natural for an upwardly mobile regional power to seek to diversify its regional bases. Furthermore, the ability to be present in various regions without being fully integrated in either one has always defined Turkey's geo-strategic role and should be seen as a potential asset for the EU as an international actor. It also accords to another comment by Davutoğlu in his work *Strategic Depth* when he states that 'if Turkey does not have a solid stance in Asia, it would have very limited chances with the EU.'^{viii}

ⁱGraham Fuller (2009) *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a pivotal state in the Muslim World*, United States Institute of Peace Press, p.168

ⁱⁱAhmet Davutoglu (1998) 'The clash of interests: an explanation of the world', *Perceptions*, 11(4), <http://www.sam.gov.tr/perceptions/volume2/december1997-february1998/davutoglu.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱEconomist (2007) 'An eminence grise', *Economist*, November 15th, p.60

^{iv}Stephen Larabee (2007) 'Turkey rediscovers the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, 83, pp.103-114

^vPhilip Robins (2006) 'The 2005 BRISMES Lecture: A Double Gravity State: Turkish Foreign Policy Reconsidered', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 33(2), p.201

^{vi}Emrullah Uslu (2009) 'Ankara Anxiously Monitors the Xinjiang Crisis', *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, 6(130)

http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35234&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=407&no_cache=1

^{vii}Davutoglu (1998)

^{viii}Ziya Öniş, Şuhnaz Yilmaz (2009) 'Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era', *Turkish Studies*, 10(1), p.9