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Deciphering Erdoğan's Regional Paradigm Shifts

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Turkey has undergone three paradigm shifts in its domestic and foreign policy in the twenty years that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power. This essay will focus on the shifts in the Middle East region and will link them to internal factors, as well. Before we delve into these shifts some general observations which are relevant to all three stages are in place. First, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in his capacities as head of the AKP, Prime Minister until 2014, and President since then, was the dominant figure in shaping these policies. Certain figures in his inner circle and political mechanisms helped Erdoğan carry out these strategies, but he generally had the first and last word on matters.¹ When speaking about paradigmatic shifts we should bear in mind that these were not sudden events but rather gradual processes which evolved over time until their final crystallization. As we shall see, the shifts in domestic and foreign fields tended to complement each other. At the same time, the changes were the result of certain domestic constraints and also a reaction to windows of opportunities in the foreign arena and the need to utilize them for shaping new policies. Lastly, the roots of each phase are to be found in an earlier one.

In terms of periodization, the following are the major stages: The first stage took place in the first decade of the AKP's reign which started in 2002, the second lasted from 2011 until 2020, and the third one is still in the making. The first stage symbolizes the shift from ideas and doctrines which were prevalent in Atatürk era, and which lasted until the end of the Cold War. These were: 'peace at home, peace abroad', secularism, Western orientation, and a certain aloofness from the Muslim/Arab world. It should be mentioned that some of the changes started in the aftermath of the Cold War and only came to full fruition under the AKP.²

The First Stage

The first stage resulted in the neutralization of the military in politics, rapprochement with the Kurds, creeping Islamization, and building a robust economy. These changes complemented the new foreign policy doctrine of "zero problems with the neighbors" which was based on Ahmet Davutoğlu's famous book *Stratejik Derinlik*, (*Strategic Depth*).³

Davutoğlu, who was a close advisor of Erdoğan and then Turkey's Foreign Minister and Prime Minister until his dismissal in 2016, based his doctrine around the following principles:⁴

-A proactive foreign policy anchored in Turkey's "geographical depth" and its unique location as a bridge between Asia and Europe as well as its "historical depth" rooted in the Ottoman Empire.

-Initiating multilateral foreign policy relations with a wide range of countries including in the Arab, Muslim and Turkic world as well as in the Balkan, the Middle East and Europe including with Russia, Greece, and Cyprus.⁵

-Employing soft power for strengthening relations with neighboring countries. The most dramatic of all was the "honeymoon" with Bashar al-Asad's regime in Syria after decades of rivalry. The relations became so intimate that the parties exchanged high ranking official visits and signed 50 cooperation agreements. Davutoğlu enthusiastically described these relations as being modelled on the European Union (EU).⁶

-Another principle was mediating conflicts between various states and organizations. Davutoğlu either ignored Israel or presented it as a stumbling block for rapprochement with the Arab countries in his early writings. However, Erdoğan centered his policies around mediation between Israel and Syria, and Israel and the Palestinians.⁷

Initially, Erdoğan's relations with Israel flourished, as evidenced by his visit to Jerusalem in 2005, and President Shimon Peres' address to the Turkish Parliament in 2007, for the first time in the history of Turkish-Israeli relations. Concurrently, Erdoğan welcomed Hamas leader Khaled Mash'al in 2006, and later became a strong supporter of this organization. Erdoğan's strong ideological support of the Muslim Brothers in general, and that of Hamas in particular, was the main cause for the deterioration of relations with Israel in 2010.

Regarding Western orientation, Turkey sought to become a member of the European Union (EU) for which it initiated various liberalization and democratization moves. At the same time, it wished to lower its dependence on the United States. The new strategy sought to strike a fine balance between ideology and realpolitik, between activism and soft power policies, and between Western and Eastern orientation.

Gencer Özcan opines that the success of the strategy in the first decade was due to domestic de-securitization policies and the rise of Turkey's importance in the region as a result of the occupation of Iraq in 2003.⁸ Whatever the case, by the end of the decade, this doctrine failed, and "strategic autonomy" emerged as the new paradigm.

The second stage

The domestic causes for the shift to the second paradigm include Erdoğan's creeping authoritarian tendencies and the government's responses to the Gezi Park upheavals of 2013, as well as the failed coup attempt of 2016, and the AKP's failure to win local elections in 2019 in such crucial places like Istanbul and Ankara. The regional causes that contributed were related to the "Arab Spring" of 2011, which Erdoğan perceived as a window of opportunity for spreading his Islamist influence in Arab countries. The global causes included Turkey's disillusionment with the possibility of being accepted to the EU; the need to close ranks with Russia due to the civil war in Syria; and the lowering of the US profile in the region.

Turkish scholars have noted five principles of Erdoğan's new strategy:

1. Turkey is a global leader, but there is a gap between Erdoğan's perception of Turkey as such and the fact that it is merely a middle power.
2. Security is an important component of Turkey's foreign policy. It includes the development of independent military industries; establishing military bases in different countries such as Qatar and Somalia; initiating military offensives in Syria (2016, 2018, 2019) and Libya (2020); and selling various military weapons including Turkish-made drones to Azerbaijan and Ukraine.
3. Identity is another driver in Erdoğan's world view: he regards Turkey as a leading country in the Muslim world whose task is to defend and promote its interests.
4. Reinforcing relations with Russia and China to counterbalance relations with the West. Turkey would strengthen economic and military relations with them and imitate their authoritarian policies.
5. Maintaining contradictory relations with the West. On the one hand, the EU has remained the main Turkey's trade partner but, on the other hand, its demonization went on unabated. The West and especially the US is described as undermining Turkey's national interests.⁹

Erdoğan used the "strategic autonomy" doctrine as a card in domestic politics for mobilizing support at home, diverting attention from internal problems such as the coup attempt, and sowing discord among the opposition parties. However, the main question is what were the results of this ambitious strategy?

Looking back at the second decade it is possible to say that it ended with one failure after another. Thus, the hope to lead the Muslim and Arab world resulted in estrangement with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The strategic relations with Syria turned into deep enmity. In fact, Turkey retained strong relations with only one Arab Muslim country – Qatar. Turkey's support for Hamas and Erdoğan's attacks against Israel triggered severe conflict between the two countries reaching climax in the mutual expulsion of ambassadors in 2018. This "precious loneliness"¹⁰ was at the root of the new paradigmatic shift.

The Third stage

The third shift began taking shape at the turn of the third decade of the twenty first century and can be termed as a "double wedding": Turkey began reconciling with as many countries in the region as possible and simultaneously pursuing a more aggressive policy in the Mediterranean, in line with the "*Mavi Vatan*" (Blue Homeland) doctrine. In this case, too, there was a complex intersection of domestic, regional and international factors behind the shift. Erdoğan was pragmatic and flexible enough to harness these factors for promoting his various agendas.

The domestic factors included the severe and ongoing economic crisis. For example, inflation reached 85.5 percent by November 2022.¹¹ Another serious problem was the free fall of popularity of both Erdoğan and the AKP. A poll carried out at the end of 2022 showed that the AKP would gain only 28 percent of the votes, while the CHP would get 24 percent. The opposition alliance garnered 36 percent of votes, while support for the ruling alliance stood at only 32 percent.¹² Such a negative turn began a few years earlier and cast doubt on winning the upcoming June elections on which Erdoğan has pinned so much hope. This was the main catalyst for a dramatic shift in the foreign arena.¹³

The opportunity which presented itself was the "Abraham Accords" of September 2020 between Israel and three Arabic-speaking countries: The UAE, Bahrain and Morocco. Ironically enough, poor relations between Israel and Arab countries in the past were the cause for Turkey's alienation from Israel, yet now positive relations were a cause for rapprochement. On the global level, another important window of opportunity was the Russian-Ukraine war which started on 24 February 2022. Erdoğan sought to use this conflict to realize his vision of turning Turkey into a global leader.

In his attempts to reconcile with his erstwhile adversaries, Erdoğan has been following the adage: "if you cannot beat your enemy join him." To convince his counterparts that the 180 degrees' shift was indeed serious Erdoğan made a point of addressing in person the leadership of these states. While the immediate motive was economic, the move came to include in time other political, diplomatic, and security motives and considerations.

The first country with which Turkey initiated reconciliation process was the UAE. It paid quick "dividends". In November 2021, the UAE decided to grant Turkey \$10 billion to help alleviate Turkey's economic crisis.¹⁴ Erdoğan reciprocated by a visit to that country in February 2022. Concurrently, Erdoğan began courting Saudi Arabia by paying an official visit in the same month, but not before going to Canossa and burying the Jamal Khashoggi affair.¹⁵

The next in turn was Israel, the courting of which took time to bear fruits, as only in December 2022 the two countries exchanged ambassadors after four years of vacancy.¹⁶ Erdoğan's motives for this rapprochement were manifold. Benefits included tapping into the gas project in the Mediterranean, driving a wedge between Israel and its newfound allies Greece and Cyprus, reinforcing economic, military and intelligence relations, and using Israel for promoting relations with the US, which had soured with the election of Joe Biden.

By early 2023, Turkey began to send feelers to Bashar al-Asad for possible reconciliation with Syria, as well. A critical motive is the hope of repatriating some 3.6 million Syrian refugees who had fled to Turkey because of the civil war in Syria and are seen as a socioeconomic burden to the country.¹⁷ Other important motives were the elimination of the Kurdish autonomous region in northeast Syria and containing Iran's ambitious projects in that country. If reconciliation were to achieve these tall goals, it would enhance significantly Erdoğan's prospects for winning the June 2023 elections. However, at the time of writing no serious progress has been achieved.

Another country which is still sitting on the fence is Egypt. Turkey's reconciliation efforts have not born fruit thus far. One reason is President Sisi's deep grudges against Erdoğan's due to his erstwhile support for his rivals, the Muslim Brotherhood. Another issue resulting from the new Mavi Vatan doctrine is a strategic disagreement between the two countries in the Mediterranean.

The Mavi Vatan doctrine was developed by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in 2006,¹⁸ but Erdoğan publicized it in a speech he delivered in April 2022.¹⁹ The gist of this doctrine is Turkey's demands on maritime areas in the East Mediterranean which would enable it to search for gas there.²⁰ (By the way, Turkey has begun developing such fields in earnest in the Black Sea). To realize this doctrine Erdoğan initiated various bold moves vis-à-vis the Tripoli government in Libya. These included the agreement on maritime borders signed between them in November 2019. Turkey granted military support to that government in January 2020 against its rival in the Tobrouk-led government headed by Khalifa Haftar; and they signed an agreement in October 2022 allowing gas exploration in the East Mediterranean. These moves put Turkey at loggerheads with Egypt which supported the rival government in Libya and feared Turkey's infringement on its maritime areas. This fear brought Egypt closer to Turkey's rivals, Cyprus and Greece.²¹ With the latter Egypt signed deals at the end of 2022, right in the middle of rapprochement talks with Ankara.²²

Conclusion

By assessing Turkey's policy shifts in the foreign arena it is possible to say that each phase introduced a new vision regarding Ankara's stance on the region. The first one symbolized Turkey's engagement with the region, employing soft power; the second the use of force for leading the region; and the third a combination of the two. The first two phases had relatively poor results. The strategy of "zero problems with neighbors" ended up alienating many neighbors. The doctrine of "strategic autonomy" resulted in "precious loneliness".

Regarding the third phase, which is still in the making, Turkey has managed to mend fences with three countries in the region and continued in earnest courting another two, Egypt and Syria. Still, it is at loggerheads with Greece and Cyprus. On another level, Erdoğan did manage to increase Turkey's standing among the Turkic states and continues to hold important cards vis-à-vis the West and NATO due to the Russian-Ukraine war. Whether this last shift will salvage the upcoming elections and leave Erdoğan as the invincible ruler, remains to be seen.

IMPORTANT NOTE: As this article goes to publication a terrible earthquake has hit Southeast Turkey and neighboring Syria. It is too early to assess its total harm which has cost already more than 35,000 lives and caused unbelievable amount of destruction in buildings and infrastructure. Nor is it possible to assess at this point in time the long term political and socioeconomic impact of this event. However if the earlier 1999 earthquake can be taken as an indication then it might lead to what was termed "earthquake diplomacy", namely improving the sore relations between Turkey and Greece and may be other neighbors as well. On the home front the earthquake might be fatal for the upcoming elections in May if Erdoğan insist on holding them on that time. In a talk with Gencer Özcan he suggested that the 1999 earthquake was a main cause for the AKP rise to power three years later.

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Notes

¹ Aylin Ş. Görener & Meltem Ş. Ucal, "The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy," *Turkish Studies*, November 25, 2011.

² For example, Neo-Ottoman ideas began to flourish in the aftermath of the cold war. Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, November 2006.

³ Gencer Özcan, "Policy of zero problems with neighbors", *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* 2012.

⁴ For a summary of this theory see, Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's foreign policy vision: An assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*, X:1 (2008), 77-96.

⁵ Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.42, No.6, November 2006, p. 952.

⁶ Gencer Özcan, "Policy of zero problems with neighbors," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* 2012.

⁷ For Davutoğlu views on Israel, see, Ofra Bengio, "Turkey's quiet revolution and its impact on Israel", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2010.

⁸ Gencer Özcan, "Policy of zero problems with neighbors," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* 2012.

⁹ Mustafa Kutlay, Ziya Öniş, "Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: Strategic autonomy or new forms of independence?" *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, Issue 4, July 2021.

¹⁰ For an early display of this phenomenon see, Aaron Stein, "Precious loneliness" in his *Turkey's New Foreign policy*, vol. 83, 2014.

¹¹ Mustafa Sonmez, "Turkey's economic growth loses steam as elections near," *Al-Monitor*, December 16, 2022.

¹² Al-Monitor/Premise, Poll finds tight race for Erdoğan in Turkey's elections, December 7, 2022.

¹³ The elections were scheduled for June but for various reasons Erdoğan decided to move them up.

¹⁴ *Khaleej Times*, "UAE announces \$10 billion Turkey investment fund," November 24, 2021. The strategic investment fund was to focus on energy and health sectors.

¹⁵ Khashoggi was a Saudi journalist who was assassinated in the Saudi consulate in Turkey in 2018, and for which Ankara blame the Saudi authorities. This affair caused further deterioration of relations between the two.

¹⁶ For the slow process of rapprochement see, Ofra Bengio, "Turkey finds Israel useful again", *Tablet*, March 14, 2022.

¹⁷ *VoA*, "Facing Poverty and Hostility, Refugees in Turkey Mull Return to War-Torn Syria," December 9, 2022.

¹⁸ Aurélien DENIZEAU, "Mavi vatan, the "Blue homeland", the origins, influences and limits of an ambitious doctrine for Turkey," *Ifri*, 2021.

¹⁹ Gürdeniz was arrested together with 103 retired admirals for suspicion of plotting against the state but were quitted shortly after being found not guilty. "Why did Erdoğan arrest the "father" of the Blue Homeland?" *Greek News*, April 6, 2021.

²⁰ To fulfill this goal Turkey put great emphasis on developing its own naval industry. "The rise of Turkish naval industry," *Defense News*, September 21, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/native/turkish-defence-aerospace/2020/09/21/the-rise-of-turkish-naval-industry/>.

²¹ For the rivalry between Greece and Turkey see, Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "Turkey's 'Precious Loneliness' vs. Greece's Multilateralism", *TURKEYSCOPE*, June 15, 2022.

²² *The Arab Weekly*, "Egypt signs deals with Greece amid talk of rapprochement with Turkey," November 23, 2022.