

Continuity or Change? Analyzing Turkish Foreign Policy during the Justice and Development Party Era

Change in Turkish foreign policy has been “a neglected phenomenon” in the literature for decades as Turkey’s alliance with Western political institutions as well as the supremacy of the military and bureaucracy in Turkey’s politics provided some degree of continuity in the foreign policy decision-making. Until the late-1990s, scholars mainly focused on the pillars of continuity in Turkish foreign policy, which had been basically Westernization and a preference for status quo. This disinterest in change in Turkish foreign policy abruptly came to an end as an alternative voice, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Because the founders of the party were former members of the Islamist Welfare Party and foreign policy makers wanted to re-establish Turkey’s ties with Middle Eastern countries, a “shift-of-axis” argument was strongly voiced as the party consolidated its power in Turkish politics. These arguments reached their zenith between 2009 and 2011 as Turkey’s relations with Israel deteriorated while the Erdoğan government voted against Iran sanctions in the United Nations Security Council. During this period, several articles, books, policy reports, op-eds, etc. were written on the subject of goal- and orientation-change in Turkish foreign policy.

The problem with this literature is that while it provided a fruitful discussion on change in Turkish foreign policy between the pre-AKP and AKP years, it could not explain the policy fluctuations during the AKP era from 2002 to present. This article aims to overcome this problem by examining change and continuity in Turkish foreign policy during the AKP leadership. To do this, I divide the AKP period into three sub-periods, which each involve different domestic and international conditions. The first period includes the years between 2002 and 2009 in which we witness the liberalization and civilian takeover of foreign-policy decision-making. In this period, the decisions on foreign policy cannot be separated from the internal power struggles between different institutions. The second period takes place between 2009 and 2013, which constituted the golden years of the AKP leadership. In these years, Turkish foreign policy took on a more ambitious and activist form as domestic and international developments provided the AKP government an opportunity to realize its objective to make Turkey a regional and global power. The final period starts in 2013 when the domestic and international atmosphere drastically changed while the foreign policy goals and methods of the AKP government took on a more complex form. The main argument of the article is that while it is difficult to prove the “axis shift” argument because of constantly-changing power struggles in the region and Turkey’s inability to play a role independent from the West, the principle of “preference for status quo” was significantly altered during the period of AKP leadership, especially from 2009 to present.

Those wanting access to the full paper, please contact the author, Dr. Murat Ulgul, via mulgul@udel.edu or mulgul@ktu.edu.tr