



[Global Power Shifts](#)

# Of Bridges and Gateways

Turkey's Regional Power Aspirations

Walter Glos/Nils Lange

The bridge to Asia. A gateway to the Middle East and Europe. For centuries, Turkey has been considered a country linking the Western and Eastern worlds. Whether that be due to Turkish military bases used by NATO as bridgeheads to the Middle East, or the threats made by its president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to “open the gates” to Europe for the millions of refugees accommodated by Turkey<sup>1</sup>, NATO member and EU candidate Turkey has been increasingly presenting the Western alliance with a *fait accompli* over recent years.

---

Turkey is militarily engaged in the most significant conflicts in its region, while also having ramped up its global military presence in recent years. Turkish influence extends from the Balkans to the Horn of Africa.<sup>2</sup> 2020 witnessed a re-escalation of decades-old conflicts with its neighbours Greece, Cyprus, and thus also the EU over the demarcation of territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, and the exploitation of the continental shelf. Turkey increasingly interferes in domestic political debates of other states, and openly claims a leadership role in its neighbourhood. Against the backdrop of America’s absence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, a power shift is thus currently taking place. Turkey is increasingly pursuing a standalone policy independent of its Western allies.

In this context, the Western world readily refers to the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the new sultan. The AK Party’s foreign policy, often dubbed<sup>3</sup> neo-Ottoman and revisionist, conveys the idea in the West that the government under Erdoğan wants to resurrect the former Ottoman Empire’s expansion and grandeur from the ashes. While Turkey wants to increase its global influence – and claims to be involved in the issues of its neighbourhood as a regional power – it certainly has no desire to be an imperial power. Contrary to the Western perception that Turkey’s foreign policy under Erdoğan primarily pursues Islamist goals, Ankara’s seemingly new, proactive foreign policy is rather intended to consolidate the regime’s

internal legitimacy. This neo-Ottoman rhetoric serves primarily to maintain the Turkish president’s power. He wants to be perceived as a strong man, both domestically and externally, thus creating a bargaining chip for talks with the EU or Russia, for instance. Still, explaining Turkey’s current foreign policy solely in connection with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s personality falls short of the mark. Rather, it is important to look at Turkey’s foreign policy in a broader historical context to realise that its current policies in its neighbourhood are much more opportunistic than strategic in nature, pursuing a deeply rooted Turkish *Realpolitik* that is by no means a new phenomenon. The West tends to over-emphasise the importance of Islam as a basis for Turkish foreign policy, which, in turn, fails to recognise the complexity and background of Turkish security policy.

The following analysis shows that while Ankara’s rhetoric might be different under other administrations, the direction of its foreign policy would be largely the same. This article highlights the real and constructed drivers of Turkey’s view of the world and resulting foreign policy.

If we take a look at Turkey’s recent history, we will see what has really changed and what forms the foundations of the country’s regional power aspirations. It will also shed light on how sustainable this seemingly new policy is, and what role Turkey might assume in the context of global power shifts.

## **The Historical Context: From Reaction to Prevention**

When the modern Turkish Republic emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, the maxim “peace at home, peace in the world” voiced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, applied in Ankara. Oriented towards this anti-imperial doctrine, Turkish policy primarily pursued domestic stability and the preservation of territorial integrity. The struggle for liberation following the Treaty of Sèvres with its Western occupation left its mark on a nationalism that continues to shape the collective historical consciousness in Turkey to this day. Forgotten in the West, the spectre of Sèvres and the narrative of encirclement still looms large in Turkey.

### **The idea of foreign powers attempting to weaken and divide Turkey is a powerful force in Turkish politics.**

---

The idea that the major Western powers would undermine Turkey’s ambitions has been deeply rooted in Turkish society since time immemorial – and this is not completely unfounded. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, major European powers such as France, Russia, and Britain systematically undermined the Ottoman Empire’s sovereignty and integrity by supporting separatist movements in what was still the Ottoman Balkans back then, and later in the Arab world, while also assuring the Ottoman government that they would help to maintain the status quo. The idea of foreign powers trying to weaken and divide Turkey remains so prevalent that it is a powerful force in Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy. According to a 2018 study by Istanbul Bilgi University, 87 per cent of Turks believe that European states want to divide and split Turkey.<sup>4</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that Turkish politicians and the media were quick to identify the West as one of the culprits for the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016.<sup>5</sup>

The memory of losing the Ottoman Empire to ethnic nationalism and separatism has resulted in hypersensitivity to outside interference in “Turkish” issues. In both Syria and Iraq, Washington sided with the Kurds without taking Turkish security perceptions into account. US support for the Kurdish YPG must, therefore, also be seen against this background and has twice as much impact on Turkish politics and society.

## **Constants of Foreign Policy**

Traditionally, Turkish foreign policy has been shaped by precisely those historical experiences of the Ottoman Empire, its geostrategic location, and the political ideology of its Kemalist founding fathers.

Turkey’s geopolitical position notably shapes its foreign policy and has ensured that its actions in recent decades have been primarily driven by changing (geopolitical) circumstances. Turkey is an excellent example of how and to what extent geography determines a country’s foreign policy. When the fledgling republic came under increasing pressure from the Soviet Union, which demanded territorial concessions from Turkey and bases on the Bosphorus, the Turkish government sought to align itself with the West by becoming a member of NATO on 18 February 1952.

This location and orientation increase Turkey’s value as a NATO ally, and ensure that Turkey is considered within the Western defence alliance primarily as a functional ally<sup>6</sup>; above all, its geographical location and military power make it an essential part of NATO. NATO’s second-largest army after the US has been firmly embedded in the Western alliance system since the Cold War and continues to represent the most important component of the alliance’s southern flank. Despite all the anti-Western rhetoric, there are times when NATO is the only international platform where Turkey can act on an equal footing. The fact that there is still no realistic alternative to ties with the West, is also reflected in the importance Ankara attaches to NATO. On

1 January 2021, Turkey took over the command of the VJTF (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force), the alliance's rapid response force.<sup>7</sup> This spearhead consists of a reinforced combat brigade with some 6,400 soldiers who can be deployed in a matter of days. Moreover, Turkey is embedded in numerous NATO and UN missions as a virtually indispensable contributor of troops.<sup>8</sup> This testifies that despite its difficulties with some of its NATO allies, Turkey remains an integral part of military structures. Similarly, Turkey has committed itself to ensure that an international military presence remains in the country after the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Turkish soldiers will continue their training mission for Afghan security forces.<sup>9</sup>

### New World – New Security Environment

While other European NATO countries such as Germany could rely on NATO's security guarantee, Turkey, since its accession, has always had to rely on itself. Following the Johnson Letter of 1964, in which the American president threatened Ankara that, in the event of an attack on Turkey by the USSR, NATO would not help Turkey if it were to become involved in Cyprus, Ankara began to improve its relations with the USSR and increasingly pursued its own agenda, independent from the rest of NATO.<sup>10</sup> Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Western Europe has found itself surrounded by friends and security, whereas Turkey has found itself engulfed by instability. Over the last three decades, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia created dozens of new states in its vicinity. The demise of Iraq and the collapse of Syria, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the war against the PKK at home have shaped Turkey's understanding of security policy. In particular, the Middle East – and thus Turkey's immediate neighbourhood – has been consistently marked by instability since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This has posed immense security problems to Ankara, particularly since the dawning of the new millennium.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, preserving a stable status

quo in the neighbourhood is of particular interest to Ankara. In this sense, Atatürk's above-mentioned doctrine was weakened from an early stage when Turkey saw its security interests threatened. With the annexation of Hatay in 1939 and the military intervention in Northern Cyprus in 1974 on the basis of the Zurich and London Agreements of 1959, establishing Turkey as one of the guarantor powers for the new Republic of Cyprus<sup>12</sup>, the Turkish Republic demonstrated its willingness to respond militarily and act unilaterally when Turkey's security interests were at stake.

### The shift from a policy of non-intervention to more active participation in regional developments has increased Turkey's political reach.

---

Turkey had traditionally avoided getting involved in regional politics and conflicts. But geopolitical developments, as well as events at home, forced Turkey to become more engaged with the outside world, and to assume greater prominence in international relations. Terror by the PKK, the experience of the almost failed Cyprus operation<sup>13</sup>, and the end of the Cold War led to Turkey's security policies undergoing a paradigm shift.<sup>14</sup> The Turkish military established the maxim of the two and a half wars, according to which the armed forces must be able to defend the country both in its Western and Eastern regions, as well as withstanding the threat from the PKK at home.<sup>15</sup>

These changing circumstances have presented completely new possibilities for Turkish foreign policy, too. The independence of the Turkic republics and strengthening of the Muslim population in the Balkans have given rise to historical parallels, and enabled Turkey to exploit positive memories of the Ottoman Empire for its foreign and economic policy purposes.<sup>16</sup> As part of this new foreign policy presence, Turkey contributed





The new Sultan? The foreign policy of Turkish president Erdoğan is often referred to as being neo-Ottoman.  
Source: © Lucas Jackson, Reuters.

to NATO multilateral military operations in the 1990s and took sides throughout its neighbourhood, from the Balkans (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo) to the Caucasus (Nagorno-Karabakh) and the Middle East (Kuwait and Iraq).

While a shift from its traditional policy of isolation and non-intervention to Turkey's increasingly active participation in regional

developments has afforded the country the potential to increase its economic and political reach, this has unleashed new challenges and security concerns at the same time. Owing to the "Arab Spring" of 2011 and its aftermath, the rapid deterioration of Turkey's regional and domestic security environment has coincided with a growing perception that its Western allies do not pay sufficient attention to Turkish key

security interests. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein reignited the Kurdish issue in Iraq, with this having become important once again in the wake of the Syrian civil war.

*Dünya beşten büyüktür –*  
**“The World Is Bigger than Five”**

Regional power ambitions have been reinforced in recent years by the role of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been in power for 18 years. Erdoğan sees his country as a regional power that is neither dependent on Europe nor the US, and certainly should not be patronised by them. This vision culminates in his mantra that “the world is bigger than five”.<sup>17</sup> Here, he refers to the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, which he wants to reform to reflect a global shift in power since the end of the Cold War. As early as 2012, when the council failed to pass a resolution on Syria, he criticised its composition in the media.<sup>18</sup> Recently, in autumn 2020, Erdoğan denounced the ineffectiveness of global mechanisms in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and called for drastic reforms.<sup>19</sup>

**Turkey seeks strategic independence without abandoning its traditional ties to the West.**

---

The “New Turkey”<sup>20</sup> is about independence at any price. Despite a disastrous economic situation and a strongly devalued lira, the Turkish government thus continues to vehemently refuse the acceptance of an International Monetary Fund aid programme. In Turkey, there is an unspoken expectation that it is entitled to assume a leadership role in a changed world. Gülnur Aybet, one of the Turkish president’s foreign and security policy advisers, describes this new role for Turkey as a “self-help state” that “provides for its own national security priorities (and) balances its relations between the major powers and regional actors to find the

best fitting solution to serve its interests”.<sup>21</sup> This serious regional power aspiration has only now become possible, since Turkey lacked the necessary resources and policy-making capabilities in the past. With the economic upturn and the stabilisation and consolidation of governmental relations in the early 2000s, along with changed geopolitical circumstances, for the first time in decades Turkey has the opportunity to expand what it considers its natural and rightful supremacy within the region.

**Independence at Any Price**

The desire for emancipation from “Western paternalism” is in some ways a perpetuation of the Atatürk republican doctrine for achieving independence. While it still depended on its Western allies in the early years of the republic and during the Cold War, today Turkey seeks strategic independence without abandoning its traditional ties to the West. This Gaullist understanding underscores the fact that what its Western allies perceive as a new tone in Turkish foreign policy has less to do with religious or imperial/revisionist ambitions, and more to do with the pursuit of independence, driven by a deep-seated nationalism.<sup>22</sup> The aggressive rhetoric and the obvious domestic power calculations behind it, are less the cause than the catalyst for developments witnessed over recent years. Despite the AK Party having pursued a liberal and much less confrontational course than the country’s Kemalist elites when it first took power, with the inclusion of the ultranationalist MHP, it has appropriated the latter’s nationalist course for itself over recent years. After losing its absolute majority for the first time in 2015, the AK Party was forced to seek cooperation with conservative/nationalist elites to maintain its power, particularly after the attempted coup in 2016. The influence of this alliance on foreign policy has become visible in the renewed crackdown on Kurds, and the now four separate interventions in Syria.<sup>23</sup> Shortly after the attempted coup, Erdoğan declared that Turkey could no longer afford to wait for problems to “come knocking on our door”<sup>24</sup>, underlining the shift from reaction to prevention.

This logic of the pre-emptive strike<sup>25</sup> and military power politics exploits Turkey's deeply rooted nationalism. The current melange of political Islam and Kemalist hardliners can be explained by the very nationalism that connects today's polarised Turkish society. This also explains why the Turkish government, despite being increasingly isolated internationally and seemingly waging a war against everything and everyone, can enforce its foreign policy agenda without any notable domestic opposition. In fact, in recent years, President Erdoğan has dramatically expanded his coalition on foreign policy issues and received support from opposition parties, except for the Kurdish HDP. In the last local elections, leading politicians from the largest opposition party, the Kemalist CHP, also won with conservative and nationalist programmes, for example Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş. In particular, the mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, who gained popularity last year and is being considered a potential presidential candidate, comes from the nationalist camp.<sup>26</sup> Until 2013, Yavaş was a member of the ultra-nationalist MHP.<sup>27</sup> In some cases, such as developments surrounding the Turkish research vessel *Oruç Reis* in the eastern Mediterranean, the CHP's opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has insisted on a much more aggressive tone in foreign policy, for instance.<sup>28</sup>

### **The nationalist foreign policy course would not change if the opposition succeeded the AK Party.**

---

This nationalist government rhetoric, motivated by domestic politics, inevitably distorts the perception of external and internal threats. Nationalism and nativism are thus stronger drivers of the Erdoğan government's foreign policy course than religious conservatism and Islamism. It is a fallacy to believe that this nationalist foreign policy course would change if one day the opposition succeeded the AK Party.<sup>29</sup>

### **In the Tradition of Turgut Özal**

The conservative/liberal Turgut Özal laid the foundation for this new foreign policy concept. During his time as Turkey's prime minister and president (from 1983 to 1993 in total), foreign policy increasingly became an extension of domestic policy. Özal believed the end of the Cold War to be an opportunity for Turkey to play "two cards" – one with its traditional Western allies, and the other with the Arab and Islamic world. During his time as prime minister and president, he began to re-emphasise their Ottoman heritage and exploit it for foreign policy initiatives. What's more, a liberalisation took place that, for the first time since the republic's founding, made Islam fit for statehood again and brought it back into society and, above all, politics. His altogether more active foreign policy, which aimed to help Turkey modernise and position itself in the new world, thus laid the cornerstone for Ankara's foreign policy presence today.<sup>30</sup>

However, the painful experience of Turkey's participation in the Second Gulf War in 1991 alongside the US, which ultimately caused more harm than good for Turkey, once again showed the strategists that the Western allies' interests were not necessarily in line with those of Ankara.<sup>31</sup> While in the Second Gulf War Ankara still allowed the US to launch air strikes on Iraq from *İncirlik*, in 2003 Turkey warned against the long-term impact of a renewed invasion of Iraq for the region and, like France and Germany, opposed the Bush administration.

This strategic reorientation continued in the vision of Erdoğan's former foreign minister, Ahmed Davutoğlu – a vision of an active and multidimensional foreign and regional policy in which Turkey, in joint forces with other actors, takes on a shaping role, especially in its neighbourhood.<sup>32</sup> However, this "zero problems towards neighbors"<sup>33</sup> policy failed spectacularly when the Arab uprisings of 2010/2011 and their repercussions tore the entire region apart. The decision to position itself at an early stage, and support Islamist forces such as the Muslim

Brotherhood at the beginning of the protests, led to Turkey's increasing isolation in parts of the Arab world after these organisations collapsed; an isolation that continues to this day.<sup>34</sup>

### Arms Independence by 2023

Beginning with Özal, continuing with Davutoğlu and moving on to the present situation, Ankara has gradually adopted an increasingly active foreign policy. So, what has changed from just a few years ago? The actual change is from a policy of active “soft power” to “hard power” in the form of an increasingly militarised foreign policy. This is mainly due to Turkey now having options that were denied to it only a few years ago. An expression of this militarisation is the expansion of forward deployed military bases close to home and in distant countries. Mogadishu, for example, has been home to the largest Turkish training facility outside of Turkey since 2017. Turkey has thus positioned itself – in addition to its naval presence in the Gulf of Aden – at a crucial bottleneck near the entrance to the Red Sea.<sup>35</sup>

Davutoğlu's multidimensional approach is still in place, but, particularly since 2015, the scales have been tipped in favour of militarised “hard power”, flanked by the build-up of a large national defence industry – with the aim of achieving military self-sufficiency in a few years' time.<sup>36</sup>

But this trend also did not start with the AK Party either. When the US imposed arms sanctions on Ankara following the Turkish intervention in Cyprus in 1974, this triggered a massive build-up of the Turkish national defence sector. The arms embargo had a serious impact on the Turkish economy and defence capability, as the Cyprus campaign required continuous logistical support and Turkey was dependent on US military supplies at that time. The Cuban Missile Crisis and the related withdrawal of American Jupiter missiles had already made Ankara realise the need for a sovereign defence industry. Following the arms embargo, in the 1980s Turkey began requiring foreign arms suppliers to shift a percentage of their production to

Turkey to facilitate a transfer of technology to the domestic market.<sup>37</sup> Today, with an export volume of three billion US dollars, Turkey is the 14<sup>th</sup> largest arms exporter worldwide.<sup>38</sup> Although Ankara has reduced the proportion of imports of its arms purchases to 30 per cent, it still remains dependent on technology from abroad.<sup>39</sup>





## Drones Leading the Way to Independence

Nothing is more symbolic of the quest for regional dominance than the armed drone, which serves the Turkish army as a multiplier of its combat strength (thus increasing the effectiveness of its armed forces) and boosts the Turkish economy as a successful export commodity. In

its decades-long struggle against the PKK, Turkey recognised early on that indigenous strategic capabilities and such multipliers of combat power are key to a high degree of strategic independence, and success on the battlefield.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, analysis of successful drone usage by the US and the UK in Afghanistan and Iraq has led Turkey to correctly assess the importance



Regional power Turkey: A strengthened national defence industry enables the country to expand its military operations in the region. Source: © Khalil Ashawi, Reuters.

of drones from the outset. Turkey now ranks among one of the world's leading drone manufacturers.<sup>41</sup> Their successful use in a wide variety of combat zones has earned them the seal of combat capability, which in turn gives Turkish manufacturers the upper hand when selling this product.<sup>42</sup> Turkish drones are used in Turkey by all branches of its armed forces and by its MIT intelligence service. Their successful deployment has now become a key element of Turkey's foreign policy.<sup>43</sup> The Turkish army has gained expertise in the effective use of drones by deploying them in asymmetric conflicts such as the fight against the PKK in Northern Iraq,<sup>44</sup> as well as by testing them on foreign battlefields. The successful use of Turkish drones, in addition to Israeli drones, by Azerbaijan proved to be a great tactical success.<sup>45</sup> The air support provided by Turkish drones in Libya to stabilise the UN-recognised government, which has restored the balance in the fight against the insurgent General Khalifa Haftar, continues to bolster exports of Turkish drones.<sup>46</sup> The systematic deployment of drones in Turkish military operations in Syria bears witness to this technology's vital importance in underpinning Turkish foreign policy.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the development of its first light aircraft carrier TCG Anadolu, which is to be commissioned shortly, this advance shows that Turkey is now capable of projecting power and deploying larger expeditionary forces quickly and effectively.<sup>48</sup>

### **New Partners – New Alliances?**

That a weak economy will ultimately curtail this active foreign policy is far from certain. There is much to suggest that the domestic political situation is not so much a constraint, but rather the source of Turkey's confident foreign policy stance.<sup>49</sup> The fact that there is broad support among the Turkish population for intensified commitment to foreign policy allows the government in Ankara to continue channelling resources in this direction, despite their absence elsewhere in the country.

If we look at Turkish foreign policy in the region with this in mind, it appears anything but arbitrary. Rather, it is rational and mainly or exclusively based on the assertion of national interests. This Turkish *Realpolitik* manifests itself in its dealings with Russia, its involvement in Libya, its military operations in Syria and Iraq, and its strained relations with Western allies.<sup>50</sup> New partnerships are being forged as part of these efforts, some of them tactical, others long-term and strategic.

## **While the Western world is preoccupied with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Russia and Turkey consolidate their military influence.**

---

The US absence in recent years and the resulting political vacuum have ensured that Ankara has at times been the only military counterweight to Russia in several conflicts in Turkey's immediate neighbourhood. Contrary to what the dispute over the procurement of the Russian S-400 air defence system and the associated non-delivery of US F-35 fighter jets lead us to believe, Ankara's current actions towards Moscow are less an expression of Turkey's reorientation towards Russia, and more a sign of a regional power's self-confident bearing. Its selective cooperation with Russia and China, viewed critically by NATO partners, is therefore of a purely tactical and opportunistic nature at this time, while also serving to achieve the country's own short-term goals. In the medium term, both Russia and China are strategic competitors that are pursuing contrary goals to Turkey in the Turkish neighbourhood as well as in Africa. While the Western states' diplomacy and foreign policy are also preoccupied with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Russia and Turkey continue to establish themselves in Libya and consolidate their military influence. Only recently, the Turkish parliament extended its mandate to send troops for a further 18 months.<sup>51</sup> Reinforced by

diplomatic and increasingly military efforts in neighbouring Niger, Tunisia, and Algeria, Ankara is successively expanding its influence and infrastructure.<sup>52</sup> In the summer of 2020, the Turkish government also demonstratively backed Azerbaijan in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, based on the slogan “Two states one nation” addressed to its nationalist clientele.<sup>53</sup> Ankara’s ability to establish a de facto state-like territory on its southern border, independent of the central Syrian state, with infrastructure that will soon accommodate half a million Syrian refugees, also underlines its claim to leadership in the region.<sup>54</sup>

### Developments over recent years reveal that Turkey is not merely striving for the status of a regional power but has long since become one.

---

This is also evident in the example of the Ankara-Baku-Kiev strategic axis. At a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Erdoğan stressed that Ukraine is “a key country for stability, peace, security and prosperity in the region” and that Ankara supports Ukraine’s “sovereignty and territorial integrity, including [the formerly Ottoman] Crimea”.<sup>55</sup> Since the incident on the Sea of Azov in November 2018, Turkey has provided strong support for reconstructing the Ukrainian navy with arms deliveries such as T-MILGEM class corvettes.<sup>56</sup> The two countries have also forged a strategic partnership to manufacture drones and other armaments, which was recently expanded again.<sup>57</sup>

Turkey’s alliance with Qatar in the wake of the Arab Spring serves as an ideological and financial counterweight to the UAE- and Saudi Arabia-led Gulf Cooperation Council, and to Egypt. In merely five years, Qatar has become the second-largest investor in Turkey, which now accounts for 15 per cent of all direct foreign investment. Meanwhile, Turkey has Qatar’s back in the conflict with Doha’s Gulf neighbours and

opposes their regional policies in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. With the end of the embargo against Qatar and the beginning of reintegration into the Arab world<sup>58</sup>, as well as Israeli integration, Turkey, precisely for these *Realpolitik* reasons, will try to find a modus vivendi with Israel, the UAE and other Arab countries in order to adjust to the geopolitical shifts in the region.<sup>59</sup> The attempts at rapprochement with Egypt and the signals of détente with Israel reinforce this assumption.

### Conclusion

Developments over recent years, and especially in 2020, reveal that Turkey is not merely striving for the status of a regional power but, de facto, has long since become one. The non-recognition of this development is a thorn in the side of the Turkish leadership, which is driving the trend towards unilateral actionism. However, in the last two years it has become unequivocally clear that Ankara has mastered the language of power, which the EU is still reluctant to speak.

In 2022, Turkey will celebrate 70 years of NATO membership. This makes it a more longstanding member than Germany. 2023 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the proclamation and founding of Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Whoever leads the country after its next elections will be aware of Turkey’s importance and will continue to demand a seat at the table. That is why dialogue and strategic cooperation with Turkey will be all the more important for Germany, Europe, and the NATO transatlantic alliance.

Despite the decline in the region’s importance in global terms and the associated global shift of power towards the Indo-Pacific, Turkey’s relevance for Germany and Europe will continue to increase and make dialogue essential. Turkey may no longer be indispensable for the US in the future, but if Europe wants to prevent a Turkey driven by circumstances, the EU must take a stronger, more strategic stance in its neighbourhood.

Whether through its increasing influence in Africa or in South Asia, Turkey could form the gateway and bridge to important regions for Germany

and Europe in terms of strategic, economic, and security policy – or it could become an ever-stronger strategic challenger. The success of this stance and Turkey’s long-term influence in the region are limited by two factors: economic and industrial resources and long-term domestic political stability. From the Turkish government’s point of view, benefits and costs of military expansionism, from Qatar to Somalia to Libya, will have to be measured against Ankara’s ability to not only use this new foreign policy to protect national security interests, but also to diversify its trading partners and economic relations and thus monetise them.

To handle the “New Turkey”, Turkish concerns and the EU member states’ sometimes contradictory interests and interdependencies with Turkey must be taken into account and respected. The US will turn its attention to other regions of the world in the medium to long term. It is therefore up to the EU, and Germany in particular, not to pull up the drawbridge or close the gates. Instead, if they are to prevent Turkey going it alone, they must take Turkey seriously as an equal partner and work with it rather than isolate it.

*– translated from German –*

---

**Walter Glos** is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s office in Turkey.

**Nils Lange** is Trainee at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s office in Turkey.

- 1 Deutsche Welle 2019: Turkey threatens to ‘open the gates’ to Europe for refugees, 5 Sep 2019, in: <https://p.dw.com/p/3P7xU> [10 Mar 2021].
- 2 For a detailed overview see: Adar, Sinem et al. 2020: Visualizing Turkey’s Foreign Policy Activism, CATS Network, 16 Dec 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3tlxfef> [10 Mar 2021].
- 3 Maziad, Marwa / Sotiriadis, Jake 2020: Turkey’s Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, Neo-Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability, Middle East Institute, 21 Apr 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3lFX9SO> [15 Mar 2021]; von Schwerin, Ulrich 2021: Erdogan inszeniert sich als Wiedergänger der Sultane, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 5 Jan 2021, in: <https://nzz.ch/ld.1590000> [10 Mar 2021].
- 4 Erdoğan, Emre 2016: Turkey: Divided We Stand, German Marshall Fund, On Turkey 118, 12 Apr 2016, in: <https://bit.ly/3bPstF3> [10 Mar 2021].
- 5 Karagül, Ibrahim 2016: July 15 is not the last attack! Anatolia is under an invasion threat, YeniŞafak, 1 Aug 2016, in: <https://bit.ly/3eGuF3d> [10 Mar 2021].
- 6 Got, Antoine 2020: Turkey’s Crisis with the West – How a new low in Relations Risks Paralyzing NATO, War on the Rocks, 19 Nov 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3vqGDUH> [10 Mar 2021]; Aybet, Gülnur 2020: Turkey, NATO, and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship in a Declining Liberal Order, Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) 19: 2, 4 Sep 2020, p.28, in: <https://bit.ly/2ORHa1a> [15 Mar 2021].
- 7 NATO 2021: Turkey takes charge of NATO high readiness force, 1 Jan 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/38Ga3EN> [10 Mar 2021].
- 8 Turkish troops are currently deployed in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mali, Kosovo, Lebanon, and the Central African Republic as part of NATO or UN missions.
- 9 Daily Sabah 2020: Turkey to extend troop deployment in Afghanistan, 16 Dec 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3rSlTmw> [10 Mar 2021].
- 10 The New York Times 1964: Johnson warns Inonu on Cyprus; Invites Him to U.S. for Talks – Turkey Said to Give Up Plan for a Landing, 6 Jun 1964, in: <https://nyti.ms/30GNStw> [10 Mar 2021].
- 11 The instability i. a. of four Arab-Israeli wars, the situation of the Palestinians, the Lebanese Civil War, the Iranian Revolution, the Suez Crisis, and the Gulf Wars all occurred within Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood.
- 12 Zurich and London Agreements 1960: Treaty of Guarantee between the Republic of Cyprus and Greece, the United Kingdom and Turkey, 16 Aug 1960, c. q. Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in: <https://bit.ly/3tmB1Jd> [10 Mar 2021].
- 13 Brenner, Stefan Maximilian 2017: Die NATO im griechisch-türkischen Konflikt 1954 bis 1989, Berlin
- 14 Tanchum, Michaël 2020: The Logic Beyond Lausanne: A Geopolitical Perspective on the Congruence between Turkey’s New Hard Power and its Strategic Reorientation, Insight Turkey 22: 3, 22 Sep 2020, p. 42, in: <https://bit.ly/3vt6hbg> [15 Mar 2021].

- 15 Elekdağ, Sükrü 1996: 2½ War Strategy, Perceptions – Journal of International Affairs 1: 4, in: <https://bit.ly/3cwwiAn> [10 Mar 2021].
- 16 Ataman, Muhittin 2002: Leadership Change – Ozal Leadership and Restructuring in Turkish Foreign Policy, Alternatives – Turkish Journal of International Relations 1, p.12.
- 17 Al Jazeera Turk 2014: Erdoğan: Dünya 5'ten büyüktür, 24 Sep 2014, in: <https://bit.ly/30XBvcV> [10 Mar 2021].
- 18 Adetunji, Jo 2012: Turkey calls for UN security council reform over failure to pressure Syria, The Guardian, 13 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/38GiEr3> [10 Mar 2021].
- 19 Bir, Burak et al. 2020: UN Security Council needs to be restructured: Erdogan, Anadolu Agency, 22 Sep 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3rQkfc7> [10 Mar 2021].
- 20 Seufert, Günter 2014: Erdoğan's "New Turkey" – Restoring the Authoritarian State in the Name of Democracy, SWP Comments 44, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Oct 2014, in: <https://bit.ly/2Nrupdu> [15 Mar 2021].
- 21 Aybet 2020, n. 6, p. 36.
- 22 Taspınar, Ömer 2011: The Rise of Turkish Gaullism – Getting Turkish-American Relations Right, Insight Turkey 13: 1, Jan 2011, in: <https://brook.gs/3tkIUyT> [15 Mar 2021]; Taşınar, Ömer 2011: The Three Strategic Visions of Turkey, US-Europe Analysis Series 50, Brookings, 8 Mar 2011, in: <https://brook.gs/3vqDTGZ> [15 Mar 2021].
- 23 Tanchum 2020, n. 14, p. 45.
- 24 Coskun, Orhan / Tattersall, Nick 2016: Evoking Ottoman past, Erdogan vows to tackle Turkey's enemies abroad, Reuters, 19 Oct 2016, in: <https://reut.rs/3rjNsyT> [10 Mar 2021].
- 25 Kasapoğlu, Can 2020: Turkey's Growing Military Expeditionary Posture, Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor 18: 10, 15 May 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3bO7h2c> [10 Mar 2021].
- 26 Doğanay, Ülkü 2020: Who will run for president, Mansur Yavaş or Ekrem İmamoğlu?, Duvar English, 3 Sep 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3eH4idt> [10 Mar 2021].
- 27 MacDonald, Alex 2020: Debt-ridden Ankara could become an example for the world: Mansur Yavas, Middle East Eye, 3 Feb 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3cygllp> [10 Mar 2021].
- 28 Hürriyet Daily News 2020: Main opposition CHP says return of Oruç Reis to Antalya is 'concession', 14 Sep 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/30IAV2z> [10 Mar 2021].
- 29 Taspınar, Ömer 2020: What the West is Getting Wrong about the Middle East: Why Islam is Not the Problem, London, p. 108.
- 30 Mufti, Malik 2009: Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture – Republic at Sea, London, p. 64.
- 31 Der Spiegel 1991: Türkei – Schwerer Fehler, 6 May 1991, in: <https://bit.ly/2OSDaOn> [10 Mar 2021].
- 32 Davutoğlu, Ahmet 2001: Strategic Depth, Istanbul.
- 33 Davutoğlu, Ahmet 2010: Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy, Foreign Policy, 20 May 2010, in: <https://bit.ly/3rFqW8X> [1 Apr 2021].
- 34 Steinberg, Guido 2020: Die Türkei will Regionalmacht sein, Cicero, 3 Jan 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/30KfbmJ> [10 Mar 2021].
- 35 Aksoy, Hürcan Aslı 2020: Excursus: Turkey's Military Engagement Abroad, CATS Network, 16 Dec 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2Q52Lnw> [10 Mar 2021].
- 36 Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey 2008: Turkey Vision 2023, Investment Support and Promotion Agency of Turkey, in: <https://bit.ly/3eNITzk> [10 Mar 2021].
- 37 Stein, Aaron 2020: Compromise or Double Down: U.S.-Turkey Relations after CAATSA Sanctions, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 15 Dec 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3vqPzcN> [10 Mar 2021].
- 38 Bakeer, Ali 2020: Turkey's Defense Industry in the Covid Age, Center for Global Policy, 10 Jul 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3tmGpMI> [10 Mar 2021].
- 39 Gurini, Ferhat 2020: Turkey's Unpromising Defense Industry, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 Oct 2020, in: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82936> [10 Mar 2021].
- 40 Kasapoğlu, Can / Kirdemir, Barış 2018: Rising Drone Power: Turkey On The Eve Of Its Military Breakthrough, Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), Foreign Policy & Security 4, Jun 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2OQqBmi> [10 Mar 2021].
- 41 At present, the Turkish army mainly uses drones from the state-owned company Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) and from Baykar, the company of Erdoğan's son-in-law, Selcuk Bayraktar.
- 42 Kasapoğlu and Kirdemir 2018, n. 40.
- 43 Pitel, Laura 2020: Turkey's armed drones bolster Erdogan's hard-power tactics, Financial Times, 8 Oct 2020, in: <https://on.ft.com/3qPp8dp> [15 Mar 2021].
- 44 Pabst, Volker 2020: Die Türkei ist zur heimlichen Drohnen-Grossmacht geworden, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 11 Mar 2020, in: <https://nzz.ch/ld.1545464> [10 Mar 2021].
- 45 Kofman, Michael 2020: A Look at the Military Lessons of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, The Moscow Times, 21 Dec 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3qQeh2P> [15 Mar 2021].
- 46 Tavsan, Sinan 2020: Turkey begins to rival China in military drones, Nikkei Asia, 7 Oct 2020, in: <https://s.nikkei.com/30MNREL> [10 Mar 2021]; Atherton, Kelsey D. 2020: Turkey's drones are battle tested and ready for export, C4ISR Net, 4 Mar 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/30MVcnE> [10 Mar 2021].
- 47 Gottschlich, Jürgen 2020: Türkei startet Syrien-Offensive. "Operation Frühlingsschild", taz, 1 Mar 2020, in: <https://taz.de/!5666616> [10 Mar 2021].
- 48 Defense World 2021: Akinci Drones, Upgraded ATAK Helicopters Among new Weapons for Turkey in 2021, 11 Jan 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/2Nlfn95> [10 Mar 2021].
- 49 Ülgen, Sinan 2020: A Weak Economy Won't Stop Turkey's Activist Foreign Policy, Foreign Policy, 6 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2OPRlXP> [10 Mar 2021].

- 50 Yackley, Ayla Jean 2020: How Turkey militarized its foreign policy, Politico, 15 Oct 2020, in: <https://politi.co/3lqDEHq> [10 Mar 2021].
- 51 Hermann, Rainer 2020: Russland und die Türkei setzen sich militärisch fest, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 28 Dec 2020, in: <https://faz.net/-gq5-a6z01> [10 Mar 2021].
- 52 Tanchum 2020, n.14, p. 48.
- 53 Kofman, Michael und Nersisyan, Leonid 2020: The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Two Weeks in, War on the Rocks, 14 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/30MRNVD> [10 Mar 2021]; İletişim Başkanlığı (Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications) 2020: President Erdoğan: “We will continue to extend support with all our facilities and hearts to our Azerbaijani brothers and sisters”, 1 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2Oy7D44> [10 Mar 2021].
- 54 Adar, Sinem 2020: Repatriation to Turkey’s “Safe Zone” in Northeast Syria, SWP Comment, Jan 2020, SWP, in: <https://bit.ly/3rSeQdN> [15 Mar 2021].
- 55 President of the Republic of Turkey 2020: “We have always supported Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Crimea”, 16 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3vqCobQ> [10 Mar 2021].
- 56 Kuzio, Taras 2020: Turkey Forges a New Geo-Strategic Axis from Azerbaijan to Ukraine, Royal United Services Institute, 18 Nov 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3ONKs8i> [10 Mar 2021].
- 57 Yavuz, Talha 2020: Turkey, Ukraine set to boost strategic partnership, Anadolu Agency, 16 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/38KOpRg> [10 Mar 2021].
- 58 Gardner, Frank 2021: Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia and allies restore diplomatic ties with emirate, BBC, 5 Jan 2021, in: <https://bbc.in/3vpS7rF> [10 Mar 2021].
- 59 Zaman, Amberin 2020: Turkey opens secret channel to fix ties with Israel, Al-Monitor, 30 Nov 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3toJMmm> [10 Mar 2021].