

Turkey's Solo Flight: Myth or Reality?

“Shift of Axis” Debate and Turkish-EU Relations

by

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Abstract:

The debate on whether Turkey is changing the axis of its foreign policy is on the agenda since early 2009. This paper argues that in fact Turkish foreign policy was going through a period of gradual transformation since the end of the Cold War, and this change was fully in line with Turkey's pursuit of its main strategic foreign policy goal: the EU membership. The recent activism in Turkish foreign policy, however, is a reaction to a change in EU's attitude towards Turkey's membership, and represents an adjustment to the new situation. As a result, there is room for identifying elements both of myth and reality in Turkey's new image, as the change is real, but the attribution of this change to the political nature of the current government in Turkey is mythbuilding.

Since the “One minute!” incident on 29 January 2009 in Davos, where during a World Economic Forum meeting the Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdogan publicly humiliated the Israeli president of the republic Simon Peres for the recent Gaza operations, there is a debate on whether Turkey’s foreign policy changes direction. News articles carrying titles such as “Turkey's foreign policy - Is there a paradigm shift?”, “How the West Is Losing Turkey”, or “The possibility of Turkey shifting alliances” are more common, and more analysts come to the conclusion that we see an unmistakable shift in the orientation of Turkish foreign policy. Whether Turkey has in fact altered its foreign policy goals or not is the subject of discussion in this paper.

Turkish foreign policy has historically been branded as pragmatic. In the post - World War II period, this pragmatism remained less visible, as within the Cold War context more or less every foreign policy decision was justified in reference to the East - West divide. Nevertheless, Turkey had firmly entrenched itself in the Western Alliance and used this pragmatic approach to harmonize its foreign policy with its allies without too serious clashes of interest, although these occurred a number of times.

In this period, the strategic priorities of Turkey were defined as remaining a constituent part of the Western World, specifically, Western Europe, remaining aloof from regional issues so long as they do not constitute Cold War - level problems, and preserving its interests within its borders and in the immediate vicinity. Accordingly, Turkey has usually become either a founding or an early member of all Western European institutions and organizations starting with the Council of Europe in 1949, and contributed with all its resources to the policy of containing the Soviet communism, kept its distance from the Middle East by not being party to any problem in this region, and limited its “vital interest” reactions to bilateral issues with Greece, its NATO partner.

All this were to change with the end of the Cold War. The reality check came on two occasions. The first was Saddam Hussein's to use force to proclaim Iraq's supremacy in the region in an attempt to fill the vacuum created by the end of bipolarity; the second, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, followed by the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Both developments occurred in the bordering regions of Turkey, and hailed a new age in which not only instability in the Middle East was not anymore limited to Arab-Israeli dispute, but there were new disputes in the hitherto more or less stable regions of the Caucasus and the Balkans.

The foreign policy rhetoric in fashion in Turkey at the time referred to these developments as "new threats, yet new opportunities". Indeed, there was armed clashes / wars everywhere around Turkey, and Turkey was receiving its rather large share from these. But at the same time there were new realities in the shape of new neighbors in the Caucasus, in the Black Sea looking toward Turkey; new regions eager to deal with Turkey in Eastern Europe, Central Asia; and finally, without the manipulations of the Cold War politics, the road seemed open for an Israeli – Palestinian deal, removing the only barrier keeping Turkey from fully consuming its already good relations with Israel.

Turkey tried to manage these threats and opportunities as much as it can, and the result is in general positive. At least Turkey always tried to become part of the solution as far as the post-Cold War crises were concerned, although imposing a solution was far beyond Turkey's –and for that matter anyone else's- capacity; more importantly has not become part of the problem, in which case these crises would have gone totally out of control.

The strategic priority of becoming an EU member, in order not to be left out of the biggest Western European project, in the meantime, faced an unexpected hurdle. Turkey's involvement with the European integration project had started only two years after the Treaty of Rome, with the application for associate membership in 1959 together with Greece. With

the Ankara Agreement of 1963 and its additional protocols, Turkey had become an associate member to the EEC, and a calendar targeting a customs union – presumably the last stage for membership – by 1995. Sensing the time was coming, Turkey had made an application for full membership in 1987, following the third enlargement of the EU. The response to Turkey’s demand came at the end of 1989. Basically the EC was stating the difficulties the 12 members facing given the enormous task of “deepening” following the Single Act, and pointing at the political and economic situation in Turkey was postponing the opening of negotiations, “without casting doubt on its eligibility for membership to the Community”.

Turkey was not happy but also not really unhappy with this answer. The EC had given a list of tasks to be performed in Turkey’s own pace, until the Twelve would feel comfortable with the idea of a new enlargement. The document had also carefully underlined Turkey’s strategic value for the West.

It is at this juncture that the Cold War came to a rather unexpected end. While Turkey was trying to adjust to the situation in its new environment, NATO’s future became unclear, hence the argument on the “strategic importance of Turkey” weakened. Turkey set to itself a new course with a double goal: to open to its regions and turn this into a strategic asset for the EU. In the meantime the the Maastricht Treaty was signed, and the new EU had moved beyond the “deepening vs. widening” debate with the fourth enlargement.

The result was an emphatic effort by a series of rather short lived governments to go ahead with the EU reforms and at the same time to improve relations with the newly restructured and problematic regions at the junction of which Turkey was situated. In the Balkans, relations rapidly improved with Bulgaria, basically erasing the memory of the 1989 crisis. With Greece, relations which had further deteriorated during Papandreu years sunk deepest in 1995 with the Kardak/Imia crisis which brought the two NATO partners to the brink of war, followed by the Öcalan crisis of 1999, but then entered a period of sincere

dialogue facilitated by mutual humanitarian support after deadly earthquakes stroke the two countries within a short interval.

As far as the Balkans were concerned, the most difficult problem Turkey had to deal with was the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed. Having recognized all former Yugoslav republics around the same time, Turkey supported their independence, and had strained relations with what would eventually become Serbia. The most difficult issue for Turkey was Bosnia, as there were more Bosniaks in Turkey than Bosnia Herzegovina. Despite domestic calls for more vigorous involvement, Turkey's restrained approach with an active diplomacy was instrumental in forging the Bosniak – Croat federation, leading to the Dayton Agreement.

In the Caucasus, Turkey had faced a radically new reality. For the first time in centuries, Russia ceased to be neighbor with a land border. There new states, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were experiencing serious domestic instabilities, with the two latter being involved in a war situation over Karabagh autonomous region of Azerbaijan. Turkey tried to develop relations of interdependence with all three, and was successful in the case of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Especially the Georgian policy is worth underlining, since the Soviet Georgian demands of border change in 1945 were at the roots of Turkey's alignment with the Western alliance.

The stability in the Caucasus was also important for Turkey because that region represented the link between Turkey and Central Asia. Central Asia was a vast region which was opening to the world for the first time. Linguistic and historical ties provided the possibility to develop closer relations between Turkey and the Central Asian republics relatively easier than with other states. Turkey had three main foreign policy goals concerning the region: that they should remain independent, that their domestic stability is preserved, and

that they should not fight with one another. Underlining all three goals, was the policy of supporting their economic independence and interdependence; hence the various energy corridor projects.

Turkey's new foreign policies concerning the Caucasus and Central Asia were conducted with an eye on Russia, of course. Although with initial ups and downs, a *modus vivendi* has been reached, and Turkey and Russia developed their bilateral ties to unprecedented levels in every aspect. Trade, tourism, natural gas, investments on various sectors have been increasing every year since the breakup of the Soviet Union, once considered to be the ultimate threat to Turkey's security.

In the Middle East the new reality has shown itself in two ways: First, the vacuum created by the end of bipolarity and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to successive Gulf crises. As a result, Iraq and Syria became the top security preoccupations of Turkey, especially related to Turkey's weak spot, the Kurdish issue. Second, Israeli -Palestinian dispute entered into a new phase, where for the first time the prospect of peace was seen on the horizon. Turkey developed a two tier approach in its Middle Eastern policy. On the one hand, it took active parts in the international efforts led by its allies, on the other, it introduced its own bilateral and multilateral projects in the region, with the aim of creating a zone of interdependence and stability. In this early phase, only Israel, and to some extent Jordan responded positively to Turkey's overtures.

The common denominator of all these policies basically consisted of three characteristics: they were totally new for Turkey, hence represented a change in foreign policy; they were aiming to invest on interdependence and stability, from which Turkey expected to benefit itself; and they were expected to be instrumental in making Turkey indispensable for the EU.

There were of course some resistance points as far as the traditional trends of Turkish foreign policy were concerned. These crystallized mostly on Cyprus, Armenia and Northern Iraqi Kurdish issues. However new approaches in the form of “openings” were to be seen in the near future.

When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, it did not differ in its approach in foreign policy from its predecessors. The party election manifesto and the government program had the EU membership as the first priority. The traditional policies related to Turkey’s allies were not challenged. There was a strong commitment to the new directions Turkish foreign policy had taken vis a vis the regional issues.

The AKP government, on the other hand, had two supplementary advantages as far as the conduct of foreign policy was concerned when compared with the previous governments of the post Cold war era Turkey. First, the advantage of forming a single party government: it had become much easier to take decisions on issues such as Cyprus, Armenia, Northern Iraq, and Syria. These were areas in Turkish foreign policy where excessive securitization had led to General Staff being too influential in policy formulation, hence bureaucratization and rigidity in foreign policy. This was against the traditional pragmatic approach, but it proved difficult to challenge by weak three party coalition governments that preceded AKP in power.

The second advantage was the economic success of Turkey, which had compensated the devastating effects of the 1999 earthquake and 2001 financial crisis, and thrust Turkey ahead to be the 16th biggest economy of the world. Although it was the previous government which introduced the painful reforms – and paid a very heavy price in the elections for this – which paved way to this economic boom, the AKP government followed suit, and reaped the benefits. The implications for Turkish foreign policy was that Turkey had always planned and prepared policies. Now it started to have the means to implement them fully and credibly.

The EU, first apprehensive because of the religious conservative credentials and rhetoric of the AKP, soon became convinced of its strong EU vocation. The reforms, started long ago, went ahead at full speed, including major constitutional revisions. In fact, more harmonization with the EU was achieved in the first few years of AKP governments than all the previous ones, due to the advantage of single party government and the EU reciprocation to positive changes in Turkey. However, there were limits.

On the surface, the relationship was advancing on a slow, yet steady pace until 2005. The nature of Turkey –EU relationship had taken a recognizable form: Not being able to say neither a definitive yes, nor a definitive no, the EU had played for time. Turkey was too big, too poor, too independent to digest, yet too promising, too influential, and yet again, too independent to push it to the other side and to have it as an adversary. Turkey, in turn, unable and/or unwilling to put its house rapidly in order to fulfill the criteria for membership, did not mind the slow pace, as long as there was light at the end of the tunnel.

Turkey's shortcomings (democratic deficit and human rights issues) in fact provided legitimate ground for the EU to keep it out without saying no. Turkey, in turn used a sort of "salami tactic", being content with the slow but steady pace, advancing one step at a time, as long as the dialogue was kept alive. What mattered for Turkey most was not to be left out of the process of European integration, the EU being the only European institution Turkey was not fully part of. Although there were signs of troubles ahead (last 3 enlargements) the process continued, albeit the salami slices got thinner and costlier.

In December 2004, Turkey's supporters in the EU -- those who took EU's performance based criteria for membership such as the Copenhagen criteria seriously – the decision to start negotiations for membership is finally taken by the EU Council, and Turkey is formally declared to be a candidate country. Turkey's membership prospects became real, and for those

who could not prevent that, the only tool available was to alter the rules of the game. Soon afterwards, the performance criteria left their place to matters of principle. Prior to the French presidential elections, while paying lip service to Turkey's candidacy, Chirac took the initiative for a constitutional amendment, according to which any future enlargement of the EU would be subject to a referendum. However it was Sarkozy's election campaign which for the first time directly challenged Turkey's accession to the EU in principle. The argument used by Sarkozy was – and still is – that simply, Turkey was not in Europe.

In Germany Merkel has become the first head of government in office to promote the policy of offering Turkey a privileged partnership instead of membership. Privileged partnership being equivalent to rejection without saying no -- since Turkey's current status is already that of a privileged partner – Turkish reaction to it was extremely negative. It was an open secret that the real issues were the consequences of the full membership in terms of the free movement of labor, and the consequences of Turkey's size in terms of the EU decision making structure. Turkey was ready to make concession on these, but not forever.

The decision to offer Turkey the status of candidacy had coincided with the enlargement which made Cyprus a full member. At the same time, membership negotiations, which used to be a rather technical dialogue between the candidate state and the EU Commission for harmonizing domestic legislation with the EU acquis, at the successful end of which membership was automatic, were declared to be on a different basis now. The “chapters” – around 35 legislative or policy areas which needed to be harmonized – were to be opened and closed one by one, by the unanimous decision of all the member states, irrespective of the level of harmonization. This effectively turned the otherwise technical mechanism into a fully political one. Thus, now France and Cyprus having declared their opposition to the opening of a number of chapters, the process is moving toward a stalemate.

Totally disappointed at the political level, and the public support for the EU having dropped from 78% in 2005 to 37% five years later, Turkey started to think about the slight possibility of a future without membership. Obviously the foreign policy of a Turkey as a member of the EU could not be the same as of a Turkey which is still Western but alone in its regions. This prospect of solitude in the middle of several volatile regions, together with a number of other occasions such as the selection of a new Secretary General for NATO, Western response to Iran's nuclear ambitions, and Turkey's recent crisis with Israel, made Turkey feel snubbed and its interests ignored by its allies. Turkey was being ignored, perhaps for the first time, by partners who were too busy to address domestic concerns, when realist foreign policy making required close cooperation, let alone courtesy.

In the meantime, the perception of Turkey in its regions, and particularly in the Middle East started to change mostly in response to the mild islamic conservatism of the AKP which made it look like a model for possible democratic success in an otherwise radical and autocratic region. Given the traditionally cool relations between Turkey and its Arab neighbors, this change of perception is the only thing which can fully be attributable to the nature of the AKP government in Turkey.

This new conjuncture, together with solid economic performance, led to an unprecedented surge in self confidence: Turks felt that there was nothing to gain from the status quo, not much to lose by overlooking it. Turkey also felt that the creation of a secure and stable environment around itself, without the psychological and material support from EU membership, required a different strategy based on Turkey's own resources and capabilities. And once in application, they prove to bring results. Turkey involved itself in brokering peace in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and its intermediations worked to an extent.

Turkey has always been responsible in its foreign policy in the sense that it did not involve any adventurist, opportunistic, or aggressive behavior, but did not push its agenda

forcefully either. Now it is responsible and active at the same time. Experimenting with a non-EU Turkey on the margins of the EU came with an assertiveness and non-compliance that was not usually associated with Turkey in its dealings with its allies; hence the debate on whether Turkey was turning its back on the West.

Maybe it is time to turn the question around: is the West turning its back on Turkey? The mindset of the current Turkish policymakers, as well as the general public opinion is such that this possibility cannot be precluded. Accordingly, if Turkey will have to fly solo, it has to exercise. The portrayal of Turkish foreign policy changes as if Turkey is acting in a vacuum is extremely misleading. The reality is that the context within which Turkish foreign policy was made having changed, Turkish foreign policy makers had to adapt, irrespective of party line or ideology. Having no strong ideological commitments and identifying Turkey's interests firmly in regional stability, they tried to achieve exactly that. In foreign policy, Turkey had always been planning; now the plans are implemented.

Still, it would be premature to think that "the West has lost Turkey". Turkish policymakers consider the EU membership as the ultimate strategic goal, and not only Turkey but all its near and far neighbors express the sincere desire – and admit they have an interest -- to see Turkey in the EU. As far as foreign policy convergence and alignment with EU foreign policy statements are concerned, except for issues related to the immediate neighborhood of Turkey, Turkish performance is impressive. Turkey's relations with the US have seen much worse moments, mostly resulting from US. Compared with them, the current chill resulting from Turkey's adamant attitude on a peaceful solution to Iranian crisis should be seen as a divergence in means, not in ends. Turkey's "axis will not shift" as the literal translation of the popular term coined in Turkey suggests, unless the virtual shift in EU's policy will force Turkey to remain "Western despite the West" in its regions and do that using the means available to it locally.