



Round table

Turkey. Which foreign policy in a Middle East undergoing transformation
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Commentary by Valeria Giannotta

*Assistant Professor Türk Hava Kurumu Üniversitesi/ University of Turkish
Aeronautical Association, Ankara*

Nowadays Turkey plays a crucial regional role due to the political, economic and social changes ushered-in by the current conservative-democratic – *Adalet ve KalkınmaPartisi* (AKP) administration. Along this transformation process emerged a strategic action that puts particular emphasis on the concept of “geographical imagination” by laying the foundations for a new geopolitical culture. Indeed, since in the past Turkey’s geographical context has been perceived as chaotic and dangerous for the stability of the country, causing Ankara’s voluntary isolation in the region, lately this picture has been reversed thanks to the current policy- makers’ regional perception. More and more intensive contacts with the neighbors through several political and social mechanisms scratched some historical prejudices to the point that the regional stability was identified as a national security issue. It is thanks to the thrust of this pragmatic and business oriented approach that Turkey, now G-20 and OECD member, could boast a growth that is among the twenty most developed economies in the world. In Ankara’s approach the economic success and the political influence is a tool of soft power for establishing peaceful relations with the neighbors, without hiding the pride for both Turkish democratic consolidation and for its imperial tradition. "Zero problems with neighbors" is the motto inspiring Turkish diplomacy under Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu who aspires for Turkey to the status of a global player by leveraging its geopolitical location, culture and economy thanks to the special relations inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Thus, the Middle East has been one of the focal points of

Turkey's new foreign policy. However, the unexpected Arab awakening had important implications on the effectiveness of Ankara's leadership in the region.

Although in the case of Turkey with the AKP there was an encouraging start, the Arab awakening had the double effect to both raise Turkey as possible source of inspiration for the countries in the region and to highlight a number of contradictions in the AKP's international agenda, making clear the crucial hurdles of the "zero problems with neighbors" strategy. Indeed, Turkish effective regional leadership suffered serious setbacks. Since it came to power in 2002 AKP made a strategic choice to reintegrate Turkey into Middle Eastern system. The peculiarity of Davutoğlu's diplomacy laid on the new perception of Turkey as a pivotal country where Asia, Europe and the Middle East meet each other. However, after the Arab Spring the neighborhood was perceived as a highly unstable area and Turkey as a lonely actor. In this context of regional instability are to be counted even the critical relations with Iran, especially the divergent interests between the two countries in the conflict between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq -where Teheran supported the efforts of Prime Minister Al Maliki while Ankara the legitimacy of Vice President Al Hashemi- and in Syria, where the achievement of a compromise seemed very hard to reach. As a matter of fact, the tension in the bilateral relations increased dramatically after the approval of Ankara to install NATO missile defense radar system on its territory. However, as the same Davutoğlu said "The two countries share very deep historical ties that emphasize the importance of many areas for their bilateral relations, starting from economic cooperation to security. In reference to this partnership the Turkish-Iranian relations have to be defined "strategic"¹. Although growth in economic cooperation was the primary objective of the openings to Iran, on the Iranian tariff front and customs limitations preventing further growth of the bilateral trade were very significant. To this we must add that the agreement on trade preferences was still in dispute and no results were recorded in the revision of price and on the clause relating to Iranian gas supply. Furthermore, to strengthen economic cooperation in the Turkish eastern province of Van Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and his Iranian counterpart agreed to open a new passage and

¹ A. Davutoğlu, dichiarazione in "Davutoğlu's Recent Visit to Iran Highlights Ankara's Regional Diplomacy" in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, n. 167, 2009.

present the work as a symbol of peace, development and welfare for the region. The attempt of economic openness toward Iran had to be read also in reference to Ankara's mediation efforts with the Western Allies on the thorny nuclear issue. Indeed, the revival of talks between Iran and the world powers was a result of numerous attempts by Turkey to engage in a constructive dialogue with Teheran and the international community. Already in 2010 in the approach to the nuclear issue Ankara coordinated its stance with the so-called P5 +1 countries becoming a spokesman for a diplomatic line based on mediation not for supporting further sanctions. Although there was no strategic leap and the real problems between the two countries remain unresolved, the approach to the nuclear issue once again underlined the willingness of Turkey to establish itself as an independent actor on the international stage for its own economic interests. In other words, the AKP government aimed to gain full cooperation in order to avoid any possible conflict with Tehran and to not strengthen the Iranian regime hardline by avoiding further Iranian influence in the neighborhood. Since both countries share a historic border with high strategic relevance and they were keen to stand as a regional leader Teheran was an essential element for the stability of the Middle East where a worsening situation would have immediate effects on Turkey's security. Another crucial element of the good neighbor policy was embodied by the critical relations with Israel. Their problems were mainly related to the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla issue of May 2010 and it was preceded by some diplomatic tensions started in December 2008 along the Gaza war. Indeed, in the wake of the flotilla attack the limits of Turkish 'zero problems with neighbors' began to be visible. Historically Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations were dictated mainly by the security concern to contain both Syria and Iran in their efforts to support the PKK. The strategic partnership was furthermore sealed by a military coordination agreement in 1996. As it is described above, reflecting the desire to mediate in the conflict between Israel and Palestine since its first mandate the AKP laid the foundation to be a bridge between Europe, the Middle East and the Islamic world. However, this was the most controversial part of its foreign policy as it was greatly influenced by a polarized public opinion. In one hand, it was welcome the continuation of close relations based on military cooperation

agreements while on the other most of the Turkish people and the media openly sympathized for the Palestinian cause. Therefore, the AKP fierce criticism to Israel and the long standing diplomatic tensions were a real turning point both in the bilateral relations and in the collective regional perception. Indeed, the AKP rise to power and its attempt to transform an Islamic party in a democratic-conservative one initially raised the credibility of Turkey as a liberal reforming actor with a strong emotional feeling towards the surrounding populations. And exactly the growing tensions with Israel, the emotional support to the Palestinian cause, the expansion of diplomatic and economic ties with the Middle East combined with the ability to balance the institutional commitments to the West with a more independent foreign policy were the main pillar of Ankara's positive perception in the area. Over time, however, this image started to creak. Turkey's harsh condemnation of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi deposition in Egypt not only caused a deep rift between the two countries, but also contributed to Turkey's solitude in the regional chessboard, causing serious setbacks "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine. The stance against 3 July 2013 military coup put Turkey at odds not only with Egypt but also with other Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which welcomed the coup. In other words, who once was perceived as the biggest beneficiary of the Arab riots in terms of regional leadership, later on seemed to be a lonely actor whose soft power was clearly not up to its foreign policy ambitions. As a survey data showed if compared to the past years the perception of Turkey as a model for the region dropped dramatically down.

In front of many simultaneous challenges in a region with a high level of unpredictability the perception of Turkey as a regional power with an unclear agenda suggests the need to recalibrate its diplomatic action. Indeed, pragmatism and decision-making flexibility are not sufficient element to exert a constructive influence in the region when a wide gap between the aspirations and the capacity-building for effective action is open.