

Working Paper No 8/2010

The Davutoğlu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy

By
Ioannis N. Grigoriadis
Bilkent University / ELIAMEP

Middle Eastern Studies Programme

April 2010

Copyright © 2010
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN AND FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)
All rights reserved

Working Paper Nr 8/2010

The Davutoğlu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis

Bilkent University / ELIAMEP

Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

49, Vassilissis Sofias Ave.

106 76 Athens, Greece

tel: (+30) 210 7257110-1

fax: (+30) 210 7257114

e-mail: eliamep@eliamep.gr

url: www.eliamep.gr

ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Author's Information:

Dr. Ioannis N. Grigoriadis is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Bilkent University and a Research Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation of European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).

His recent publications include *Trials of Europeanization: Turkish Political Culture and the European Union*, (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), “Islam and Democratization in Turkey: Secularism and Trust in a Divided Society”, *Democratization*, Vol. 16, No. 6, December 2009, pp. 1194-1213 and “The Orthodox Church and Greek-Turkish Relations: Religion as Source of Rivalry or Conciliation?” in Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 51-70.

Many of his articles can be found in his personal blog <http://epifyllides.blogspot.com/>
He can be contacted at ioannis@eliamep.gr

Summary

Turkish foreign policy under the AKP administration has been associated with the name of Ahmet Davutoğlu. Davutoğlu was the chief foreign policy advisor of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan before he was appointed foreign minister in 2009. As an academic, he has outlined his foreign policy doctrine in several writings, most important of which is his book “Strategic Depth.” This study explores Davutoğlu’s strategic vision, the extent to which this informs Turkish foreign policy, as well as its contradictions.

It is virtually impossible to discuss Turkish foreign policy since 2002 without a reference to Ahmet Davutoğlu. Davutoğlu was one of the few academics who joined the ranks of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP). Born in the conservative, central Anatolian city of Konya, he came from rather humble backgrounds to an academic career in the field of international relations before moving to politics, first as the chief foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and later as foreign minister. Having developed his strategic vision about Turkey in his academic capacity, Davutoğlu belongs to the very privileged group of academics who were given the opportunity to put their theory into practice. While his doctrine is often dubbed as “neo-Ottomanism,” the use of this term is rather misleading. Ottomanism was a nineteenth-century liberal political movement aiming to the formation of a civic Ottoman national identity overarching ethnic, linguistic and religious identities. The term was briefly reinstated as “neo-Ottomanism” to characterize the foreign policy overtures of Turgut Özal in the late 1980s. While these involved increased interest in the Middle East, they share little of the conceptual content of Davutoğlu’s vision. This study aims to outline Davutoğlu’s foreign policy doctrine, evaluate its relevance to current Turkish foreign policy-making, as well as its limitations.

Davutoğlu's thought moved from a coarse geopolitical to a strategic model which while not devoid of geopolitical foundations is more compatible with liberal principles of international relations

The "Strategic Depth" Doctrine

While Davutoğlu’s early publications were based on rather outdated geopolitical models, his vision underwent significant modifications from the late 1990s to the 2000s, something not atypical for the majority of the AKP political leadership. Although geopolitics still comprises a key framework of Davutoğlu’s strategic thinking, it is supplemented by liberal elements, such as soft power, conflict resolution and promotion of “win-win” solutions. In his book “Strategic Depth,” published in 2001, Davutoğlu elaborates on his strategic vision about Turkey. He argues that Turkey possesses “strategic depth” due to its history and geographic position and lists Turkey among a small group of countries which he calls “central powers”. Turkey should not be content with a regional role in the Balkans or the Middle East, because it is not a regional but a central power. Hence, it should aspire to play a leading role in several regions, which could award it global strategic significance.

According to Davutoğlu, Turkey possesses “strategic depth” which allows it to implement a multi-dimensional foreign policy and claim a central role in global politics

In Davutoğlu’s view, Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf and Black Sea country, can simultaneously exercise influence in all these regions and thus claim a global strategic role. In view of these, he rejects the perception of Turkey as a bridge between Islam and the West, as this would relegate Turkey to an instrument for the promotion of the strategic interests of other countries.

Instead of letting other countries use Turkey to promote their regional and global strategic role, Turkey should develop a proactive policy commensurate to its historic and geographic depth, which is amplified by its Ottoman legacy. To achieve that aim, Turkey should capitalise on its soft power potential. This is based on its historic and cultural links with all the regions which it belongs to, as well as its democratic institutions and thriving market economy. Turkey needs to put aside the militaristic image which its strong military and history of military tutelage over society and politics has bequeathed. Instead, it should promote conflict resolution, regional economic cooperation which would obviate the need for regional intervention of great powers. In Davutoğlu's own words:

... Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities and thus has the capability as well as the responsibility to follow an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy. The unique combination of our history and geography brings with it a sense of responsibility. To contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a call of duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history for Turkey.

In a departure from what he argued in the 1990s, Davutoğlu identifies two conditions for Turkey to succeed in its global strategic ambitions. The first refers to its domestic politics, while the second to its relations with neighbours. On the domestic front,

The Kurdish question and the polarisation between Islamists and secularists pose major obstacles to the realisation of Turkey's strategic potential

Turkey needs to resolve its own Kurdish question, as well as bridge the growing rift between the Islamist and secularist elements of Turkish society. Davutoğlu advocates the resolution of both conflicts on the basis of liberal principles: Turkey's strategic potential will be released if a fair and lasting solution for the Kurdish issue is reached, which will

guarantee Kurdish minority rights within Turkey and a liberal consensus is achieved on the question of secularism between different segments of Turkish society. The Kurdish armed conflict which has lasted more than thirty years and cost the lives of approximately 30,000 people, has split the society, posed a heavy burden on Turkey's budget and prevented economic development in large parts of eastern and southeastern Turkey. The confrontation between the Islamist and the secularist segments of Turkish society has reached unprecedented proportions since the 2007 presidential election crisis and threatened social cohesion and the functionality of the state.

On the international front, Davutoğlu argues that Turkey needs to resolve all the bilateral disputes which have hampered its relations with its neighbours. In what was

The resolution of all pending conflicts with Turkey's neighbours is also seen as indispensable for Turkey's rise into a global actor

coined as "zero problem policy with neighbours," he states that in recent decades Turkey has wasted crucial efforts and time in conflicts with its neighbours. For Turkey to become a regional leader and play a global strategic role, it needs to overcome phobic syndromes and establish cordial relations with all its neighbours. Its foreign policy should aim

to resolve all the pending disputes which Turkey's diplomatic inertia had accumulated in the past, so it can seek its own global strategic role. Developing close relations with all

rising global powers, China, India, Russia and Brazil, would be a key in that process. Seeking a leading role in intercivilisational and interreligious dialogue would become one of Turkey's leading priorities, as Turkey could capitalise on his historical and cultural legacy.

Moving from Theory to Practice

Given that Davutoğlu, as chief foreign policy advisor to the prime minister and foreign minister, has been an extremely influential actor throughout the AKP administration, it makes sense to investigate to what extent his strategic doctrine has informed Turkish foreign policy-making. The impact of Davutoğlu's doctrine is evident in several of the initiatives which the AKP government took in the field of domestic and foreign policy. Turkey's new Middle Eastern policy is a clear example of this. Significant improvement has been noted regarding bilateral relations with Syria, Iraq and Armenia, while little change has been observed regarding Greece and Cyprus.

The Domestic Front

The decision of the AKP government to launch a new initiative with the aim to resolve the Kurdish issue was one of the most important items in Turkey's political agenda in 2009. Following the launch of a Kurdish-language state channel (TRT Şeş), Erdoğan announced that his government would take a set of measures aiming to provide equal rights to Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent. The most spectacular moment of the AKP's "Kurdish opening (Kürt açılımı)" -later dubbed as "democratic opening (demokratik açılım)"- was the return of a group of 34 PKK militants from northern Iraq to Turkey on 19 October 2009. While these were received with jubilation by Turkey's Kurdish population, the nationalist backlash witnessed in Turkish public opinion led the AKP government to slow down the initiative. Little real progress has been noted since then, although the issue has maintained a top position in the country's political agenda. Despite its shortcomings and unfulfilled promises, this "opening" was in line with Davutoğlu's view that the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue was urgent and indispensable for Turkey's strategic interests.

Relations with Neighbours

Syria

The most spectacular change was in Turkey's relations with Syria. While the two countries had come to the brink of war in late 1998, due to Syria's support for the PKK, relations entered a blossom in 2005. Political and economic cooperation grew ever stronger, while Turkey repeatedly attempted to mediate between Syria and Israel with the aim to achieve a peace agreement and the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. The September 2009 decision to reciprocally lift the visa requirement for tourist visits was a rare move in the region which had a very positive effect on public opinion of both countries.

Iraq

Relations with Iraq have also improved significantly. While Turkey's policy against Iraq since the 2003 war had focused on preventing the rise of an autonomous or independent Kurdish political entity and eliminating the presence of the Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan-PKK) in Northern Iraq, its policy under the influence of Davutoğlu's doctrine moved from containment to engagement. Turkey accepted the legitimacy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a federal entity within Iraq and deepened economic and political cooperation with the Baghdad federal government. Davutoğlu became the Turkish high-level official to visit Northern Iraq in October 2009. He met Turkey's erstwhile archenemy and President of the KRG Massoud Barzani and Prime Minister Nehcirvan Barzani and announced the opening of a Turkish consulate in Erbil. In his statements, Davutoğlu argued that such a visit should have taken place long ago. Stating that he found Erbil very developed, Davutoğlu added

All of us will contribute to the even further development of Erbil. This will become a bridge between Iraq and Turkey. We are the gate of Iraq to the European Union. And Erbil is our gate opening to Basra.

While this rapprochement remained fragile due to the persistence of the Kirkuk question and the ongoing operations of the PKK from Northern Iraq, it was a radical departure from previous hostility and mistrust. It also confirmed Davutoğlu's view that good relations with Iraqi Kurds and Iraq are crucial for Turkey's access to the Persian Gulf,

Iran

Relations with Iran also improved significantly. Energy cooperation moved beyond the purchase and transit of Iranian natural gas through Turkey to the development of Iranian hydrocarbon fields by Turkish companies. Moreover, Turkey claimed a key mediating role in the Iranian nuclear dispute. Distancing itself from the United States and the European Union, Erdoğan made repeated statements on Western double standards regarding nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Davutoğlu visited Tehran in February 2010 with the aim to broker a deal on the issue of uranium enrichment. Iran's nuclear ambitions were evidently an issue of utmost significance for Turkish national security, as well as an opportunity for Davutoğlu to put his proactive foreign policy vision into work.

Armenia

Under Davutoğlu, Turkish diplomacy also engaged in an unprecedented attempt to heal relations with Armenia. Turkey and Armenia broke off diplomatic relations in 1993 as a result of the Nagorno Karabagh war, while Turkey also shut its land border to Armenia. Armenian efforts for the global recognition of the 1915 massacres against Ottoman Armenians as genocide were an additional point of confrontation. Despite these adverse circumstances, Turkey and Armenia signed on 10 October 2009 a historic accord to establish diplomatic relations. If ratified by the parliaments of both countries, this accord could lead

to the reopening of the Turkish-Armenian border, facilitate economic cooperation and civil society communication and pave the way for the resolution of both the Nagorno Karabagh and the genocide questions.

Greece-Cyprus

On the other hand, an asymmetry has been observed in the Cyprus question, one of Turkey's longest and most-protracted conflicts. Although Davutoğlu's role could be identified in Turkey's policy shift and support for the Annan Plan in 2004, no follow-up has been noted since then. While Davutoğlu has repeatedly underlined Turkey's interest in a compromise solution and chastised Greek Cypriots for their rejection of the Annan Plan, Turkey has failed to come up with proactive policies and moves which would highlight its continued strong commitment to conflict resolution. A partial withdrawal of Turkish troops from Cyprus which could be perceived as tangible evidence of Turkey's determination for a breakthrough in the island has not materialised yet. Moreover, little has changed in Turkey's bilateral disputes with Greece. What in fact questioned whether the government had full control over developments in Greek-Turkish relations, were newspaper revelations in January 2010 about the existence of a clandestine military plan (the Balyoz-Sledgehammer Plan) aiming to destabilise the Turkish government through provoking a crisis in the Aegean.

Israel

If there is a country where relations have suffered a rapid deterioration under the AKP administration, this is Israel. Turkey's foreign policy overtures in the Palestinian question often caused the fierce reaction of Israel, especially when they involved engagement with the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip. Turkey's outspoken condemnation of Israel during the Lebanon and Gaza wars only added further acrimony to bilateral relations, which reached a dip with the confrontation between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Israeli President Peres during the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in January 2009. While this sharp deterioration could be hardly compatible with the "zero problems policy," it was however in line with Turkey's growing regional ambitions. Turkey's mediating role in the Middle East would no more be dictated by the United States, the European Union or Israel. Turkey would act as a "central power," and this would lead to a reconfiguration of its relationship with Israel.

Turkey's Emerging Global Interests

Turkey's growing interest in hitherto neglected parts of the globe is another feature of the implementation of Davutoğlu's doctrine. Sub-saharan Africa and Latin America attracted unprecedented attention by Turkish diplomatic authorities. A series of Turkey-Africa summits were organised in Turkey with the participation of numerous African leaders. In a speech Davutoğlu delivered in December 2009, he stated that seven new embassies were opened in 2009, while twenty-six would open in 2010 most of which in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. He also announced his intention to ask for a sharp rise of the budget

and the personnel of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, so it could stand up to the new role he envisioned for Turkey. He encapsulated this as follows:

By 2023 when the country will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the republic, I envision a Turkey which is a full member of the EU after having completed all the necessary requirements, living in full peace with its neighbours, integrated with neighbouring basins in economic terms and for a common security vision, an effective player in setting orders in regions where our national interests lie, and active in all global affairs and among the top ten economies in the world.

In other words, Davutoğlu's vision amounted to the full realisation of Turkey's strategic and economic potential. While Turkey was already a member of the G-20 group having the seventeenth largest economy among the group members, Davutoğlu aspired to create the conditions to bring Turkey to the top ten list.

A Critique

The implementation of Davutoğlu's foreign policy doctrine has contributed to a transformation of Turkish foreign policy and the rising importance of Turkey's diplomatic role, especially in the Middle East. Yet it suffers from contradictions which might undermine its successful implementation. Davutoğlu's strategic vision faces a tough test in the case of Iran. In accordance to this vision, Turkey has refused to side with Western pressure aiming to stop Iran's uranium enrichment programme and has followed an independent policy aiming to put Turkey in the centre of a compromise solution. Prime Minister Erdoğan also called for nuclear disarmament in the Middle East, implying that it would be unfair to demand from Iran to freeze its nuclear programme, while Israel has faced no criticism for its violation of nuclear proliferation treaties and development of nuclear weapons. By trusting the good intentions of Iran's leadership, Turkey is taking a big risk. If Iran defies previous statements and does develop nuclear weapons, Turkey could be one of the biggest losers in terms of regional security and might be embroiled into a nuclear arms race with other Middle Eastern states.

Moreover, there is a serious contradiction in relegating Turkey's EU membership ambition to simply one of Turkish strategic priorities. According to Davutoğlu's view, Turkey's EU membership is desirable, but it is not considered Turkey's unique strategic orientation. On the contrary, it is put into context with Turkey's multiple strategic alternatives. Yet what this position misses is the importance of Turkey's reform process and EU membership for the management and resolution of its own domestic conflicts. Davutoğlu has highlighted the resolution of the Kurdish question and the Islamist-secularist confrontation as the most important conditions for the implementation of Turkey's strategic ambitions. Turkey's EU membership process has been the single most important trigger of the democratisation reform which reshaped Turkey between 1999 and 2004. The continuation of this process which slowed down from 2005 onwards is still to a large extent linked to EU-Turkey accession negotiations. To the extent that Turkey's EU accession process is crucial for the resolution of Turkey's two

By distancing itself from the West on the question of Iran's nuclear ambitions, Turkey undertakes a considerable risk

lagging domestic conflicts, its strategic relationship with the European Union is of much higher significance than any other alternative. As the difficulties in the implementation of the Kurdish opening as well as the absence of a major overhaul of state-religion relations in

By relegating Turkey's EU membership to one of Turkey's strategic options, Davutoğlu's vision underestimates the importance of Turkey's EU membership for the resolution of Turkey's domestic disputes

Turkey manifest, the resolution of these disputes will be extremely difficult without pressure emanating from Turkey's EU accession process. Hence Turkey's EU membership becomes indispensable for the realisation of Turkey's strategic potential. Turkey's advanced regional ambitions do not necessarily pose an obstacle to Turkey's European integration. One could even argue that a regionally stronger Turkey can be considered a more appealing

candidate for EU membership and a more valuable EU member state. The clarification of this point would also help soothe European concerns that Davutoğlu's doctrine is really about shifting Turkey's strategic priorities from Europe to the Middle East.

Finally, there is a serious threat of overextending Turkish diplomatic efforts in claiming the global strategic role of a "central power." What Davutoğlu assumes is a Turkey with a fast growing economy, democratising regime and willingness to spearhead globalisation on a regional and global basis. While all these are all possible outcomes, it might be too optimistic to consider Turkey's best case scenario as basis for the planning of its regional and global strategic role.

Conclusions - Policy Recommendations

Turkish foreign policy needs to give a new impetus to Turkey's EU accession, which has abated since 2005. This can help resolve Turkey's crucial domestic conflicts, namely the Kurdish question and the confrontation between Islamists and secularists. As the European Union is uniquely poised to facilitate this process, Turkey's EU membership becomes crucial and cannot be treated as only one of Turkey's strategic options.

European authorities should make it clear that Turkish aspirations to a leading regional and a global strategic role are not incompatible with EU membership under the condition that Turkey fully complies with the membership criteria. In fact, a Turkey which enjoys an upgraded strategic position and cordial relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours will be a more appealing EU member state and an asset in European strategic planning.

Further Readings:

Abdullah Bozkurt, "Davutođlu Sees Turkey among Top 10 World Players by 2023", Today's Zaman, 5/1/2010

Ahmet Davutođlu, "The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (Dis)Order", Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 2, no. 4 (1998)

—, Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu (İstanbul: Küre, 2005)

—, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", Insight Turkey, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2008), pp. 77-96

—, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010", Turkish Policy Quarterly, Vol. 8, no. 3 (2009), pp. 11-17

Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 42, no. 6 (2006), pp. 945-64

H. Tarık Ođuzlu, "Türk Dış Politikasında Davudođlu Dönemi", Ortadođu Analiz, Vol. 1, no. 9 (2009), pp. 43-50

Emrullah Uslu, "Ahmet Davutođlu: The Man Behind Turkey's Assertive Foreign Policy", Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 6, no. 57 (2009)

The Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) was founded in 1988 and operates as an independent, non-profit, policy-oriented research and training institute. It functions as a forum of debate on international issues, as an information centre, as well as a point of contact for experts and policymakers. Over the years, ELIAMEP has developed into an influential think-tank on foreign policy and international relations issues. ELIAMEP neither expresses, nor represents, any specific political party view. It is only devoted to the right of free and well-documented discourse.