Assessing Turkish foreign policy under AKP

Key Points

- Its handling of foreign policy is one of the areas that generate most intense domestic debate and international scrutiny of the ruling AKP party in Turkey.
- Turkey's traditional allies have been somewhat neglected as the AKP has pursued a more enthusiastic policy towards anti-Western states.
- For the AKP's critics, the last seven years of AKP rule has amounted to an incremental shift away from the West.

Turkey's ruling AKP party's foreign policy generates intense domestic criticism. Soner Cagaptay examines what this policy has meant for the country's allies, as well as its critics.

Turkey's ties with its neighbours have been transformed since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in November 2002. Some analysts have described the AKP's foreign policy as a "zero problems with neighbours" approach. Yet, Turkey's new foreign policy environment indicates otherwise.

Under the AKP, Ankara has indeed eliminated problems and built good ties with some neighbours, such as Russia, Syria and Iran, and signalled a thaw with Armenia, with whom Turkey shares a closed border. On the other hand, Ankara's traditionally good ties with its neighbours such as Georgia and Azerbaijan have deteriorated under the AKP, and Turkish-Israeli ties could unravel despite diplomats' best efforts.

Furthermore, Turkey's ties with the European Union (EU), to which Ankara should be committing its energy if Turkey is to be a "Western" country, have become lethargic for reasons that have to do as much with the AKP's loss of interest in the EU process as with France's and other European powers' objections to Turkey's EU entry.

Subsequently, rather than having a static approach to all neighbours, Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP has resulted in significant ups with some neighbours and significant downs with others, especially those that are pro-Western.

Foreign policy

First and foremost, the AKP's foreign policy has focused heavily on Muslim Middle East. Many analysts have referred to the AKP's foreign policy as "neo-Ottomanist," suggesting "secular" imperial ambitions or desire to achieve status as a regional power. In fact, the AKP's foreign policy energy has not reflected Ottoman ambitions. The party does not assert Turkey's weight equally in the areas that were under Ottoman rule, namely the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Instead, the AKP has focused its energy on the Middle East with a slant towards Islamist and anti-Western actors, while building a financially-driven relationship with Russia.

A study of high-level visits by AKP officials to the Middle East, Balkans and Caucasus reveals that the party focuses asymmetrically on anti-Western Arab countries and Iran, while it ignores Israel, the Balkans and the Caucasus.

Between November 2002 and April 2009, the Turkish foreign minister made at least eight visits to Iran and Syria, while paying only one visit to Azerbaijan, a Turkic state once considered to be the closest country to Turkey, and one to Georgia, despite the fact that after Georgia's independence, Turkey had acted as a benefactor of that country.

Similarly, between November 2002 and April 2009, the Turkish prime minister made at least seven visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, while paying only two to Greece and Bulgaria, Turkey's two immediate EU and Balkan neighbours.

Much of the AKP's energy in the Middle East has focused on Syria. In the 1990s, Turkey viewed Syria as an adversary, because of its support for the Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK) terrorist attacks against Turkey. Yet, on 13 October, Turkey and Syria opened their borders, which facilitated visa free-travel, and set up joint cabinet-level meetings which encouraged an improvement in bilateral policymaking.

While Turkish-Syrian rapprochement started in the late 1990s when Damascus stopped supporting the PKK, the past seven years under the AKP has brought about the most significant strengthening of Syrian-Turkish ties.

The AKP's sympathy towards Turkey's Arab neighbours, and the party's leaders' tendency to analyse the Middle East through an 'us versus them' religion-based political lens, as well as side with anti-Western causes in the region have helped build Turkish-Syrian relations.

Growing closer
Turkey's ties with Iran have also improved under the AKP's leadership, though not to the same extent as Turkish-Syrian ties.

This is due to the fact that Tehran is a regional power and unlike the Baath regime in Damascus, it does not need patrons to survive. Still, Turkey defends Iran's nuclear programme, as justified by the AKP's "us versus them" religion-based political lens.

As international pressure to prevent Tehran's nuclearisation has mounted, Iran will likely launch diplomatic overtures to further strengthen its bonds with Turkey.

Trade links, including Turkish purchase of and investment in Iranian natural gas, will further improve bilateral ties. Yet it will also create tensions between Ankara and the West, which will view AKP-promoted investments in Iran a violation of the policy of economically isolating Tehran.

The improvement of Turkish-Russian ties is related to energy as well. Until 10 years ago, Turkish-Russian relations were very poor. Russian and Ottoman Empires fought over 20 major wars after they established a land border in the 1470s, all of which Russia initiated. In modern times, Bolshevism, regarded by the Turks as Russian expansionism disguised as communism, kept Turkish-Russian ties sour.

The fall of communism opened a door for new ties, as Moscow cultivated commercial relations. The AKP has built rapprochement with Russia on this foundation. Improvement has been facilitated by close personal ties between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian leader Vladimir Putin. The two leaders have met nine times since 2002, usually in Russia.

The close ties between Putin and Erdogan that have improved Turkish-Russian relations, have also resulted in the deterioration of Turkish-Georgian ties. Since 2002, Turkish-Georgian ties have withered despite the fact that Ankara was Tbilisi's regional patron after Georgia gained independence in 1991, for instance training the Georgian military and providing Tbilisi with its first naval vessels.

The situation changed under the AKP as Turkish-Russian ties improved: when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, the AKP preferred a policy of benign neglect towards Tbilisi, offering to unite occupied Georgia and Russia in a "Caucasus Stability and Security Platform" initiative. Needless to say, this platform never took off. Furthermore, due to its religion-based political attitudes, the AKP shows aversion towards Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili's government that uses Christian symbols in Georgian domestic politics.

In decline

The deterioration of Turkish-Azeri ties under the AKP is even more surprising than the decline in Turkish-Greek ties. Before the AKP came to power, Turkic and secular Azerbaijan was Turkey's closest ally the motto summarising ties between the two countries was "one nation, two states" but ties have since unravelled. Once again, ideology has played a role. In the past, Azerbaijan viewed secular, pro-Western Turkey as a role model.

There have been reports of Turkish efforts in Azerbaijan to convert Shia Azeris to Sunnism. This new face of Turkey has become less attractive for Baku. Different values and a lack of personal chemistry between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and AKP leadership have exacerbated the strains. The rapprochement AKP has pursued with Armenia, a positive development in itself, has fanned the fire in the Turkish-Azeri relationship, as Ankara does not view the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijan as the key problem in the region's politics. On 15 October, Azeri authorities ordered the removal of Turkish flags at a First World War memorial erected to honour Turkish soldiers who fell defending Baku from the Russians.

Turkey's ties with Israel have also significantly deteriorated under the AKP. The party's critical rhetoric regarding Israel, which has eroded all Turkish public support for ties with Israel, had been dismissed for a long time in the West and in Israel as domestic politicking. However, that evaluation has changed.

On 7 October, the AKP invited Israel to Anatolian Eagle, a NATO air force exercise that has been held in central Turkey with US, Israeli and Western states' participation since the mid-1990s. Erdogan justified his party's decision by saying that Israel is a "persecutor." Yet, the next day, the AKP announced that it had requested that Syria participate in joint military exercises. The AKP's "us versus them" mindset, which does not see states but rather religious blocks in the Middle East, is corroding the foundations of Turkey's 60-year-old military and political co-operation with Israel.

Battling EU

Finally, Turkish-EU ties under the AKP have deteriorated. European leaders and key EU countries, especially France, object to Turkey's accession, and this has led to a political stalemate. Initially, the AKP pushed aggressively for EU accession, making Turkey an official candidate for membership talks in 2004. Yet, in 2005, the AKP lost interest in accession precisely as Turkey-EU talks began and Turkey became obliged to not only pass but also implement tough domestic reforms towards membership.

The AKP declared that year to be the "year of Africa", symbolically demonstrating its withering appetite for Europe. The subsequent loss of interest in reforming for the EU allowed Nicolas Sarkozy, France's then new president, oppose Turkey's bid, which subsequently led to an impasse in Turkey's EU accession process.

According to its critics, the AKP could have adopted two attitudes towards the accession impasse.

The first choice was adopting a strategic view of accession, defining Europe as the penultimate goal of Turkish foreign policy, and drastically reforming on a domestic level for membership to the point of embarrassing Paris into lifting its objections to Turkey, lest it be cast an anti-Muslim country.
Or, the AKP could have given up on reforms, indicating that EU expectations of it were beyond deliverable. The party chose the second path because it approaches EU entry from a tactical standpoint and is determined to pursue accession only for populist gain only but not when it involves a costly reform process.

A strategic view of EU accession would have meant that the AKP would have pursued the EU path to bypass the French veto and break the impasse on Turkey’s accession even if such reforms cost the party some initial popular support.

According to the party’s critics in Turkey, had the AKP adopted a strategic view of accession, this would have been good for Turkey and also good for the party. By pushing for EU membership, the party could have prevented the erosion of its erstwhile liberal democratic brand, a problem that has cost it dearly in Washington in the shape of lost political sympathy, and lately also in Brussels. Accordingly, the AKP has not adopted EU entry as a strategic goal. Subsequently, seven years after the party took power, Turkey’s EU ties have stalled.

**Asymmetrical focus**

Rather than being pro-Western or neo-Ottoman in a "secular" sense, the AKP’s foreign policy is asymmetrically focused on Russia and anti-Western Middle East powers. And rather than having a "zero problems with all neighbours" approach [as ascribed by some analysts], the AKP’s foreign policy is a mix bag, eliminating problems with some neighbours, while souring previously good ties with other neighbours, especially pro-Western ones.

Still, of all changes that have taken place in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, loss of interest in EU accession is seen by many Turks as the most alarming. This is since today Turkey’s EU entry is about whether or not Turkey will choose the West as its strategic objective.

If Turkey’s EU accession had been stalled in the pre-11 September 2001 world, such a stalemate would not have had strategic repercussions for Turkey.

Then, the EU zone ended up in Austria and there was room for Turkey to be outside the EU but still part of Europe and the West as was the case with its Balkans neighbours.

Accordingly, with the EU having pushed its boundaries into the eastern Balkans up to the Turkish border and with radical Islamists claiming that there is a war between the West and the world of Islam, there is arguably less room for gray political areas in which Turkey can position itself.

Another fear that anti-AKP Turkish voices have is that the party’s new foreign policy involves Ankara offering its services in relation to all regional issues and result in a lack of foreign policy depth.

By not prioritising EU accession, the AKP might have missed the opportunity to take Turkey into the EU.

However, looking at the AKP’s report card since 2002, which includes improved ties with anti-Western Iran, Syria and Russia, and deteriorating ties with pro-Western Georgia, Azerbaijan and Israel, one could also conclude that perhaps the AKP never had a Western vocation for Turkey in mind.

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