

The imperial legacy in the Turkish strategic culture. A 2018 appraisal of Davutoglu’s concept of Strategic Depth

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The paper aims to take a closer look at the relation between strategic culture and security strategy with a particular focus on its developments in Turkey. As the last concise attempt to formulate a comprehensive Turkish foreign policy the concept of Strategic Depth - *Stratejik Derinlik* - developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a university professor turned strategist, Minister of Foreign Affairs and later on prime minister of Turkey during the long reign of the AKP, it proved to be a softened but more refined iteration of previous security strategies aimed at marking Turkey as a major regional and even international security actor. Turkey is the prime example of how enduring strategic culture can be and how important it is to understand its implications in order to identify the main drivers in one’s security and foreign policies.

During most of its Kemalist period Turkey maintained a low stance in international relations. With a military that ruled but not governed, the establishment was more concerned with following the legacy of Kemal Atatürk *Yurtta Barış, Dünyada Barış - peace at home, peace abroad-*, in order to preserve the republican and values, and their own privileges in the process. For more than 50 years Turkey relied heavily on NATO for its security while following the lead of its main security partner, the United States. It is no surprise its foreign policy lacked lustre and initiative. Stuck in a defence and ideological block, struggling to maintain the laicity of its Turkey has vacillated between the East and the West. Its most notable international intervention has been the Cyprus invasion and the de facto separation of the island between Greece and Turkey, action meet with international discontent. Otherwise Turkey seemed set to preserve and develop more a sense of national identity than setting eyes beyond its borders.

However, the Kemalist legacy started to erode after the collapse of the Soviet Union. With its main strategic competitor in the region weakened, Turkey became more and more assertive as a regional player. A first step initiated by Turgut Özal’s foreign policy outlook *Adriyatik’ten Çin Seddi’ne* - from the Adriatic to the Great Chinese Wall – had, as an immediate consequence, positioned Turkey in intense regional competition with its neighbors. Özal’s outlook about the potential opportunities for development after the collapse of the Soviet Union were far more reaching than those of the Ottoman Empire rising eye brows in many chancelleries as very few actually believed in a revival of Pan-Turkism and a integration, or at least a rally, of the Turkic peoples around the Turkish republic. Soon it became obvious how unrealistic such an approach was. Regional competition brought more pressing matters close two its borders where frictions with Greece and Syria worsened.

As military tensions ensued Turkey was preparing for what was called at the time “the two and a half wars” a strategic concept developed by a relatively obscure diplomat, Şükrü Elekdağ. The concept of the two and a half wars aimed to prepare Turkey for a war on two

fronts, with Greece, which whom it had disputes over islands and territorial waters and with Syria which harboured Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdish PKK. On top of these Elekdağ expected a possible massive armed Kurdish insurrection on its own territory. Direct confrontation has been avoided several times but since then, Turkey engaged in a comprehensive strategic plan for modernising its military and developing its military industrial complex.

The AKP's victory meant a new approach to security matters, an approach that officially acknowledged the imperial past and Turkey's predominant Muslim population as factors of importance for the new Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu's multidimensional approach implied a change from continuous confrontation to project specific cooperation with everyone as long as Turkey was the driving force behind and the coordinating vector in front. For a significant period Strategic Depth made a lot of sense for Turkey and for its near abroad partners.

However, each and every attempt to change the strategic culture inherited from Imperial times seemed to be short lived. This paper attempts to showcase how the major milestones in security strategies aiming to change Turkey's strategic culture have performed in an attempt to better understand the implications of strategic culture in the development of future security strategies.