

Re-Defining Türkiye's International Relations: Two Decades of 360° Foreign Policies

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ABSTRACT *Analyzing modern Türkiye's foreign policy is the perfect case study of how, over time, a nation-state can completely restructure its approach to engaging with the outside world. Yet this analysis does not aim to propose an extended or complete listing of individual countries' relations; on the contrary, it basically tries to suggest what was the catalyst when measurable change occurred for the first time. In brief, Türkiye progressed from promoting splendid isolation during the past millennium to becoming a fully integrated and often trend-setting international actor in just over two decades. Hence, determining the actual catalyst for change, which according to the author is not just an election victory but also a much more profound paradigm shift in elected officials' attitudes towards the wider world, is this contribution's major aim. After discussing the analytical differences between international relations on the one hand and foreign policies on the other and focusing on the electorate as a key contributor and beneficiary of and from proactive foreign policies, the piece proposes a number of key examples to come up with a tangible way to measure foreign policy success.*

Keywords: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Türkiye's Foreign Policy, European Union, United Nations Reform

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Introduction

Should the public have a say in, or at least an interest in, the foreign affairs of their country? Professor Christopher Hill, for many years the leading scholar in the field of International Relations, and in particular during his long tenure at the London School of Economics, clearly thinks so and published a landmark book back in 2003.¹ Following the timeframe of this article, the analysis commences on a two-decade-long paradigm shift in the foreign affairs of the Republic of Türkiye. With the start date for comparison being the landslide victory of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in November 2002 under its charismatic, much-cherished, and trusted leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, an analysis would fill many scholarly volumes. Hence, readers should be advised that, figuratively speaking, this is just a look at the tip of the success story iceberg.

In his book, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, Hill is on a dual mission: to bridge the gap between the popular (or non-academic) perception of foreign policy and academic dismissal of foreign policy analysis as an archaic and irrelevant instrument of the state. In his book, Hill tried to 'liberate' foreign policy from its zealot custodians and 'high priests' who since the 18th century have wrapped it in a veil of mystique 'protecting' it from the realm of public policy and democratic accountability.² While foreign policy is commonly associated with international politics by the

general population, it has lost favor as a subject of study, research, and teaching among scholars specializing in international relations within academia.

Hill calls for the inclusion of a democratic component in foreign policy formation in conjunction with efficiency and rationality, thereby endowing it with greater effectiveness and popular legitimacy.³ Hill's reflections allow to put modern Türkiye's bilateral relations and the wider set of foreign policy making into the current proactive approach towards being a global actor.

The important distinction highlighted here will be revisited toward the end of this article. This includes an examination of why the governing AK Party comprehends the significance of transforming Türkiye into a globally respected foreign policy actor. This transformation aims to persuade the electorate that the policy of splendid isolation, which persisted until late in 2002, was fundamentally misguided. In preparation for the upcoming case studies, it is essential to attribute the coining of the term '360-degree foreign policy' to its likely originator, for what appears to be its inaugural usage. In a piece titled "Türkiye Sees Foreign Policy from 360-Degree Angle," Kübra Chohan wrote in May 2018 for *Anadolu Agency* that "Presidential Spokesman İbrahim Kalın has said Türkiye's position in Western alliance does not prevent it from opening up to other strategic regions."⁴ Writing for the İstanbul-based *Daily Sabah*, Kalın said:

“As it has been the case over the last 16 years, Türkiye sees foreign policy from a 360-degree point of view. It does not consider it as a zero-sum game.”⁵

The very essence of modern Türkiye's foreign policy becomes evident: it is entirely possible to be, for example, a leading member of NATO and closely cooperate with Western partners, all while simultaneously establishing successful relations with countries in the North, East, and South. Thus, a crucial gap in academic discourse has been addressed, emphasizing the importance of analyzing foreign policies within the broader context of international relations, as opposed to the reverse. Additionally, the term ‘360-degree foreign policies’ has been introduced and presented within a Turkish context, arguably for the first time. This article now proceeds to examine a select set of case studies within the realm of Turkish foreign policy, specifically those implemented since 2003. Subsequently, the analysis will return to the concluding argument, considering whether foreign policy constitutes an integral component of Türkiye's long-term 100-year strategy, and whether nation branding should encompass foreign policies beyond mere marketing dimensions, encompassing elements such as trade or culture.

European Union Accession

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ing Türkiye in a prolonged waiting phase, serves as a valuable instrument for assessing Türkiye's evolving approach as an international actor. Most fellow candidate countries, and ever more so towards the final stages of becoming a full member state, more or less sat idle with regards to engaging in proactive foreign policies. The accepted way of thinking was that in order not to make any last-minute enemies in Brussels' corridors of power, it is best to wait until membership is granted and then automatically and without much fanfare accept the provisions of the common foreign and security policies. Needless to say, many former candidate countries could have easily avoided this trap as those common foreign and security policies evolved over time and did not even exist, for example, when Spain and Portugal entered the bloc back in the year 1986. Nevertheless, no capital wanted to alienate other member states, so acting as an independent

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global player –if at all possible when considering some of the smaller former candidate countries was a clear no-no.

Ankara faced the same dilemma: whether to wait for accession or continue on its previously established foreign affairs path. This situation marks another milestone, indicating Türkiye's distinctiveness in its approach. Upon embarking on alignment with the body of EU law, known as the *acquis communautaire*, following Türkiye's attainment of full candidate country status in 1999 and the EU Council's decision on October 3, 2005, to initiate negotiations with Türkiye, in Brussels, it became evident that, except for a few complex chapters such as Environment or Public Procurement, Türkiye would have been technically prepared for full membership within a timeframe of no more than two to three years by 2009. Yet the so-called opening and closing of chapters proved cumbersome not from the side of Ankara but from Brussels instead. In addition to that, Greece, France, and Southern Cyprus erected one roadblock after the other with the clear aim of only

ever accepting Türkiye into the bloc if Ankara abides by the demands of those three nations. Some analysts would go so far and argue this tactic underlines that a number of EU member states never wanted to let Türkiye join the EU!

At present, 16 chapters out of 35 are open, one is temporarily closed, and 14 are blocked.⁶ Ankara's remarkable and praiseworthy response can be aptly characterized as follows: while Türkiye maintains its commitment to the path leading to full EU membership as an official state policy, it also pragmatically acknowledges the existing circumstances. Ankara refuses to await a decision from Brussels, which may potentially take another five or six decades. Hence, after having completely revamped the economy following the dramatic financial and economic meltdown early in the new millennium, the newly elected governing AK Party embarked on re-designing Türkiye's foreign relations from 2006 onwards too. This process of double restructuring had been ongoing since early 2003, but with huge successes on the social and economic front domestically more clearly visible by late 2005, the time had come to focus on a new image abroad, as an assertive, aspiring, and inspiring foreign policy actor.

This in turn led many in Europe to worry about whether an independent and successful Türkiye is something to laud or fear. Thus, despite being kept in the *ante-chambre* even after October 3, 2005, Türkiye decided to do the right thing and create pro-

active regional and, at times, even global foreign policies regardless of what Brussels would think of it.

Having delineated what could be deemed the catalyst for initiating Türkiye's proactive foreign policies in 2005, the discussion now turns to the bilateral relations between London and Ankara. Subsequently, an examination of the imperative reform process within the United Nations Security Council ensues, aiming to gauge whether tangible outcomes have materialized in Türkiye's foreign policy in general. With the catalyst for EU membership negotiations on October 3, 2005, the primary approach of positioning itself as an independent democratic nation, while engaging with the West, North, East, and South, became evident in the years immediately following the decision made during the Brussels accession process on October 3, 2005. This outcome validated Türkiye's frustration with the persistently slow-paced process.

United Kingdom

In accordance with the hypothesis, which aligns with Hill's perspective, asserting that foreign policy should be examined within the framework of international relations rather than the other way around, particularly in light of an increasingly engaged public showing heightened interest in their nation's international position and reputation –a dimension largely overlooked for more than five decades after the Second World War–

one ideal subject for a case study is the bilateral relations between Türkiye and the United Kingdom, encompassing both the pre-Brexit and post-Brexit periods. In other words, bilateral international relations between two independent states lead to the implementation of a set of foreign policies, not the other way round.

Considering the constrained scope of this commentary, it is worth noting that it was the British government in 2005 that played a pivotal role in initiating the official EU accession negotiations for the Republic of Türkiye. This significant development occurred during a well-known late-night negotiating marathon held in the Belgian capital city of Brussels. The man at the helm of such a development is British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. As it had transpired that the Austrian Government might wish to veto the official start of accession negotiations, Straw took the issue on board, and despite rumours that the Turkish delegation might leave the conference hall, the night turned out to be a success, at least from the 2005 perspective. Straw's intervention was the result of, first, a proactive foreign policy of Britain understanding that EU enlargement is in the interest of all parties concerned, and second, a reflection of the state-of-the-art bilateral relations between both countries.

Within the scope of the following ten years, bilateral relations went from strength to strength, with examples including defense industry cooperation, trade, educational exchanges, the Türkiye-sponsored creation of a

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modern Turkish studies chair at the London School of Economics, and an ever-increasing number of British tourists and (future) residents.

Returning to the EU accession impasse as outlined in the previous chapter, London never completely focused on that aspect alone but engaged in bilateral relations while promoting Ankara's accession to the bloc and deciding to cooperate on many other issues of regional and global concern as well.

Fast forward to the heinous coup attempt orchestrated by the FETÖ terrorist organization on July 15, 2016. 'Dreadful' was the very word highly respected British politician Sir Alan Duncan had used in his condemnation of the coup attempt. Sir Duncan was Minister for Europe at the time and the first European representative to arrive in Ankara immediately after July 15 2016, to express his country's solidarity with the people of Türkiye. His visit(s) became a lasting symbol of the friendship that united both states. He repeated this wording again in 2017 when he said via *Twitter*, "Heading to #Türkiye for 5th visit

as Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCO) Minister. 1 year since the dreadful coup attempt. Important to uphold democracy" on August 17, 2017.⁷

What the support of Sir Duncan for modern Türkiye's democracy underlines is that while quite a number of supposedly partner countries took far too long to realize the seriousness of the heinous coup attempt and, above all else, understand who was its mastermind, Duncan and his government at once spoke up and spoke out. This fact demonstrates how far both countries' bilateral relations have come in just over a decade, since 2005. A soon-to-be 'Brexit Britain,' hence a much more independently acting United Kingdom after David Cameron's fateful referendum, clearly appreciated Ankara's recently established set of foreign policies. Clearly anchored in the West yet looking North, East, and South as well which was the approach of the British government for its very own foreign policies as well. Besides, it is fair to assume that the first post-Brexit trade deal which was agreed upon between London and Ankara did not happen by chance but as a reflection of many years of trustful bilateral cooperation.

United Nations Security Council Reform

The previously mentioned date, October 3, 2005, was highlighted as a potential catalyst for Ankara's adoption of a new set of foreign policies. Subsequently, an examination of



bilateral relations between the UK and Türkiye served as an illustrative case study reflecting these proactive international relations. The discussion encompassed both transnational policies and traditional two-state relations. Finally, but significantly, an examination will be made to understand the potential implications of Türkiye's new policies for a larger entity: the United Nations.

In his highly acclaimed book *A Fairer World Is Possible*, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan puts forward a set of ideas with a view to modernizing the internal structures of the United Nations, in particular those of the United Nations Security Council. A much-cited comment made by the President around the time of the publication of his book in September 2021, "The World Is Bigger than Five," perfectly underlines his con-

cerns.⁸ He wrote, "It is neither moral nor fair for just five nations to make decisions on issues that could influence the fate of the world. The world is bigger than five countries."⁹

Türkiye openly asks to limit the timeframe of permanent Security Council members to the same as is currently employed for non-permanent members. And there is an intertwined issue debated at present: if the first reform had been pushed through, the veto system would need to be abolished as well.

The choice of this example is guided by the fact that, on one hand, it may appear relatively straightforward to identify and assess tangible benefits in the context of bilateral relations between individual states. Conversely, when attempting a similar analysis within the framework of a regional,

Turkish President Erdoğan reiterated the importance of reforming the UN during his speech at the 78th General Assembly meeting held at the UN headquarters in New York on September 19, 2023.

MURAT ÇETİNMÜHÜRAR / AA

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transnational, or international body like the EU, the complexity of the situation increases, necessitating a more meticulous examination. Yet the fact alone that Türkiye now has the global standing to even ask for a complete overhaul of the internal workings of the world's largest transnational body, the UN, shows how successful the past two decades were indeed.

Another indicator for the seriousness of Ankara to find allies for its proactive role in asking for reform at the United Nations is that fact that the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications arranged for a series of conferences and panels about exactly that topic in many different countries both within Europe and on other continents, too.

An undertaking like this would have been unthinkable twenty years earlier; it demonstrated a proud, modern, democratic Türkiye looking outside, no longer inside. 'Old' Türkiye and her past elites were not interested in

that outside world. Modern Türkiye is different as the government and president carry the will of the people, and a strong, successful, role-model nation is exactly what that public wants.

Conclusion and Outlook: In the Wakening of the 'Century of Türkiye'

In the framework of the past examples was concluded that the Republic of Türkiye embarked on a remarkable reformist and modernization path, including in the domain of foreign policies and international relations, and in particular during the past two decades. In conclusion, a related question merits attention: as the country turned 100 years old, plans for celebrating the centenary have been well underway since mid-2022. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had announced an ambitious calendar of events to look back at what his nation had achieved over time. Yet at the same moment, the President and his government were and are looking ahead –in other words, building on a role model legacy while entering the next hundred years of reform, progress, and stability crowning with the President Erdoğan's vision of the Century of Türkiye. Will foreign affairs become an integral part of these undertakings?

From an observer's viewpoint, the answer to both questions should be a resounding 'yes.' First, returning to Hill (see above), including public opinion in foreign policy making has become a major success factor at the domestic

ballot box. Erdoğan understood this vital aspect from day one in office. The AK Party thus removed foreign policies from the elites and allowed the entire population to participate in their formulation by declaring foreign policies a key element of all election manifestos. What the population understood was that not only tutelage from former, often undemocratic, elites at home must become a thing of the past, but that tutelage as exercised by foreign powers will no longer be tolerated either.

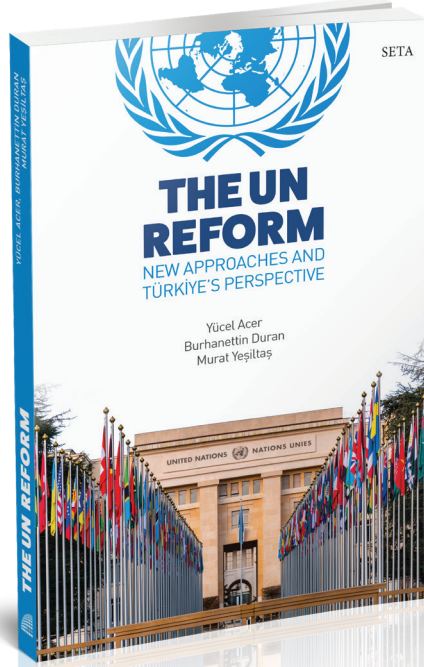
Second, as Türkiye embarks on the ambitious venture of promoting Türkiye's influence abroad once more, foreign policies will prove crucial in approaching international audiences, including academia, business leaders, investors, politicians, and even tourists, who, in the age of 24/7 online news, are very keen to know where to go before actually going.

While numerous additional examples could be considered, such an extensive endeavor is beyond the scope of this work. Therefore, the conclusion emphasizes that Türkiye's departure from the concept of isolation that prevailed during the five post-war decades, in favor of adopting a proac-

tive 360-degree set of foreign policies, has resulted in a significant reconfiguration of its global role. This transformation carries implications that extend beyond the scope of this discussion, deserving further academic exploration. ■

Endnotes

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THE UN REFORM

NEW APPROACHES AND
TÜRKİYE'S PERSPECTIVE

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