

**Turkey's New Activism in Asia**

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*Abstract*

This article aims to analyse Turkey's foreign policy towards Asia, which is part of Turkey's emerging universal foreign policy vision. The notion of geographic imagination is provided to theorize Turkey's emerging policy attitudes and behaviors. Turkey's involvement in Asia will focus on the development of economic relations, security cooperation, supporting Asian political schemes for a multilateral world order and playing a facilitator role in Asia's encounter with the West. This new foreign policy orientation links the reform and change in the domestic landscape and Turkey's new activism in Asia, which has opened new horizons in its relations with Asian states and has encouraged policy-makers in their search for a central role in a number of regions ranging from Africa to Asia.

Keywords: Turkey, Asia, regional politics, critical geopolitics, geographic imagination,

**Introduction**

Recent years have witnessed considerable change and reform in Turkey's political, economic and foreign policy. Turkish politicians are proud of this transformation, and they promise to contribute to security, stability and prosperity in a wide range of territories, which go beyond Turkey's immediate neighbourhood, namely to distant geographies in Asia and Africa. Turkey's newly formed interest in these territories is the result of putting its house in order, gaining self-confidence in international relations, developing a universal vision of foreign policy, and searching for a way to play a central role in world politics.

We argue that a comprehensive understanding of Turkey's activism in Asia requires discussing the changing domestic dynamics and the rhetorical and practical connotations of the formative relations between power and geography in the mindset of policy makers in

Turkey. The idea of geographic imagination aids in the understanding of the changing meaning and mindscapes of distant geographies and the dynamic process of affiliation to formerly far away territories. Namely, although the distance remains same, the perception of these geographies changes under the premises of a new geographic imagination. The physical distance and former difficulties of being involved in these geographies has started to not make strong sense in policy circles and at the public level.

There emerges a process of discovery of the closeness of these geographies and availability for Turkey's involvement through the instruments of remembering past relations, unfolding cultural and civilizational affinities, and exploring possible opportunities. In this article, we aim to analyse Turkey's activism in Asia, which is part of Turkey's new universal vision of international affairs. We hold the idea that the evaluation of whether Turkey can play such a role falls short of understanding new activism and policy implications. Only after a comprehensive discussion of Turkey's motives and rhetoric as well as its capabilities, policy options and choices, may we come to a conclusion on Turkey's role in Asia. In this regard, we will employ the notion of geographic imagination to theorize Turkey's emerging policy attitudes and behaviors. We will also discuss Turkey's policy toward a number of Asian countries and its general policy line in Asia. Finally, we will provide our assessment of Turkey's Asian policy.

### **New Geographic Imagination and Foreign Policy**

The literature on critical geopolitics questions the relationships between space and place, as well as the cultural and political dimensions, which enter a tense interaction with them. These novel approaches question the role of geopolitics in the foreign policy making process, rather than accepting them as something objective and natural. There is a special focus on geographic imagination which shapes cognitive maps of political elites, paving the way for naming regions or continents, such as the Middle East and Asia, and constructing mental zones, like East and West. This naming is important since it is socially constructed through historical experiences and interactions. It is based on a number of attributions and categorizations and helps policy makers define their rhetoric and practices. For example, there is a certain kind of understanding and perception about a region if it is located in the West. The language and rhetoric--from policy formulation to perception of traffic order--will change according to the long standing image and interpretation of the West.

The attributions, categorizations, and perceptions lead to the emergence of a culture of geopolitics, which influences regional policy making. The creation of new geopolitical images

of threats is widely discussed in the literature. In the same sense, geographic imaginations may re-define potential enemies as potential allies and a distant zone as a potential area of influence. The change is a reflection of another form of relationship between power and geography.<sup>1</sup> This premise emerges from the new idea of 'critical' geopolitics, which departs from traditional interpretations of geography as static or given. In the old sense, geopolitics was considered as a concrete science dealing with natural, objective and static realities vis-à-vis the vague boundaries of foreign policy analysis. This new school of thought, on the other hand, explains geopolitics as an invention of social, political, and cultural imaginations.<sup>2</sup>

The premises of critical geopolitics challenges the old interpretations with the idea that geographical space is a product of social construction. This new approach is concerned as much with maps of meaning as it is with maps of states. The boundary-drawing practices are conceptual and cartographic, imaginary and actual, social and aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> The imaginative creativity plays an important role in construction of geography. Identities, perceptions, and biases are as important as concepts in this process as are the natural factors such as proximity, territory, and spatial borders. One may interpret this claim as the absence of neutrality and objectivity concerning the factors that socially construct the meaning of geography.

The new meaning of Asia is an example of the dynamic interaction between power and geography. There emerges a process of re-positioning, which places Turkey in a wider geographical landscape or makes it part of a new region. Turkey's new geographic imagination places it within Asia in a way that it occupies not only an important geographic position, but also may be able to emerge as a meaningful player in political and economic settings. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan exemplified this rhetoric by saying that: 'Istanbul is not only a center combining the continents but also a central symbol combining and synthesizing the civilizations.'<sup>4</sup> He places Istanbul in the center of a vast landscape, where Turkey's geography gains meaning in a wider territorial context, and Turkey emerges as an influential player in the same context.

The central elements which have determined geographic imagination have changed through a serious transformation in the domestic landscape. The new geographic imagination has shifted the former stance of Turkey toward Asia, which does not place Turkey as a part of Asia, to one of Turkey in Asia, which assumes an influential role for it in Asia. It marks a remarkable break from the old imaginary and it is now on trial in regional politics. This new imagination creates different feelings about Asian countries in the minds of policy makers. The crux of the question lies within the afore mentioned transformation, which has changed the geographic imagination, and subsequently reshaped foreign policy choices. The old

nation-state based geographical imagination was the result of domesticating the nation-state territories, which created a sense of well defined homeland in strict territorial terms. The regional rhetoric and language has been built on the idea that the homeland was under continuous threat and indeed it was surrounded by the enemies. This discourse helped policy makers to create a strong sense of defending the homeland, mobilizing support at home and preserving their hold on power. Under the definition of the old geographic imagination, Asia was a distant continent and there was a selected involvement to a romanticized Eurasia and oscillating interest to the issues of Turkic peoples in this geography, such as the problems of Uighur Turks. Although Turkey's search for influence in the Turkic republics of Central Asia represented a departure from traditional foreign policy line, it fell short of evolving into an Asian policy.

In this sense, the new geographic imagination is being shaped under the changing nature of the nation-state and its frontiers have expanded beyond the homeland in the cognitive map of policy-makers. Although there is no question of the viability of Turkey's borders that separate the country from Asia, its area of influence and, in another sense, its responsibility goes beyond the national borders under the impact of new geographic imagination. The relationship between "bordering and othering"<sup>5</sup> lost its meaning after removing the strain of domestic threat perceptions in foreign policy. This transformation goes beyond the classical discussions of perception or misperception in foreign policy attitudes.<sup>6</sup> It creates a wide-spread impact on the culture of national security and geopolitics, which means widening the horizons of policy makers and the emergence of certain new attitudes in foreign policy. The change can be understood in a multilateral framework, which includes the transformation in many realms of the domestic landscape and the bilateral interaction of each component of political, economic, and cultural transformation with the emerging geographic imagination. The territorial limits to Turkish involvement in Asia disappeared in this new mindset. It goes beyond the Turkic republics of Central Asia and deals with them along with other Asian countries in a wider Asian landscape. As Kirisci has suggested, "the political development, economic capabilities, dynamic social forces, and ability to reconcile Islam and democracy at home are the qualities that offer Turkey the possibility to develop and implement"<sup>7</sup> such active and influential policies in distant geographies such as Asia and Africa.

## **Turkey in Asia**

The domestic transformation has changed the political attitudes that have paved the way for decreasing the range of geographic others and has redefined the friends and enemies in the region, thus extending Turkey's potential area of influence<sup>8</sup>. As we discussed in theoretical terms, Asia is closer than in earlier periods, and policy-makers have the self confidence to be involved in Asian affairs. They seek participation in regional political and economic groupings and want to develop ties with a number of Asian countries. These are not temporary responsive policies to emerging situations, but long-lasting policy choices, which will resist both domestic and structural factors. Societal forces are increasing their influence in Turkish foreign policy making, and they are competing with the old bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition. There is now a strong focus on Turkey's globally influential role in issues such as the dialogue of civilizations and central role to contribute to solutions of a number of global problems, such as international terrorism.

We will discuss the changing Turkish policy and attitudes toward China, India, Pakistan, Japan and Malaysia to exemplify Turkey's new activism in Asia within this wider framework. Although the discussions of the current state of relations between Turkey and these countries may seem to be departing from a theoretical and in-depth analysis, it is necessary to focus on a number of policy choices and initiatives to exemplify Turkey's new policy line and style in Asia. We will focus on the new geographic imagination with a special emphasis on the emergence of new regional rhetoric, policy orientations, and visible self-confidence in interfering in regional affairs, and the dynamic multi-dimensional policy style in Asia.

## **China**

Despite the physical distance between China and Turkey, relations go back hundreds of years. The ancient Silk Road kept trade and cultural links alive for a long time.<sup>9</sup> Despite the legacy of these long years of involvement, Turkish-Chinese diplomatic relations began only in 1971.<sup>10</sup> The start of China opening to the outside world in 1978 facilitated the ties between the two states.<sup>11</sup> China's new attitude in international relations paved the way for high level official visits and exchanges.<sup>12</sup> These visits were dominated by talks on cooperation prospects in politics, economy, and security. In political terms, the Eastern Turkestan and Cyprus questions preserved their special places on the table. Turkey was striving for Chinese help in the United Nations (UN), considering the fact that China is a permanent member of the UN

Security Council. In addition, the problems of Uighur Turks have always been a concern in Turkish-Chinese relations.

Although Turkey's relations with China have been dominated by the nationalist concerns of Uighur Turks, recent years have witnessed a pragmatic shift to economic matters and to a lesser extent a Turkish willingness to participate in Asian political and security schemes. The signals of this pragmatism were seen during Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Turkey in April 2000. Then Turkish President Suleyman Demirel pointed out that:

We do not interfere in your internal affairs. We have language, religion and kinship relations with Uighur Turks. We want them to live in peace and prosperity. These people are bridge of friendship between our countries. I believe in that these people are loyal parts of your country. It is our policy to support China's territorial unity.<sup>13</sup>

Zemin responded that: "We are paying serious attention to these people. Beijing will initiate a development plan for western China. We want Turkey to take part in these plans."<sup>14</sup> Turkey's current Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, visited China in January 2003, before his term began. During a joint press conference with Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, he underlined the importance of Chinese territorial unity and his desire to improve economic and security ties with China.<sup>15</sup>

On 24 June - 29 June 2009 President Abdullah Gül visited China and said one of the major goals of his visit was to boost economic relations.<sup>16</sup> In Beijing, Gül held talks with his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao and attended a Turkey-China business forum.<sup>17</sup> Following the meetings, seven cooperation agreements were signed between the two countries in the fields of energy, banking, finance and culture.<sup>18</sup>

The Urumchi riots erupted on July 5th 2009. Just six days after President Gül's Urumchi visit. The main problem has been the inadequacy of China's minority policy that fell behind the international human rights standards.<sup>19</sup> Turkey reacted fiercely to these riots as almost genocide against the Uyghurs and urged China to stop the assimilation of its Uyghur minority<sup>20</sup>

On the 27<sup>th</sup> January of 2010 holding a joint press conference with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in Istanbul, Yang said that Turkey and China had established formal diplomatic relations 39 years ago, adding that the relations between the two countries were boosting. Turkey had significant influence in the world and in its region, Yang said and stated that Turkey made great contributions to regional and world peace. Yang noted that the

two countries were also cooperating in UN Security Council, adding that the two countries had similar views in fight against global financial crisis and climate crisis.<sup>21</sup>

Turkey and China have overlapping interests in their geopolitical and security concerns in the Middle East and Central Asia. Peace and security in these areas serve the best interests of both countries and focus attention on energy security and the activities of new terrorist networks. There seems to be two promising and stable main economic zones in these regions. These are the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) region and Turkey. China has made considerable progress in economic activities in the Dubai centered Gulf economic region. There is new rising interest in Turkey as a stable emerging market and as the gateway to the Balkans and Europe. Turkey's new geographic imagination has led to the re-evaluation of China as an important partner and has motivated policy makers to search for further economic, political, and security ties with China. Turkey's policy makers have a new self-confidence that they can play a much more influential a central a role in international relations, rather than the previous inactive bridge role. They are paying serious attention to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and seeking observer or permanent status in this organization.<sup>22</sup> Turkish policy makers have assumed dynamic cooperation prospects with SCO (previous section unclear) in a number of issues ranging from international trade to regional security. According to Hasret Comak, Turkey's observer status is important for its elevation to a regional power in Asia, and this membership is likely to be a stepping stone toward Turkey's membership in ASEAN and other influential Asian organizations.<sup>23</sup>

## **India**

India was an ally of the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1986. In those years, Turkey was a close ally of the U.S., which put these two countries at opposite poles until the late 1980s. The warming up began in 1998 with then Prime Minister Turgut Ozal's visit to India. The end of the Cold War created a suitable environment for improving political and economic relations. However, Turkish-Indian relations were still under the strain of Turkey's relations with Pakistan. The latter was also a legacy of the Cold War era which goes back to the Baghdad Pact and the later Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). Turkey was a member of CENTO along with Iran and Pakistan. The idea was to constitute a strong pro-West alliance in West Asia.

The issues at stake in Turkish-Indian relations are the Cyprus problem, the Kashmir problem, and the struggle against new international terror. India's position in the UN was against the Turkish stance in the Cyprus issue, while Turkey favored Pakistan's position in the

Kashmir problem. Ozal's visit in 1986 was revolutionary and opened an open discussion on these problems, which led to better grasp of the questions in both sides. Under the premise of a new geographic imagination, Turkish policy makers have changed their policy line toward the Cyprus issue and Turkish-Greek relations. Turkey is in a more advantageous position in the UN on the Cyprus issue and relations with Greece are at a much better level in comparison to the relations during the 1980s and 1990s. Turkey's increasing flexibility in these areas has put an end to their straining impact on relations with India.

New international terrorism, which has gained strength in the aftermath of September 11, not only threatens the United States and its allies but also, as seen in the latest incidents, a significant part of the world. We want to stress that the continuous Al-Qaida attacks signify the vulnerability and weakness of defense, security, and intelligence systems against new international terrorism. The terrorist networks have created an image of a virtual state. Turkey and India have been hit by terrorist networks and feel the approaching threat in this age of terror. Both countries support the U.S. led war on terrorism, although this alliance creates difficulties and dilemmas in their domestic politics and foreign affairs, as well as security concerns. In particular, after 1995, relations shifted to the economic realm. Turkish politicians assumed a greater role in regional and international affairs for themselves. In this new role, Turkey is closer to Asia as a part of Asian civilization and culture and as an influential country, which is also anchored in the West.

The new geographic imagination widened the horizons of Turkish policy makers and led to the emergence of certain new attitudes in foreign policy. The attributions, categorizations, and perceptions have paved the way for the emergence of new meaning and mindscapes of some regions and countries, which have had been perceived as irrelevant or less interesting in policy circles. In addition, as part of the same process, policy makers have widened the scope of their policies, searched for a role in far away territories, joined regional schemes, and unraveled the interconnection of a number of issues to focus on wider and globally shared problems. Turkish policy makers, under the motivating and stimulating guidance of a new geographic imagination, aim to develop relations with India, pointing out the urgent need to cooperate on a number of global issues, such as the Al-Qaida terrorist network, and specifically in mutual terms, the potential benefit of further economic relations, such as trade and investment.

Turkey's new regional interest in Asia and its changing policy line is a welcome development in India. The two countries share common concerns in terms of energy security and oil and gas transport security.<sup>18</sup> Turkey's search for security and its constructive



involvement in a number of chronic problems of the Middle East, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Iraqi crisis, fit into India's regional perspective and priority of securing oil and gas flow from this region. According to Pasha: "From Indian perspective, Turkey is the only country which exports security to a wide geography from Caspian to the Arabian Gulf peninsula."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the emergence of new republics in the energy rich former Soviet south, the Iraq and Afghanistan problems, energy security and oil and gas transport issues, rising fundamentalism, and Al-Qaida terrorism draw Turkey and India closer together. This motivates them to develop common initiatives. Turkish policy makers underline that improvement of the relations between countries may help India to correct its image in the eyes of Muslim countries. Turkey's new policy line also aims to persuade India to pay attention to the consideration of Muslim countries and of OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) on the Kashmir issue. The Secretary General of OIC is a Turk, and Turkish policy makers believe in the possibility of a facilitator role in the solution of the Kashmir issue, considering the fact that Turkey has good relations with related countries and influential positions in concerned international organizations.

### **Pakistan**

The relations between Turkey and Pakistan have been warm and friendly since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. These relations are manifold, and there are numerous ties in political, economic and security realms. Turkey's new geographic imagination unfolds the Asian side of the Turkish identity, while not allowing it to dominate Turkey's foreign policy orientation. This new imagination does not have a single region or civilization in its orientation but rather has Turkey as a central country which could be a global player. The policy dimension of this new rhetoric is to re-define the regions and countries in a way that these new images make sense under the premises of new geographic imagination. Turkish policy makers have a number of countries in mind to coordinate the presumed role in Asia. The most likely country in this sense has been Pakistan. However, there are a number of problems for any ally of Pakistan in an Asian context. The Pakistan-India problem, the former Taliban connection, and Pakistan's nuclear issue are among these problems. In this sense, Turkey has not attempted to build a Pakistan based policy line, but a dimensional policy formulation which also places it in an influential position.

Turkey and Pakistan are members of the Developing Eight (D-8), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and OIC. They share the same perspectives and support each other's positions on the Kashmir and Cyprus questions in these organizations. Turkish

policy makers have distanced themselves from Pakistani positions when they feel those positions may put other policies and options under strains.<sup>25</sup> However, neither the difference in the role of religion in government nor Turkey's distancing from Pakistan on some issues have prevented close relations between Turkey and Pakistan.<sup>26</sup>

The President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, completed a part of his school education in Turkey and has always expressed his warm feeling toward Turkey and Turkish people. In public opinion polls, there is a visible and high degree of sympathy toward Pakistan, and this public support helps policy makers to be more active in Asia and with Asian issues. As a sign of friendly attitudes both at the state and societal level, the first high level visit to a Pakistani earthquake area in 2005 was made by the Turkish Prime Minister. Turkish state and charity organizations immediately began to campaign to help Pakistan. The quick move of the Turkish people to share the sorrows of the Pakistani people and to extend help with all possible means exemplified Turkey's ties to Asia.

Turkey's new activism in Asia has been a well-received development in Pakistan. Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah Gul, in May 2003 and Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan, in June 2003 visited Islamabad. Erdogan was accompanied by 110 businessmen indicating the serious search for improving trade and economic relations with Pakistan. There are official committees in both sides that aim to expand the agreements on land transportation, drug trafficking and environmental issues. A partnership is emerging on the common concern of Al-Qaida terrorism and how to counter its continuous threats.<sup>27</sup> Turkey and Pakistan, as Muslim states, support the U.S. led war on terror and deal with extremism in their own contexts. In addition, Pakistan feels strong pressure to take strict measures against Islamic groups based on the past record of their having exported the Taliban regime to Afghanistan. Turkey and Pakistan are paying enormous attention to the stability and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Pakistan hosts a high number of Afghan migrants and extends considerable economic support for the recovery and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Turkey led the ISAF forces twice and coordinated NATO's civilian activities in that country. Turkey and Pakistan have a military coordination pact named "High Level Military Dialogue" which convenes twice a year to discuss common security concerns.<sup>28</sup> These two countries also have assumed a role for themselves to bridge the gap between the West and Islam through open and honest dialogue. Pakistani intellectuals pay increasing attention to Turkey's relations with the West and the European Union membership process.<sup>29</sup> This interest has encouraged Turkish policy makers to claim the role of acting as a civilizing facilitator between the West and Asia.

Turkey launched a trilateral summit process between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey. The first of these summits was held in Ankara in April 2007 and focused on security. The second one, mainly about economic relations, took place in Istanbul in December 2008. The third was organized in Ankara in April of 2009 and focused on security and intelligence.<sup>30</sup> The fourth meeting between Pakistani and Afghan leaders, conducted on 25 January 2010 as part of the trilateral Ankara cooperation process, saw the three countries pledged to increase coordination between their political, military and intelligence tiers in the fight against militancy and terrorism.<sup>31</sup> Turkey being a strong regional power and a brotherly country can play a very constructive role in getting these countries to talk seriously and find common ground without getting emotionally involved.

### **Japan**

Turkey has traditionally had good relations with Japan. The relations go back to the 19th century and there has been smooth and problem-free continuous contact between the two states during this time. Although Turkey has pursued Western style development and modernization, Japan has been always on the agenda as an alternative model for the critics of Turkish modernization. The two countries have played influential roles in the encounter of Eastern and Western civilizations. Japanese and Turkish intellectuals have contributed to the emergence of the idea of the West in the Asian continent. Probably due to this long period of warm relations, the trust of the Turkish people for Japan occurs at a high level.<sup>32</sup>

Turkish policy makers perceive Japan as a highly modernized and technological state of Asia, which also aims to improve its position in global terms. Turkey has paid attention to Japanese geopolitical concerns in Asia and its priorities in the Middle East. Turkish policy makers have sought Japanese support in a number of their initiatives in the Middle East. In the new rhetoric of Asian policy, Turkey values democratic legitimacy and multilateralism in world politics, which can be secured only through the active involvement of influential Asian powers in a number of global problems. Turkey's active and dynamic diplomacy in a number of Middle Eastern problems offers some relief for Japan, which is likely to benefit from stability in the Middle East. Turkey's contribution to the solution of the protracted crisis of the Middle East would mean a secure access to energy resources and preemption of international terrorism, which partly disseminates to the rest of the world from this geography. Turkey's European aspirations are also closely followed in Japan. Since the end of World War II, Japan has faced the challenges and opportunities of interacting with the West, Turkey's

peaceful integration into the EU seems an interesting development for Japan. This issue was on the agenda during Erdogan's visit to Japan in April 2004.<sup>33</sup>

According to Yoichi Funabashi, "Japan wants Turkey to be EU member. It is important for us to have Turkey that remains a Western oriented and secular country. These qualities validate Turkey as a role model country for the stability and peace within our region."<sup>34</sup> Such an appreciation increases the self-confidence of policy makers for a more active role in Asia. Turkey's relatively successful modernization, internal peace and staunch opposition to Al-Qaida terrorism are important assets in the eyes of Japanese policy makers, which keep a close watch over radical movements in Asia. The cooperation against international terrorism is in the center of Turkey's Asian policy and offers Turkey's own experience in dealing with ethnic and extremist terrorism in the form of a series of security agreements with the Asian countries, including Japan.

### **Malaysia**

In the 1980s, Turkey under Turgut Ozal and Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamed were presented as two different promising models for the Muslim world. Malaysia's Islamic identity oriented development and Turkey's secular-western oriented modernization were the rising stars in the Muslim world. It is interesting to note that while the regimes of Islamic oriented Middle Eastern states have been a consideration among Turkey's secular state elite, similar tendencies in the Asian context did not create such a problem.<sup>35</sup>

Mohamed and his successor Abdallah Badawi favor a kind Islamic and Asian oriented policy, which opposes Western and U.S. over-involvement in their region. Malaysian leadership have developed a critical attitude toward U.S. designs in Asia. In this sense, Turkey's strategic alliance with the U.S. and political and military ties with Israel have constituted the main barriers for further development of Malaysian-Turkish relations. However, Turkey's new regional rhetoric is to pursue Turkish-American relations on an equal footing, rather than the form of dependency that happened in the Cold War era. For example, the Turkish parliament did not allow the U.S. administration to open a northern front against Iraq. Although this development caused considerable discomfort in U.S. policy circles, Turkey's new political elite made clear that they were in search of more room to maneuver in their relations with the U.S. In addition, Turkey has adopted a critical stance toward Israel for violence in the occupied territories and for Israel's disproportionate use of force during the Lebanon crisis in August 2006.

In the eyes of Turkish policy makers, Turkey's emancipation from the chains of earlier policies have paved the way for its emergence as an influential actor in a wide range of geography ranging from Africa to Europe, and from there to Asia. There is less criticism of Turkey in a number of platforms like the D-8 and OIC, and indeed formerly critical countries have begun to appreciate Turkey's independent policy line. Malaysia is among these countries which appreciates Turkey's involvement in the Middle Eastern problems and its newly emerging active involvement in Asian geography. Turkey's participation and even its leading position in military and civilian activities under the global scheme of the war on terror was criticized by Malaysian leadership. Mahathir Mohamed openly argued that the U.S. intervention would never solve the problem, but further aggravate the problem.<sup>36</sup> However, the increasing trust in Turkey's involvement in Asian affairs and Turkey's contribution to Afghanistan's recovery and reconstruction reversed the early negative preoccupations.<sup>37</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Turkey has undergone a transformation in legal, political and economic realms. The impact of this reform and change in these areas on foreign policy has been increasing self-confidence, emergence of a universal vision of foreign policy, and a search to evolve into a central player in international politics of different regions, such as the Middle East, Africa and Asia. We analyzed the foundational bases, rhetorical formulation, and policy implications of Turkey's new activism in Asia. We have argued that Turkey's new activism in Asia has opened new horizons in its relations with the Asian states and this new foreign policy orientation is linked to the reform and change in the domestic landscape.

Turkey's new Asian rhetoric and policies support the premise of critical geopolitics, which states that geographical space is a product of social construction. "The identities, perceptions, and biases are important concepts similar to the prioritized natural factors in traditional schools of geopolitics, such as proximity, territory, and spatial borders in this process." We have argued that the geographic imagination is a strong determinant of political language and rhetoric in this newly formed interest on Asia, which becomes policy behavior on the ground. However, Turkish policy-makers have made it clear that this activism should not be interpreted as an Asian oriented policy but a part of a universal vision of foreign policy.

The motives and perceptions in foreign policy have started to meet with the regional realities in Asia. There is no question about a more active Turkish role in Asia and the development of relations with a number of Asian countries. From the perspective of Turkish

policy makers, Turkey's involvement in Asia is likely to happen on the basis of three areas of cooperation. These are the development of economic relations, security cooperation, supporting Asian political schemes for a multilateral world order, and playing a facilitator role in Asia's encounter with West. Although policy makers' decisive will and the emerging areas of cooperation underline the new-born activism in Asia, there is no guarantee that Turkey's Asia policy will facilitate Turkey's emergence as an influential actor in this geography and that Turkey's involvement will be a long-lasting and constructive one.

There is always the possibility of becoming part of problem while trying to solve the problem. Asian politics has its own dynamics and problems, economic and political schemes, historical background and expertise, number of ethnic, intra-state and trans-boundary problems and inter-state conflicts which set structural barriers for an influential and constructive engagement. Considering Turkey's capabilities and regional limitations, there may be possible setbacks or even complete suspension of Turkey's search for an influential role in Asia. However, there is one thing for sure; the frontiers of a new geographic imagination will reach to Asia, and the coming years will witness an increasing Turkish interest, involvement and presence in Asia.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> As Said noted: "just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings." See Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p.7

<sup>2</sup> For a sample of works in the tradition of the new geopolitics, see Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1996); Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, eds., *Rethinking Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 1998); John Agnew, *Geopolitics, Re-visioning World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "The Critical Geopolitics Constellation: Problematizing Fusions of Geographical Knowledge and Power," *Political Geography* 15:6-7 (July - September 1996), pp. 451-456; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Geopolitical Structures and Geopolitical Cultures: Towards Conceptual Clarity in the Critical Study of Geopolitics," in *Geopolitics: Global Problems and Regional Concerns*, [Bison paper 4], ed. L. Tchantouridze, (Winnipeg: Centre for Defence and Security Studies, 2003), pp.75-102.

<sup>3</sup> Dalby and Ó Tuathail, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, p.4.

<sup>4</sup> R. T. Erdogan, Speech to 38th Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Asian Development

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Bank, Istanbul, 5 May 2005, see <<http://www.adb.org/annualmeeting/2005/Speeches/prime-minister-speech.html>>, accessed May 10, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Henk Van Houtum, "The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries," *Geopolitics* 10:4 (2005), p. 674.

<sup>6</sup> See, Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey's Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times," *Chaillot Paper* 92 (September 2006), p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> A. Hammerstad, "Domestic Threats, Regional Solutions? The Challenge of Security Integration in Southern Africa," *Review of International Studies* 31:1 (2005), pp. 69-87.

<sup>9</sup> Wang Youming, "Political Relations of China and Turkey," a presentation delivered in the 1<sup>st</sup> International Turkish Asian Congress held in Istanbul May 25-26, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ali Civiler, "Turkiye-Cin Iliskileri," [Turkish-Chinese Relations] *Bogaziçi Universitesi TUSIAD Dis Politika Forumu* [Bogazici University-TUSIAD Foreign Policy Forum] (October 2003), <<http://www.tusiad.org/dpolitika/raporlar/civiler.pdf>>, accessed July 12, 2006.

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<sup>17</sup> "Turkey Willing to be in Close Touch with Far-East", *Anadolu Agency*, 17 June 2009, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey-willing-to-be-in-close-touch-with-far-east.html>.

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