

# The Turkish Dilemma: Unveiling the Southern Corridor\*

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## Resumo

### O Dilema Turco: Como Abrir o Corredor Sul

O pragmatismo da nova política externa Turca de zero problems *with neighbours*, em que foram privilegiadas as relações de proximidade com os países vizinhos, permitiu o crescimento das relações políticas, diplomáticas e económicas regionais, contribuindo para um aumento de importância e relevância internacional de Ancara.

Mais do que um modelo para os movimentos resultantes da Primavera Árabe, a Turquia islamita, secular e democrática pode ocupar uma posição de referência, quer para se constituir como interlocutor regional privilegiado, quer para servir de ponte para a União Europeia e os Estados Unidos.

Neste artigo procura-se identificar a identidade e evolução desta nova imagem de relações internacionais turca, e até que ponto poderemos inferir da existência de uma área de influência, com diferentes níveis, que se inicia no Afeganistão e que termina no Norte de África.

A importância deste *Southern Corridor* será demonstrada pela real capacidade de Ancara em conseguir influenciar os diversos atores regionais e internacionais, numa perspetiva de longo prazo, resistindo às diversas idiossincrasias internas, e impondo uma política externa com opções de rotura, e esse é o grande dilema turco.

## Abstract

Turkey's pragmatic "zero problems with neighbours" foreign policy provided an opportunity to increase its relevance in the international community.

More than a possible role model to the "Arab Spring" freedom movements, Turkey became a reference as an Islamist, secular and democratic country, ready to assume a position as a regional interlocutor, and a bridge between the European Union and the United States of America.

This article identifies the conception and evolution of this new Turkish foreign policy, and the real influence that Ankara is having from Afghanistan to Northern Africa. The importance of this "Southern Corridor" will be proved by Ankara's capability in persuading and influencing regional and global actors under a long term framework, independent of the country's internal situation. This requires a foreign policy able to sever former options being this the great Turkish dilemma.

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“Turkey is re-emerging as a significant regional power (...) returning to its position prior to World War I, when it was the seat of the Ottoman Empire.”

George Friedman (2012)

The international community tectonic changes after the Berlin Wall collapse presented big challenges to Turkey. After decades of a foreign policy which leaned towards the West, Ankara started to define a more pragmatic approach after the Islamist Party – *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP)<sup>1</sup> – rise to power in 2002. The strategic environment was seen as an opportunity to rebuild Turkish regional power, placing Prime-Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan under a uncommon opportunity to materialise Ahmet Davutoğlu’s political concept of “zero problems with neighbours”.

This was due, in part, to Turkey’s loss of overall importance to NATO’s strategic plans. Ankara’s foreign policy aims were adrift for more than a decade, but this created an opportunity to rebuild and refocus it. What was a problem became a major opportunity, one that could open doors long closed to Ankara’s interests.

Turkey is a complex country. It brings different emotions to all the academics, politicians and public opinion. The XVII century siege of Vienna is still relevant to this day, and the memories of the great Ottoman Empire still overshadow many European countries. The Turks also have a name for their missed expectations – the Sevres syndrome – when the partition of the Ottoman Empire was conducted in terms that would turn Turkey an almost completely unviable country. Only the deployment of a military force by Kemal Atatürk allowed some of the key territories to be kept.

Today we are quite far from the “sick man of Europe” metaphor, as the Ottoman’s eve was then named. Surveys of the Turkish Economical and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) – and others forums and organizations – show that Turkey has the best image ever. Its renewed geostrategic importance is recognized at all levels.

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<sup>1</sup> The Justice and Development Party, was formed on 14 August 2001, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It became the predominant political Party on the general elections of 3 November 2002, winning 34% of the vote, and achieving 363 seats in the 550 seat parliament. After the interim election in the Siirt province and new participation in the Party, AKP’s number of seats rose to 367.

The first Islamic country that President Barack Obama visited was Turkey, illustrating Ankara's renewed importance to Washington as a hub of different civilizations, religions and societies capable of acting as a gate or as a bridge between them.

Apart from other important theoretical concepts that confirm Ankara's current strategic importance, we would like to emphasize Turkey's close proximity and role in the "New Great Game" (72% of the confirmed gas reserves and 73% of oil reserves are located in the Caspian Sea and Middle Eastern regions), as well as its location in the Asmus, Larrabee and Lesser's "Crisis Axis", which confine a complex conflict matrix that intercepts the Middle East, the Caspian and the Black sea (Asmus, Lesser and Larabee, 2003).

The combination of these geopolitical concepts makes Ankara a main actor in the recent security paradigm that involves some proxy and frozen wars (*e.g.* Balkans, Georgia, Lebanon and Palestine), and its actions are extremely important concerning the political and economical interests in the region.

### **"Who Lost Turkey?"**

Being an interesting query (Zakaria, 2010), it raises a different, but complementary question: "Where is Turkey?"

Both questions recognise an evolution of Turkish foreign policy, as they try to find an answer to the why and how Ankara's foreign policy has changed so dramatically.

To understand this evolution we must put it in perspective. Turkey experimented five foreign policy periods: Kamal Atatürk (until 1938); İsmet İnönü and the Second World War (until 1952); NATO and the Cold War (until 1990); post-Cold War (until 2001); and since AKP political leadership (2002) (Kiraboglu, 2011).

In the post-First World War period, Turkey believed that, in order to survive, it had to isolate itself, and accordingly Atatürk developed a security policy above all, avoiding the external conflicts as much as he could. This period focused on internal cohesion, avoiding border issues disputes with neighbouring countries but keeping in mind any possible attack to Turkish territory (mainly from the Soviet Union).

İnönü, replaced Atatürk as president, but kept the policy of neutrality, even during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> After the end of this war Turkey had to choose

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<sup>2</sup> Turkish neutrality was only broken in 1945, when it declared war to the "Axis" countries, in order to obtain some post-war gains.

sides. As one of the recipients of the Marshall Plan<sup>3</sup>, Ankara leaned – understandingly – towards the West and the United States.

This option generated a side effect. Probably seeking protection from the ever present Ottoman imperial designs of the past, most of their neighbours, except Israel, moved towards the Eastern Block and the Soviet Union. During this period, Turkey experienced major disputes spanning from territorial disputes –with Greece, Syria and Iraq – to natural resources (mostly water) – with Iran, Iraq and Syria –, and faced security challenges – from Armenia, Iraq and Syria (the latter two as a result of the Kurdish issue).

However, it was with NATO membership that Ankara definitely assumed a more proactive and western oriented foreign policy, losing in the process the freedom to follow its own geopolitical agenda. Ankara was now NATO's southern flank deterrent towards the Soviet Union, controlling Moscow's naval access to the Mediterranean Sea through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits.

With the end of the Cold War Turkish importance was, somehow, devalued by its western partners, only to be partly re-established during the first Gulf War. Its proximity to Iraq, Iran and Syria, meant that Ankara was seen as a key player. Nevertheless, the fragility of its internal political situation didn't allow a more assertive and independent oriented foreign policy. The major goal was focused on preserving close ties with Washington and keeping the doors open to European Union's membership.

However, this period opened the way to a more pragmatic foreign policy analysis as part of an introspective process of the country's role in the region. In spite of being a logistics and operational base during the first Gulf War, Turkey realised that its previous policy was heading towards a dead end. Internalizing that energy resources and economics are part of the international competition and integral to a state's development, Ankara started to advance and strengthen contacts with neighbouring countries.

One of the strategic economic goals was to change the nation's concept from import substitution to export-led growth, so Ankara started looking for new markets and became more and more interested not only on the expansion of its diplomatic and political relations but also in the preservation of the regional stability, materializing the first step to its "Southern Corridor" formula.

This pragmatic foreign policy formula, started in the 1990's and received a major push with the AKP government, in particular after 2007, with Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems" policy. The Minister of Foreign Affairs transformed all the

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<sup>3</sup> The Marshall Plan was firstly decided (allocated) to the Greek-Turkish region and named only as Truman Doctrine. It was extended later to other European countries.

Turkish international relations mentality – from a reacting one to a proactive one – being able to intervene mostly through “respected mediation”.

This was a return to its regional roots. In spite of having all the foreign policy focused on the European Union membership process – and they still have a Ministry for the European Affairs –, Ankara refurbished the scope of its policy. Naturally this is a path with some restraints that must be added to the previous ones that Turkey always experimented, namely the competition with Saudi Arabia and Iran for the regional influence. Accordingly Ankara developed an intense and dynamic policy based on a soft power approach, the recovering of Islamic and Turkic values and a more proactive role and new type of missions given to Turkish armed forces.

The Turkic card was played on a historical and cultural level, fostering ancestral bonds with neighbouring countries through television and radio broadcasts (e.g. soap operas), and organisations, mostly non-governmental, with education and humanitarian programs<sup>4</sup>. These types of initiatives were met with suspicion by regional competitors (notably Russia) who considered them noxious to its interests and influence in the region.<sup>5</sup> But on the other hand, Russia recognised the extreme geopolitical importance of Turkey as a result of the “pipeline delineation game”.

On Central Asia, the Turkic card is an asset. Through the revival of its historical roots in this former-USSR region, Ankara was able to become an important player in the “New Great Game” or “the oil and the glory game”. This policy provided an opportunity for a bigger role and influence over the layout routes of the energy pipelines from the Central Asia producers to European Union consumers.

As a strategic alternative to the Russian monopoly over the energy transportation lines to the West, Turkey is part of several gas and oil pipelines projects, such as the Nabucco, the Baku-Supsa-Ceyhan, the Kirkuk-Ceyhan, the Southern European gas ring, the Baku-Tbilisi- Erzurum and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan linking Turkey, via Mediterranean Sea and Greece, to the Central and Southern Europe. Apart from this, Ankara has been able to develop several bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries in order to improve its supply of oil and gas.

But the success of some of these projects is, and will be, influenced and shadowed by Russia’s power and capability to advance reliable alternatives.

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4 As a major example, we have the Turkish-American Islamic scholar Fethullah Güllen’s Movement. This religious-cultural initiative defined its action field (from the United-States to Central Asia) and “provides a unique example of a type of faith-based on a civil society initiative” (Kalyoncu, 2007). According to these goals, the Movement builded schools in several Caspian and Caucasus countries, in order to help improving the educational and health standards.

5 Using different excuses, most of the schools where shut down by the authorities and the volunteers had to face legal charges.

The new Turkish foreign policy opens the door to exploit the country's strategic location in the "New Great Game" but requires a delicate balancing act between its interests and those of the European Union and Russia, because of Ankara's dependency on Moscow's gas supply.<sup>6</sup>

But these types of concerns are followed by a different security and defence strategic approach, which was developed to face international and regional challenges. With NATO's second biggest armed forces and an annual budget of 14 Billions USD, Turkey changed one of its primary missions from positional deterrence in his West and Southern borders, to an expeditionary and projectable military capability, turning their multinational military missions a very fruitful foreign policy asset, ranging from Afghanistan to the Balkans – where in the former the Turkish armed forces assumed the commanding effort in the theatre of operations, avoiding the image of being an occupying force but a "brother Islamic country" helping the locals, through humanitarian operations. This new image shown to the international community brought major respect from the Islamic and Arabic countries.

Concerning the great Mediterranean area, Turkey renewed its interest in the Middle East in the 1990's, but it was with AKP that it boomed, mainly after the second term elections in 2007, being expressed by the growing trade, diplomatic exchanges and free movement of people and goods<sup>7</sup> (Zalewski, 2012). Commercial relations were mostly developed through multilateral Free-Trade Agreements, like the one signed with Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. But bilateral agreements were also signed with the three countries on its southern border: Syria, Iraq and Iran.<sup>8</sup>

However, the improvement of the regional cooperation doesn't hide the ever present "battle for the hearts and minds" (Akyol, 2012), as many interests are being played on the Mediterranean chessboard between Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Each country has its own model to export in order to achieve a major regional influence. Iran's "true Islam" model for the region is facing Turkish "liberal Islam", accepted by the Western powers, bringing more than just a rhetoric idea to this competition. Relations between the two countries are also being affected because

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6 The trade relations with Russia have improved. There are plenty of joint-ventures, notably the building of the Blue Stream pipeline and the first Turkish nuclear plant.

7 Visa requirements were abolished with many neighboring countries.

8 The latest, for instance, is one of the priorities for Ankara, concerning his energy security policy. Take notice for example of the May 2010's nuclear fuel swap deal with involving Iran, Brazil and Turkey. Iran's main bridge to the international community is still Ankara, which is exemplified by the fact that the talks between Iran and the six powers concerning Tehran nuclear program are held in Turkey.

of issues like the Syrian crisis, Iraq<sup>9</sup> and NATO's missile defence shield, creating a paradoxical situation because both countries want to preserve their bilateral political and diplomatic links.

Being a Sunni country with strong connections to the United States, Saudi Arabia is a different regional competitor. The Arabic card is the influence that Riyadh hopes to expand. But indirectly, Saudi Arabia has a domestic issue that gives strength to Turkish islamists political movements – Wahhabism. This conservative and extremist Islamic movement supports Güllen's and other Islamists Turkish movements and already spread to some Caucasus countries and Russian republics.

However, currently Erdogan managed to become the leader of the oppressed Islamic people. Forced by his own political base, the Turkish Prime-Minister "exported" his image, making criticisms to the United States, European Union and, most recently but strongly, against its former ally in the region, Israel.

### **The Turkish Model: New Dynamics on Mediterranean's Policy**

The arch of instability in the Mediterranean Sea represents a recent pivotal reference in international affairs, considering the actors involved and the differences between its Northern and Southern margins. Deeply constrained by the financial crisis, the European Union wasn't really prepared to face the recent events that took place in the region, which was reflected by the fact that she didn't take a common and strong position. As so, Ankara managed to take advantage of the perceived gap between European words and deeds, and developed an active political influence over several of these new democratic movements.

The "Arab Spring" got everyone by surprise, imposing mandatory changes on the external policies of some the world's most important countries. With a false start – because of his support for the non-democratic friendly regimes, like the ones of Ben Ali and Mubarak – Turkey was the first country to realize the real dimension of those movements, and proceed with a fast change of priorities. Starting as apparent powerless bystanders – maybe studying to where these developments would lead – Turkey became an active supporter of the freedom movements, not by seeing them as symbols of a common revolution, but by realizing that there isn't one and unique Mediterranean region. Ankara had to face different interlocutors,

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<sup>9</sup> In Iraq Shia are being supported by Tehran patronage and the Kurds and Sunnis by Ankara interests. That is a situation mostly enhanced by Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki, who repeatedly denounced "Turkish interference on internal affairs".

movements, interests and perspectives each leading to totally different results and goals. A major influx of weapons and money provided by Turkey to these movements gave them not only the possibility of defending themselves but provided an opportunity to assert Ankara's interests in the region and in the process potentiate and expand economic and trade relations with non-European Mediterranean countries, seeking new and bigger markets.

The approach to the western Mediterranean countries, for instance, was quite concentrated on this commercial prospect. Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are strong trade partners but political and diplomatic relations are still relatively modest, even considering an improvement during this period, especially with Tunisia<sup>10</sup>, where the "revolutionary movement" was the first to receive an open support from Ankara, demonstrating a major turn in its "zero problems" policy. As so, AKP became a source of inspiration to the mainstream moderate Islamist Tunisian party, the *Ennahda* Movement<sup>11</sup> – also known as Renaissance Party.

Being one of the major commercial partners since 1980's, with 15 billion dollars in contracts, mostly on public construction<sup>12</sup>, the Libyan case was a matter of *realpolitik*. Focused on the economic prospect, Ankara didn't stand by NATO's side during the first phase of the popular uprising. This pragmatic policy was only abandoned after it became clear that, forced by the international community coalition, Kaddafi's regime was falling apart. Turkey mediation tried to negotiate a quick and soft political transition and kept its momentum until the final days of the conflict thus becoming one of the most important partners concerning the reconstruction of the country.

The Egyptian case was far more complex because Hosni Mubarak was the leader of a quite friendly regime. Since 1966 that Cairo and Ankara have privileged relations, mostly based on a similar foreign policy, prioritising security and stability, only with disagreements here and there about specific issues.<sup>13</sup>

Cairo was, and still is, a highly important trading partner, with an annual volume of 3 billion dollars – favourable to Turkey on 1.3 billion (TMFA, 2012). Turkish interests extend from textiles to tourism, and the country is seen as a "promise land" for Ankara's investments, especially as a result of the Free Trade Agreement signed in 2005.

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10 It was in Tunes that Erdogan had one of the most important speeches of this period.

11 Getting its name from the Arabic for "awakening" or "renaissance", this moderate Islamist Party became the strongest and better organized after Ben Ali fall.

12 Turkish investments on Libya were one of the most important foreign ones, being essential to the economical development of a pipeline network as well as major harbor facilities.

13 Cyprus is an example of these "issues", as Cairo supported the Cyprus-Greeks over the island's partition.

Many observers point out that Egypt is experiencing a situation that Turkey previously had one decade ago, namely the preponderance of the military in power and the influence of Islamist movements. In fact, both military have internal political and economic interests, and seek for stability and influence in their respective foreign affairs policy. But the military in Egypt are too strong and internally connected to the previous regime, not assuring the same civilian support as the Turkish did – labelled as the “Guardians of the Republic” –, and there are some doubts about their unclear political goals through the ruling of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

If we look at the Egyptian Islamists, and what would be the future role of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is quite easy to find a connection with the AKP roots. Abdel Futouh, former presidential candidate and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, even called himself the “Egyptian Erdogan”. However some doubts persist about the political and social intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Cairo acknowledges that Turkey is important as a possible sponsor of much needed investments in the country. However, with Turkish increased regional role, relations between the two countries became more competitive, with Ankara intervening more assertively in the “Egyptian area of interest”, like Gaza, Palestine and the Golan Heights.

Erdogan’s visit to Cairo, last September 12<sup>th</sup>, where he had an almost triumphal and popular reception, provided him with an excellent opportunity to reinforce Ankara’s “Southern corridor” policy.

He met field marshal Hussein Tantawi<sup>14</sup> and addressed the Arab League where he assumed the Turkish support to the “Arab Spring” movements. In his speeches, Erdogan, exalted the path taken by the Egyptian freedom movements and attacked Israel for its recent actions towards the Palestinian Authority. But it was in Tunes, three days later, that Erdogan, side by side with the Tunisian Prime-Minister, Beji Caid Sebti, completed his vision for the political future of the region, saying that the country should have nothing to fear from the influence of Islam in politics: “The most important thing of all, and Tunisia will prove this, is that Islam and democracy can exist side by side!” (Akyol, 2012)

Much has been written about the Turkish model for the “post-Arab Spring” countries, but is that real or just a headline that the international press always use to define Turkish growing influence in the region?

First of all, we should ask: what are we talking about exactly? Are there references and influences of Kemalism and/or Islamism?

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<sup>14</sup> Tantawi is the head of the ruling council that took over when Hosni Mubarak was toppled in February 2011.

President Gül refers, indirectly, that the Turkish model is “Islam, democracy, market economy and modernity” (Akyol, 2011). We agree with this perspective, adding that democracy, through elections, brings – additionally – the military to accept the political power and Islam to accept secularism.

But can Turkey be a model for these countries? The winners of the first elections, in Tunisia and Egypt, evoked the “Turkish Model”, and that’s a fact. However, are they really interested and prepared to follow this model?

There are major differences between most of the countries involved, and between them and Turkey. Their respective social, political, judiciary and military organization are far different from what we see in Turkey, sometimes fractured by tribal interests and with a very weak but sometimes rather conservative religious approach. Under this framework, expectations concerning the possibility of a strong secular and democratic central governance are a matter that most of these countries are not prepared to follow, yet.

So, we do believe the model is not suitable for the “Arab Spring countries”, at least for the moment, but, considering the common root causes and general characteristics, it can work out as a sort of “inspirational spring” and as an example of a democratic Islamic ruled country which follows social and political secularism, bringing together political Islam and democracy.

### **A Reluctant Mediterranean Neighbour**

Inserted in this new approach for the Mediterranean region and despite of the recent events, it was with Syria that the “zero problems” policy seemed to achieve its main goals. Since 1999 the bilateral relations are recovering from a continuous competition on issues like Hatay<sup>15</sup>, water resources<sup>16</sup> and the Kurds<sup>17</sup>. However, it was with Erdogan and AKP that bilateral relations started to increase, reaching 2 billion dollars in trade. There was a huge development in economical relations, and the launching of a joint dam project – on the Asi river – and excellent diplomatic relations were the visible face of that growth. Those good relations led Washington to believe that Ankara would be the unique regional actor to influence Syria and Iran, and through her, the Washington was “listening to the region” (Badran, 2011).

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15 Hatay is a city reclaimed by Damascus but that is part of Turkish territory.

16 Especially after the construction of the Great Anatolian Project (GAP), the Syrians considered that Turkey didn’t respect the international law regarding this issue.

17 Syria allowed the PKK to have safe havens in their territory, playing this card to pressure Ankara.

When the rebellion started and the Army begun to crash the freedom movement, Erdogan felt he could control Assad. Through multiple diplomatic visits<sup>18</sup>, Ankara tried to influence Assad to reach a negotiated solution. Turkey had economical interests at stake, but mostly geopolitical issues to consider, namely on its Southern border.

It was only at the end of 2011 that Erdogan realized that Assad was not considering the possibility of following a political reform path. Erdogan assumed a leadership role when he called for an international community intervention, namely through the Arab League, the United Nations and, more recently, NATO. Turkey's Prime-Minister "hands on approach" and political action included the mediation between the two parties, but, at the same time, gave protection to civilian refugees and to the Syrian Liberation Army on Turkish soil. Turkey had abandoned the "zero problems" policy, taking sides on the conflict, and that was a major change.

Until recently, Israel was the closest friend Turkey had in the region and a much needed partner for political, security and economic issues. Whatever the Turks may now say about Israel, the military cooperation, more than a technological issue, was a security one. In fact, it didn't represented a threat and Tel Aviv didn't ever use the Kurdish card against Ankara.

However, recent events lead to a more unstable relationship. The 2006 Lebanon War, the Davos Conference incident<sup>19</sup> and the flotilla attack<sup>20</sup> resumed some of the problems that the bilateral relations were experiencing. Erdogan felt particularly betrayed by the 2006 war, because he was mediating a Syrian-Israeli truce, and the events destroyed his previous diplomatic efforts.

His response passed through the support of Hamas on the post-election period, the replacement of Israeli forces by Syrian ones in the series of annual air exercises<sup>21</sup> and the support, with political and diplomatic assets of Palestinian independency.

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18 Most of the negotiations were conducted by Ahmed Davutoglu. He received Assad's promise that it would pull back the military forces and make an agreement with the revolutionary movement. Eventually, a contact made by Teheran changed the whole plan, forcing Damascus to maintain the pressure on the movement.

19 This event took place during the World Economic Forum, in Davos, on January 2009, when Erdogan abandoned a panel discussion on Gaza, after an angry exchange of arguments with the Israeli president, Shimon Peres. On his arrival to Istanbul, Erdogan was received as a hero.

20 It was a raid of the Israeli Navy on six humanitarian aid ships flotilla heading to Gaza. This May 31st 2010 incident occurred on international waters, when the Israeli Commando Units circled the ships in order to proceed to a cargo inspection. During the clashes nine activists were killed and an Israeli military was seriously injured.

21 In 1999 both countries signed a Euro-Asian Security Agreement that allowed Israel to train pilots in the Turkish air space.

Poor diplomatic communication, but mostly public opinion pressure, led to a decline in the quality and quantity of the bilateral relations, with Ankara's receiving a positive feedback from the Islamic public opinion, where the Davos Conference gave de stage and the Gaza flotilla incident the opportunity to reach a worldwide audience.<sup>22</sup>

Natural resources and border definition are also problems that oppose Turkey to Greece, alongside with other issues like Cyprus diferendum <sup>23</sup>, the definition of the maritime continental platform and the capability to exploit possible and valuable resources.

For now the situation has improved, but it remains an open issue, affecting Eastern Mediterranean security, mainly because of Greece financial situation, which may polarize the bilateral relations, as the social and political turmoil may open way to nationalists and, as consequence, a revival of the bilateral historical confrontation.

However and in spite of these incidents and disputes, even considering the current situation, we believe that Turkey may soon resume efforts to mend their bilateral relations with Tel Aviv and Athens, because Ankara must understand that these bilateral conflicts don't contribute to promote its national interests.

Beside this bilateral face, Ankara's involvement in the Southern Mediterranean has also a multilateral facet, considering the common projects with EU, NATO and OSCE, the latter organization through the Mediterranean Partnership. Considering NATO's regional security approach, the North Atlantic Council developed in 1994 the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) initiative, "in order to provide regional security and stability" (NATO, 2006). Some actions were launched under MD's auspices, bringing the Mediterranean region to the centre of the security and political debate. But, such a large scale approach had an almost irrelevant and practical outcome.

European concern about the southern margin of the Mediterranean, led to a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), launched in 1995. Known as the Barce-

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22 There is a new issue affecting the bilateral relations: Cyprus's oil reserves. Tel Aviv signed a joint-venture with Cyprus concerning the Aphrodite oil field which includes a maritime area located between the two countries. Israel is trying to become an energy exporter after two major gas reserves were discovered since 2010, while Turkey struggles to keep and develop itself as an energy hub.

23 It is a dispute that remains unresolved even under the rule of international law, since the 1974 Turkish invasion of the Northern part of the island. The support for the United Nations plan, refused by the Greek part of the island, was evidence of this fact. However, Nicosia, considering the European Union patronage, didn't want to solve this issue. Cyprus is, in fact, one of the reasons deterring the fulfilment of the EU membership, as Ankara insists on forbidding sea-port access to Cyprus ships.

lona process, this initiative involved dialogue, cooperation, peace and stability goals, encompassing the EU and 15 countries from the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region, including Turkey. This framework aimed to reinforce the interaction between the member countries, especially after the 2000 Valencia Conference, when was approved a “Common Strategy for the Mediterranean Region”.

Latter, in 2004, after the last enlargement and with the purpose of avoiding new dividing lines between the European Union and its neighbours – but also to create around the Union a ring of “prosperity, stability and security” – the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) directed towards the eastern border countries and the non-European Mediterranean countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Tunisia.

This political approach offered everything but the institutions, as interesting as it was, suffered from some “European diseases” right from the beginning: good theoretical ideals with diffuse implementation.

One of the most criticised aspects was the fact that the Mediterranean region was seen as one, worsening the probabilities of its success with the inclusion of the eastern border countries in the overall program. Another criticized aspect was the unfortunately very common individual states initiatives which tend to affect negatively the overall European policy for the region.

The biggest case in point was French President, Nicholas Sarkozy’s “Mediterranean Initiative”, launched in 2008. Defining as goals the dialogue, political coordination and cooperation on matters of energy, security, counter-terrorism, immigration and trade, the French initiative soon was accused of not-bringing anything new only contributing to affect the ENP efficiency.

Turkish participation was seen as an alternative to the EU membership, a perspective that created an open wound in Ankara’s interests and perceptions towards EU. Even considering that it had several cooperation processes with Europe, as the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), this type of solutions didn’t fulfil Ankara’s ambitions.

Under this political framework, Turkey decided to follow an autonomous approach. Currently Ankara doesn’t feel at ease working along with Brussels, because of four major reasons: it doesn’t agree with this vision of a common policy concerning all these countries; it feels like a small European candidate state applicant in the hands of countries like France and Germany; it limits Turkish independence on foreign policy issues; and, last but not least, Ankara doesn’t see how a strong EU’s foreign policy can be capable of dealing with these regional problems.

This was proved by the European response to the “Arab Spring”. Even considering the “Partnership for Democracy” and the package of measures called three

“M” (money, mobility and market access) it was a weak and not centralized reaction, with each country seeking to achieve their own objectives. The ideal of “assuring a smooth path to democracy” to these Southern Mediterranean countries looked like it was not on the European policy centre of gravity.

Turkey considers that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership should be revived, but in a different perspective, more dynamic, larger and stronger, where she should have a pivoting role.

### **The Way Ahead**

Once Turkey comes to terms with the challenge of a new foreign policy formula it may rise to the level it aspires to, becoming a rejuvenated actor in a increasingly important region. The “zero problems” policy was extremely important because it opened the door to a more independent and active foreign policy, but it was not a total success.

Turkey’s economic, political and diplomatic influence has spread all over the “Southern Diagonal”, but this *modus operandi* is only ten years old, which in terms of political History represents a mere footnote reference, even more knowing that we are experimenting a world order transitional period.

There’s no doubt, however, of Turkey’s current geopolitical momentum and importance. But is this momentum sustainable? The positive answer will depend on the following questions:

- Will the AKP Islamists stay in power, keeping the liberal and democratic model as an inspiration for the Islamic world, and if they do not, what foreign policy will be followed by other political forces?
- What kind of relationship will Ankara develop with the European Union?
- How long will Turkey be able to “ride the current political wave”, taking real advantages of it for energy, economic and political purposes?

Recent events show that Prime-Minister Erdogan is able to conquer domestic and foreign public opinion, but his populist moves tend to alienate some of his support base – the Islamists – which may influence AKP’s future ability to conduct major changes. The Turkish society anachronism, the internal socio-political divisions, the democratization and freedom of speech debate, and the Kurdish issue will continue to test Erdogan’s conservative government.

Turkish ability to use soft power has to be reinforced by a more assertive foreign policy, cooperating with strong actors as the United States and the European Union. Turkey doesn’t need to be a close friend in the morning – accepting US and EU help – and a foe in the afternoon – rejecting and criticising their policy for the region.

It has to find a way to live with these two actors, even if it doesn't mean an EU membership, but it needs to cooperate in the broad Mediterranean region. The goals that must be explored are in terms of political, economic and energy security matters, allowing Turkey to develop and reinforce its regional power, completing the strengthening of its Islamic, market economy, democratic and secularist model.

Some may call it an "neo-Ottoman policy", some may call it "Turkish Gaullism", but what we are talking about is a country assuming its importance as a true regional power.

Will Turkey be able to develop and reinforce this "Southern Corridor" foreign policy axis? This is one of its current challenges and not a lesser dilemma.

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