



# Policy Brief

***Turkey's Geopolitical Assertiveness: Re-evaluating the balance of power in terms of political and economic leverage in Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Caspian Region***

*Dimitris Rapidis*

*11 May 2010*

**Abstract:**

*After 9/11 and the War on Terror, Turkey has progressively and substantially started to re-evaluate its geopolitical assets through a series of active and multi-faceted regional diplomacy and mobilization initiatives. The widening of its sphere of influence and issue-entanglement has taken serious proportions, which can be explained in the eyes of an external observer from the acknowledgement of the country's vital geopolitical position, political influence and efficiency, and economic potential and dynamics. As a matter of fact, this shift has been materialized through a series of events that started from the non-compliance of the Turkish government to provide its facility services (i.e. military airports) for the needs of the NATO aircraft troops' expedition in Iraq in 2003, stepping to the advancement of the country's mediating role in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, passing from the enhancement of bilateral relations with Russia, and ending up with the wide and extrovert skepticism over the acquisition of the EU full membership status. Given these facts, Turkey seems to behave more confidently in the regional chessboard by balancing different interests while solidifying its voice and role as a pivotal power. This Policy Brief examines the way Turkey has achieved to re-assert its geopolitical role and aims to put a light on eventual steps that can set the country as an equal interlocutor along with the US, Russia, and the EU, addressing the current global economic crisis and giving possible solutions to the major issues involved in its backyard.*

After the end of World War Two and the establishment of the spheres of influence between the United States (US) and the USSR, Turkey has chosen to enforce its ties with the West and set itself as vital part of the military strategic doctrine of NATO, while nourishing the pro-European Community (EC) foreign-policy orientation through the Association Agreement of 1963. Serving as a fundamental ally of the US, Turkey was considered as a critical bulwark against the expansion of the Soviet military power into the Mediterranean and the Middle East axis, and a major co-operator in the framework of the EC's Neighboring Policy strategy. These conditions remained intact throughout the Cold War era, but also during the first decade after the fall of communism and the re-setting of the geopolitical order led and sustained by the hegemonic power of the US.

It is not but during this last decade that Turkey has undergone a major transformation, which is mainly signaled by the launching of a number of new foreign-policy initiatives that have increased the country's regional influence and stature. Amongst the most striking ones we include the mediating role assumed in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, the enhancement of bilateral relations with Russia, and the first, strong signs of explicit skepticism upon the acquisition of the European Union (EU) full membership status.

The departing point of this shift can be initially observed in a tough period of crisis inside the NATO Alliance, with reference to the US accusations against Iraq's possession of nuclear weapons, when Turkey decided to deny the provision of its military airports for the needs of the NATO aircraft expedition in March 2003. This decision by the Parliament had shocked the Western community and had been invested with unexpected support by the Arab states. It is believed that since then, Turkey's position in the Muslim world has been altered substantially and that its geopolitical role has been advanced, with major consequences in the regional balance of power.

#### *The "Strategic Depth" Doctrine*

The constructor and inventor of Turkey's new geopolitical doctrine is the well-respected academic, former chief foreign-policy advisor of Erdoğan and current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Indeed, he stressed out the importance of encompassing different political elements in designing a new foreign-policy agenda, such as the inclusion of soft power, conflict resolution and the abandoning of zero-sum solutions in bilateral relations. His strategic vision saw Turkey as a pivotal player in the international chessboard, with specific emphasis on the promotion of a multi-dimensional image in adjacent regions that are considered to be of paramount importance for the country's strategic role. From that perspective, Turkey can no longer be identified as a one-region country, but as a multi-regional one, should it exercise influence in the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia, the Caspian Region, and the Mediterranean Basin.

The concept of strategic depth has been part of a large debate in Turkey about the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Ever since the establishment of the modern Turkish state by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, Kemalists saw the Ottoman legacy as a fundamental impediment for modernization, as well as a basic destructive factor that could disorientate the country's quest for unity away from any multi-cultural approach towards Turkey's wider identity. Nonetheless, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) policy has achieved to progressively turn the Turkish society towards a more nuanced and positive approach regarding its Ottoman past, especially by putting weight on the Ottoman feature of building blocks for a more assertive role in regional politics that could be in the benefit of the Turkey overall. In other words, the re-ignition of the Ottoman legacy can be equally seen as the re-integration of the country into a region that it has always been -geographically- part of.

Accordingly digested and accepted by a large part of the society and the new political elite. The Republicans, who traditionally remain a considerable political force in Turkey, are The broadening and widening of Turkish foreign-policy doctrine has also been less able to control public opinion, as they used to be in the previous decades. Therefore, the influence media play has been diversified along different spheres of interests and elements of deep democratization have been surfaced into the public debate. In addition to that, the economic dimension of foreign-policy expressed through the liberalization of the economy, and the

strengthening and increase of quality and quantity of trade transactions between Turkey, the Middle Eastern states and Russia, have also had a major impact in the shift of Turkish public opinion towards a more pro-active and open-minded approach towards foreign affairs issues.

By the same token, a number of important legislative reforms centered on the strengthening of civilian control over the military have diminished the influence it has traditionally exerted in Turkish political life. Furthermore, the unveiling and arrest of high-ranking officials allegedly involved in paramilitary scandals (e.g. Susurluk) and plots (e.g. Ergenekon), that were aiming at destabilizing AKP and reverting political normality, have additionally engendered an unprecedented degree of public criticism. All things considered, along with enacting a new geostrategic dogma, AKP has accomplished an immense transformation of the Turkish society by modernizing fundamental aspects of democratic public governance scarcely seen during the previous decades.

### *The "Influence Race" with Israel*

Turkey's strategic and geopolitical doctrine reflects the effort to overcome phobic syndromes of the Cold War and establish cordial relations with all its neighbors. The locus of threats and challenges that were entrenching USSR as primary source of danger were substituted by a much more diverse set of security dilemmas that have to be addressed, such as the Kurdish separatist movement, the sectarian violence in Iraq, and the nuclear-armed Iran. Although Turkey has been entangled with serious initiatives in the previous cases, its mediating role in the Arab-Israeli conflict inevitably strikes the attention.

While Turkey is steadily maintaining and nourishing strong ties with the Arab world, the bilateral relations with Israel have recently become strained. Despite being the first Muslim state to recognize Israel in 1949 and develop strategic-priority co-operation, and high-paced trade proceedings and pacts, diplomatic dialogue has suffered a sharp deterioration due to Turkey's outspoken condemnation of Israel during the winter 2008-09 offensive in Gaza. As a matter of fact, in the course of the World Economic Forum in January 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan and the Israeli President Peres entered a verbal confrontation when the former was not allowed to finish his criticisms of the Israeli actions and stalked off the stage angrily. Recently, another diplomatic episode came into surface when the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon summoned the Turkish Ambassador to Israel Ahmet Oğuz Celikkol to a meeting in order to protest a Turkish soap opera

that depicted Israeli agents kidnapping Palestinian children, but the final purpose of the meeting was for Ayalon to insult Celikkol by seating him on an inferior chair and avoiding shaking hands with him. These incidents, explicitly exposed in the media, outline the degree of the current status of the Turkish-Israeli relationship.

Given the fact that the two countries were mutually considered as partners and regional allies, freezing relationships can be translated in line with Turkey's growing regional ambitions and aspiration to become the key mediator and regional power in the region. On the other hand, the deep differences of the two governments over a number of important issues, but especially over the nuclear program of Iran, also play a role in the current diplomatic deadlock. In any case, Turkey's stature and credibility in the Arab world has increased; the final key assumption dropped from the analysis of the Turkish approach of the issue in a period Israel is gathering worldwide criticism about its politics in the Middle East.

### *Vital Partnership with Russia and the Energy Corridors*

Both in political and economic terms, the relationship between Turkey and Russia has been significantly ameliorated in the last decade. From a political perspective, during Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia and Turkey officially abandoned the residues of the Cold War era through a series of joint declarations towards the deepening of their partnership in the fields of energy, trade and security. The understanding of common interests underlying this relationship is evident in reference with the increase in high-level political contacts, the wide-reaching trade partnership, and the perception of mutual trust in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Caspian Sea regions.

As a matter of fact, Russia is Turkey's largest trade partner, supplier of natural gas, and major investor in the construction industry. In addition to that, Russian investments in Turkey in the fields of tourism and communication have also grown considerably in recent years, giving Turkey a comparative asset due to its large internal market and natural beauty. Similarly, Turkey is expanding its ties with Russia via the support of Russia's interest in the conflict zones of Caucasus and the mutual acceptance of a more elastic and wise rapprochement with regards to Iran's nuclear program. Contrary to the US approach to Iran, Turkey has decided to develop a non-myopic and less phobic approach to the eventual threats that Iran can possess that can alter regional stability by denying to accept sanctions and marginalizing policies that could put further stakes in the regional balance of

power. Moreover, the US effort to be involved in the electoral processes in Central Asia, as part of the Washington strategic dogma aiming at augmenting its military and political leverage in the region, has been accepted with skepticism by both Turkey and Russia. In short, we can further point out that one of the most important factors that keep Turkey and Russia in the same set of interests can also be found in the endeavor to keep US outside the geographical axis that connects Middle East, Central Asia, and the resourceful Caspian Sea region. The sayings of Brzezinski after the end of the Cold War, that the power which would achieve to control the wider Eurasia could play a dominant role in regional and global politics, seems to find its modern version with the vigorous strategic involvement of Turkey and Russia in an area where the US is struggling to retain a dominant role.

In equal terms, Turkey is delicately building its geopolitical leverage unilaterally by constructing and designing pipelines that could create energy sufficiency and security of supply. Already, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (TBC) pipeline has been one of the largest-scale and hefty economic achievements of the country, as it additionally decreases the oil tanker traffic in the Bosphorus, thus contributing to greater stability and security in the Istanbul area. What is more, the projected Nabucco gas pipeline linking Erzurum with Europe is considered as a bottom-line and crucial strategic initiative with the intention to diversify the current energy supply game, led mainly by Russia, and crown Turkey as a forcefully vibrant actor in energy security of supply and efficiency in the wider Mediterranean Basin.

All things considered, the East-West energy corridor is expected to encourage market economy, increase the business opportunities for Turkish companies, and strengthen the South European gas ring.

Notwithstanding, Turkey is wisely keeping the door open for cooperation with Russia. The visit of Putin in Ankara in August 2009 gave a boost to the South Stream pipeline project, which Russia has promoted as an alternative to Nabucco. In that sense, Turkey is developing a multi-dimensional energy strategy, aspiring to seal either of its projects and feel secure and independent from any further misbalance of power. Meanwhile, Ankara is fostering its relationship with Turkmenistan, a strong ally of Turkey in Central Asia essentially in the basis of the common ethnic and religious ties, as a counter-balance to China's grind for the Caspian Sea energy resources. Therefore, soft politics coordinately play a role in the enhancement of Turkey's active role, and contribute to the making of a wider sphere of geopolitical prominence.

### *Re-addressing Full Membership in the EU*

Since 2005, popular opposition to Turkey's membership has increased across Europe, particularly due to the size, the level of democratization and macroeconomic deficiencies, and the sense that the country does not really belong to the European culture. Increasing popular opposition in Europe has also coincided with the growing of Turkey's ties with the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia, and accordingly with skeptical approach of the Turkish public opinion to membership. Under that prism, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel are questioning Turkey's credentials for membership while proposing a privileged partnership that could be of equal benefit for both EU and Turkey.

Despite the hindrances and the stalemate, EU membership is still considered as a strategically essential target for Turkey. Membership should not impede Turkey's geostrategic position but instead it could work as a parallel asset for voicing out the country's role and positions. Furthermore, bridging the East and West flanks of the Mediterranean should be of mutual interest for both parts with reference to the creation of a common area of action and the procrastination of US influence in Eastern Europe. Likewise, the defense and security doctrine established in the framework of NATO could take different dimensions and unleash a new strategic coordination between EU and Turkey.

As a matter of fact, given that both parts tend to decline towards a more deliberate action in terms of self-determination within the Alliance, a potential initiative aiming at creating a shield that would safeguard and address the new challenges for regional stability (e.g. illegal immigration; trafficking) could set aside the current deadlock and thaw the negotiation process.

In addition to that, the promotion of the idea of a privileged partnership in the place of full membership should not be abandoned as an alternative, given that both parts seem to be reluctant of proceeding as vigorously and determinedly as in the period of 2002-05 where Turkey was obsessed with the accession process and evaluation, and the EU was pushing Turkey to amend its legislative framework and reform its sclerotic military establishment.

Finally, privileged partnership may offer a bilateral independence, and especially in a period when the EU is faced with crucial socio-economic concerns, Turkey can benefit from and re-assert its pivotal role while participating in the stimulation of the European economic landscape.

### *Turkey's prerogative in addressing the economic crisis with reference to the European Union*

In a regional level, Turkey is considered as an important stakeholder with a great potential in capital. Turkish economy has registered superb improvement in competitiveness in recent years and proven its potential as a magnet for international investors, while having ostentatiously preserved sustainable levels of growth and production. Being a member of the G-20, Turkey has increased its exports, modernized its tourism infrastructures, expanded the potential of its automobile industry, and advanced the quality and quantity of its commercial shipping industry.

To achieve this, Ankara answered the crisis that hit the country in 1999 with a quite unprecedented manner for an indebted economy: despite having found resort at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to liquid its economy, the strong and inspiring political leadership of Erdoğan has brought about a tremendous shift of growth rates by denying the measures the IMF delegate body proposed for exiting Turkey from the crisis. The result is what we experience nowadays; a country with political, social, and economic confidence which has a direct impact in its geopolitical assertiveness.

The member-states of the EU that are currently encountering a huge debt crisis (e.g. Greece) or those that can potentially be found in similar position (e.g. Portugal, Spain, Ireland) in the near future should turn their attention to the economic miracle of Turkey and learn from it. At the same time, Turkey needs to deepen and strengthen its commercial ties and investments in the Mediterranean axis of the EU as an act that could unveil its geopolitical leverage and secure regional economic and political stability.

***Dimitris Rapidis** is a Junior Policy Development Analyst and Graduate Student of the MSc. in Political Science at the University of Geneva. He is member of the GPS Group in London, UK, and has been working for three years in the private-public sector, mainly in research analysis and issue-development positions. His specialization area is Public Policy Governance, with a special focus on developing countries.*

#### **About GPoT**

Global Political Trends Center (GPoT) was established as a research unit under the auspices of Istanbul Kultur University in 2008.

GPoT Center aims to produce innovative and distinctive policy recommendations by analyzing the contemporary trends in regional and international politics.

*\*The opinions and conclusion expressed herein are those of the individual author and does not necessarily reflect the views of GPoT or Istanbul Kultur University.*