

## **TURKEY'S REVIVED BALKAN ROLE**

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From the Balkans to the Caucasus to the Middle East, Turkey is focusing on establishing an arc of influence in many countries which were once part of the Ottoman Empire (The National, 2009). This new course has been described as "neo-Ottomanism". Frustrated by open rejections coming from European capitals such as Paris, Vienna and Berlin, Turkey is focusing increasingly on its role in a region that it once either ruled or dominated for centuries (Spiegel Online, 2009). Turkey's Ottoman past and its historical and cultural ties with the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia are seen as important assets that enhance Turkey's ability to become a central power (Larrabee, 2010). The architect of Turkey's new foreign policy has been its current foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Davutoglu is convinced that Ankara must be on good terms with all its neighbors, and it cannot fear contact with countries and organizations that are branded as enemies by the West, namely Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah. Davutoglu believes that Turkey should become a respected central power throughout the territory once ruled by the Ottoman Empire (Spiegel Online, 2009).

Davutoglu argues that Turkey possesses "strategic depth" due to its history and geographic position. Turkey should not be content with a regional role in the Balkans or the Middle East because it should not be looked at as a regional but a central power. Due to this assumption it should aspire to play a leading role in several regions which could award it global strategic significance. According to Davutoglu, Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf and Black Sea country which can simultaneously exercise influence in all these regions and therefore have a global strategic role. It should exercise influence by developing a proactive policy corresponding to its historic and geographic depth which is amplified by its Ottoman legacy. This aim should be achieved by Turkey capitalizing on its soft power potential and following the "zero problem policy with neighbors" (Grigoriadis, 2010). This new dynamism in foreign policy has caught many by surprise and the focus in this article will now turn to Turkey's new dynamic role in the Balkan region.

More specifically with regard to the region of the Balkans, Davutoglu has been quoted as saying that "The history of the Balkans is the history of us all. If we work with a joint vision we can build the future together" (Turkish Weekly, 2009). He believes that the connotation of 'neo-Ottomanism' should not be taken negatively and rather should be looked upon as an effort to bring the peoples of the region closer to each other (Turkish Weekly, 2009).

Ultimately the Balkans are not the top priority on Turkey's list of geopolitical objectives. Turkey has much more immediate interests in the Middle East, where the ongoing US withdrawal is leaving a political power vacuum that Turkey wants to fill and use to project influence in its Muslim backyard and in

the Caucasus where competition is slowly intensifying with Russia. The Balkans rank below these priorities but are very much on Turkey's mind this is because the Balkans relate to Ankara's relationship with Europe (Stratfor, 2010).

On Monday the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2010 the European Center for Peace and Development (ECPD) located in Belgrade, Serbia, organized an international round table discussion in which the main emphasis was on the importance of reconciliation and tolerance in achieving freedom from fear and freedom from want in the Western Balkans. This international round table was made up of academics, diplomats and political analysts who came from the whole Balkan region. In the discussions were many important points made in regard to Turkey's role in the Balkans. Such points included comments such as 'One cannot speak of the Balkans without Turkey', the idea that the 'Balkans and Turkey are one of the spheres of Europe' and that 'Turkey should be included constantly in the future voice of the Balkans'.

Therefore Turkey's role with regard to the Balkans has not only been highlighted by diplomatic missions between Ankara, Belgrade and Sarajevo but also mentioned in round table discussions as something which should no longer be taken for granted but is now a given fact. According to the Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, "The problems of the Balkans could not be solved without Turkey" (Turkish Weekly, 2009).

Following the First World War, the Turkish Republic was dominated by a secularist military which felt that the Ottoman Empire's overextension into surrounding regions led to the Empire's collapse and that attention needed to be focused on the homeland. Turkey became established on the principle of European-style nationalism and rejected non-Turkic peoples. During this period Turkey felt little attachment to the Balkan Slavic Muslim population left behind by the legacy of the Ottoman Empire (Stratfor, 2010).

The Ottoman heritage was revived in the Balkans, more specifically in Bosnia, during the wars that plagued this region in the 1990's. These wars awakened the cultural and religious links between Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). BiH is a country where Bosnian Muslims make up one of the major ethnic groups and they hold Turkey in high regard. Turkey's important role in solving the problem in BiH has also been highlighted by Vuk Jeremic. He has stressed that "The center of the problems in the Balkans is Bosnia-Herzegovina; we need to concentrate our energy and good will on Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Turkey's role in this issue is crucial" (Turkish Weekly, 2009). Furthermore Davutoglu also echoed the same calls urging that cooperation between Turkey and Serbia in the region, especially in resolving the political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a top priority (Today's Zaman, 2010, Stratfor 2010).

The greatest diplomatic success so far has been the adoption of the Istanbul Declaration under the initiative of the Turkish President Abdullah Gul. This declaration on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2010 involved also the Serbian President Boris Tadic and the Chairman of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Presidency Haris Silajdzic. Both Tadic and Silajdzic agreed, with the obvious support of Turkey, to aim to

bridge their differences and establish a mutual understanding and overcome historical differences as well as work towards a more prosperous region where the final aim would be integration into the EU. To most analysts such diplomatic success for the Balkans was historical, and it was under Turkey's strong initiative that it happened (EMGPortal, 2010).

Turkey's rising influence in the Balkans is part of its return to geopolitical prominence under the ruling Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP is far more comfortable using the Muslim populations in the Western Balkans as anchors for its foreign policy than the secular Turkish governments of the 1990s. The AKP is challenging the Kemalist view that the Ottoman Empire was something to be ashamed of. Instead it is pushing towards the idea that Turkey should reconcile with its Ottoman heritage. Ankara has diplomatically supported a centralized Bosnian state. Turkey also lobbied on behalf of *Bosniaks* (Bosnian Muslims) during the recent Butmir constitutional reform process for BiH and was one of the first countries to recognize Muslim Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 (Stratfor, 2010).

From a geopolitical point of view Turkey wants to use its influence in the Balkans as an example of its geopolitical importance to Europe, which is very nervous about the security situation in the Balkans. The point is not to expand influence in the Balkans for the sake of influence economic or political. Ankara wants to demonstrate that its influence is central to the region's stability and that without Turkey there will be no permanent political settlement in the Balkans. Turkey has started once again to consider the Balkans as its backyard and believes that it should never be left out of the negotiations (Stratfor, 2010). According to the prominent Balkan analyst, Obrad Kesic, what is worrying for the US State Department is the fact that the elite in the US diplomacy have come to the conclusion that Turkey has started to follow its own independent policy regarding the Balkans, not always agreeing or following US policy. This has not only happened with regard to the Balkans but also with other regions such as the Caucasus and the Middle East (NSPM, 2010).

Although Ankara's diplomatic initiative in the region is significant, Turkey has still not had a large economic presence in the region. Compared to Europe's economic presence, Turkey's bilateral trade and investments with the Balkan states have been paltry. Ankara is conscious of this deficiency and plans to address it. It has realized that without concrete efforts it is difficult to sustain political influence in the Balkans without a firm economic presence. Another sensitive issue to Turkey's involvement in the region is the suspicion of Ankara's intentions among Serbs in BiH. Turkey's outgoing support for Bosnian Muslims and a centralized BiH have caused suspicion in the Serbian entity of BiH, *Republika Srpska*. The same case has been in Serbia where Turkey's involvement in Balkan affairs has allowed domestic nationalist elements to exploit the situation and raise tensions in the country the Balkans. Turkey must also be very careful in its policy to showcase and itself as a neutral peacemaker if that is what it wants to be. Its ruling AKP government is

definitely faced with having to walk a thin line between anchoring its influence among the Muslim populations of the Balkans and presenting itself as a fair arbiter between all sides while also looking to maintain its image abroad (Stratfor,2010).

Echoing the words of its current Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, the overall foreign policy aim is that "By 2023 when the country will commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the new republic, Turkey should be envisioned as being a full member of the EU after completing all the necessary requirements, living in full peace with its neighbors, integrated with neighboring basins in economic terms and for a common security vision, an effective player in setting orders in regions where its national interests lie, play an active role in global affairs and be amongst the top ten economies in the world" (Grigoriadis, 2010 ; p.9).

It has definitely made giant strides in its foreign policy in order to achieve the objectives set for 2023. There is also the question of how will its revived Balkan foreign policy affect the Balkan states. This result still remains to be fully seen.

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