

Book Review

Perception of Leaders and Developments in Türkiye's Foreign Policy (2002-2018)

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Abstract

This book argues that the fundamental transformation in Turkish foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) from 2002 to 2018 is best explained by changes in the perceptions, worldviews, and identity-building projects of its leaders, principally Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ahmet Davutoğlu. Employing a constructivist theoretical framework focused on the individual level of analysis, it traces a shift from a "Passive-Western-Oriented" discourse to a "Proactive-Unilateralist and Identity-Based" one. The doctrine of "Strategic Depth" provided the initial intellectual roadmap, while the Arab Spring served as a critical turning point. The interplay between leaders' evolving perceptions of Türkiye's power and identity forged two distinct periods: an era of unproblematic commercial diplomacy followed by a phase of aggressive, identity-driven policy. The book concludes that, although structural factors were influential, the agency and perceptions of leaders were decisive in redefining national interests and macro-orientation.

Keywords

Leaders' perception, AK Party, Turkish foreign policy

1. Introduction

The evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy since the AKP's ascent in 2002 represents a pivotal subject in international relations, marking a transition from a conservative, West-aligned NATO member to an assertive, independent actor in multiple regions (Çınar, 2018; Aras, 2019). While structural explanations—citing post-Cold War shifts, economic growth, and regional instability—provide context, they fail to fully account for the depth and directional volatility of Ankara's approach. This book posits

that the perceptions of leaders concerning national identity and international status are the cornerstone of foreign policy orientation (Golmohammadi, 2019). Therefore, it analyzes this period not as a mere structural outcome but as a construct of the ruling elite's discourse, using analysis of key speeches, writings, and policy results.

Constructivism offers a theoretical view, contesting objectivist approaches by positing that social identities and national interests are constructed through interaction, discourse, and shared understanding (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002). By focusing on the individual level of analysis—the cognition, personality, and worldview of key decision-makers—the study highlights leaders as dominant “Meaning Makers” who establish the perceptual frameworks for policy, especially in systems with centralized power (Hudson, 2005; Gülmez, 2021). The core identity shift underpinning policy change was from a “submissive disciple of the West” and “peripheral state” to a “regional power center,” “leader of the Islamic world,” and “independent international power” (Taşpınar, 2012). This imagined identity fused religious conservatism (evoking Islamic and Ottoman heritage) with neo-nationalism (emphasizing power and autonomy), a synthesis championed by the AKP (Yavuz, 2009).

The book delineates two relatively distinct periods, shaped by the internal evolution of leaders' discourse and reactions to external events. The First Period including “Strategic Depth” and “Trouble-Free Commercial Diplomacy” (2002-2011) profoundly shaped by Ahmet Davutoğlu's “Strategic Depth” doctrine, which held that Türkiye's Ottoman history and geo-cultural position endowed it with unique strategic depth, demanding a redefinition from a “bridge” to a “central country” and independent leader across civilization spheres (Davutoğlu, 2011, 2008). This directly countered the traditional Kemalist, Euro-Western orientation. The operative discourse featured “commercial diplomacy” for economic interdependence, “Zero Problems with Neighbors” for regional stability and legitimizing leadership, and “diversification of foreign partners” to avoid dependence (Aras, 2009). This period witnessed expanded trade and investment in the Middle East, Balkans, and Caucasus; active mediation roles; and continued EU accession talks, all framed within a discourse of “Islamic liberalism” reconciling religious values with democracy and markets.

The Second Period: “Aggressive Neo-Ottomanism” and Identity-Based Foreign Policy (2011-2018) along with The Arab Spring which was a pivotal test and turning point. Turkish leaders initially noticed it as an opportunity for Türkiye to lead as a “model” for emerging moderate Islamist states (Gülmez, 2021). This perception, coupled with domestic economic confidence and Erdoğan's consolidating power, triggered a qualitative shift from “neutral mediator” to “active advocate.” The Syria policy exemplified this: rapid escalation from advocating reform to demanding Assad's ouster and actively supporting the opposition, effectively burying the “Zero Problems” doctrine and entangling Türkiye in protracted conflict (Tol, 2021). Concurrently, identity discourse turned overtly toward “Neo-Ottomanism,” emphasizing Sunni-Islamic identity. Erdoğan's rhetoric increasingly referenced Ottoman legacy, duty to the Muslim Ummah, and sharp criticism of Western “colonialism” and

“Zionism” (Yavuz, 2020). Relations with the West deteriorated, marked by stalled EU talks and the contentious purchase of Russian S-400 systems, symbolizing a quest for independence and rift with NATO (Aydın & Açıkmeşe, 2020). This shift resulted from leaders overestimating their regional influence, disillusionment with the West and failed regional democratization, and domestic centralization of power under Erdoğan post-2017, which enabled a more personalized, ideological, and risky foreign policy that also served domestic legitimization (Öztürk & Akgün, 2020).

2. Discussion

The analysis underscores leaders’ agency in driving change while recognizing its dialectic with structural constraints. The power of perception to redefine identity and interests is clear: leaders successfully constructed a new discourse of Türkiye as a “civilization-state” with legitimate regional leadership claims, enabling interventions, confrontations, and new alliances (Golmohammadi, 2019). Erdoğan’s charismatic, authoritarian personality was instrumental in personalizing and aggressively executing this vision. However, structural factors persistently limited options. The global economy, energy needs, rival military power (e.g., Russia in Syria), NATO/EU pressures, and geopolitical realities (e.g., maritime disputes) compelled tactical recalibrations (Aydın, 2020). A move toward “more cautious realism” in the period’s later years—such as mending ties with Russia and engaging rivals like Egypt—shows that while perceptions set the course, structures shaped outcomes. Institutionally, change was not merely discursive; traditional secular institutions like the Foreign Ministry were weakened while new tools (e.g., TIKA, religious diplomacy, and TV series) institutionalized the new paradigm.

3. Conclusion

The book convincingly frames the AKP-era foreign policy transformation through the impact of leaders’ perceptions and discourse on national identity and interest redefinition. The two-stage process—first under “strategic depth” and commercial diplomacy (2002-2011), then under “aggressive neo-Ottomanism” and identity-based interventionism (2011-2018)—was facilitated by the Arab Spring and domestic presidential centralization. Although structural factors provided the context and constraints, the overarching direction, priorities, and emergent tensions stemmed directly from the AKP leaders’ identity and power project. This supports the necessity of integrating individual-level analysis with structuralism when examining foreign policy paradigm shifts. The analysis ends in 2018; subsequent events like the Eastern Mediterranean crises, the 2020 Karabakh War, and normalization initiatives suggest an emergent third phase of “pragmatic realism,” blending residual identity motives with stringent cost-benefit calculations.

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