

Turkey Entering the European Union through the Balkan Doors: In the Style of a Great Power?

Bedrudin Brljavac *

Abstract

Confronting an increasing EU opposition from a number of influential member states to its membership the AKP government adopted a multilateral approach to its foreign policy making resulting in dynamic economic and diplomatic policies with the countries from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Balkans region. In this article we analyzed the effects and consequences of a paradigmatic shift in Turkish foreign policy in the western Balkans in relation to the country's EU membership prospects. Through its pro-active economic and diplomatic initiatives in the region Turkey has been proving itself as indispensable country for the European Union membership. Thus, if the Turkish government concentrates more on solving its internal problems and continues its pro-active diplomacy in western Balkans, among other regions, it could become not only a regional but also a global power.

Keywords

Turkey, Foreign Policy, European Union, Western Balkans,
Great power, Soft Power

* Bedrudin Brljavac, is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of Sarejevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Turkey's European Union Journey

Turkey has been waiting the longest in the row amongst the applicant countries aspiring for the entrance to the European Union. In fact, Turkey has been an associate member of the EU since 1963. Although Turkey applied to enter the EU on 14 April 1987 it was officially recognized as a candidate for a full membership only in December 1999 at the Helsinki Summit of the European Council¹. Since then under the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP, Turkey has implemented significant reforms in order to meet the Copenhagen criteria, especially regarding democracy-building, human rights, the rule of law, stable administration and protection of minorities. However, in spite of the AKP's commitment to the EU accession process its final membership to the bloc has been stalled by a number of domestic and external problems. While the military and Kemalist forces are the biggest domestic challenge, the issue of Cyprus continues to be a major external obstacle to full EU membership. Furthermore, a number of EU members such as Germany, France, and Austria are rather ready to grant Turkey a "privileged partnership" instead of full EU membership². Facing a strong EU opposition to its membership the AKP government adopted a multilateral approach to its foreign policy making resulting in active rapprochement towards the countries from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Balkans region making it more powerful world actor.

¹ Ahmet Sozen, "Turkey - EU Enlargement at a Crossroads: Turkey's Democratisation in Light of its EU Candidate Status", Eastern Mediterranean University (Famagusta, North Cyprus), 2005, Paper prepared for presentation at the 2004 Conference *Enlargement and the Future of the European Union: Parallel Paths or Crossroads?*, in Warsaw, Poland, 1-3 July, 2004.

² Mette Buskjer Christensen, "Mobilizing local networks for a better informed dialogue on Turkey's accession to the EU", *Policy Brief-1, EU-Turkey relations and the functioning of the EU*, 2009, available at <http://accesstr.ces.metu.edu.tr/dosya/christensen.pdf>, p. 10.

The Currency of a Great Power

Still, is it possible to think of Turkey as a superpower or a rising great power. Does Turkey meet these five criteria that Kenneth Waltz suggested? In terms of its population, Turkey's total population in 2010 was around 73.7 million³. Also, the area of Turkey is 783,562 km² (302,535 sq mi)⁴. Turkey has been among the world leaders in producing agricultural products, textiles, construction materials, motor vehicles, ships and other transportation equipment, consumer electronics and home appliances. As for its economy, Turkey has the world's 15th largest GDP and 17th largest Nominal GDP⁵. In terms of the military potential, in 2008 the Turkish Army had nearly 401,000 active personnel and it is the second largest army of NATO only after the United States⁶. Thus, if we exclude political instability as decades-old problem in Turkey than it is possible to conclude that the country has the criteria that how Kenneth Waltz defined a great power. Also, John Feffer from the Huffington Post points out:

“Turkey remains stubbornly fixed in Western culture as a backward-looking land of doner kebabs, bazaars, and guest workers. But take population out of the equation -- an admittedly big variable -- and Turkey promptly becomes a likely candidate for future superpower. It possesses the 17th top economy in the world and, according to Goldman Sachs, has a good shot at breaking into the top 10 by 2050. Its economic muscle is also well defended: after decades of NATO

³ TE, “Turkey Population”, *Trading Economics*, 2010, available at <<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/turkey/population>>.

⁴ UN, “UN Demographic Yearbook, April, 16, 2007.

⁵ WB, “World Development Indicators Database – Gross Domestic Product in 2009 (Nominal), World Bank, 27 September, 2010.

⁶ The Economist, “Who is losing Turkey?”, 26 October, 2006.

assistance, the Turkish military is now a regional powerhouse”.⁷

Still, how do we recognize the great power when we see the one? A great power is a state that has a capacity to influence policy-making in the international system⁸. In fact, the main characteristics of the great powers are economic, military, diplomatic and cultural strength that make them recognizable and influential at global stage. The term “great power” a first time was used in the post-Napoleonic era to define the most important states in Europe at the time⁹. However, it has been a challenge for social scientist to define and describe the meaning and structure of a great power. The first debates on the meaning of great power used to analyze states by a realist school of thought which emphasized the importance of military strength of the state. In this light, prominent historian Taylor pointed out that “The test of a great power is the test of strength for war.”¹⁰ The French historian Duroselle put it in this way: “a great power is one which is capable of preserving its own independence against any other single power.”¹¹ Nevertheless, at the end of World War II and Cold War the definition of great power also included economic and political state of affairs in a country. For instance, the founder of the neo-realist theory of international relations Kenneth Waltz¹² suggests a set of five criteria to define a great power:

⁷ John Feffer, “Stealth Superpower: How Turkey is Chasing China to Become the Next Big Thing”, *Huffington Post*, 14 June 2010.

⁸ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, New York, Palgrave, 2002.

⁹ Sir Charles K. Webster (ed.), *British Diplomacy 1813–1815: Selected Documents Dealing with the Reconciliation of Europe*, G Bell, 1931, p.307.

¹⁰ Alan JP Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1954, p.24.

¹¹ Kertesz and Fitsomons (eds), *Diplomacy in a Changing World*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1959, 204.

¹² Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1979.

1. Population and territory,
2. Resource endowment,
3. Economic capability,
4. Political stability and competence,
5. Military strength.

Paradigmatic Shift in the Foreign Policy

The main policy-maker of the ongoing AKP's multi-dimensional approach to foreign policy has been Ahmet Davutoglu who defined Turkey's global strategic role in his 2000 book *Strategic Depth (Stratejik Derinlik)*. Davutoglu pointed out that Turkey is positioned at the center of main “geo-cultural basins”, the West, the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia, and thus should create dynamic and proactive foreign policy within each of these geographies. In Davutoglu’s own words: “Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities and thus has the capability as well as the responsibility to follow an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy... To contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a call of duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history for Turkey.¹³” That is, in his capital book he stresses that Turkey must rediscover its historic and geographic identities and pursue a balanced approach towards all global and regional actors. He also put an emphasis on Turkish potential of the soft power based on active diplomatic efforts, regional cooperation and economic engagement to utilize in its manifold historical and cultural relations¹⁴. That said, Turkey recently has focused on the strategic importance of the Balkans region in order to rediscover this strategic location as part of its foreign policy doctrine.

¹³ Ahmet Davutoglu, “Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 8, N. 3 (2009), p. 12.

¹⁴ Zejno Baran, “Torn Country: Turkey between Secularism and Islamism”, *Hoover Institute Press*, 2010, p.117.

Using its soft power potential in the context of the foreign policy-making Turkey recently has initiated significant strategic diplomatic moves at unquiet western Balkans countries. In fact, soft power is the ability to achieve your objectives through attraction and good image¹⁵. As Joseph Nye points out: the central currencies of soft power are an actor's values, norms, culture, and institutions that have a potential to attract other actors to “want what you want” rather than to coerce them¹⁶. Thus, using its soft power capabilities Turkey has made paradigmatic shifts in its foreign policy-making and taking new position on the world stage. Specifically, utilizing rich historical and cultural heritage from the Ottoman reign over the Balkans the Erdoğan's government has recently initiated considerable diplomatic moves and strengthening its political leadership within the region. As Bülent Aras points out: “Turkey has gained the status of a soft power by experimenting with its foreign policy and demonstrating achievements on the ground.¹⁷” That is, recently Turkish diplomacy has played important integrative role in the process of ethnic reconciliation and peace-building amongst the worn-torn ethnic groups at western Balkans¹⁸. Furthermore, in the lack of a clear and strategic approach of the EU towards the region Turkish diplomacy headed by Davutoglu has filled a diplomatic vacuum and strengthened its position of inevitable regional leader without which it has become impossible to make necessary compromise solutions.

¹⁵ Phar Kim Beng, “Turkey’s potential as a soft power: a call for conceptual clarity”, *Insight Turkey*, V.10, N. 2(2008).

¹⁶ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004.

¹⁷ Bülent Aras, “Turkey's soft power”, *The Guardian*, 14 April 2009.

¹⁸ Doga Ulas Eralp, “Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Future Reflecting on the Past”, *SETA, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research*, August, 2010, Brief No: 46, p.5.

Pro-active Diplomacy in Western Balkans

Recently, Turkey's pro-active foreign policy making in the western Balkans secured it a position of important mediating country. Turkey has initiated a number of diplomatic meetings between the former enemies in order to contribute to peace and regional stability. Thus, over the past two years the Turkish officials have organized several meetings between the officials from Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia culminating in the Istanbul Declaration in April 2010¹⁹. The main objective of the Istanbul Declaration was to boost regional cooperation and the EU membership prospects of the region. That is, the document signed by the regional leaders says, “we confirm our readiness to take all the necessary steps to secure peace, stability and prosperity in the region.”²⁰ Furthermore, following several meetings between Turkish and Serbian officials in March 2010 the Serbian parliament passed a resolution apologizing for failing to prevent the Srebrenica execution of over 8000 Bosniak adult males. Gözde Kılıç Yaşın, from the Turkish Center for International Relations and Strategic Analysis (TÜRKSAM), claims that the trilateral meetings are important not only for reconciliation and better diplomatic relations between Bosnia and Serbia but also for setting a problem-solving model for heated Balkans political scene.²¹ In other words, by making soft diplomatic initiatives that resulted in constructive and concrete solutions and compromises Turkey has

¹⁹ Eldar Sarajlic, “The return of the Consuls: Islamic networks and foreign policy perspectives in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, Paper presented at the conference *After the Wababi mirage: Islam, politics, and international networks in the Balkans*, European Studies Center, University of Oxford, December 2010, p.25.

²⁰ Igor Jovanovic, “New Beginnings in the Balkans?”, *ISN, International Relations and Security Network*, 21 May 2010.

²¹ Gözde Yaşın Kılıç, “Bosna-Hersek'te AB-Batı Balkanlar Zirvesi”, *Turkish Center for International Relations and Strategic Analysis (TÜRKSAM), Balkanlar*, 31 Mayıs, 2010, available at <<http://www.turksam.org/tr/a2054.html>>.

clearly proved that it has become essential and inevitable player for the resolution of conflicts in the region.

Furthermore, Turkey's new foreign policy in the Balkans is strengthened by dynamic and increasing economic investments. In other words, Turkey's volume of trade with the Balkan countries has increased from about \$3 billion in 2000 to nearly \$17.7 billion in 2008²². Also, Turkish banks provided 85 percent of loans for construction of a highway through Serbia for easier Turkish transport of goods to EU member states. In 2008, Turkish Airlines bought a 49 percent stake of Bosnia's national carrier, BH Airlines²³. While Balkan countries are waiting long for EU membership and face fierce competition at its single market Turkey allows a privileged access of their goods to its rapidly growing market of around 80 million consumers. Thus, Turkish recent omnipresent economic cooperation with Balkan countries is increasing its chances to become the dominant power which has an important part of influence in a region where it has strong strategic interests. Since most of the countries from the Balkans region have a very devastated economic infrastructure and unstable political ambient this Turkish brave and increasing investments can strengthen its growing leadership position in the region. As Erdoan Shipoli argues: "Turkish initiatives are present not only in the political arena, but also in economics, society, culture and education. This is an opportunity for Turkey to take the lead in Balkan politics, the opportunity of a lifetime."²⁴ In fact, recent dynamism of Turkish economic and foreign policy at the Balkans has increased its influence at the global stage.

²² Mail International, "Turkey uses economic clout to gain Balkan foothold", 14 March 2011.

²³ Reuters, "Turkish Airlines to buy Bosnian carrier - Report", 30 December, 2010.

²⁴ Erdogan Shipoli, "The Turkish Balkan Initiative", *Today's zaman*, 26 May, 2010.

Strong Cultural Ties

Additionally, relying on rich legacy of Ottoman past Turkey has traditionally kept strong cultural and historical ties with the countries from the region. That is, since the post-Ottoman period Turkey has always viewed the Balkans as its closest allies due to deep and dynamic historical and socio-cultural links with the regional states. As the official statement of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey says: “Basic elements of Turkey’s policy towards the Balkans can be summarized as follows: developing relations to the highest level with the Balkan countries, with which Turkey has historic, cultural and humanitarian ties; enhancing the existing atmosphere of regional peace and stability; keeping the transportation connection of Turkey with Western and Central Europe open” (MFA of Turkey). What’s more, on the basis of intensive historical and cultural relations with the Balkans countries and its wide knowledge of socio-political context Turkey can play the role of constructive mediator. Thus, in an interview with *Today’s Zaman*, Djukic-Dejanovic emphasized special position of Turkish diplomats in the Balkans pointing out that “The Turkish foreign policy establishment was able to understand the often complicated position of Serbia and her neighborhood much better than anybody else and has really helped us a lot²⁵”. Indeed, Turkey can use its omnipresent cultural capital with regards to the Balkan countries in order to intensify its foreign policy making within the region.

Furthermore, due to the Ottoman heritage within the countries of western Balkans Turkey has traditionally had strong cultural relationships with the whole region. Recently, Turkish soap operas that have become very popular among the population

²⁵ Abdullah Bozkurt, “Growing ties with Turkey more important than EU, Serbian Parliament speaker says”, *Today’s zaman*, interview with the President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Dr. Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic, 23 December 2010.

in the region have been promoting Turkish culture, the customs, and its life style²⁶. For instance, the one Turkish product that did have a profound impact in the region is the soap opera titled “Binbir gece” or “Şehrezad,” as it is better known locally. This Turkish soap opera, which was a hit on Turkish TV a few years back, made it somewhat late to the Western Balkans, but it sure came in full swing and single-handedly succeeded, probably more than any other recent endeavor, in promoting a new image of Turkey in the Balkans²⁷. In addition, in 2010 the Turkish International Co-Operation and Development Agency (TIKA) provided 3.5 million euro for the reconstruction of the Mehmed Paşa Sokolović Bridge in the city of Višegrad, over the Drina River in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska²⁸. Also, there are two Turkish-funded universities in the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina in which students from Turkey mix with students from the region. In addition, there is a large number of primary and high schools opened by the Istanbul-based Foundation of Journalists and Writers which are better known as the Bosna Sema Education Institutions. What’s more, these Institutions educate students of Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian nationality²⁹. This is important platform for building peace among former warring nations, an intercultural rapprochement and mutual cooperation.

Balkans as a Playground for “Great Powers”

Balkans is positioned at an important strategic geography making a link between Europe and Asia. Throughout the history Balkan has always played significant geo-strategic role as the

²⁶ Balkan Chronicle, “Turkish Soap Operas Take Balkans by Storm”, *Editor*, 31 December 2010.

²⁷ Harun Karcic, “The “Seherzad Effect” in the western Balkans”, *Today’s zaman*, 06 January 2011.

²⁸ EMG, “TIKA finances Drina bridge renovation in Bosnia”, *Ekonom: east Media Group*, 26 April, 2010.

²⁹ Today’s zaman, “Serbian torture base now houses Turkish school”, 06 January 2011.

crossroad between East and West. This territory has attracted regional and global powers to realize their interests and to expand them to other regions³⁰. Especially in the aftermath of dissolution of Yugoslavia the Balkans region has become the playground for strategic accomplishment of diverse interests of several actors. The US has dominated the policy-making processes in the post-communist Balkans countries the last two decades. For example, it made critical efforts to stop the war in Bosnia signing the peace agreement in Dayton in December 1995 and the US also was the major proponent of the independence of Kosovo. Although the EU has played a passive role in the Yugoslav conflicts it developed more strategic approach towards the region in the end of 1990s through the integration policy³¹. Also, Russia is the next power that seeks to enlarge its sphere of influence in the region through political and financial means primarily in Serbia and Serb-dominated Bosnian entity, Republika Srpska. Lastly, during the ongoing Erdoğan government Turkey has intensified its political, economic and social policy-making across the Balkans region focusing mostly on Bosnia. Turkey's ambitions in the Balkans have forced the EU to pay more attention to political processes in the region, where Russia and the United States are also vying for influence³².

In particular, the European Union member states have been disturbed by increasingly pro-active and highly visible role of Turkey in the Western Balkan countries' political and economic policy-making. Since the European Union has been one of the most active, if not the most visible one, actor at the region recent

³⁰ Nikola Zeljkovic, "Clash of interests on Balkans between USA, Russia, Turkey and the EU", *2010 Moscow Conference on Geopolitics Connecting Geography to Politics: 21st Century Issues and Agendas*, IAPSS – International Association for Political Science Students, p.2.

³¹ Mamoru Sadakata, "The Balkans between the EU and NATO: Focusing on the Former Yugoslavia", *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, V. 6, N. 3 (2006), p.40.

³² Anes Alic, "Vying For Influence In The Balkans", *Radio Free Europe (RFE)*, Commentary, June, 2, 2010.

dynamic and active Turkish foreign policy has become serious threat and warning to the bloc's policy-makers. In other words, Turkey's diplomatic and financial deployment in the Balkans has provoked a prompt response from the EU, which hopes to remain the main authority in the region. And Brussels indeed has a lot of catching up to do, largely because over the past four years it has lost much of its credibility³³. It does not have a luxury of repeating the scenario from the 1990s when the European Union member states looked rather paralyzed and ineffective in front of the Yugoslavian conflicts taking place at their doorsteps. If the European Union is going to become important world actor both politically and economically then it is of utmost importance to tackle the problems in its closest neighborhood³⁴. Thus, the logical question would be: Will the European Union succeed in reforming one of the most complex regions in Europe, or will it fail and lose the credibility it needs to become a great power?³⁵ On the other side, a recently launched pro-active Turkish foreign initiative in the region is slowly but steadily demonstrating rising Turkish power.

Turkey as a Regional Power

Therefore, the unstable region of western Balkans has become a place where the power and diplomatic capability of rising and great powers is demonstrated and measured. That is, among other things, in this turbulent region great powers demonstrate their power while rising or to-be-great-powers are pursuing policies that are aimed at carrying them into the status of great power. For instance, the USA proved and further strengthened its greatness and status of global superpower when it brought the Bosnian crisis to the end in 1995. Also, today the

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Taylan Ozgur Kaya, (2009), "Identifying the EU's Foreign and Security Policy Roles", *Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika*, V. 5, N. 17 (2009), pp. 121.

³⁵ Ajdin Perco, "The Western Balkans: The Ultimate Test for the European Union", *E-International Relations*, February 7, 2011.

European Union's image of the rising power is being tested in the case of western Balkans and especially in Bosnia³⁶. On the other side, Turkey as a rising power tends to prove its position of regional power and even rising power at a global level joining the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) team. So far, Turkey has demonstrated considerable diplomatic policy-making in the region and it is proving its potential of becoming great power in foreseeable future. In addition, through pro-active economic and diplomatic initiatives in the region it is proving itself as indispensable country for the European Union membership³⁷. As John Feffer argues, "Today, the E.U. and Turkey compete for influence in the region, and much hangs on Turkey's prospects for joining the 27-member European organization³⁸". Its dynamic foreign policy in the western Balkans is bringing Turkey slowly but steadily into the Brussels although a number of EU member states are still against its status of full member of the bloc. However, if Turkey continues with its pro-active foreign policy in the Balkans region the EU will come in the situation when it will have to admit Turkish membership.

Turkey's Internal Problems

However, before Turkey decides to play more reconciliatory role in resolving its regional problems it is of crucial importance for its government to firstly deal with its internal political, judicial and social problems. For instance, the so-called Kurdish problem is one of the biggest problems for Turkish government to deal with since many Kurdish citizens claim that

³⁶ Ana E. Juncos, "The EU's post-Conflict Intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina: (re)Integrating the Balkans and/or (re)Inventing the EU?", *Southeast European Politics*, V. VI, N. 2 (2005).

³⁷ Katinka Barysch, "Can Turkey combine EU accession and regional leadership?", *Centre for European Reform*, Policy Brief, 2010, p.9.

³⁸ John Feffer, "Stealth Superpower..."

they are being under repression by the government³⁹. Then for years Turkish society has been living under great fear of terrorist attacks coming from militarist Kurdish organization PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) which is struggling for a kind of more semi-autonomous Kurd-populated South-Eastern region of the country. And probably the most important, the problem of secularism has stayed alive since the foundation of modern republic in the year 1923. In relation to this problem recently Turkey has confronted with a collusive network commonly referred to as "Ergenekon," which is related to the anti-government attacks and coup plots against the state composed mainly by the members of the ultra-nationalist secret services, military coup plotters and right-wing activists. In fact, since it was first launched in June 2007 the Ergenekon case has become one of the largest and most controversial judicial investigation in recent country's history⁴⁰. All being said, Turkey should pay more attention to solving its domestic problems in order to become stronger and more credible player at both regional and global stage⁴¹. In other words, if Turkish government tends to demonstrate more active foreign policy then it must build its political and economic order strong to act as a model country.

Concluding Remarks

As the EU-related reform process in Turkey recently has faced serious challenges coming from a number of influential EU leaders the AKP government headed by its Minister of Foreign

³⁹ Henri Barkey & Graham Fuller, "Turkey's Kurdish Question", *Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998.

⁴⁰ Gareth Jenkins, "Between Fact And Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation", *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program – A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center*, 2009, available at <<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0908Ergenekon.pdf>, p.9>.

⁴¹ Barysch, "Can Turkey combine...", p. 8.

Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu has made a paradigmatic shift in the foreign policy adopting a multi-dimensional approach that means a dynamic and pro-active diplomacy in the West, the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia. Following such paradigmatic shift Turkey has recently become more active in the western Balkans intensifying its economic, diplomatic, and cultural policies. Through its increasing diplomatic efforts in the region, besides its activeness in other regions in the world, Turkey tends to prove its potential of being a super power or a great power. In addition, Turkish government has viewed a Balkan crisis as a diplomatic opportunity and thus strengthened its image of a rising power. Turkey proved itself as a mediating country after it organized a number of diplomatic meetings between the former enemies in order to contribute to peace and regional stability. Moreover, its businessmen significantly increased economic investments in the region increasing a volume of trade with the Balkan countries from about \$3 billion in 2000 to nearly \$17.7 billion in 2008. Also, relying on rich legacy of Ottoman past the country has traditionally kept strong cultural ties with the region. As a result, through such a pro-active economic and diplomatic initiatives in the region Turkey has been proving itself as indispensable country for the European Union membership. Indeed, if Turkey concentrates more on solving its internal problems and helps resolving the "Balkan deadlock" it could become not only a regional but also a global power.