

# *The last decade metamorphoses of Türkiye`s foreign policy agenda: is its future on the scaffold?*

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**Abstract:** Türkiye as newly shaped state with its proclamation as a republic in the 20th century had at its beginnings embraced many values of the Western world, including some in matters of foreign policy actions. But its geographical position gave it not only a great advantage, but also a great challenge: that of shaping its identity and constantly ensuring its protection on two continents. Constantly held back from making high-impact geopolitical decisions, Türkiye has been forced several times in its recent history to decide its position. Its decision to be part of NATO, to continue the process of secularization and the intention to be part of the E.U were such moments, but the events in the Middle East and its complicated relationship with Russia turned it out of its way. The past years showed us a divided Turkey, increasingly isolated and which seems to put its future on the scaffold, and the present work aims to identify and exemplify such moments.

**Keywords:** Turkey, foreign policy, dilemma, NATO, EU, Russia, Middle East

**Rezumat:** Turcia ca identitate statală a secolului al XX-lea odată cu proclamarea sa ca republică începuse să îmbrățișeze valori ale lumii vestice, inclusiv în materie de acțiuni de politică externă. Însă poziția sa geografică i-a oferit nu doar un mare avantaj, ci și o mare provocare: aceea de a-și contura identitatea și de a-și asigura constant protecția pe două continente. Constant reținută în a lua decizii geopolitice de mare impact, Turcia a fost determinată de câteva ori în istoria sa recentă să își decidă poziția. Decizia sa de a fi parte din NATO, de a continua procesul de laicizare și intenția de a fi parte din U.E au fost astfel de momente, însă evenimentele din Orientul Mijlociu și relația sa complicată cu Rusia au întors-o din drum.

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Ultimii ani ne arată o Turcie divizată, tot mai izolată și care pare că își pune viitorul pe eșafod, iar lucrarea de față își propune să radiografieze și exemplifice astfel de momente.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Turcia, politică externă, dilemă, NATO, UE, Rusia, Orientul Mijlociu

## Introduction

The process of identification, classification, and analysis of the main purposes and interests on the foreign policy agenda of a certain state is first of all, dependent on the establishment of analysis` directions, on the tools used, the temporal classification and on the identification of the main decision-makers. Of course, it is of great importance to understand how their behavior influences a certain geopolitical space. In addition to this idea, we consider applicable the argument of Kenneth Waltz and neorealist theories that puts forward the view that the foreign policy of a state is the reflection of its internal policy, the argument being that it is not the states themselves that act but the people in their composition.<sup>1</sup>

This paper attempts to create a framework for understanding the tendencies of Turkish recent foreign policy and to bring to attention a brief process of analysis by deconstructing the foreign policy agenda of the Republic of Türkiye (officially renamed and internationally recognized as Türkiye<sup>2</sup>) during the recent past with the year 2012 as a reference starting point. Given the fact that the current Republic of Türkiye has under its jurisdiction a vast territory, spread over two continents, we consider necessary to propose the identification of its actions, interests, and objectives both in the European and in the Asian space. Thus, in the first part of this paper we will focus on the foreign policy promoted towards the neighboring states. Also, we will pay attention to the objectives that Turkey has in the Black Sea region, given the wide opening to it.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War. A Theoretical Analysis*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Turkey made efforts in December 2021 to convince international audience and officials to internationally recognize the name of the country Türkiye instead of Turkey. The official explanation was that this rebranding was needed to express better the values, goods, and Turkish cultural traits. An article published by Anadolu Ajansı entitled *How is the 'Turkey brand' developed?* explained that this change has first of all economic and historical reasons reminding of the greatness of Constantinople and all national goods.

(<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/turkiye-markasi-nasil-gelistirilir/2446924>). However, critics have argued that this decision was just to distract the public attention from the real economic issues of the country.

Another aim of this paper is to observe Türkiye as an actor on the international stage interacting with other state actors (its neighbors) or non-state actors as a component part of some organizations, in the present case, we will refer to the behavior within the Organization North Atlantic Treaty and its attitude towards the European Union. Moreover, we will have a look upon Türkiye's objectives and behavior towards the Russian Federation – one of the actors with which it has had a vast set of oscillating interactions. Finally, we will try to conclude with a present-day vision based on its recent foreign policy activity.

In order to explore these aspects, we will briefly identify the main political actors in the Turkish decision-making process and establish the time frame we will focus our attention on: the period 2012-2017 marked Abdullah Gül's presidential term (August 28, 2007 – August 28, 2014) with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as prime minister (2003-2014), who will succeed him as president starting from August 28, 2014-until now. During his term Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed prime minister (28 August 2014 – 24 May 2016), followed by Binali Yıldırım. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not experience drastic changes during the period in question, its portfolio being alternately held by Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009-2015), Feridun Sinirlioğlu (August 28, 2015 – November 24, 2015) and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu (August 29, 2014 – present).

We consider necessary to point out some conceptual clarifications that we will refer to during this paper. First of all, we will use the concept of "interest" based on Joshua Goldstein's classification model: the interests of a state in a region are negotiable, non-negotiable, declared and real (which are usually undeclared), and these can be material, economic, political or cultural.<sup>3</sup> We will also refer to the concepts of "political realism" (in E.H.Carr and Hans Morgenthau's understanding political realism mostly discusses about the sovereign state – in its Westphalian sense – and its security with its implications and on the balance of power<sup>4</sup>),

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Goldstein, Jon C.Pevhouse, *International Relations* London, Pearson Longman, 2007, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> In of E.H.Carr's vision, the state is the main actor of the international scene and the main element that matters is the territory. Carr also supports the view that on the international stage the right of the states that prove to be the strongest matters. Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, London, Harper Perennial, 1964. Complementary, Morgenthau's contribution is distinguished by theorizing the six principles governing international relations: politics is governed by objective laws, the definition of interest in terms of power, power is the control of man by man, political realism does not identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with an universal morality, political realism maintains the autonomy of

“liberalism” and “Neo-Ottomanism” (*Yeni Osmanlılık*). To some extent we will refer to liberalism in its understanding of international relations meaning that it suggests that the power of a state is given by its capacity and economic resources, the behavior of states reflects the nature of their interests and the main actor on the political stage is the civil society which in Turkish case could be characterized as apathetic.<sup>5</sup>

Last but not least, we will bring to attention the “Neo-Ottomanism” traits and examples in the past years` Turkish foreign policy agenda. *Yeni Osmanlılık* is not a new perspective of discourse and action, as a matter of fact it appeared in 1980s<sup>6</sup>, in the context of Turkey's invasion of Cyprus and the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Some main ideas and notions that are the core of Neo-Ottomanism are anchored in the Ottoman past and its internal structure and foreign policy aims. More specific, one reference is the 16th century associated with the reign of Sultan Suleiman I (Süleyman) who promoted an expansionist policy, adopted social reforms, and carried out an internal cultural policy, building numerous mosques and grandiose palaces.

### **Abdullah Gül and the politics of the “new Turkey”**

In an article published in 2012, Ibrahim Kalin (the chief foreign policy advisor to then prime minister R.T. Erdoğan) noted: “[...] in an age of simultaneous globalization and regionalization, Turkey has begun a process of soul-searching; in keeping with this, it initiated a process of reform in such critical areas as domestic politics, judicial reform, minority issues, national security, and economic development, all of which have eventually transformed foreign policy”.<sup>7</sup> In his attempt to define on one hand, and to justify on the other, the new course of Turkish foreign policy, Ibrahim Kalin talked about “the new sense of history and geography as a strategic asset”<sup>8</sup> (which Ahmet Davutoğlu attempted to conceptualize several years before) and, identified three principles that guide the new Turkish foreign policy agenda: political and economic justice, the balance

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the political sphere. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., New York, McGraw-Hill Education, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the concept is much more complex, and the theoretical works are numerous; but we mention a few referential ones: John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, London, Parker, Son, & Bourn, 2014; John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> David Barchard, *Turkey and the West*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Ibrahim Kalin, “Turkish foreign policy: Framework, values, and mechanisms”, *International Journal*, Vol. 67, 1, *Charting the new Turkish foreign policy* (Winter 2011-12), 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

between freedom and security, and the third one aims at economic development used as a tool to strengthen bilateral relations.<sup>9</sup>

According to his article, the first principle justifies, for example, the approach to Palestine – the idea that Turkey is the promoter of geopolitical justice (if we can name it like that); the second principle rather justifies internal political gestures aimed at state interference in all social levels, and, in particular, keeps under observation the activity of minorities (with reference to the Kurdish one), and the third one, emphasizes (in this case not so much) the trade with the EU as well as the economic relations with Russia, Iran and Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

In Ankara`'s official discourse, the implementation of these principles will be achieved through instruments such as: the involvement of all political actors, the support of democratization processes, the expansion of economic integration and the strengthening of intercultural relations and interpersonal communication<sup>11</sup>, basically elements of “soft power” that Ahmet Davutođlu detailed in his 2001 paper and speeches.

We chose to begin this paper with some brief references to Ibrahim Kalin's article from 2011-2012 because, from our point of view, it subsumes, on one hand, Türkiye`'s new foreign policy directions not only during the terms of Presidents Gül and Erdoğan and, on the other hand, underlines the change in Turkish self-perception: an identity metamorphosis that it is also translated into its foreign policy, as we will see.

The 2012-2022 period represented for the Turkish political environment the mandates of two presidents who, although both founding members of the same party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP) and collaborators or successors of the portfolio of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, imposed guidelines on the Republic of Turkey of foreign policy with almost diametrically opposed emphases and impacts. The two visions we are analyzing were influenced, shaped, or perhaps influenced the way the ministers managed foreign policy portfolios: Ahmet Davutođlu (2009-2014) and Mevlüt Çavuşođlu (2015 – present).

We will not propose an approach guided by the idiosyncratic variable (personality and psychology of the individual) proposed by the pre-theory of James N. Rosenau<sup>12</sup>, as we consider that the decision-making process depends on many more internal and external factors,

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p.16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> See James N. Rosenau, *The Study of World Politics*, vol. 1, London, Routledge, 2005, and the original article of J.N. Rosenau, “A Pre-Theory Revisited: World Politics in an Era of Cascading Interdependence” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, 3 (1984), pp. 245-305.

however, we believe that for the outline of an analysis complete, some mentions regarding the professional career of the leaders/decision-makers in question are necessary.

Abdullah Gül's background is in economic studies acquired at the University of Istanbul and in London, he has worked as a lecturer for several universities in Türkiye and worked for the Islamic Development Bank in Saudi Arabia. Gül was the leader of the AKP from 2001 to 2007 and he is considered one of the party's strongest voices since its founding. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who was the former mayor of Istanbul (1994-1998), has a strong Islamist and traditionalist education, continued with studies in the administrative field, at the current Marmara University. In 1999, following the recitation of a poem by the supporter of the pan-Turkish movement, Ziya Gökalp, Erdoğan was arrested for ten months and forced to resign as mayor. He carried out his main political activity within the AKP, holding the position of prime minister, and finally, in the 2014 election, he became the twelfth president of Turkey.

Ahmet Davutoğlu is known not so much for the mandate of the Prime Minister, as the holder of the temporary portfolio of Foreign Affairs and for the leadership of the AKP (2014-2016) especially for his contribution to shaping and theorizing a new foreign policy agenda of Turkey. A graduate of a German-specific high school and then of the economics and political science department of Boğaziçi University, he ends up teaching international relations in Istanbul for three years. Fluent in English, German, Arabic and Malay, Davutoğlu publishes a series of articles and studies that will be used as guidelines for the foreign policy agenda.

The last decade of Turkish foreign policy was marked by a set of ideas and concepts theorized by Ahmet Davutoğlu in the early 2000s which, as we saw in the article quoted above, were continued, and resumed in 2012 and will be reinterpreted in 2017, as we shall see. Ahmet Davutoğlu proposes an at least interesting concept: *stratejik derinlik* (strategic depth)<sup>13</sup>. It has four principles: good neighborliness policy, securing borders, implementing an active, dynamic foreign policy doubled by an increasing regional economic interdependence and, lastly, promoting multiculturalism.

Although these ideas have liberal vocations, the way in which they are exemplified and applied have a rather realistic orientation: if during the Cold War, Türkiye was a state on the periphery, in recent decades it has become a state of strategic importance, given the fact that, according to Davutoğlu, it is positioned in a key area between two

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, Istanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001.

continents and its roots are in an imperial past and cultural heritage.<sup>14</sup> In addition, he added that the role and the value of a state on the international stage is given by its geostrategic position. From this point of view, in Davutoğlu's view, Türkiye has an important position. To a certain extent, his concept refers to the Ottoman Empire's past by bringing the references to the empire's relations with the Middle East, the Balkans, and Central Asia into the present.<sup>15</sup>

At a first glance, Abdullah Gül's mandate could be described as a promoter of the "good neighborly policy". In support of this statement, we mention the fact that he was the first Turkish president to visit Armenia and the relationship with Greece was no longer placed in an antagonistic position, the dispute related to the Cyprus issue was smoothened over (not completely settled).

Apart from this, Gül supported Türkiye's orientation towards European integration, being one of the supporters of the idea that Turkey is European through the democratic values to which it subscribes. In an interview on 14 April 2012, asked if Türkiye considered itself a European country, Gül argued:

"...if we consider European history as a Christian club, then Turkey is not part of that history, of course. Instead, if we consider Europe with all its historical, economic, geographical, and political traits, then Turkey is definitely part of it. In addition, despite the fact that Europe has gone through a major economic crisis in the last two years, Turkey has paid great attention to the Maastricht criteria. Our banking system is operating in a healthy manner. Our economy has grown by over 8.5% annually in the last two years. Turkey is getting closer to European values and deserves closer ties with the EU."<sup>16</sup>

A year later, Gül maintained his position, the difference was that he increasingly introduced in his statements other geopolitical and economic

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<sup>14</sup> Gilles Bertrand, "Turkish Diplomacy since 2003: Transition from Realpolitik to a Liberal Foreign Policy?", *Perspectives*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Special Issue: *The Changing Role of Diplomacy in the 21st Century*, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Angel Rabasa, F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, California, RAND Corporation, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> The interview was offered by Abdullah Gül's during a visit to the Netherlands on April 14, 2012, for the daily newspaper *De Volkskrant* conducted by Arjen Van Der Ziel, "Islamofobia'nin Yükselmesi Son Derece Tehlikeli", published on former Turkish president's website, <http://www.abdullahgul.gen.tr/mulakatlar/360/83952/de-volkskrant.html>.

goals outside the European continent, using the card of the good neighbor and pointed out the need for regional economic interdependence:

“...Turkey is a bridge between Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus and each of our neighboring countries has a different form of government and a different administrative style. In Turkey, we have a vast majority of Muslim population, democracy, human rights, market economy, which makes us unique in this area. From a geographical and geopolitical perspective, Turkey belongs to this region, and we have historical ties with all our neighbors. But in terms of values, we are with the West. If we think about the future, it is almost a mathematical fact that the economic and balance of power in the world will tilt towards Asia. So, politics must incline towards that direction too.”<sup>17</sup>

The Balkan space was not left under the radar during Gül’s terms, which tried to mediate the conflicts in the Balkans, organizing meetings between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and Croatia; he was the defender of the Muslims in Bosnia and Albania, actions that were also intended to outline Türkiye’s image as a good mediator and to attract the support of the Balkan states in its process towards European integration.<sup>18</sup>

In what concerns the Middle East, Türkiye wants to assert itself as a democratic model for the Arab states, and to apply the second principle of its new strategy (the implementation of an active foreign policy), and this fact could be observed especially in the context of the Arab Spring. Türkiye during Abdullah Gül’s mandate played the role of a discreet mediator in Syria, and tried to convince Bashar al-Assad regime to make a change and allow the organization of free elections, but without supporting external intervention:

“Syria is now at a dead end, so change is inevitable. [...] But we don’t believe the right way to create change is through external intervention. The people must make that change. Civil war is not something that anyone would want to see happen. Everything must be done to prevent it. It is very dangerous.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Turkey’s Moment. A Conversation With Abdullah Gul”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 2. no. 1 January/February Issue, 2013, 2-7.

<sup>18</sup> See Mustafa Türkeş, “Decomposing Neo-Ottoman Hegemony”, in *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 2016, pp. 191-216.

<sup>19</sup> Abdullah Gül’s interview for *The Guardian* November 21, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/21/turkish-president-syria-abdullah-gul>.



Given the fact that, prior to the events in Syria, both Gül and Erdoğan had close ties to Assad family, Türkiye's position could not be firm against the violent intervention of the regime's forces against the rebels either. Furthermore, as Mustafa Türkeş argues, Ankara "had to back away from the liberal-inspired strategy of zero problems with its neighbors, preferring instead to provide political protection to Syria's Sunni communities."<sup>20</sup> Even so, the situation became much more complicated for Turkey in 2012 when Assad withdrew his military forces from northern Syria, from the border with Türkiye, leaving the area under the control of the Kurds in that area.

Türkiye's relations with Iran have been within the parameters of a good economic collaboration for many decades, the vulnerable point being the ties between the two with Israel. The conflicts in Gaza Strip area that started in 2008 and worsened in 2014 fragmented Turkish diplomatic ties with Israel and brought them closer to Iran. To maintain at least a semblance of good neighborliness, Türkiye and Israel signed an agreement to normalize relations (June 28, 2016) whereby Israel offered \$20 million in compensation to Turkish families affected by the Gaza attacks and included a possible resumption of the gas pipeline talks - which have drawn Iranian discontentment. However, the outlined situation between Türkiye-Iran-Israel is not only limited to economic, military, and diplomatic aspects, but also has ethnic and religious considerations: Iran supports the Assad regime, being made up of Alawites (Shia), while AKP members support the opposition from Syria, being mostly Sunni.

### **Neo-Ottomanism: The Middle East plan B and the abandonment of Europe?**

Since assuming the presidency in 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seemed to be moving further and further away from the Europeanization process started by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and later supported by Abdullah Gül. This distancing can be observed, on the one hand, at the declarative level, on the other hand, from the foreign policy gestures, not few in number, from the last years. If Türkiye at the beginning of the 2000s seemed to have made efforts towards a diplomatic path with clear goals, promoting democratic values and discovering its identity features in Europe as well, thus rallying more and more to the European community expansion process, starting from 2014, these efforts were increasingly transferred to the Middle East, Türkiye rediscovering its roots in the area.

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<sup>20</sup> Mustafa Türkeş, "Decomposing Neo-Ottoman Hegemony", p. 13.

The analyzes of the last years place this reorientation in the broad sphere of the neo-Ottoman current which, although it appeared in the 1980s, leaves a strong mark on Turkish domestic and foreign policy in the current mandate of President Erdoğan.

From a geopolitical and geostrategic point of view, there can be identified three main directions of manifestation of Neo-Ottomanism: the European reunification of the Balkans (the Turkish government was trying to obtain Balkan support for integration into the EU), the second one aims at the energy road to the Caucasus (the Oil Pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline), and the third direction is directed towards the New East and is marked by worsening relations with Israel and the problems with Iran.<sup>21</sup> If we put aside for the moment the first two directions, it is easy to see under these conditions that Türkiye's objective is to become a status-quo power in the Islamic world, and for this "it will use all the tools at its disposal to create vectors in the three directions: the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East."<sup>22</sup>

In Gilles Bertrand's opinion, the biggest foreign policy direction's weakness during the term of President Erdoğan is a much too closeness to the authoritarian regimes that rule the countries of the Muslim world. In these contexts, the leadership in Ankara has had to moderate its increasingly vocal position pro-governments Bashar Al-Assad, Mohamed Morsi, Muammar Gaddafi and reposition itself very hesitantly, on the side of the Western international community.<sup>23</sup>

As for Syria, like Iran, it pursued a dual policy: it supported Kurdish attempts to destabilize Türkiye in the 1980s, but in the 2000s they had a common goal of preventing the rise of Kurdish minority nationalism in their territories.

Even today, Iran's nuclear ambitions are causing anxiety in Ankara for the simple reason that it would create an imbalance of power in the Persian Gulf, which would cause Türkiye to counterbalance and arm itself, or, less expensively, to join the United States and Israel, transposing the scenario into a situation of the *security dilemma type*<sup>24</sup>.

On a different note, we draw attention to the change in Türkiye's position in the conflict between Israel and Palestine: although for a long time Israel was a source of armaments for Türkiye, in the 2000s, Erdoğan

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<sup>21</sup> Nicolae Țibrigan, *Revirimentul Turciei: între panturcism și neo-otomanism* [Turkey Sudden Change: between Panturcism and noe-otomanism], <http://geopolitics.ro/revirimentul-turciei-intre-panturcism-si-neo-otomanism/>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Bertrand, *Turkish Diplomacy since 2003*: 77.

<sup>24</sup> See Robert Jervis, „Cooperation «Under the Security Dilemma»“, *World Politics*, vol. 30, 2, (1978), pp. 171-172.

reoriented Türkiye's position in favor of Palestine, even organizing a series of meetings with Palestinian representatives without consulting the United States or Israel.

If we have a look at Turkish experts' official statements the discourses the policy is that, although, the diplomatic relations with Iran are not quite good, the energetic cooperation between the two should not be affected:

“The energy trade can bring politically different points into agreement. This is what we have experienced with Russia. We have different positions in Syria but there is now much more dialogue. Turkey and Iran will see the economic advantages and they might put aside political differences. I see this taking place. Look at the Astana talks on Syria”<sup>25</sup>.

There is worth to be mentioned in the context of this new ideologic guidelines of policy the fact that during the past years were opened several Turkish embassies throughout Asia and were sponsored new mosques building in America, Russia, Romania, Germany, Cuba, Kosovo, Japan, etc. For example, in 2000 a mosque was inaugurated in Tokyo<sup>26</sup>, in September 2015, after a long period of renovations sponsored by the Turkish government, one of the largest mosques in Europe was reopened in Moscow. In the same year, a mosque was inaugurated in Greece, and in 2016, negotiations were held with the Cuban state (February 11, 2016)<sup>27</sup>, with the Romanian state (negotiations started in 2015<sup>28</sup>), and in March the only mosque with two United States minarets in Maryland<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Gürkan Kumbaroğlu, the head of Turkish Association for Energy Economics, *Hürriyet*, June 10, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iran-israel-promise-turkeys-next-big-energy-potential-1115305>.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/35578/president-erdogan-visits-tokyo-mosque-and-turkish-culture-center.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Daren Butler, *Turkey's Erdogan proposes building mosque in Cuba*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-cuba-mosque-idUSKBN0LG1E220150212>.

The same information was reported by the Turkish press as well: *Hürriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-president-erdogan-presents-cuba-mosque-project-to-castro.aspx?pageID=238&nID=78254&NewsCatID=338>

<sup>28</sup> See *Agerpres*, <http://www.agerpres.ro/externe/2015/06/25/turcia-va-construi-la-bucuresti-omoschee-cu-o-capacitate-de-2-000-de-persoane-daily-sabah-05-23-39>.

<sup>29</sup> *Victoria Jones*, *Turkish President to Attend Grand Opening of Maryland Mosque*, <http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/Turkish-President-to-Visit-Maryland-Islamic-Center-373769191.html>

### **Türkiye, Black Sea and Russia – what about NATO?**

The Black Sea region was long disputed between the Ottoman Empire, the Tsarist Empire, and other European powers, but the changes of its status were mostly during the 19th and 20th centuries (for instance, the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829, the Treaty of Paris from 1856 which succeeded the Crimean War, the Versailles treaty system after the First World War – the Treaty of Sevres, the Treaty of Lausanne from 1923, the Montreux Convention from 1936). On this last part, the discussion will center on the Straits and their geostrategic importance for Türkiye and not only. Bosphorus connects the Black Sea with the Marmara Sea and Dardanelles connects the latter with the Aegean Sea, the two separating Europe from Asia. The Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits have the status of international waterways, but from an economic and political point of view these are subordinated to the Turkish government<sup>30</sup>.

The Montreux Convention allowed free access for commercial shipping, but military vessels were restricted; in addition, it contained the prohibition of the access of ships of non-riparian states to the Black Sea for more than 21 days, their tonnage must not exceed 15,000 tons, and their number was limited to a maximum of nine<sup>31</sup>. The moment of signing of this Convention represented a major cooling point in the relations of the Soviet Union and Türkiye although, the Turkish state was one of the fewest non-communist states with which the Soviets had had the closest ties at that moment.<sup>32</sup> This statute was revised on July 1, 1994 with new provisions, by the decision of the Ankara Government, following the Nassia oil tanker incident. Speed, ship sizes and Türkiye's permission to close the straits in case of fire, sports or environmental actions were restricted.<sup>33</sup>

So, geography was simultaneously a blessing and a challenge for Türkiye: on one side, it was the economic advantage and the possibility to be an active actor at Black Sea region, but on the other hand it faced the clash of interests in this space with the historical competitor, Russia. The beginning of the Cold War forced Türkiye to abandon the avoidance and neutral discourse and to choose in 1952 to join the North Atlantic Treaty

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<sup>30</sup> See C. G. Fenwick, *The New Status of the Dardanelles*, „The American Journal of International Law”, Vol. 30, 4 (October 1936), 701-706 and Paul Gogeanu, *Strâmtoarele Mării Negre de-a lungul istoriei* [Black Sea Straits during History], București, Editura Politică, 1966.

<sup>31</sup> See *The Convention of Montreux*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii-convention-relating-to-the-regime-of-the-straits.en.mfa>

<sup>32</sup> Walter Z. Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*, New York, Federick A.Praeger Inc. Publishers, 1956, p. 207.

<sup>33</sup> Hugo Caminos, Vincent P. Gogliati-Bantz, *The Legal Regime of Straits. Contemporary Challenges and Solutions*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Organization<sup>34</sup>. The presence of military headquarters on Turkish territory made clear for the Cold War dispute that Türkiye was willing to become a pillar of Western security on the southeastern flank. This aspect worsened diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc until the fall of communism<sup>35</sup>. As a matter of fact, the 1990s seemed to have improved the relations of Türkiye with the former communist European countries, especially economically.

Yet, the 2000s had so far many challenges by placing Türkiye between its role in NATO, its strategic position at the Black Sea region and Russian Federation. For instance, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 was a dilemma for Ankara government as Türkiye could not rally to Russian interests and trajectories because of its NATO membership and because of the Tatar minority in the territories under Russian influence, but it also could not adopt a firm negative position because of its dependence on Russian gas (in this case the Blue Stream gas pipeline).

As a reaction, Russia blamed Türkiye to have favored United States by breaching the Montreux Convention in July 2014 when the American frigate USS Taylor exceeded the maximum length of stay in the Black Sea by 11 days<sup>36</sup>, yet, Russia had an advantageous status, transporting weapons to Syria through these channels. This episode was outrun and Ankara's government baffled the international community with its increasing dialogue with Moscow. For example, on March 2019 during a joint press conference of foreign ministers Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Serghei Lavrov in Antalya, Çavuşoğlu declared:

„We are not only developing our bilateral relations with Russia, but also strengthening our cooperation on regional issues. We confer with Russia not only about Syria and certain countries, but also in many areas, including Central Asia and the Balkans. The purpose of these consultations and the purpose of cooperation is the stability and development of the region, and we will continue these consultations in the coming period.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, „Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952” in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (1985), pp. 807-825.

<sup>35</sup> See Nilü Goren, *The NATO/US-Turkey-Russia Strategic Triangle: Challenges Ahead*, Center for International & Security Studies, U. Maryland: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17001>

<sup>36</sup> Viorica Marin, „Expert rus: Rusia și Turcia ar trebui să negocieze închiderea strâmtorilor Bosfor și Dardanele pentru navele militare ale statelor non-riverane Mării Negre”, *Adevărul*, August 7, 2014, [http://adevarul.ro/international/rusia/expert-rus-rusia-turcia-trebuie-negocieze-inchidere-a-stramtorilor-bosfor-dardanele-navele-militare-statelor-non-riverane-marii-negre-1\\_53e38ecb0d133766a816b58a/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/international/rusia/expert-rus-rusia-turcia-trebuie-negocieze-inchidere-a-stramtorilor-bosfor-dardanele-navele-militare-statelor-non-riverane-marii-negre-1_53e38ecb0d133766a816b58a/index.html), accessed on 20 May 2022.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-rusya-federasyonu-disisleri-bakani-ile-ortak-basin-toplantisi.tr.mfa>, accessed on 15 May 2022.

Another important example is the 2022 Russian unforeseen invasions of Ukraine when Türkiye found itself again caught in the middle and pressured to face the decision to close the Straits to Russian warships<sup>38</sup>. Its next step was to attempt to play the mediator role in this complex situation. On March 10, took place Türkiye-Russia-Ukraine Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting initiated by Ankara government in Antalya on the occasion of Antalya Diplomacy Forum under the theme of “Spotlight on Mediation in a Changing Peace Landscape.”<sup>39</sup> On March 16, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu had a meeting with S. Lavrov in Moscow, followed the next day by a visit to Ukraine and a meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba, yet with any results.

We chose the topic of Straits as a focus in this reference on recent Turkish foreign policy activity as we consider them a reference point of Türkiye’s foreign agenda direction. In 2011 the world, even the Turkish public opinion, was skeptical when the leadership in Ankara announced the start of a project called “Kanal İstanbul Projesi” (Istanbul Canal Project) to be completed in 2023<sup>40</sup>. It is designed to be parallel to the Bosphorus and should completely take over the traffic of goods on the Bosphorus<sup>41</sup>. Planned to measure 45 kilometers long, 400 meters wide and 25 meters deep is an artificial shipping canal that burdens Turkish economy, jeopardizes the areas` environment and divides Turkish public opinion. Yet, it is less probable to be completed and inaugurated in 2023.

If completed, Turkey aims to redirect a good part of the oil tankers that pass through the Bosphorus and an important amount of the oil transport from Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Georgia to the Mediterranean Sea to the big oil tankers of the world. The project does not seem, but it is an ambitious one, considering that it aims not only to build a canal parallel to the Bosphorus, but also to build a new city of almost three million inhabitants near Istanbul, and the investment would be around 30 billion dollars, as some estimate. We purposely mentioned this project here as another indicator of Türkiye’s actions to distance itself to European and Western community and its will to have an independent and monopolistic

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<sup>38</sup> James Kraska, “Can Turkey Legally Close Its Straits to Russian Warships? It’s Complicated.” in *Foreign Policy*: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/01/turkey-black-sea-straits-russia-ships-ukraine-war/>, accessed on 19 May 2022

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-rusya-ukrayna-uclu-disisleri-bakanlari-toplantisi--10-mart-2022.en.mfa>, accessed on 19 May 2022

<sup>40</sup> Daniela Popescu, “The Straits – Between Geopolitical Best Card and Bone of Contention in the Turkish-Russian Relations. Kanal İstanbul Projesi” in *Romanian Journal of History and International Studies*, vol.5,1, (2018), pp. 233-243.

<sup>41</sup> R. T. Erdoğan, „Karadeniz ile Marmara Denizi arasına ‘Kanal İstanbul’ yapıyoruz”, April 27, 2011, [http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/\\_Article/pg\\_Article.aspx?Id=32d07aaf-7097-4459-9f0b-bf9f79c20fd1](http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr/Forms/_Article/pg_Article.aspx?Id=32d07aaf-7097-4459-9f0b-bf9f79c20fd1), accessed on 15 May 2022

foreign policy, to be an energy knot between Central Asia, the Middle East and the Black Sea.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusions

The scenarios of the first decade of the 2000s Turkish foreign policy bet, almost guaranteed, that Türkiye will not turn its back on the West, nor will it abandon the project of joining the European Union, no matter how close the relations with the Middle East have become. However, the unpredictable nature of the actors on the international stage, especially of the decision-making factors that govern them, once again demonstrates the complexity of foreign policies.

Western states were confident that Türkiye could become a stable bridge to the Arab world, yet the last years proved that Türkiye is rediscovering the Middle East, but this time not as a promoter of Western values, as Atatürk had planned (and to a good extent of the last decade, Abdullah Gül as well), but the heiress of a dead Empire and as the bearer of Islamic roots and traditions.

A decade ago, analysts characterized Turkish foreign policy as „a mixture of liberalism and neo-Ottomanism“<sup>43</sup> but it had been proven that any form of liberalism was excluded from the power equation, the internal agenda is daily scheduled by an authoritarian regime, strongly impregnated with Islamism and traditionalism, and the foreign policy agenda reshaped and its new form is fractured from Europe. Türkiye's foreign policy towards European Union became increasingly incisive (for example, near the German elections, Erdoğan asked German citizens of Turkish origin to vote against the main parties) and, in an interview for BBC News in 2017 Erdoğan stated that:

“...if the EU bluntly says that it will not be able to accept Turkey in the EU, this will be comforting to us. Then we will initiate our plan B and C. The European Union is not indispensable for us. Turkey is able to stand on its own feet. When I was in my first term as prime minister, Turkey was being described as a country which has accomplished a silence revolution, but now, the same EU not only does not invite us to the leader summits anymore, but they are also waste our time. This is the situation right now. The majority

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<sup>42</sup> Christian Keller, „Kanal Istanbul: Pipedream or Politics?“, *Institut Français des relations internationales*, July 27, 2011, (<http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/christiankellerfinal.pdf>) accessed on 19 May 2022

<sup>43</sup> Gilles Bertrand, *Turkish Diplomacy since 2003*, p. 79.

of my people don't want the EU anymore, they don't think the EU's approach is sincere"<sup>44</sup>.

It is predictable that the plan B Erdoğan refers to was the Middle East, but even in this area the situation is not a comfortable one for Türkiye, and the president seems to know part of the risks of such a decision since he also mentions a plan C, which does not seem to be clearly identified. But how predictable and reliable can this space be? Let us not forget that in Syria the Assad regime is still in power or Abdel Fattah al-Sisi `Egypt. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Hamas are reliable partners. Iran does not convey that it would stop giving up its nuclear ambitions and the relationship with Israel is not a flourishing one. Above all, the Kurdish issue seems to be increasingly pressuring Ankara.<sup>45</sup>

Five years later after this confident statement of Erdoğan, he takes advantage of the Ukrainian crisis after the Russian invasion and asked the EU officials to resume the EU adherence discussions for Türkiye. Moreover, taking into account the declining Turkish economy, Erdoğan calls on European Union to show "the same sensitivity for Türkiye's membership as for Ukraine".<sup>46</sup>

To sum up, based on the above-mentioned aspects several issues remain complicated to predict: if Türkiye wants to impose its own geopolitical justice, what will its status as a NATO member would look like? Would Türkiye sacrifice its security umbrella for better relations with Middle East and Russia? Erdoğan` Türkiye declares that it can survive without European integration, and through its actions it seems that it chooses the path of self-isolation from the European continent, yet, under these conditions, what will this mean for the immigrant's aspects, and which would be the costs for Türkiye's economy and security? These remain some multi-faceted dilemmas and for sure are not the only ones, but for the purpose of this article we attempted at exemplifying the pushes the most Türkiye on a scaffold. What we know is that the international system is a competitive one and the states will tend to acquire similar features to those they are in competition with and, on a last note, history proved us that states and their leaders have the tendencies to follow their own interest at the expense of the common interest and most of the times this is an expression of foreign policy agendas as well.

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<sup>44</sup> Interview for *BBC News*, July 12, 2017: <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-40577220/president-erdogan-tells-the-bbc-most-turkish-people-don-t-want-the-eu-anymore>.

<sup>45</sup> Semih Idiz, "Events in the Middle East force realism on Erdogan", *Al Monitor*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/turkey-events-in-middle-east-for-ce-erdogan-realism.html>.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/turkey/>