

Increasing Realism in Turkish Foreign Policy during Post-Davutođlu Era

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ABSTRACT *This article compares Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutođlu era with the previous period and analyzes the changes and continuities in these two periods. In the first years of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) period, the Davutođlu era, Turkish foreign policy featured soft power and cooperation-based characteristics. While maintaining its proactive and multi-dimensional aspects, there were three crucial changes in Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutođlu era. First, the elimination of the Fetullah Terror Organization (FETÖ) network from the state institutions and organizations after the July 15 coup attempt contributed to the effective functioning of the state, more autonomous foreign policy, and successful military operations. Second, Türkiye adopted a new security concept aiming to eradicate the sources of terrorism both within and outside its borders and began to use more hard power. Third, Türkiye increased its capabilities in crisis management in its relations with great powers and managed its autonomous foreign policy. These three changes in the post-Davutođlu era led to increasing realism, autonomous foreign policy, and the rise of deterrence and the sphere of regional influence.*

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, Hard Power, Realism, July 15 Coup Attempt

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Introduction

This article compares Turkish foreign policy during and after the Davutoğlu era and analyzes the changes and continuities in these two periods of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) governments. After a long period of domestic troubles, economic difficulties, and short-term coalition governments in the 1990s, the successive one-party governments provided political stability in Türkiye in the AK Party period from 2002 until now, and this domestic change created new dynamics in Türkiye's foreign policy. Ahmet Davutoğlu, an academic, came into prominence in terms of formulation of foreign policy principles in the first years of AK Party government and was responsible for implementing foreign policy later. Because of Davutoğlu's importance and influence, the period starting in 2002 and continuing until roughly 2015 was called the Davutoğlu era in Turkish foreign policy.¹

In the Davutoğlu era, Türkiye adopted soft power and cooperation-based foreign policy to improve its political and economic relations first with its neighbors and the global and regional actors simultaneously. The "zero problems with neighbors policy" became one of the trademarks of that period. The first years of the AK Party period witnessed a reform process toward the goal of EU membership. Reform packages and policies aiming to deepen the democratization and modernization of the society went hand in hand with proactive foreign policy especially in that period. After the reform process slowed, Türkiye could put its soft power and trade-oriented foreign policy approach into practice with the help of favorable external conditions and a proactive approach. As a result, increasing autonomy in Turkish foreign policy was achieved. The electoral successes of the AK Party and the relative political stability in domestic politics led to this continuity in Turkish foreign policy. However, the emergence of the Arab Uprisings changed the regional dynamics and the proactive foreign policy understanding of Türkiye became unsustainable in the new regional context.

Türkiye continued its proactive and multi-dimensional foreign policy in the last period of the Davutoğlu era while facing new problems arising from different cases of the Arab uprisings, particularly the Syrian civil war. Türkiye's attempts to adjust its policies to respond to external challenges led to a transition period in the last years of the Davutoğlu era. In other words, the changing regional context in the Middle East and North Africa and changes in Türkiye's relations with the regional and global actors made its shift in foreign policy inevitable. In the post-Davutoğlu era, the July 15 coup attempt became a turning point for domestic politics and foreign policy. The policies developed as a reaction to the coup attempt reflected a new transformation in Turkish foreign policy.

This article argues that the transformation in Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutoğlu era was caused by various elements, most of which stem from the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war. Soon after, the July 15 coup attempt paved the way for the concrete results of the transformation. The end of the Davutoğlu era replaced the soft-power and cooperation-based foreign policy approach with a relatively more autonomous, hard-power-based, and realist foreign policy understanding.

The changing regional context in the Middle East and North Africa and changes in Türkiye's relations with the regional and global actors made its shift in foreign policy inevitable

Increasing realism in the post-Davutoğlu era refers to the rise of realist elements, mechanisms, and tools compared to the Davutoğlu era, such as more frequent use of hard power, the primacy of security rather than economic concerns, the emergence of a zero-sum understanding against the sources of the threat near the borders of Türkiye and the rise of conflictual issues instead of cooperation. Eminent scholars of Turkish foreign policy addressed the primacy of realist elements in the current period. They used different conceptualizations referring to these changes in Türkiye's foreign policy approach and actions. Fuat Keyman used the concept of "moral realism" by combining humanitarian policies with realist elements while defining this change.² Meliha Benli Altunışık points out the "new turn" in Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East based on domestic and regional insecurities and underlines "heightened threat perceptions, zero-sum competition with other regional powers, the increasing resort to the use of military force, risky behaviors and brinkmanship, and a preference for unilateral action."³

Türkiye's military operations in Northern Syria, its logistical support for the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya and Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War, as well as the conflictual relations and assertive discourse in the Eastern Mediterranean, can be given as examples of increasing realism in the current period. The AK Party's defense policy in the recent period was also interpreted as an indicator of the replacement of decades-long idealism with "a more realistic approach based on the new understanding of 'self-help' in defense."⁴ This article will highlight this transformation and the increasing use of realist elements in Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutoğlu era.

Before doing so, it will be helpful to elaborate on Turkish foreign policy in the Davutoğlu era. Therefore, the upcoming section will point out the main principles, foreign policy approach, instruments, and critical turning points in the Davutoğlu era, which will constitute the reference point for analyzing the

The soft power-based approach of Turkish foreign policy in the Davutoğlu era and its prioritizing cooperation and economic interdependence reflected a neoliberal institutionalist view

transformation in Turkish foreign policy in the current period. Then, Türkiye's foreign policy moves and approach in the post-Davutoğlu era will be discussed. The three main changes in the post-Davutoğlu era will also be explained as the main elements or indicators of transformation in Turkish foreign policy after the July 15 coup attempt. Last but not least, the results of a thorough

analysis of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party government, in general and in the post-Davutoğlu era, in particular, will be presented in conclusion.

Turkish Foreign Policy in the Davutoğlu Era

The Davutoğlu era in Turkish foreign policy was relatively long so it is more effective to determine analytical divisions and periodization to highlight the turning points and decisive factors in that period. Though the proactive and more autonomous foreign policy in the AK Party period reflected the domestic transformation in Turkish politics, external factors continued to play decisive roles and the decision-makers had to adjust the policies in accordance with the changing regional and international context. Among the external factors, the Arab uprisings and the consequences of different cases played a more decisive role and became critical in shaping Turkish foreign policy.

Between 2002 and 2005, the reform process toward the goal of European Union (EU) membership shaped domestic politics and foreign policy. The harmonization packages not only supported progress toward the goal of EU accession but also increased the level of democratization and modernization and resulted in legal changes regarding significant issues. This reform process created a positive atmosphere in domestic politics and consolidated societal support for the AK Party policies. The continuation of societal support was vital for political stability and pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy. The reform process in that period was defined as a “silent revolution.”⁵

On the other hand, the first AK Party government coincided with the period after the U.S. declaration of its “global war on terror” and the Bush Administration was about to make an operation against the Saddam regime in Iraq. Despite the negotiations between the AK Party government and the U.S. administration, the Grand National Assembly rejected the March 1 Memorandum, which would have permitted the U.S. military forces to use Turkish soil during the operation against Iraq in 2003. The rejection resulted from the negative

stance against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in public opinion, the lack of expected benefits in exchange for unlimited support during the First Gulf War, and the legal debates about the U.S. operation.⁶ This decision greatly disappointed the U.S. officials and led to the deterioration of U.S.-Türkiye relations. Despite the attempts to recover the relations and positive messages about the strategic importance of U.S.-Turkish relations, the loss of confidence on both sides continued for years. As a result, Türkiye had troubled relations with the U.S. in the first years of the AK Party period despite the improvements in the EU-Türkiye relations.

The period between 2005 and 2010 witnessed the implementation of soft power and cooperation-based foreign policy formulated by Davutoğlu with the help of a favorable external context. Despite this general positive atmosphere in the external context, the improvements in the EU-Türkiye relations in the initial years were replaced with some disagreements and problems such as the slowing down of the reform process, the acceptance of Cyprus membership to the EU despite Türkiye's and Turkish Cypriots' support for the Annan Plan, and the changing attitudes of some leading EU members, such as France and Germany, after the leadership changes, and those problems led Türkiye to a search for new alternatives.⁷ On the other hand, there were some improvements in U.S.-Türkiye relations starting with the second term of the Bush Administration. During this period, Turkish foreign policy diversified by improving relations with many actors, pursuing proactive policies, taking the initiative to resolve long-term problems, and playing the role of mediator in several regional disputes. The Davutoğlu principles could be put into practice in that period. Since there were almost no high-intensity military conflicts in the regional and international arena, Davutoğlu's proactive foreign policy approach based on principles such as zero problems with neighbors policy, soft power, increasing interdependence by improving economic relations, making regional alliances, "rhythmic diplomacy," multi-dimensional foreign policy and increasing cooperation with international institutions and multilateral platforms played a more decisive role in shaping Turkish foreign policy.⁸ This period came to an end by 2010 due to critical changes in external conditions, starting with Israel's raid on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in 2010 and, more importantly, the emergence of the Arab Uprisings, which changed the regional dynamics and foreign policy of regional and global actors toward the Middle East.

Davutoğlu's main principles and foreign policy approach played the most decisive role between 2005 and 2010. Among them, "zero problems with neighbors policy" is used to analyze improving relations with nearby actors. This policy was based on establishing win-win relationships with neighboring countries by increasing regional cooperation and economic interdependence. It was effective with the help of improving political and economic relations with neighbors until the eruption of the Arab Uprisings. Türkiye's proactive



Turkish National Defense Minister Hulusi Akar (C) oversees a new air operation in Northern regions of Iraq and Syria with members of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) command level at the Turkish Air Force Operations Center in Ankara, Türkiye on November 20, 2022.
ARIF AKDOĞAN / AA

foreign policy led to positive steps in relations with actors who were considered traditional “enemies” of Türkiye in its region, like Armenia. It was a dramatic shift compared to the Cold War period “defensive-nationalist” Turkish foreign policy based on the idea that Türkiye was surrounded by actors harboring hostile stances toward Türkiye.⁹ Therefore, the perspective change can be interpreted as a constructivist turn regarding the role of ideational factors in shaping identities and interests. In general, the soft power-based approach of Turkish foreign policy in the Davutoğlu era and its prioritizing cooperation and economic interdependence reflected a neoliberal institutionalist view in terms of International Relations (IR) theories.

Apart from that, Davutoğlu defines Türkiye as a “central country,” and increasing proactivism in Turkish foreign policy demonstrated Türkiye’s assertive strategy in taking on a leading role in the region. The idea of a central or pivotal state also reflects the autonomous character of Turkish foreign policy, which was maintained and strengthened by the successive AK Party governments. Presidential Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın describes the foreign policy instruments of Türkiye as: “Engaging all political actors, supporting democratic processes, expanding economic integration, and increasing sociocultural relations and person-to-person communication.”¹⁰

Moreover, it was also argued that Türkiye became more relaxed, mature, and flexible in terms of using new strategies in its actions over time.¹¹ Because of the absence of huge challenges and unexpected conditions in the external context in that period, the principles, strategies, and instruments of Turkish for-

eign policy were compatible. Turkish foreign policy was also defined as “multi-dimensional,” “multi-faceted,” or “multi-vectorial” due to its engagements with various issues on different levels. As a result, Turkish foreign policy in that period reflected the implementation of Davutoğlu’s foreign policy approach under favorable external conditions.

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Soft power was one of the most frequently used expressions to describe Turkish foreign policy in the Davutoğlu era. Türkiye, in that period, established its foreign policy with the elements of soft power as opposed to the security-based hard power components of previous periods. “Modernity, commitment to democracy, economic dynamism, and dialogue-based good neighborhood diplomacy” were considered the basic components of soft power.¹² The role of a suitable international atmosphere in this foreign policy approach was apparent. The impact of EU reforms and the relatively peaceful environment in neighboring countries paved the way for Türkiye’s soft power in the region.

In terms of explaining Turkish foreign policy in the Davutoğlu era through IR theories, emphasis on liberal values is really strong among scholars. Attributing great importance to economic relations, cooperation, and institutions and defending liberal values constituted an essential part of Turkish foreign policy.¹³ Türkiye transformed into a “trading state” with increasing economic relations with many countries, especially in the Middle East, and establishing visa-free agreements with them.¹⁴ This period was labeled a “liberal turn” by some scholars at the time.¹⁵ Kadri Kaan Renda explains Turkish foreign policy activities about neighborhoods as “Not an exact but a similar, example of ‘complex interdependence,’” which was defined by neoliberal institutionalists.¹⁶ Economy-based analyses show the scope of the relationship between states as a “practical hand” or liberal foreign policy strategy.¹⁷ Apart from that, liberal tones were also analyzed as increasing de-securitization of foreign policy.¹⁸

To put it another way, the increasing weight of liberal elements and economic relations display the significance of soft power as opposed to hard power. The improvements in economic relations provided benefits until the Arab Uprisings. On the other hand, some scholars pointed out the realist or constructivist elements in Turkish foreign policy. İbrahim Kalın claims that Turkish foreign policy combined the elements of realist and constructivist approaches but needed to find a balance between “realpolitik” and “ideal-politik.”¹⁹ It was also argued that Europeanization was used as an instrument and Türkiye prioritized realpolitik considerations in most cases.²⁰ According to some scholars, “The govern-

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tivist elements such as “issue leading, opportunity seeking, region organizing, and region mobilizing,” were more prominent.²³ Sometimes, the role of ideology is attributed to Davutoğlu's worldview's influence on his foreign policy formulation.²⁴ Dietrich Jung rejects the decisive role of religious attitudes in Turkish foreign policy.²⁵ In sum, the liberal elements came into prominence in the Davutoğlu era despite the existence of realist or constructivist elements. These components provide insight into Davutoğlu's foreign policy approach.

The year 2010 became a critical turning point for the evolution of Turkish foreign policy, and the aforementioned external developments created new challenges. Türkiye had to adjust its foreign policy under the changes in the regional context. The Arab Uprisings created political instability in the Middle East, led to leadership changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and civil wars erupted in Syria and Yemen as well as Libya in a later period. The 2013 military intervention in Egypt turned the situation upside-down not only in Egypt but also in the whole region. Therefore, the period after the emergence of the Arab Uprisings created unexpected consequences for Turkish foreign policy and brought the end of that foreign policy approach in the Davutoğlu era. The last years of the Davutoğlu era can be regarded as a transition period for transformation in Turkish foreign policy. Whereas proactive and soft power-based foreign policy in the previous years produced political and economic benefits for Türkiye, the existing tools and relations were insufficient to maintain a positive atmosphere. For example, soft power or economic cooperation could not be implemented in the chaotic context of military conflicts in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. Davutoğlu expressed the need for Türkiye to play a more active and effective role as an “order instituting country” in its region as early as 2009.²⁶ Thus, there were signs of increasing assertiveness and a focus on leadership, especially in the Middle East, while keeping the liberal elements in the foreign policy approach.²⁷ In other words, a more assertive foreign policy approach went hand in hand with the liberal tones in foreign policy in the period after the Arab Uprisings. It was also defined as a “self-centric approach aiming to create a new regional environment in conformity with the idea of Westernism.”²⁸ The changes in the regional context strengthened the likelihood of assertiveness in that sense. In addition, close relations with some regional actors, like the Assad regime in Syria, deteriorated after changes in the external conditions.

ment has often followed a mainly realist foreign policy approach in the Middle East and used idealism for the maximization of Turkish national interests.²¹ In addition to the realist elements, different analyses focused on the constructivist variables in Turkish foreign policy in the Davutoğlu era.²² Some construc-

Furthermore, the overthrow of the Moammar Gadhafi regime and the following civil war created another source of political instability in the region. Whereas Erdoğan was one of the first leaders who called on then-President Hosni Mubarak to leave office, and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood was welcomed by Türkiye, the 2013 military intervention in Egypt deteriorated Turkish-Egyptian relations. In short, different cases of the Arab Uprisings influenced Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, and the shifts in the regional context resulted in the loss of Türkiye's previous gains.

Türkiye's proactive approach to foreign policy approach faced criticism due to the negative outcomes in the new regional context, and it was considered over-activism for Türkiye. Volker Perthes underlines the limitations of Turkish foreign policy depending on the difficulties in complicated issues, the negative attitudes of other actors, and the risk of adopting positions in controversial areas.²⁹ It was also underlined that over-activism might result in trade-offs that lead to dilemmas between "ethics and self-interest."³⁰ Türkiye experienced these dilemmas in Syria, Egypt, and Libya. Thus, this period showed the possible problems and risks of increasing activism and pro-active foreign policy behavior because of the limitations of capabilities and the changes in external conditions. Criticism was centered on the absence of principles or a firm axis.³¹ Türkiye encountered security threats stemming from the political instability in the Middle East. The increasing number of failed states in the region, the problem of ISIS, increased terrorist attacks targeting urban populations, the involvement of great powers in regional disputes, and the refugee crisis were the main problems in that period.³² Therefore, Fuat Keyman defined it as a transition period that prepared the basis for the re-set of Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutoğlu era.³³

Regarding foreign policy role concepts, Joerg Baudner identifies the initial phases of the Davutoğlu era with "civilian power" traits and the last period with "regional power."³⁴ As a result, the last period of the Davutoğlu era in Turkish foreign policy reflected Türkiye's attempts to adapt to the changing regional context after the Arab uprisings. Consequently, Türkiye's proactivism in that period was generally based on reactions to regional developments. The external considerations were much more decisive than domestic considerations because of the high internal polarity and low external polarity of Gerry C. Alons' conceptualization.³⁵ Davutoğlu's principles and foreign policy approach were not of primary importance in that period.

Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Davutoğlu Era

In the post-Davutoğlu era, some elements of Turkish foreign policy were maintained but there were some important changes as well. In this period,

there were three main changes in Turkish foreign policy. First of all, Türkiye experienced a coup attempt on July 15, 2016, and this HF coup attempt made restructuring the public institutions inevitable because of the established Fetullah Terror Organization (FETÖ) network in these institutions. The July 15 coup attempt demonstrated the long-term FETÖ plan of controlling the state in Türkiye by overthrowing the elected government through military force. FETÖ members were particularly effective in the judiciary, police force, and the military. In terms of foreign policy, FETÖ members also aimed to shape Turkish foreign policy. In addition, their role in the intelligence services, which are sensitive in carrying out foreign policies, also became apparent in the previous years. Apart from that, FETÖ had direct contact and carried out various activities in many countries, such as the U.S. and Turkic Republics in Central Asia. However, the July 15 coup attempt revealed the hidden agenda of FETÖ and its global network. After the coup attempt, eliminating FETÖ's network in domestic politics and foreign policy became one of the main goals for strengthening state institutions and organizations. The activities of the FETÖ members and their global network negatively affected the likelihood of political stability in Türkiye and its goal of attaining a more autonomous approach to foreign policy. Thus, eliminating the FETÖ network created a window of opportunity for more efficient state institutions and organizations, the consolidation of state power, and the use of more integrated tools and mechanisms for autonomous foreign policy.³⁶

The changes in security institutions after the failed coup attempt were more apparent because not only “the organizational status of the Turkish Police, Coast Guard, and Gendarmerie was restructured but also the General Command of the Gendarmerie and Turkish Coast Guard were transferred under the direct control of the Ministry of Interior.”³⁷ Furthermore, “reshuffling of the Turkish Armed Forces’ structure” through which the Ministry of Defense gained the upper hand in the military decision-making process was one of the first critical moves in that period.³⁸ Türkiye’s successful military operations in Syria and Iraq after the July 15 coup attempt were not coincidental, so it constituted the domestic reason for the achievement besides the external reasons like improving relations with Russia. Türkiye’s first operation, Operation Euphrates Shield in Northern Syria, started just 40 days after the coup attempt, and the result showed the power and capability of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) despite the changes in the military ranks. As a result, the July 15 coup attempt was a turning point for Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutoğlu era, and the gradual elimination of the FETÖ network in the following period provided the required coordination and integration of state institutions and organizations.

Secondly, Türkiye tried to readjust its foreign policy to deal with the problems related to changes in external conditions and adopted a new security concept

aiming to eradicate the sources of terrorism both within and outside its borders. As a result, the post-Davutoğlu era Turkish foreign policy included increased use of hard power and realist elements. Because of the ongoing civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIS, the emergence of other terrorist groups in the Southern borders of Türkiye, and terrorist attacks targeting urban populations in Türkiye, the soft power-based foreign policy of the Davutoğlu era were no longer appropriate for the country. Direct security threats in that context required the active use of hard power tools and proactive policies against terrorism. Therefore, the new security concept and increasing realism were a *sine qua non* to deal with the regional problems, and they led to “an emerging doctrine of preemption” against the PKK and ISIS across the border.³⁹

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However, other actors’ external conditions and attitudes were also important for performing cross-border operations. In addition to the non-state actors and terrorist groups, the direct involvement of Russia dramatically changed the dynamics of the Syrian civil war. Therefore, Türkiye needed to collaborate with the Russian Administration to use Syrian airspace in its operations. Türkiye could manage this risk through leadership diplomacy and the recovery of Turkish-Russian relations after the failed coup attempt. After arranging the necessary external conditions, the success of the military operations depended on the capability of the TSK and the effective management and coordination of the operations.

Türkiye’s investments in the defense industry and development of its military technology, especially of unmanned aerial vehicles, provided a comparative advantage for Türkiye’s successive military operations in Northern Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring, and Operation Spring Shield). Consequently, there was a rise in the use of hard power in the post-Davutoğlu era to deal with the security threats stemming from the regional political instability, and Türkiye could achieve its goals in its counter-terrorism actions with the help of its operational capability and development of the defense industry in the current period.

Thirdly, Türkiye increased its capabilities and experiences regarding crisis management in its relations with the great powers like the U.S. and Russia in the AK Party period through different means, such as compartmentalizing the problematic issues or “policy of balancing” in some cases, and these policies

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helped its autonomous foreign policy.⁴⁰ The transformation of domestic politics combined with alienation by the Western powers as a result of the problems with the U.S. and the EU led to a focus on a more autonomous Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye's search for autonomous policies and foreign policy diversification was considered a "shift of axis" and was not welcomed by its traditional Western allies. Turkish foreign policy consistently reflected "autonomy," refuting the

of "axis theory."⁴¹ Türkiye tried to simultaneously improve its relations with its neighbors, the Western actors, Russia, and China.

The March 1st Memorandum crisis in U.S.-Türkiye relations can be considered a triggering factor for Türkiye's more autonomous foreign policy because of the decisiveness of the U.S. policy in the previous periods. The U.S.-Türkiye relations "evolved from a solid Cold War alliance to a more a la carte relationship."⁴² The U.S.-Türkiye relations faced new crises starting with the Obama period. Whereas Türkiye supported the Syrian opposition in the Syrian civil war, the U.S. provided logistical support for the PYD/YPG, which Türkiye considers an extension of the PKK, on the ground and increased Türkiye's security concerns near its borders.

Furthermore, the FETÖ leader, Fetullah Gülen, lives in the U.S., but the Obama Administration did not respond positively to Türkiye's application for Gülen's extradition. These two problems, namely the U.S. support for the PYD/YPG and the extradition of the FETÖ leader, remained the main problems in U.S.-Türkiye relations and were inherited by the Trump Administration.⁴³ During the Trump period, secondary issues created new problems, such as the Pastor Brunson crisis, the Halkbank trial, and the S-400 missile system besides the two main problems, but the U.S.-Türkiye relations could be sustained with the help of leadership diplomacy between Trump and Erdoğan as well as compartmentalizing the problematic issues for strategic and long-term goals defined as "learning to 'agree to disagree.'"⁴⁴ As a result, U.S.-Türkiye relations continued at a relatively lower level in the post-Davutoğlu era compared to former periods due to a lack of confidence on both sides and disagreements over some critical issues. However, Türkiye had more experience in crisis management, especially in its bilateral relations with the global powers.

Unlike the U.S.-Türkiye relations, Türkiye's political and economic relations with Russia significantly improved in the 2000s. This positive trend strengthened the diversification of Turkish foreign policy and gained a sustainable



136 soldiers of the Special Mine Search, and Clearing teams of Turkish Land Forces Command arrive in Baku, Azerbaijan, on December 16, 2020.

Turkish National Defense Ministry / AA

character despite diverging interests and policies in neighboring regions. There were different dimensions of Turkish-Russian relations, and this multi-dimensional relationship increased interdependence. While the economic relations, particularly on energy cooperation, and socio-cultural aspects of the relations increased to a great extent, these dimensions of bilateral ties remained sensitive to political relations.⁴⁵ Despite the positive trend in Turkish-Russian relations, some important developments in different regions led to diverging interests and positions of both sides. The Syrian civil war constituted one of the diverging points in the evolution of relations.

On the one hand, Türkiye's initial attempts to convince the Assad regime to reform were replaced by the policy of supporting the Syrian opposition and prioritizing regime change in Syria. On the other hand, Russia attributed more importance to the continuation of the Assad regime, and it aimed to prevent Syria from turning into a "second Libya" through the intervention of the Western powers.⁴⁶ More importantly, Russia's direct involvement in Syria made this divergence more sensitive from Türkiye's perspective. The downing of a Russian jet by the TSK because of violations of Turkish borders led to a significant decrease in Turkish-Russian relations. The harsh response of the Putin Administration of economic sanctions and blocking the movement of people and goods negatively affected the Turkish economy and bilateral relations with Russia. Until July 2016, "the two countries political, economic and cultural links were almost completely frozen due to the Russian sanctions."⁴⁷

However, the deterioration of relations did not last long. The July 15 coup attempt became a turning point for domestic politics in Türkiye and Turkish-Russian relations. While the reactions of the American and European officials created disappointment in Türkiye, Putin's immediate and strong support paved the way for the normalization of bilateral relations. The well-known "pro-American geopolitical self-identification and anti-Russian stance" of the FETÖ movement were also important reasons for Russian support for the president and the Turkish government against the coup attempt.⁴⁸ After the July 15 coup attempt, bilateral relations rapidly improved and normalized. Türkiye started to conduct operations in Northern Syria, and Russia refrained from blocking Türkiye's operations, reflecting the Russian understanding of Ankara's security concerns to a certain extent.

Despite normalizing Turkish-Russian relations, some crucial disagreements and diverging interests created challenges. In addition to the different positions of Türkiye and Russia in Syria, Türkiye's logistic and military support for the al-Serraj government in Libya and the Azerbaijani government in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict against Armenia in 2020 created new sources of tension in the Turkish-Russian relations. Furthermore, the question of Idlib remained the biggest challenge in Syria despite the temporary resolution of the problem by establishing de-escalation zones through the Sochi Agreement in 2018.⁴⁹ These divergences between Russia and Turkey reflected the geopolitical competition in those regions. In the recent period, the Russia-Ukraine War came into prominence as a threatening factor for regional stability and Türkiye's relations with both sides. However, Türkiye's constructive role, mediation attempts, and balanced policy contributed to keeping good ties with the two actors and produced some concrete achievements such as hosting the negotiations between delegations and leading the "grain corridor" agreement together with the UN. It can be claimed that maintaining close relations with Russia by compartmentalizing the problematic issues in the current period was one of the significant achievements of Turkish foreign policy. In general, compartmentalizing the diverging points in the relations with the global actors and keeping bilateral relations relatively better have been one of the characteristics of Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutoğlu era. As a result, Turkish-Russian relations maintained their positive trend starting with the 2000s, except for a short period between the Russian jet crisis and the July 15 coup attempt in Türkiye. Likewise, bilateral relations were improved despite some crucial disagreements and diverging policies in different regions with the help of the compartmentalization of those issues.

Looking at the other side of the coin, the developments in the regional and international context and changes in Turkish foreign policy in the post-Davutoğlu era could not lead to the expected outcomes in all issues, so this period cannot be considered a total success story. The different cases of the Arab Up-

risings and changes in the Middle Eastern context had already deteriorated Türkiye's relations with some Middle Eastern neighbors such as Syria and Egypt.

Furthermore, some initiatives aimed to establish large cooperation excluding Türkiye in the Eastern Med-

iterranean. The negative trend in Türkiye's relations with Greece, Egypt, and Israel strengthened these initiatives, so the Eastern Mediterranean has turned into another area of fierce competition in Türkiye's neighborhood. Türkiye's alienation from the West due to problems and crises in its relations with the U.S. and the EU, and the European actors decreased its international support in its struggle in the Eastern Mediterranean and other regional issues. Apart from that, Türkiye's rejection of the military intervention in Egypt and its support for Qatar in the Qatar crisis in the Gulf region aggravated its relations with the Gulf states, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. The UAE and Saudi-led campaigns and policies against Türkiye and its allies reflected the regional competition, if not enmity.⁵⁰

In addition, Türkiye's military operations in Northern Syria, its maritime deal and logistic support for the GNA in Libya, and its political and logistic support for Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War were not welcomed by the regional and international actors in general. As a result, Türkiye remained almost isolated in its region and reached the point that it was far from the policy of "zero problems with neighbors." Türkiye's isolated position after the Arab Uprisings was defined as "precious loneliness" by İbrahim Kalın in 2013 while he was the chief foreign policy advisor of Erdoğan. The position of "loneliness" is still standing in the present case despite Turkish foreign policy's increasing autonomy and realism, and normalizing its relations with some regional actors. Although the problematic relations with many actors and increasing isolation had various reasons, and Türkiye was not solely responsible for that position, the accumulation of crises and problems certainly increased the burden of Türkiye's foreign policy agenda. Hence, the decision-makers had to deal with some of these problems to achieve their goals in the following period.

Conclusion

Turkish foreign policy experienced two significant transformations in the AK Party period. In the first transformation, during the Davutoğlu era, the security-oriented foreign policy approach of the previous decades was replaced

Türkiye adopted a new security concept aiming to eradicate the sources of terrorism both within and outside its borders and began to use more hard power

The increasing realism and hard power used in foreign policy were necessary for Türkiye to deal with the changing external conditions

political and economic relations until 2010 with the help of favorable external conditions, the emergence of the Arab Uprisings created huge challenges for Turkish foreign policy, and the regional context significantly changed after that period. Maintaining soft power and cooperation-based foreign policy was no longer possible due to the security threats that emerged in the neighboring countries and the proliferation of military conflicts. The decision-makers of Turkish foreign policy tried to respond to these challenges by adjusting some policies. The Davutoğlu era ended in 2015 after this transition period, and the July 15 coup attempt triggered the restructuring of state institutions and organizations and reforming of foreign policy. This process that started with the Arab Uprisings led to the second transformation in Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party period.

In the post-Davutoğlu era, there were three crucial changes in Turkish foreign policy, leading to increasing realism in the foreign policy approach. First, the July 15 coup attempt in 2016 changed the dynamics in domestic politics and foreign policy actions. The elimination of the FETÖ network from the state institutions and organizations provided a well-functioning of state and better conditions for more autonomous foreign policy. These developments, in combination with the good relations with Russia, contributed to Türkiye's successful military operations in Northern Syria following the coup attempt.

Second, parallel to the rise of security threats and terrorist attacks stemming from the Syrian civil war and political instability in the Middle East, Türkiye adopted a new security concept aiming to eradicate the sources of terrorism both within and outside its borders and began to use more hard power. Türkiye combined its assertive policy and military operations with diplomatic activities in that period. Third, Türkiye increased its capabilities in crisis management in its relations with great powers and managed its autonomous foreign policy with the help of its former experiences and compartmentalization of problematic issues to keep diverging policies from turning into crises. On the other hand, the crises and problems with Western actors, the Arab Uprisings-related problems with some Middle Eastern actors, regional competition and policy divergences with some Gulf States, and the initiatives aiming to exclude Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean led to the isolation and "loneliness" of

by a proactive, soft-power, and cooperation-based understanding of foreign policy. The "zero problems with neighbors policy" was combined with improved relations with global and regional actors. The multi-dimensional foreign policy gained proactive characteristics in that period. While this foreign policy approach provided opportunities and improvements in

Türkiye in its region. Thus, Türkiye has to deal with this isolation in the next period. The new foreign policy approach should be strengthened by increasing friends and focusing on rising autonomy.

Consequently, the three changes in the post-Davutoğlu era contributed to the maintenance of autonomous foreign policy and the rise of deterrence and sphere of influence in the regional sense. The increasing realism and hard power used in foreign policy were necessary for Türkiye to deal with the changing external conditions. It strengthened the effectiveness of foreign policy actions in the current period. The military operations of Türkiye in Northern Syria and Türkiye's logistic and military support in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh reflected the transformation of Turkish foreign policy in the recent period. ■

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