



FPC Briefing: Turkey – Role Model or Regional Bully?

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How Turkey Sees Itself?

Turkey increasingly sees itself as a regional power with global aspirations. It is no longer a compliant member of the western block but an independent, ambitious, self-confident, assertive country. Some may even say it is pivotal to its region and indispensable to the wider world.

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu has been widely credited with the foreign policy vision of Turkey. He has been to Britain several times in recent years to explain his doctrine of “strategic depth”, how he sees the world and Turkey’s place in it. The Foreign minister sees a historical transformation of the global world order and with it, Turkey’s changing position, both globally and regionally. He calls the present time “the fourth great world order”. Previous ones are described as the traditional order, the colonial order and the Cold War order. He believes, whilst geography has lost some of its importance, traditional geographical regions have re-emerged. According to Mr Davutoglu, the world, has not yet achieved a balance of power in this new era. This had produced a fragile political status quo. The world cannot carry this imbalance. For this reason, “Leaders must interject certain values into the system to restore balance”

Security and freedom are two of these key values. They need to apply to all of humanity and “not just for some people and some nations.” Just as important is the need to reform the economic structures. That’s where Turkey comes into the picture. Mr Davutoglu believes Turkey can play an important role in constructing this new political, economic and cultural system. He often emphasises the role Turkey played through these previous orders. He says that Turkey was a leader in the traditional era. It was never colonised during the colonial era. It has been a member of NATO and therefore maintaining its influential role during the Cold War era.

With this kind of background, Turkey today has geopolitical responsibilities. According to Mr. Davutoglu, Turkey’s neighbours in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia expect leadership from Turkey.

Ahmet Davutoğlu bases his ‘strategic depth’ doctrine on four principles:

- 1- A secure neighbourhood based on a common understanding of security,
- 2- A pro-active, high-level political dialogue with all neighbours,
- 3- Fostering regional economic interdependence
- 4- Promoting “multi-cultural, multi-sectarian peace and harmony.

In December 2010, Mr Davutoglu told a Turkish TV programme their next target was to make Turkey the wise man, the wise country of humanity, of the world, to make it a country whose views are respected, who has principles, becoming the voice of human conscience and standing up for its values.

It’s possible to provide several more examples of how Turkey sees itself from various publications and speeches but in the spirit of the time, I’ll give you a taste of recent Twitter messages posted by a senior Turkish minister, instead.

Egemen Bagis, Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator is a keen Twitter user. These are the recent examples of his messages posted from Davos, The World Economic Forum, which took place 25-29 January 2012. It is the very same Swiss mountain resort where, in 2009, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan won his fame with his “one minute” speech to Israeli president Simon Peres.



The first one was posted in Turkish. I translated it here. Others were all in English, in Egemen Bagis's own words.

- *"Snow in Davos is reflecting the brilliance of Turkey this year. Thank God we have the self-confidence of being able to say 'one minute' to all world matters."*
- *"PM Erdogan's successful 'one minute' policies in Turkey, the region & global economy were among the most popular topics discussed in Davos."*
- *"Just completed 3 intense days in Davos. Turkey was the shining star of World Economic Forum. Ready to host global intellectual leaders in İstanbul June 4-6."*
- *"Turkey's most influential soft power is her democracy which is strengthened by EU reforms. That's why Turkey is a source of inspiration."*
- *"I didn't get any questions on Turkey's Press Freedom-Intellectuals know AK Party govt is the most democratic & pro-liberties one in our history"*

How is Turkey seen from the outside?

Ahmet Davutoglu and Turkish Foreign Ministry make good use of social media, too. But it was in London I was able to listen to him in recently. On 22 December 2011, Mr Davutoglu was the guest of honour at the "Most Successful Turks" Awards Ceremony organized by the Business Network Association .

He told a big crowd of businessmen, politicians and academics in a Park Lane hotel, that there were three pillars of Turkey's success. The first is a healthy functioning democracy. The second is its fast growing strong economy. The third is its pro-active foreign policy.

He also told the audience that Turkey didn't discover oil or gas reserves to become important. Instead, it tapped into the man and woman power and the dynamism of Turkish people. Surrounded by several successful businessmen and women of Turkish origin that have contributed to British economy, this was an effective and well received speech. When he finished it, he was asked to hand the award to the most supportive British person towards Turkey.

Before he read the name that came out of the envelope, he said he wanted to correct the title of the award: in his words "not just the most supportive Briton; but the most voluntary Turk" meaning the most honorary Turk. The lucky recipient was Labour Party's Jack Straw.

Back in the days in early 2000's, when I worked in Turkey as a BBC correspondent, I met and interviewed Jack Straw, in Ankara. He was the foreign secretary at the time. At the top of his agenda, along with foreign ministers of other EU members was always Turkey's reform programme. On human rights, the Kurdish issue, the Cyprus dispute, I had found him to be one of the most outspoken politicians of the time.

During this long ceremony in London last December, we had serving cabinet ministers, former secretaries of state, the mayor of London and politicians of all shades as well as business people making speech after speech about Turkey. I was quite surprised to see that not a single person made even a mildly critical comment about today's Turkey, its slowing pace of reform, growing violence in the South East or worsening freedoms of speech and media. There was only endless admiration and praise for this rising powerhouse.



What I witnessed in London a couple of months ago is not at all exceptional. In similar meetings elsewhere in Europe and in North America, the same kind of speeches have been delivered for the past few years.

Admittedly, there is much to admire about Turkey's economy and its development in recent years. Turkish president Abdullah Gul's state visit to Britain in November 2011 was, deservedly, hailed as a great success.

Britain has always been by far the staunchest supporter of Turkey in the EU. Unlike the UK, another key ally, the United States had to work hard to repair strained relations with Turkey. But now, President Obama can count Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan among his favorite leaders. Obama has, according to the Washington Post, spent more time speaking on the phone with Erdoğan than any other ally. Turkish and U.S. diplomats say they cannot remember a time when cooperation between Ankara and Washington was closer. President Barack Obama called Turkey's prime minister more than any other leader except Britain's prime minister in 2011.

Occasionally, you get the odd-one out like the presidential candidate Rick Perry. The Texas governor claimed Turkey was run by "Islamic terrorists" and questioned its continuing presence in NATO but he was quickly put down by the administration and ridiculed in the media.

The most widely shared view in the States seems to be: "Turkey has become a complex, dynamic, difficult, sometimes infuriating, sometimes very helpful and indisputably important ally of the United States" as journalist and Middle East commentator Jackson Diehl puts it.

Carnegie Council's trustee and the Eurasia Group's founding president, Ian Bremmer was asked last month how he predicted Turkey's role in 2012. He said that one of the things that made a country successful in a world where the United States was less dominant and not able to export its values and rules was the ability to hedge between different centers of economic growth, different centers of opportunity, different centers of political power.

Turkey was one of those countries. Turkey was flexible. Bremmer saw that Turkey's opportunities were developing across the board with the Middle East, with the Gulf in particular. Turkey was not as exposed to Europe as it was five years ago, though the EU was still its biggest trading partner. He thought that Erdoğan, too, was in pretty solid shape, even though the prime minister had his difficulties over changing the constitution. Bremmer saw one exception, though: "Turkey is moving from a more secularist model to one where conservative Islam is not only tolerated but is actively promoted. In certain sectors of investment that will be problematic. For example, if you do media in Turkey, you had better change your programming or prepare for such. If you do clothing in Turkey, you are going to need to address that. Maybe tourism might take a hit in some areas." he said. The picture I see in continental Europe is more complex.

In October 2011, The European Union's latest annual progress report, criticized Turkey over freedom of expression and treatment of its minorities. The EU also worried about Turkey's notorious law against terrorism.

It was critical of Ankara for its increasingly hardline stand towards Cyprus, too.

On the positive side, the EU progress report praised the government for judicial reforms and removing the army from politics. It also lauded Turkey's positive role in "Arab Spring" countries.



In January this year, again in Europe, but this time from another European organisation, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg severely criticised Turkey's human rights record as well as the dysfunctional state of its judiciary.

As for France, we have recently had a good glimpse of how Turkey is seen from Paris. I'll return to the issue of France and the fall-out from the genocide denial bill passing through the Parliament a little later.

But, for now, let me just say this- I don't know which caused more of a stir in France: Turkish papers denouncing Sarkozy as the Satan or the Turkish government ministers calling French move "racist and Islamophobic" or could it be Prime Minister Erdogan saying that Sarkozy's grandfather was an Ottoman Jew. His ancestors were expelled from Spain, to be welcomed by the Ottomans. No matter how hostile and racist he is towards Turkey, they will not give Sarkozy the pleasure of pretending to pick a fight with Turkey. "We are a big country. With our history, with our culture and heritage, we will behave in a way that befits a proud and great nation" said Mr Erdogan.

Perception of Turkey in the Middle East

Namik Tan is one of Turkey's most senior diplomats. Presently, he is Turkey's ambassador to Washington. He spoke to an audience in Georgetown University in February 2012. "The global agenda is currently witnessing important trends," Tan told them "The historic transition in the Middle East and North Africa comes to the fore with global ramifications" adding "We are right in the middle of fire. Everywhere is burning. Just take a moment and think where Turkey is. It's very important."

One could dismiss these words along with other somewhat self-centred comments we hear from Turkish officials. Yet, it is obvious Turkey's growing engagement with an increasingly volatile Middle East is bringing its leaders unprecedented popularity and prestige. There is no doubt that Turkey has emerged as an important player in the Middle East. It has actively been trying to become an influential player in the region. It has managed to make friends with old foes; it created vast commercial opportunities for Turkish businessmen. It tried hard to mediate in several long-lasting disputes. Sometimes it worked as in the Balkans, sometimes it failed with long lasting repercussions as in the case of Israel.

If not always a role model, Turkey has clearly become an inspiration. The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East, a research conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), was published on February 2nd, 2012. TESEV's annual survey aims to understand how Turkey is seen in the Middle East. It was first conducted in 2009. 2011 is the third year they were doing it. This latest survey was conducted in 16 countries, including Egypt, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Libya. It shows that Turkey is the most popular country for 78 percent of the people in the region. They had 'very or somewhat favourable' opinion of Turkey. The lowest marks for Turkey's popularity came from Syria, only 44 percent saying they had a positive sentiment towards Turkey, while only 30 percent saying they were pleased with Turkey's reaction to regional developments in the past year. Compared to last year, that is a fifty percent fall from grace for Turkey.

In popularity stakes, how did other countries fare? The United Arab Emirates is the second most popular country with 70 per cent. Saudi Arabia and China, share the third place with 64 percent. The USA gets 33 percent. They asked why Turkey is seen as popular. Its democracy, with 32 per cent, is the most important factor. Its working economy -with 25 percent- is the second most important. Its Muslim identity is seen as the third most important factor, with 23 percent. Do they see Turkey as a



role model? Regionwide, 61 percent of the people surveyed see Turkey as a suitable role model for the Middle East. 22 percent object to it. In this respect, the greatest support for Turkey comes from Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. One of the most interesting results is how Turkish soap operas are perceived- they are considered as a social catalyst, just like Al Jazeera is seen as a political catalyst in the Middle East

A brush with reality

So, Turkey thinks it is a global player. It tries to act like it. The West, with a few exceptions, goes along with it. The street, the public opinion in the Middle East, especially in North Africa and in Palestine, seems, pretty impressed with it, albeit for different reasons. It is nearer home, Turkey's neighbours with shared borders that seem to be bothered. That's where chilling encounters with reality come in. But wasn't the policy called "Zero Problems with neighbours?" How did we end up with "Zero Neighbours without problems"?

Turkey and Syria were close regional allies until last summer. They were holding joint cabinet meetings and military exercises, lifting visa requirements, and creating a bilateral strategic council. Trade was flourishing and leaders of two countries were having family holidays together. In the early days of the Syrian uprising, Turkey took a cautious line. It seemed confident that Turkey's influence on Baser Assad should make a difference. Ahmet Davutoğlu demanded that the Syrian government end its crackdown "immediately and unconditionally".

When it was ignored and the brutality of the Syrian regime increased, Ankara abruptly shifted its stance on Syria, opening its doors to Syrian opponents and refugees. The longer Turkey seemed helpless to stop Assad regime killing its people, the quicker Iran and Russia filled the influence gap-left by Turkey.

Two years ago, Turkey resisted U.S. pressure and opposed sanctions on Iran. Now Turkey is firmly on the side of the US as Washington and European Union are tightening curbs against Teheran. As Syria struggles to control the uprising, its protégée, Hamas, seems to turn its face towards Turkey. Turkey says there are no plans for Khaled Mashaal, the Hamas political leader based in Damascus, to move to Turkey, though some news sources suggest that Turkey may not completely close the door to a possible Hamas office in Turkey.

Last month, the Hamas premier Ismail Haniya visited Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan at his Istanbul home. Relations are warm but critics of the government are pointing out the dangers of having Hamas based in Turkey, in case of another conflict in Gaza, especially if Hamas starts attacking Israel again.

Relations with Israel, despite public pronouncements, seem to be quietly mended behind the scenes. Turkish businesses continue to deal with Israel and according to TUSIAD's Umit Boyer, no matter what kind of difficulty governments have created for the business, the trade has not stopped. It's actually increased and continues to increase. Another pillar of "Zero Problems with Neighbours" policy was Iraq. As the fears of a full scale sectarian clashes loom in Iraq, a war of words have broken out between Erdogan and Iraqi leader Nuri Al Maliki.

Erdogan said that Turkey wouldn't remain silent if a sectarian struggle started in Iraq. Maliki's office responded with a statement saying that Turkey was interfering in Iraq's affairs and "Erdogan had to be more careful in handling the usual protocols in international relations." Turkey is worried about a Shia and Sunni divide in its region. It also likes to be seen above sectarian differences.



In a recent speech to his deputies, Mr Erdogan rejected accusations that his government is following a Sunni sectarian agenda. He also hit back at Maliki and said that his government is neither against nor behind any sect, and that those who perceive its policies as interference should first look at themselves. Erdogan also said his government is planning to organize a regional meeting of Sunni and Shi'ite leaders later in February 2012.

We'll see if the Turkish prime minister can manage to persuade other countries of the region that he does not follow a religious agenda. But in Turkey, his recent speeches have raised eyebrows even among his supporters. Especially when he said the AKP's aim was to raise religious and conservative youth in the country. It is not just sectarianism that overshadows regional ties. Ethnicity and nationalism, together with growing militarism play its part, too.

Turkey is reluctant to see the emergence of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, but it has developed strong political and trade ties with Iraq's Kurds. Even though Erdogan and others still refuse to refer to Iraqi Kurdistan with its proper name, Turkish presence is everywhere. With new luxury hotels, banks, restaurants and construction firms, more than half the foreign companies in Iraqi Kurdistan are Turkish. About 80 percent of goods sold in the region are made in Turkey.

Iraq as a whole has now become Turkey's second biggest export market after [Germany](#), selling more than \$8 billion of goods last year. About 70 percent of Turkey's exports to Iraq are to the north. Politically, this can be a fragile alliance. Over the border, clashes have flared up again between Turkey's security forces and the the Kurdish armed insurgency PKK.

As intractable conflicts go, Turkey's Kurdish problem has been a very costly one - both in human lives and the damage it has inflicted on the country's political, economic and social development. As well as being the most urgent and difficult issue for Turkey, the Kurdish conflict has been the biggest obstacle for further democratisation and reform inside; for bold and necessary foreign policy decisions outside.

One of those festering problems is Cyprus. The prospects for a settlement remain as distant as ever. In September Turkish warships were sent to the island in an ongoing dispute over Nicosia's exploration for gas in its territorial waters. The latest UN round of talks did not produce any results. Cyprus takes over the EU rotating presidency on 1st of July. Turkey has made it clear that it will suspend its links with the EU's presidency while Greek Cypriots sit in the chair.

Cyprus is another key policy issue where the AKP government has made a significant change to its approach. In its early days of power, the AKP took a pro-settlement line. After the rejection of the Annan plan by the Greek Cypriots and the accession of Cyprus to the European Union, the enthusiasm for a solution understandably weakened. But as long as Turkey's EU membership prospects remained, the government was careful not to burn the bridges.

Recently, AKP has adopted more of a nationalist attitude towards Cyprus. This has become very apparent when Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas died. Whilst it is understandable that the government would acknowledge Mr Denktas' historical role and the widespread affection among Turks towards him; it was rather puzzling to see somewhat over- the- top veneration of Mr Denktas during the three days of national mourning.

When it comes to raising expectations, promising much- yet delivering little or none - nothing beats the example of Turkey-Armenia relations. Failing to abide by the commitments it made in 2009 to



establish diplomatic relations and to open its long-closed border, Turkey has seriously damaged the credibility of its “Zero Problems with Neighbours” policy. As things stand now, Turkey came to a conclusion that Azerbaijan is a bigger priority for Turkey. Improving relations with Armenia cannot be achieved against Azerbaijan’s wishes. Energy interests and very strong public opinion would prevent that.

The extent of nationalist sentiment among the AKP leadership and grass roots became more evident during the recent spat with France. Relations between France and Turkey were seriously damaged when the French Parliament and Senate approved legislation that would make it illegal to deny the Armenian genocide. The bill caused a furious reaction in Turkey, at all levels. There was widespread condemnation of not just the bill but of France, the French president and occasionally, the entire French nation. The new law makes it a crime to deny that the mass killings of Armenians in 1915 were genocide. The punishment can be up to a year in prison and a €45,000 fine for those found guilty. Since it was passed in the Senate, Turkish ministers have been queuing up to challenge French authorities to arrest them for denial. So far, only the Minister of EU Affairs, Egemen Bagis’ comments denying genocide seem to have incensed the Swiss authorities. Turkey has previously threatened “permanent sanctions” against Paris. But recently, Erdogan said they would take a step by step approach.

Whilst I, too, personally object to the French bill, on the basis of freedom of speech, I find Turkey’s criticism of French democracy’s shortcomings somewhat rich. Reporters Without Borders’ annual report showed that perceptions of freedom of expression in Turkey fell sharply in 2011. It sunk 10 places to 148th of 179 countries ranked; six places below Russia and followed by Mexico and Afghanistan.

It may also be necessary to remind everyone that acknowledging Armenian genocide is still actionable in Turkey. 2015 is the 100th anniversary of the 1915 killings. Turkey will come across more challenges internationally during the next couple of years. The quicker these difficult issues are faced and dealt with the better. For a country like Turkey that carries a heavy historical baggage, promoting a neo-Ottoman agenda seems a perverse way to go about it.

The EU was instrumental for reform in Turkey. The indifference we see today to Turkey’s domestic issues compound increasingly illiberal nature of the AKP government. The more it grows economically and in confidence, the smaller the prospects of Turkey’s EU membership seem to get. A Europe in financial crisis has become a much less attractive ambition for the fast growing candidate that has been pushed around far too long.

A year or two ago, when the German chancellor Angela Merkel talked about a special kind of membership, Turkey used to get furious. Now, Turks themselves are suggesting a different kind of relationship between Turkey and the EU. The former Economy minister, Kemal Derviş, now vice president of Brookings, recently spoke at a panel in Istanbul about EU –Turkish relations. This is what he said: “The EU has rules, but they are not absolute, they are evolving. We could talk about a different form of integration. I am not talking about a privileged partnership outside of Europe, but a special relationship inside Europe”.

Turkey has become the world’s 16th largest economy. It has doubled its per capita income in less than a decade. Unlike aging Europe, it has much more favourable demographics. Despite its worrying current account deficit, and the talk of overheating, the outlook in economy seems brighter than any other aspect of today’s Turkey.



So, why are we questioning whether Turkey can be a role model for others? Human Rights Watch and its Turkey researcher Emma Sinclair-Webb gave the best answer to this question in their World Report 2012: “Credibility Depends on Rights at Home”¹ But I want to finish with a hard-hitting quotation from the columnist, Ahmet Altan. Altan had been a supporter of the AKP government until recently. Fears over growing authoritarianism and return to militarism forced many liberals to re-examine their alliance with the AKP government, at least with its prime minister. Altan is the editor of Taraf newspaper. I am often quite critical of Taraf and its journalism ethics but on this occasion he couldn’t sum it up better.

“In Turkey, the first hit to the system came from Turgut Ozal. But the real showdown was started by AKP. AKP realised it could not deal with the military republican establishment, so it enlisted the support of the European Union that wanted a universal democracy and legal system. Taking the public and the world behind it, AKP started to clean up. It reformed the law, uncovered Ergenekon, took on the coup plotters and pushed the military back. It accepted the Kurds also had rights. It started talks with them. AKP listened to Alevis. It promised a new constitution. For every step it took to change this rotten system, it found the people of Turkey and the the developed world on its side. It created hope.

Erdogan was respected internationally as a leader that brought democracy to a Muslim country. His name has been added to great world leaders. And then, all of a sudden, AKP stopped. It realised what big advantages this system they wanted to change provided for its rulers. How big the power was and how you could generate huge number of supporters by distributing a bit of the share. They decided it was cleverer to make a deal with the system, to become a part of it, rather than to fight it.”

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¹ Human Rights Watch, Turkey: Credibility begins at home: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/01/22/turkey-credibility-depends-rights-home> (January 2012)