

From zero problems to leading the change: making sense of transformation in Turkey's regional policy

by Şaban Kardaş

This policy brief engages the ongoing debate among political analysts who question the course of Turkish foreign policy and raise the provocative question whether Ankara's ambitious 'zero problems with neighbors policy' has failed. The brief maintains that Turkey's regional policy is still influenced by the same doctrine of the central country, which suggests continuity in Turkish leaders' approach to Middle Eastern affairs. As in the pre-Arab Spring years, they are still driven by a desire to create a regional order in Turkey's neighborhoods, but the brief acknowledges that Turkish foreign policy also experienced a transformation in the sense of a shift of emphasis away from the principle of zero problems with neighbors towards the principle of striking right balance between freedom and security, both components of central country doctrine. As the disrupted domestic order in transition countries poses threats to the region at large, Turkey's proactive policy aims at reestablishing domestic order on the basis of democratic principles. The brief concludes with a discussion of the major limitations on Turkey's ability to manage the new regional transformation in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the uprisings.

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Turkey's relationship with Syria has gone through a dramatic transformation over the course of the last two years. While Turkey was pursuing limitless cooperation with Syria two years ago, it now is actively supporting the political and military opposition forces that are fighting for the fall of the Baath regime. Turkish government's breaking off ties with the Syrian government and support for uprising has definitely earned it applauses in many quarters. However, opposition parties and foreign policy pundits are increasingly charging government's policy towards Syria with adventurism and even playing a gambit. Rebuffing such charges, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu often argues that as a new region was reborn, Turkey will lead the wave of change and "be the owner, pioneer and servant of the new Middle East."

To better contextualize such heated statements, one has to look at the broader debate on Turkey's regional policies. Indeed there is an ongoing debate among political analysts who question the course of Turkish foreign policy, raising the provocative question whether Ankara's ambitious 'zero problems with neighbors policy' has failed in the wake of Middle Eastern uprisings.

For several years, Turkey had worked to forge good neighborly relations and spearhead a zone of peace in its neighborhood. To that end, it has un-

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dertaken revolutionary initiatives that included attempts towards resolving bilateral disputes, establishment of high level strategic cooperation councils, removal of visa requirements and plans for establishing free trade zones. Cooperation and regional integration was the wave of future, as Turkey appeared to be set on trajectory of peaceful rise, capitalizing on its soft power assets.

Corresponding roughly to the onset of the Arab Spring, however, Turkey has found itself in a turbulent regional environment, which has increasingly pitted it against its neighbors. After its decision to install an early warning radar as part of NATO’s missile shield project on its soil, Turkey’s relations with Iran turned increasingly sour, with high level Iranian officials mounting criticism against Ankara. Turkish leaders have been increasingly engulfed in the political turf war in Iraq, with Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki openly accusing Ankara of interfering in his country’s internal affairs. Turkey’s vocal criticism towards Damascus’s brutal crackdown of the uprising and its support for the Syrian political and military opposition effectively ended the diplomatic ties between the two countries. At the same time, the freefall in the rapidly deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relationship and Ankara’s hardening position on the Cyprus issue further raised questions whether it was pursuing policies of bullying in Eastern Mediterranean.

More than a force for cooperation and integration, Turkey risked being viewed as an aggressive power that confronts its neighbors and meddles in their affairs, relying on coercive instruments. In an environment where even those analysts sympathetic to Ankara’s regional policies have grown wary of what they perceive as confrontational rhetoric uttered by Turkish leaders, many have already declared the end of zero problems policy. For critics, Ankara’s ambitious foreign policy has vanished, if not its moment of regional leadership.

As will be explicated in the following pages, however, Turkey’s regional policy is still influenced by the same doctrine of central country, which suggests continuity in Turkish leaders’ approach to Middle Eastern affairs. As in the pre-Arab Spring years, they are still driven by a desire to create a regional order in Turkey’s neighborhoods, for such a belt of peace and stability will be key to advance its wealth and security. What has changed is the shift of emphasis away from the principle of zero problems with neighbors towards the principle of striking right balance between freedom and security, both components of central country doctrine. Such a transformation is only normal given the changing nature of the threats to the regional order. In coming years, therefore, the main litmus test for Turkey will be its ability to assist the formation of functioning state apparatus in the countries undergoing transition that can meet the economic and political demands of their people and establish domestic order.

Central country: the doctrine behind Turkey's regional policies

To understand the transformation of Turkey's regional policies, some conceptual clarity is warranted. The analyses that herald the death of Turkey's regional policy have assumed wrongly that Ankara pursued 'zero problems with neighbors' policy in recent years. In fact, even in its heyday, 'zero problems' was hardly a policy, strategy or the doctrine. It was only one among several principles that have collectively made up Ankara's regional policy. There was definitely a doctrine as the centerpiece of Turkey's regional policies, but it was the 'central-power' policy.

The central country, a concept Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu used to explain Turkey's international positioning in his academic writings, refers to an actor that is geographically and geoculturally located at the intersection of self-contained regional systems. Davutoglu believes that Turkey's unique geographic and geocultural position gives it a special central-country role, and as such, Turkey cannot define itself in a defensive manner. As a result, Davutoglu expects Turkey to play a proactive role in shaping its neighborhood, for Turkey's security and prosperity at home necessitates the establishment of peaceful and stable orders in the immediate regions that surround it.

In 2004, Davutoglu, as he progressively took charge of the formulation of Turkish foreign policy as the chief advisor to prime minister, listed five principles forming the core of Ankara's 'central power' strategy: the balance between freedom and security; zero problems relationship with neighbors; multi-dimensional foreign policy; a new diplomatic style; and rhythmic diplomacy as the components of Ankara's new foreign policy. By the time he became the foreign minister in 2009, he already outlined his vision for Turkey as the 'order instituting' power in its neighborhoods, a restatement of central power doctrine. In his view, it was not an imperial vision to shape the surrounding areas after its own image. Rather it was a geopolitical necessity, for Turkey simply could not afford to remain aloof to disorder around it. As the Balkans suffered from post-conflict traumas, Caucasus was beset with frozen conflicts and the Middle East was threatened by political and sectarian tensions, Turkey had to assume the responsibility and play a lead role toward the establishment of regional order.

Getting the fuss about 'zero problems' right!

Then, it begs explaining how Turkey's regional policy popularly came to be defined as the 'zero problems policy.' In the specific context it was developed, zero problems principle had a symbolic value, for it signified the break with the foreign policy mentality of the past that had presupposed that Turkey was surrounded with enemies. Believing that this mentality fostered a defensive

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reflex on the part of Turkish elites, Davutoglu saw it as the biggest obstacle before a proactive regional policy. Keen to deepen cross-border exchanges in the neighborhood, key to expanding Turkey’s influence and remove barriers before Turkey’s Western integration, Davutoglu formulated zero problems principle which first and foremost necessitated and aimed at the resolution of existing bilateral disputes with Armenia, Greek Cypriots and Syria. It was for that reason that Turkey supported Annan plan on Cyprus, the normalization process with Armenia, launched high level political dialogue with Syria and Greece, and built stronger ties with the Kurdistan regional government in Northern Iraq. By building on those foundations, second, Turkey hoped to precipitate a broader platform for cultural, economic and political interaction, hence creating a cordon of peace and security around Turkey through forging interdependence among regional actors.

In short, ‘zero problems’ was a useful conceptual innovation to respond to a very specific challenge: how to achieve cooperation and integration with neighboring regions with which it had achieved only meager cooperation, due either to its choice or conjectural factors. Penetrating into neighborhood naturally required stability and predictability, which exerted pressure on Turkey to pursue a *status quo* policy in addition to seeking to resolve bilateral problems. Ankara did exactly that by cooperating with the incumbent regimes and refraining from questioning their democratic credentials. Hence, while Turkey’s rising regional profile was characterized by economic liberalism, whereby it flourished with trade, investments and economic interdependence, it lacked the elements of political liberalism, as Turkey’s leaders developed collegial ties with their authoritarian counterparts.

‘Zero problems’ principle was far from perfect in its implementation. The ill-fated rapprochement with Armenia bore no fruits, while the political dialogue with Greece achieved limited concrete results to settle the long-standing bilateral disputes in the Aegean Sea, and after 2006 Turkey was hardly forthcoming on Cyprus issue. Granted, it was instrumental in helping reshuffle Turkey’s ties to surrounding regions, as the share of neighbors in trade volume rose progressively, and its soft power spread throughout the neighboring regions. While its cultural products have penetrated into the daily lives of the Arab, East European or Balkan people, Turkey’s ascendance in international affairs and its successful blend of various cultural and political traditions have gained it the ability to garner influence through power of persuasion.

It was never intended to be the comprehensive foreign policy doctrine, but given the appeal of the term, ‘zero problems’ gained popularity as such. The resulting conceptual confusion led many analysts including the members and supporters of the government to label the entire range of Turkey’s regional policy as zero problems, and as a result it was often forgotten that what Turkey in fact aspired to realize was the notion of central country.

Regional policy upside down?

Since the onset of the Middle Eastern uprisings, Turkish foreign policy has undergone a major transformation. While critics like to argue that Turkey now has problems with all neighbors, at the core of the debate lies Turkey's policy towards Syria, the poster child for zero problems policy, and its call for regime change and resort to a more coercive approach. Even those sympathetic to the government argue that with this new policy Turkey risks losing the momentum it had gained through zero problems policy. Others even suggest that Turkey is falling into a trap, as it is drawn into regime change business and seeks to redesign the regional order.

Yet there has been little sound analysis as to what that transformation entails. Most analysts, rather than engaging in a more serious exploration of the relationship between Turkish foreign policy's conceptual toolkit and the course of events, prefer to jump on the easy conclusion that Turkish foreign policy has been completely revamped, because they mistakenly equate zero problems with regional policy. As such, the existing analyses not only miss a very strong element of continuity but also fail to properly account what has exactly changed.

As will be explained below, the central country doctrine still underpins Turkey's foreign policy, which point to a strong element of continuity. What has changed is the chief principle that guides Turkey's regional policy at the particular conjecture, and the clues for that can be found in recent statements by Davutoglu. In various speeches he summarized the thinking behind not only Ankara's policy on Syria but also the core theme that underpins its regional policies: how to maintain regional order in the face of the security externalities of domestic turmoil.

Challenge today: assist domestic transformation to maintain regional order

Today, the challenge before Turkey's leaders is not how to penetrate into a relatively calm neighborhood as much as how to tackle the dynamic security risks posed by domestic transformations that also have put the entire region in flux. As Turkey responds to a different contingency, naturally, 'zero problems' also loses its relevance as the guiding principle of its foreign policy. But it would be misnomer to call this shift of emphasis as the collapse of 'zero problems', because it was not specifically meant to be applied to a contingency involving the domestic order in regional counterparts. Nor has Turkey abandoned its central country doctrine. On the contrary, faced with this new environment, Turkey still falls back on the central country doctrine, this time highlighting another core principle that is relevant to the new contingency: establishing the balance between security and freedom.

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While previously the issue at hand was to establish regional order through deepened relations with regional countries, today, the challenge is of a different character: the nature of the relationship between the regimes and societies has been at the core of the maintenance of regional order, as these events have immediate repercussions for other regional actors including Turkey. Previously, Turkey was confronted with a similar challenge in Iraq and Lebanon and in order to prevent regional destabilization caused by the political fragmentation in these countries, Ankara had actively worked to promote national reconciliation among rival ethnic and sectarian groups. In a similar vein, since the start of the Arab uprisings, Turkey has progressively abandoned its support for the notion of stability built on incumbent regimes and moved in the direction of embracing pro-democratic popular movements, hoping that it would help reestablish the domestic order in the transition countries, key to regional order.

Hence, as Turkey works actively to restore the domestic order, interestingly one can observe the rise of political liberalism in Turkish leaders' parlance, in the sense that they openly express their preference for democracy as the regime type that needs to be pursued by their neighbors. Turkey increasingly champions democracy, as it is seen as the most effective political system to ensure good governance and produce economic growth, keys to domestic stability and regional order.

To that end, Turkey has proactively supported the masses demanding political change. It argued for gradual peaceful change and worked to prevent civil conflict and foreign military intervention. In the countries undergoing a relatively peaceful transition, such as Tunisia and Egypt, it has engaged with the new governments to assist their transformation. In the countries where uprisings gained a militarized dimension, after initial hesitation, Turkey coordinated its position with the regional and international actors and joined the coalitions seeking to overthrow incumbent regimes. With the fall of Gaddafi in Libya it works with the new rulers towards reconstruction, while in Syria it has been at the forefront of international coalition seeking to topple Assad. It is this proactive profile that makes it indispensable in any discussion on the future of the Middle East.

The way ahead

The real challenge at time of such a regional transformation is to ride the wave of change. Turkey increasingly emphasizes the principle of democratic governance, because it believes that creating a cordon of peace and stability depends on the establishment of the balance between security and freedoms. The right way to problematize Turkey's role in the Middle East and North Africa, therefore, is to ask whether it commands the necessary wherewithal to manage the regional transformation and stabilize the region,

rather than the fruitless question of whether it can still sustain zero problems with neighbors. Turkey's desire to help the domestic transformation is worth commending but there will be major limitations on its ability to shape the new regional order in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the uprisings.

For one, Turkey's knowledge into Middle Eastern affairs has been limited, given the long disconnect from the region. Despite the advances it has achieved in the last decade, Turkey still lacks in-depth insight into the unique conditions of individual countries, not to mention its shortages of personnel versed in the language, society and culture of Arab countries. Second, Turkey will hardly have much leverage over the trajectory of these transition countries, for the parameters of domestic transformation, such as the Islamism, sectarianism or tribalism will be beyond its reach. Moreover, despite its growing soft power assets, Turkey can neither channel billions of dollars needed for economic development nor can it mobilize enormous economic, social and political instruments for nation building and democratization. Last but not the least, the regional geopolitical dynamics are too complex to allow for being shaped by a single actor like Turkey.

Turkey may not lead the change or shape the region as the ambitious rhetoric suggests, but still it is likely to play a constructive role in the unfolding of domestic transformations and regional order. The question of spreading democracy aside, what is urgently needed in these countries is the establishment of functioning economic and political systems. Turkey's own experience of democratization and various political and economic reforms introduced in the last decade serve as a source of inspiration and footprint for its leaders' new engagement in the region, which provides a useful starting point. Indeed, Turkey can share some good governance practices through increased exchanges between its civil society and government institutions and their counterparts from the region. Such interactions are increasingly underway, which are paralleled by various programs Turkey's development assistance agency is developing in the region. With these programs, Turkey can make modest but vital contributions towards capacity building in areas as diverse as security sector reform, judiciary, media, health and education, all necessary components for good governance and eventual nation building.

More importantly, it is good news that in this volatile region Turkey is one of the few nations willing to work for stability, instead of sowing seeds of further chaos by capitalizing on and deepening the lines of division. Both in Iraq and Syria, where sectarian differences along Shiite-Sunni lines have been one major source of the domestic conflict and where some regional countries interfered in such conflicts with a sectarian agenda, Turkey has deliberately avoided playing the sectarian card and took steps toward dampening those tensions. Also welcome is Turkey's readiness

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to pursue cooperative policies and coordinate its work with other regional actors and extra-regional stakeholders. In the coming days, such cooperative security practices on Turkey's part will be ever more crucial to bring calm to the region, precondition to consolidation of the transition countries and paving the way for functioning economic and political systems, necessary components of regional order. ♦

An earlier version of this brief appeared in the summer 2012 issue of Internationale Politik.

Recommended Reading

Bulent Aliriza and Stephen Flanagan, "The End of Zero Problems? Turkey and Shifting Regional Dynamics," in CSIS: Part of the 2012 Global Forecast (April 12, 2012).

Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkey's Zero Problems Foreign Policy," in Foreign Policy (May 20, 2010).

Suat Kiniklioglu, "The neighborhood: policies, priorities and power," in Today's Zaman (March 2, 2012).

Sinan Ulgen, "Turkey's 'Zero Problems' Problem," in Project Syndicate (November 15, 2011).

Kadir Ustun, "Turkey needs to rethink policy towards its fractious neighbors," in Al Monitor (April 16, 2012).

Nuh Yilmaz, "Turkey's Zero Problems with Neighbors Policy 2.0," in Cairo Review (July 3, 2012).

Tarik Oguzlu, "The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' Policy," in SAM Policy Brief, No. 1 (February 2012).

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