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- 24 TURKISH DISAPPOINTMENT: HOW THE EUROPEAN UNION
CONTRIBUTED TO ANKARA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY
Diogo Noivo



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Articles in journals: Paulo Gorjão, "Japan's Foreign Policy and East Timor, 1975-2002" (*Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 5, September/October 2002), pp. 754-771.

Articles in newspapers: Paulo Gorjão, "UN needs coherent strategy to exit from East Timor" (*Jakarta Post*, 19 May 2004), p. 25.

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Turkish disappointment: How the European Union contributed to Ankara's new foreign policy

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Modern Turkey has always been seen as the West's reliable and indefectible partner in a region marked by permanent convulsion. The strength of its transatlantic ties and the resilience of its European ambition brought some comfort to both European and North American internal and external policies. Particularly after 9/11, Turkey was often presented as the living example that a Muslim country and a successful democratization process were compatible – it was portrayed as an example of the positive effect of Western influence. However, Turkey's recent actions and statements have shaken the West's political chessboard.

Recent events – namely an episode with an aid flotilla headed to Gaza – and the overall relationship with Israel as well as Ankara's stance toward Iran portray a significant shift in Turkish foreign policy. This change stands for abandoning a foreign policy almost exclusively tailored to the West and its interests, and instead investing in the development of an Eastern axis. This clearly affects the advancement and outcome of a long-lasting enlargement process with the European Union – aside from disturbing Europe's external interests and even its security – and alters the strategic grounds of the United States' foreign policy in the Middle East.

More than an exhaustive account, this article intends to analyze the broad consequences of the EU-Turkey relationship and then argue that such outcomes have influenced Ankara's new international stance. Therefore, it is first necessary to do a brief overview of Turkey's EU accession process. Secondly, a general descriptive analysis of the country's current foreign policy is needed to set the basis of Turkey's new priorities. Lastly, this article will assess the practical changes and consequences that have occurred.

Europe and Turkey: A troublesome yet long relationship

One of the main arguments against Turkey's EU membership revolves around the idea of European identity, stating that Turkey is far from integrating such a concept. Actually,

the Ottoman Empire was an important part in the process of building a European sense of being. Part of Europe's common identity was built around the idea of "the other" represented by the Ottomans. In other words, by being "the other" the Ottoman Empire represented all that the Europeans were not supposed to be. However, and contrary to what some Europeans may (want to) believe, there was not an absolute cultural separation. Ottoman contribution to the European identity goes beyond a mere opposition; i.e., among other aspects in European culture and lifestyle, Ottoman sounds, instruments and musicians were exquisite and coveted assets in European orchestras – a fact which deeply influenced some of Europe's most important and emblematic composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven. In a political perspective, many of Europe's contemporary borders and societies were defined by contact with the Ottoman Empire. In a nutshell, despite differences and wars, Turkey was always part of European history and identity, and vice-versa. If we add this to the fact that the EU is, above all, a political project aiming for stability and the promotion of liberal democratic values, the identity argument tends to sound like an excuse. Furthermore, bearing in mind that this argument is partially grounded on European Christianity, it is counterproductive in terms of security, as it alienates a Muslim country which is a democratization success story. From a broader security perspective, it fuels the narrative professed by jihadist terrorists, according to which there is a Western/Christian repulsion towards Muslims and their lands.

Behind this and other discussions is a lengthy accession process which started with Turkey's application for associate membership to the European Economic Community (EEC) in September 1959. Then, in 1964, Turkey signed the Ankara Agreement with the EEC, which in its article 28 allowed for the possibility of a future Turkish membership. Despite this association agreement, Turkey was only granted candidate status in 1999, following the European Council in Helsinki. However, the beginning of accession negotiations had to wait until 2005. Interruptions within European processes are normal since EU bureaucracy and legalities resemble Istanbul's Grand Bazaar: an intricate labyrinth in which even locals get lost and where the most interesting aspects lay in hidden corners. Still, the reasons behind the unusual length of this process – no other country with prospects of accession had to wait this much – are eminently political.

In 1995, the EU established a Customs Union with Turkey. The Customs Union aimed at fostering trade in manufactured products between Turkey and the EU and strengthening Ankara's alignment with EU policies concerning the technical regulation of products, competition, and Intellectual Property Law. Despite being an important landmark, this Union generated some unbalance since Turkey's imports from Europe increased substantially while exports had little growth. Furthermore, due to preferential trade policies, the Customs Union also harmed Turkey's commercial relationship with non-European countries. Obviously, over time this generated the idea among Turks that they were supporting with economic losses the development of a political project where they were unwelcome.

In December 2004, the year before negotiations officially opened, the European Council acknowledged Turkey's decisive progress on its ambitious reform package, in reference to Copenhagen's political criteria – the general framework that any candidate has to fulfill in order to join the EU. Such recognition led to the decision, in October 2005, to open negotiations. These accession negotiations encompass 35 chapters which Turkey must adapt to. It has been a complex process due to resistance from Austria, Greece and Cyprus. To this date, only one chapter has been closed – science and research – and eleven more have been opened, while eight remain blocked. From Turkey's point of view, the math is different: three chapters are being blocked by Austria and Germany, five chapters by France and two by Cyprus. It is important to bear in mind that in order to open and close a chapter, unanimity in Council is required.

Despite the long road ahead, Turkey has indeed made progress, some of which in highly sensitive areas. As a consequence of its historical evolution, political power in Turkey results from a delicate balance between the government and the military, a fact which is overwhelmingly evident if we look into the several military *coups d'état* (both threatened and accomplished) and, most recently, the Ergenekon case in 2008.¹ Civil-military relations in Turkey are characterized by permanent tension and the solidity of the country largely depends on carefully managing this pressure. In order to match EU criteria, the Turkish government passed a law limiting the power of military courts in July 2009, a step that generated enormous internal tension and evidently jeopardized the country's stability. Moreover, the risk was even higher as this happened just a year after the ruling party, AKP (Justice and Development Party), was formally accused of Islamist deviationism – the argument that justified past *coups d'état* – and barely escaped a conviction by the Turkish Constitutional Court.

But these are far from being the first and only reforms. Among other changes, in 2001 Turkey emended its Constitution to meet the Copenhagen criteria. A year later, Parliament passed several laws in order to improve Turkey's human rights standards. In 2004, the country abolished the death penalty and revised its penal code.

Turkey is, of course, still far from meeting European standards, and therefore it is premature to envision immediate accession. However, there must be some equality in the criteria, which did not happen when Romania and Bulgaria were accepted: these two countries did not fulfill the established conditions. Furthermore, despite being insufficient, Turkey's reforms were matched by European manifestations of exclusion. For example, in 2002 French President Valérie Giscard d'Estaing stated that Turkey's accession would mean the end of the European project; more recently, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy built their electoral campaigns, as far as foreign policy issues were concerned, around the idea of blocking Turkey's EU membership. In fact, after being elected, President Sarkozy decided to block the opening of negotiation chapters in June 2007, in a flagrant violation of the EU common position regarding the accession. With regard to member-states, there are slightly more in favor than against

accession. However, while the member-states who are against have an almost militant attitude in pushing their agenda, those states that are in favor hardly voice their position. In Turkey, these reactions, positions and statements cause a sense of betrayal that reduces the number of citizens who support the accession, and consequently empower the ones who are against it. In fact, disappointment is so obvious that according to Omer Taspinar, if “you scratch the surface of what seems to be a secular versus Islamist divide in Turkish attitudes toward the West, you will quickly see that both the so-called Islamist and secular camps embrace the same narrative vis-à-vis Europe and America: nationalist frustration”.²

Turkey's EU admission does generate some legitimate concerns, often stated by member-states: among others, a shift in the Union's political balance of power due to demographic criteria; an economic burden; and possible migration flows. Nonetheless, the real reasons behind the difficulty of this process have more to do with the idea of Europe than with Turkey's adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. Regardless of whether Turkey is able to match the requirements of each one of the 35 chapters, its accession largely depends of the intra-European discussion around the meaning of the European Union: is it a political and economic project, or an identity of political construction? To put it simply, at the end of the day Turkey's accession is out of its own hands.

EU political mismanagement has made Turkey aware of this, and the country has naturally become disappointed, both at the social and political levels. Turkish support for the accession has significantly decreased,³ and the Turkish government has undertaken a number of policy changes to distance itself from its traditional European ambitions. Foreign policy wise, the change is now quite visible as recent events in Gaza have demonstrated. Although it is difficult to establish direct causality, the sequence of roadblocks in the EU accession process seems to be partially reflected in some of Turkey's recent foreign policy options.

Crafting a new foreign policy

Ankara's significant developments toward a better relationship with Armenia, its new approach to the Kurdish issue and even its stance on Cyprus (one of the main pebbles in the shoe of accession) do not reflect compliance with European objectives. In fact, they represent a drift away from its traditional Western axis.

In a May 2009 cabinet reshuffle, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan named Ahmed Davutoglu to be in charge of Foreign Affairs. A political science scholar and a longtime adviser of Erdogan's foreign policy, Davutoglu aimed for “higher standards” and wanted to give “strategic depth” to his country's external relations. With nothing good to show from its relationship with Europe foreign policy wise, and with a great amount of dependence on the US, Ahmed Davutoglu wanted to draw the path to

regional preponderance and global intervention capability – a plan that reflects Turkey’s renewed and most likely exaggerated confidence. Apart from deriving from the turbulent relationship with the EU, Turkey’s new foreign policy also takes advantage of the new balance of power emerging in world politics. Power is being redistributed in favor of rising countries – Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) – which sometimes can adopt a revisionist stance regarding specific issues concerning the international status quo.⁴ Turkey, a pivotal state and a regional power with a significant growth rate even during the latest financial crisis, certainly belongs to this wave of emergent states and wants to take advantage of its new place in the world.

This strategy lies partially in exploiting Turkey’s Ottoman heritage as a way of reaching into Middle Eastern circles, a fact that gave the new Foreign Minister a label of ‘neo-Ottomanist’. Actually, for some Turkish elites, the government’s Muslim political rhetoric from the last few years is explained by the AKP’s attempt to make the country more religious in order to reinforce ties with neighboring states. Amid the cultural dimension, Turkish foreign policy goes far beyond a mere historical evocation.

Turkey now pursues a “zero problems” policy with its neighbors. Because Turkey’s Western neighbors reside in Europe, this “zero problem” policy is mainly meant for the Eastern side. Apart from the obvious and legitimate interest of wanting a stable and conflict-free neighborhood, Ankara also considers enhancing its economic relations with potential trade partners to be a foreign policy priority, since economic interdependence can consolidate political ties. Furthermore, Ankara needs to secure nearby markets to ensure export growth and access energy sources, both fundamental for sustainable economic development.

The country sees itself as a major international player – a role that it wishes to deepen – and aims to become a true security provider in the region. With regard to Europe, Davutoglu’s plan officially maintains accession to the EU as a national and compatible goal, because his strategy is based on a “multidimensional agenda”. Ankara says it does not want to confine itself to a set of traditional ties and wishes to explore new ventures that can strengthen the country’s position without abandoning privileged diplomatic relations built over decades.

In fact, one could argue that Turkey has no serious alternative to the EU and the West.⁵ Nonetheless, more than a sign of continued commitment to the accession bid, this could be a cautious way of maintaining the European door open until the new approach starts to offer consolidated results that can work as a real alternative. For now, there is doubt about Turkey’s true intentions – apprehension that may also exist within the AKP government’s most inner circles. The future will most probably be defined by the outcome of Turkey’s diplomatic initiatives. However, it is safe to conclude that, as Ian Lesser has pointed out, the “new Turkish-Western relationship will be *a la carte*, and driven by convergent national interests rather than amorphous notions of geopolitics and identity”.⁶ In other words, the EU and

the US can no longer count on an indefectible partner whose policy guidelines are to stand by their side.

From theory to practice: Effects of Turkey's new stance in the world

The implementation of this strategy did cause significant changes and even appears to precede Davutoglu's appointment. This is not incoherent if we remember his role as main foreign policy adviser to the government, as well as the existent disappointment with Europe.

During the "Five Day War" in August 2008, Ankara showed an indifferent attitude towards Georgia,⁷ which had an important place in its foreign policy, and took the opportunity to build up ties with Russia. Ties between Ankara and Moscow are centered largely on their economic relations. Nevertheless, although it is still premature to imagine how future developments will be shaped, they will certainly affect Central Asian countries as well as energy security calculations both in the region and in Europe.

NATO is an organization where Turkey has full membership and the power that comes with it. Hence, Ankara often used its seat in NATO as a means of protesting against the political friction that has occurred during the long accession process to the EU. However, complaints were taken to a different level when Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen advanced his candidacy to become secretary-general to NATO in March 2009. Clearly using its Muslim credentials, Turkey threatened to veto Rasmussen due to the Mahomet's caricature controversy in Denmark in 2005. More importantly, Turkey acted on behalf of all Muslim countries, which fits into the new foreign policy instruments.

While relations with Iran and particularly with Syria were far from sound in the past, Turkey has now become closer to these countries, and with regard to Tehran has even adopted an activist stance – more than building political bridges, Ankara often seems to prefer to pick sides. This of course does not contribute to good relations with the US and the EU, but more importantly it damages once vital relation with Israel.

Although already under pressure, Turkish-Israeli relations got a lot worse after Recep Tayyip Erdogan's outburst with Shimon Peres in Davos, in January 2009. Since then, the usual joint military exercises have been canceled and tension has grown between the two countries, in a sense altering Turkish-Israeli relations beyond any recognition. Therefore, ties that were founded on a shared concern with Syria and Iran have broken entirely.

With Turkish public opinion suffering from "EU accession fatigue", it would not be hard to adopt a completely new external orientation. Nonetheless, after years of having its back turned to the Arab world, Turkey needed to find a common cause in order to reestablish relations with Arab states, and to implement its neighborhood plan. The negative attitude that the majority of countries in the region have against Israel, associated to increasing domestic support for Gaza and for religiously driven causes

in general – partially motivated by the AKP itself – presented themselves as a golden opportunity to put the transformation in motion. Israel then became the perfect vehicle for the foreign policy realignment strategy. For the current Turkish government, whatever the outcome of the aid flotilla headed to Gaza, it would always be a win-win situation: if Israel denied access (as it did), Turkey would create an international incident and use its new activism to demonstrate the disappearance of the Turkish-Israeli partnership; if, however, Israel allowed the boats to dock in Gaza, Turkey would then claim victory over the Gaza blockade and present itself as the Palestinian's knight in shining armor. In both situations, Ankara wins the goodwill of its Muslim neighbors. And, on the domestic front, this new neighborhood strategy that embraces Arab Muslim causes has earned the AKP significant support and may well contribute to a victory in the next elections in 2011. Yet there are consequences for the region, for Europe and for the United States. Turkey's alienation of Tel Aviv contributes to Israel's regional isolation, creating an unfavorable political context for the Middle East peace process.⁸

However, just as in the case of Georgia, NATO, Iran and Syria, Turkey's current relation with Israel is not helping to maintain good ties with either the EU or the US. The first noteworthy dissension from its North American alliance happened in 2003, when Turkey denied passage to US troops headed to Iraq. However, it was perceived as a general disagreement with the intervention and as a way to preserve national security. It cannot be seen as a sign of an overall distancing from the West, so much so that between 2001 and 2004 there was a period of intense national reform aiming at compliance with EU criteria. Furthermore, Turkey has quietly allowed the US to use Incirlik airbase to support military activities in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁹ However, there has been clear disagreement as well as diplomatic tension on topics such as Iran and Gaza. Moreover, regarding the Middle East, the AKP government sees the US as a weak and mistaken actor. Turkey has defied the US by publicly supporting Hamas and arguing that the Islamist movement has to be an equal party in the negotiations. On Iran, Ankara voted against sanctions¹⁰ in the United Nations and signed a deal on nuclear energy to which Brazil was also a party. Understandably, these steps were all seen as inadequate by the US. At this stage, the bilateral relationship is, to say the least, tainted.

Under a different point of view, one could argue that Turkey's new external direction might strengthen its role as an EU candidate since it provides solid ties with the Near East, improving Europe's neighborhood policy – Turkey would thus be building itself as a strategic asset. Indeed, this could be the case if Ankara did not pursue its foreign policy in a mutually exclusive fashion. In other words, and despite the external policy plan's explicit desire to develop the new Eastern axis in accordance with its traditional Western vocation, Turkey's activism undermines its foothold in Europe and even in the US. For example, Ankara cannot ferociously criticize Israel for committing war crimes and then be willing to welcome the President of Sudan Omar al-Bashir in Turkey, or turn a blind eye to Hamas' human rights violations; nor can it undertake ventures such as

supporting the aid flotilla. Notwithstanding real humanitarian needs in Gaza, this flotilla was a clear political provocation; Ankara cannot give tacit support to Tehran's blackmail on a sensitive topic such as nuclear weapons; and it certainly cannot enact its foreign policy militantly under the banner of Ottoman legacy and affinities.

Conclusion

Time passed, and the Ottoman Empire gave birth to the Turkish Republic. Europe was first able to gather around a Community to later form a Union. Yet, while the Turkish Republic seemed to have overcome historical acrimonies and tried to join the EU, Europe's attitude towards Ankara is apparently still held hostage by the sense of "otherness". After setting a number of criteria to be met by Turkey, the EU has delayed the process mostly due to political and cultural motives, thus altering its initial conditions, aside from being completely unable to act under a sole voice. Ironically, those EU member-states that portray Europe as being a Christian geopolitical area tend to be the same that question Turkey's secular credentials.

As mentioned above, Turkey still has a long way to go in its political reforms. However, other countries were able to find their way into the EU while still being outside the accession framework. On the other hand, each time Ankara made meaningful reforms which often fueled domestic controversy, all it got as feedback was continued skepticism – if not intransigency – from several member-states. Instead of building a large support base, the EU's management of Turkey's accession process ended up alienating the country and, to a certain extent, even radicalizing it. Needless to say that this context does not contribute to the expansion of what the EU believes to be universal values, nor to the establishment of a stable neighborhood and to the creation of a solid bridge into the Middle East. Turkey's accession to the EU, or at least serious prospects for admission could keep reforms on track and be the foundation of a true liberal democracy in the country. The more distant Ankara is from Europe, the more unlikely democratic reforms will become.

The reasons behind the length of the accession bid, as well as the several roadblocks it has suffered, have made the EU unpopular in Turkey. Hence, a government that keeps pushing the European agenda will not be popular either, which means that with regard to foreign policy, Turkey did not see any significant gains in aligning with the EU or the US. In fact, gains were crucial as they could counterbalance regional foes resulting from being a declared supporter of Israel. If one looks at these factors, a change of external priorities is not surprising.

Therefore, Ankara's recent foreign policy shift removed Europe from the top of the external priorities list. Moreover, the path now followed by Turkey also demonstrates deviation from its former "Western vocation", showing that its foreign policy orientation

goes far beyond a momentary political tantrum. The EU is responsible for its own loss of credibility. The EU definitely contributed to a rhetorical re-Ottomanization of Turkey, as well as to Ankara's urge for greater external independence.

Although it is important to bear in mind that so far the recently adopted foreign policy orientation has not provided great results, given the dramatic change in Turkey's foreign affairs it is doubtful that the EU still has the time to invert this tendency.

If Turkey's bid for EU accession is ignored, Europe will lose a crucial opportunity to develop a stable and democratic partnership, and thus to expand so-called European values; for maintaining its economic sustainability; for creating a solid bridge into the Middle East, where Europe is not taken seriously as an international player; and also to connect to the Muslim World, an important element for both neighboring and internal security.

(Endnotes)

- 1 An alleged plot to overthrow the government made by individuals identified as ultra-nationalist Kemalists, with ties to the country's military and security forces. These individuals claim to be defenders of secularism and national interests which, according to them, are incompatible with the path taken by the ruling party. The entire criminal process has been ill-managed, politicized and, thus, quite controversial: the AKP has taken it as an opportunity to victimize itself and push its agenda. Nonetheless, the military's reputation was unavoidably tarnished.
- 2 Omer Taspinar, "A new era in Turkish foreign policy" (*Today's Zaman*, 14 June 2010).
- 3 In a poll conducted in 2007 by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, 40% of Turks supported the accession. In 2004, however, 73% thought membership would be desirable. In a different poll, the Eurobarometer showed a 71% Turkish support in 2004. In 2008, numbers dropped to 42%.
- 4 Gilles Andréani, "Turkey, Europe, and the United States in a Multipolar World" (German Marshall Fund of the United States, Mediterranean Policy Program, Policy Brief, 11 June 2010), p. 2.
- 5 Sevket Pamuk, "Turkey and the EU: hurtful uncertainty" (*The Guardian*, 4 December 2009).
- 6 Ian O. Lesser, "Rethinking Turkish-Western relations: A journey without maps" (German Marshall Fund of the United States, Analysis, 30 June 2010), p. 1.
- 7 Mitat Çelikpala, "360 Degrees diplomacy" (German Marshall Fund of the United States, Analysis, 19 June 2009), p. 2.
- 8 Andréani, "Turkey, Europe, and the United States in a Multipolar World", p. 3
- 9 Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey's new foreign policy direction and implications for U.S. policy" [Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 28 July 2010].
- 10 Apart from the political dimension, Ankara's opposition to sanctions is also deeply related to its economic ambitions. The imposition of sanctions in neighboring countries will affect Turkey's exports thus harming the economic angle of its new external strategy.