



'TURKISH GEOPOLITICS': THE 'PLAYGROUND' OF TURKISH DIPLOMACY IN MESOPOTAMIA AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE 2020s

Nikolaos Stelgias

The term 'Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland)' has been in the limelight of Turkish and global news lately. The term was invented by nationalist and militaristic circles who returned at the 'spotlight' of current Turkish affairs during the past decade. Through the term 'Blue Homeland', these Turkish officials from the diplomatic corps and the Armed Forces are attempting to highlight their country's claims off the coasts of Turkey and Cyprus. Turkey's claim of sizable areas of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean as the continental shelf and exclusive economic zone places Ankara and many neighbouring capitals on opposing and antagonistic sides.

The conception of 'Mavi Vatan' is one aspect of Turkey's new grandiose designs for a range of national issues. Besides, the same masterminds are also enlisting the term 'Turkish Geopolitics' to promote Ankara's geopolitical road map referring to an area stretching from the depths of Mesopotamia to the seas of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean and North Africa. This geographical region encloses all areas which are of national interest for Turkey's conservative government of Justice and Development Party (Ak Party). In particular, the Kurdish Question, the Cyprus Issue and Greek-Turkish relations, are all based on this region. Furthermore, the achievement of a leading role on issues of energy, economy and regional policy in collaboration with Muslim Brotherhood's branches throughout the region is a paramount goal for the Turkish government.

This study intends to discuss the four pillars of the 'Turkish Geopolitics' which have progressively turned into a doctrine for Turkey's national security and foreign policy over the past five years. During the previous years, Turkey has experienced the developments of the Gezi Affair, the rupture in the government's

Dr Stelgias was born in 1982 in Istanbul and completed his doctorate in Athens, in 2011. He is a historian, researcher and writer. He has published many academic articles and books in English, Greek and Turkish, focusing on modern Turkey, Cyprus Issue, Kurdish Problem and the ongoing affairs and conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Dr Stelgias is also the correspondent of the Kathimerini Cyprus newspaper in the Turkish Cypriot community and Turkey. Dr Stelgias' recent book, 'The Ailing Turkish Democracy' is available from the Cambridge Scholars Publishing House.

relations with the Gülen Movement, the conclusion of the consultations for an amicable settlement of the Kurdish Issue, and the early days of the governing party's electoral shortcomings. Furthermore, after the failed coup attempt in 2016, the officials who support nationalist and militarist approaches have returned to crucial positions in Ankara. In this framework, the government has taken three essential steps on national issues.¹ First, Ankara has taken advantage of the rifts in the relations of the Great Powers, fuelled by the so called "new Cold War," to strengthen its radius of action in the Kurdish Question in Iraq and Syria. Second, Turkey struck a multidimensional alliance with Qatar, which has an essential impact on several issues. Third, the intensification of Turkey's military and energy presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, and especially in the surrounding waters of Cyprus, was followed by the country's military involvement in the Libyan crisis.

Turkey's grandiose plans for Mesopotamia and the Eastern Mediterranean as described by the doctrine of 'Turkish Geopolitics' are promoted by government officials, diplomats, officers of the Ministry of National Defence and ex-officers and commanders of the Turkish Armed Forces. Several of the supporters of these national strategies have found themselves at the epicentre of the 'Ergenekon', 'Balyoz' and Military Espionage cases during the last decade. Amongst them is Admiral Cem Gürdeniz² who has through his public interventions set forth the key elements of the 'Turkish Geopolitics (Türk Jeopolitiği)', meaning Turkey's new strategy on national issues.³

¹ For a first look at Turkish foreign policy on the doorstep of the third decade of the 21st century, see M Aydın - Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century and undefined 2019, "Twenty Years before, Twenty Years after: Turkish Foreign Policy at the Threshold of the 21st Century," *Routledge*, n.d., accessed June 22, 2020; Barış Kesgin, "Turkey's Erdoğan: Leadership Style and Foreign Policy Audiences," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 56–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2019.1575735>; Özgür Özdamar and Balkan Devlen, "Man vs. the System: Turkish Foreign Policy After the Arab Uprisings," in *Fear and Uncertainty in Europe* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 177–95, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91965-2_9; Hasan Kösebalaban, "Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward Syria: The Return of Securitization," *Middle East Critique*, June 15, 2020, 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2020.1770450>; Birol Başkan and Özgür Pala, "Making Sense of Turkey's Reaction to the Qatar Crisis," *International Spectator*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1739846>; Seufert, "Turkey Shifts the Focus of Its Foreign Policy: From Syria to the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya Zur Verfügung Gestellt in Kooperation Mit / Provided in Cooperation with: Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik (SWP)," 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020C06>; K Wasilewski, "Turkey's Involvement in Libya," 2020, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/gray-literature-detail?id=846940>.

² Gürdeniz was a flag officer of the Turkish Navy when in 2011 was jailed on charges of participating in a coup plot. He was also the commander of Cihat Yaycı, another Navy officer, who created the concept of the 'Blue Homeland'. In mid-2020, Yaycı resigned from his duties in the Turkish army in response to his transfer to an inactive post. For the life and military career of Gürdeniz see "Cem Gürdeniz," accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.babil.com/kisi/cem-gurdeniz>.

³ "Emekli Tümamiral Gürdeniz: Türkiye'nin Mavi Vatan Hedefleri, Emperyalizme Atılmış Tokattır," May 6, 2020, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/haber/emekli-tumamiral-gurdeniz-turkiye-nin-mavi-vatan-hedefleri-emperyalizme-atilmis-tokattir-207288>; Cem Gürdeniz, "21. Yüzyıl Türk Jeopolitiğinin Ağırlık Merkezi: Doğu Akdeniz | Independent Türkçe," July 5, 2019, <https://www.indyrturk.com/node/48556/t%C3%BCrkiyeden-sesler/21-y%C3%BCzy%C4%B1l-t%C3%BCrk-jeopoliti%C4%9Finin-a%C4%9F%C4%B1r%C4%B1k-merkezi-do%C4%9Fu-akdeniz>.

According to the retired Admiral, the 'Turkish Geopolitics' has four main pillars which concern the following fields of Turkish policy: First, the impact that the new Cold War has on Turkey and mainly on the shaping of its foreign policies. Moreover, the promotion of the 'Turkish Geopolitics' has enabled the development of a crucial power struggle in Ankara. Besides, national issues such as the Kurdish, Cyprus, and Greek-Turkish relations are also affected by the said geopolitical theory/strategy. Also, the country's national interests regarding energy and economy in the Eastern Mediterranean, as developed under the 'Turkish Geopolitics', frame Turkey's relations with its competitors in the region.

As Admiral Gürdeniz mentions the first pillar of the 'Turkish Geopolitics', meaning the impact of the new Cold War, brings forward an interesting theory. From his point of view, the contest of the Great Powers (US, Russia, China) on several fronts serves regional forces such as Turkey. In this framework, Turkey has fresh opportunities to establish its claims on a variety of issues. From Gürdeniz's point of view, the USA is a 'collapsing hegemon', whose 'withdrawal' from the Eastern Mediterranean enables Turkey to make new diplomatic and military moves.⁴

According to the former high-ranking staff member of the Turkish Navy, the alleged US fall is concurrent to the significant political showdown taking place in Ankara between the people of the 'State mentality' and those of the 'Atlantic vein'.⁵ Gürdeniz defines those who believe in the 'Turkish Geopolitics' as of 'State mentality' and emphasises that they regularly use nationalistic and militaristic rhetoric on several national issues.⁶ Those who belong in the 'Atlantic vein' on the other hand, often come from the opposition. This group believes in the implementation of liberal policies and the democratisation of Turkey. In addition, during the past, they supported the peaceful solution and amicable compromise of national issues such as the Kurdish and Cyprus. For Gürdeniz, the success of the 'Turkish Geopolitics' doctrine will depend on the result of this historical struggle taking place in Ankara.

The third pillar of 'Turkish Geopolitics' deals with the geographic dimension of Ankara's new doctrine. The theory concerns vast geography that stretches from the Turkish-Iranian border to the coast of North Africa. The uniformity of this front is indicative of Ankara's intention to relate all domestic issues. From Gürdeniz's point of view it is not viable to analyse the developments in Kurdish Issue separately to those occurring in the Greek-Turkish relations:

"In the 21st century, the Turkish Geopolitics' gravity centre is Eastern Mediterranean. It has three legs. Northern Iraq/Northern Syria, TRNC and Blue Homeland. (It aims to) prevent the establishment of the so-called

⁴ Cem Gürdeniz, "Kovid-19, Okyanuslar ve Denizlerdeki Mücadeleyi Etkilemiyor," accessed June 22, 2020,

<https://www.denizbulten.com/yazar-kovid-19-okyanuslar-ve-denizlerdeki-mucadeleyi-etkilemiyor-45.html>.

⁵ "Abd'den Yunanistan'a Savaş Gemisi. Cem Gürdeniz. Pankuş - 91 " (Youtube, July 22, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNftBkL9h_M&fbclid=IwAR2kmQ49w4Fho_qu-CbK1YSyp45VFF-dDQyoG3ho3i7OehRfQG67xq1w8fI.

⁶ Cem Gürdeniz, "Mavi Vatan: Akdeniz Kalkanı Harekâtı," accessed June 22, 2020, <http://toprakgemi.blogspot.com/2020/05/akdeniz-kalkan-harekat.html>.

Kurdistan, the efforts for blocking the independence of the TRNC and ending our military presence on the island, stripping our rights for the continental shelf in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas.⁷”

Finally, according to the ‘Turkish Geopolitics’ doctrine, Turkey should move to increase its power and influence in terms of economy, energy, diplomacy, culture, and military affairs in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this context, countries like Greece and Cyprus, who are the ‘puppets’ of Great Powers such as the United States and the European Union must not be allowed to undermine Turkish interests.⁸

In conclusion, the ‘Turkish Geopolitics’ doctrine is of particular importance for three reasons. First, it leads to the understanding that government circles in Ankara believe that “the new Cold War is creating opportunities for regional powers such as Turkey to make their claims visible”. Second, it links all of Turkey's national issues in a vast area that stretches from mid-Mesopotamia to the Eastern Mediterranean. In this area, Turkish officials and the military are developing alternative plans based on the calculation of possible profits and losses from the management of the Turkish national issues (Kurdish Question, Cyprus, Greek-Turkish, etc.). Third, the ‘Turkish Geopolitics’ relates the active promotion of Turkish claims in the region to the outcome of the political struggle happening in Ankara. Furthermore, according to Gürdeniz, the economic crisis and new developments in the post-COVID 19 period puts to question the future of the cooperation between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan government and its nationalist allies.⁹

⁷ Cem Gürdeniz, “Mavi Vatan: Ekim Ayı, Asya Çağı ve Doğu Akdeniz,” accessed June 22, 2020, <http://toprakgemi.blogspot.com/2019/10/ekim-ay-asya-cag-ve-dogu-akdeniz.html>.

⁸ “Abd’den Yunanistan’a Savaş Gemisi. Cem Gürdeniz. Pankuş - 91”; Cem Gürdeniz, “Mavi Vatan: ABD Doğu Akdeniz’de Ne Yaptığını Biliyor Mu?,” accessed June 22, 2020, <http://toprakgemi.blogspot.com/2020/05/abd-dogu-akdenizde-ne-yaptgn-biliyor-mu.html>.

⁹ Cem Gürdeniz, “Dolar Mı? Doğu Akdeniz Mi? | Veryansın TV,” accessed June 22, 2020, <https://veryansintv.com/dolar-mi-dogu-akdeniz-mi/>.

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