

The Role of Turkey in Southeastern Europe

The Western Balkans

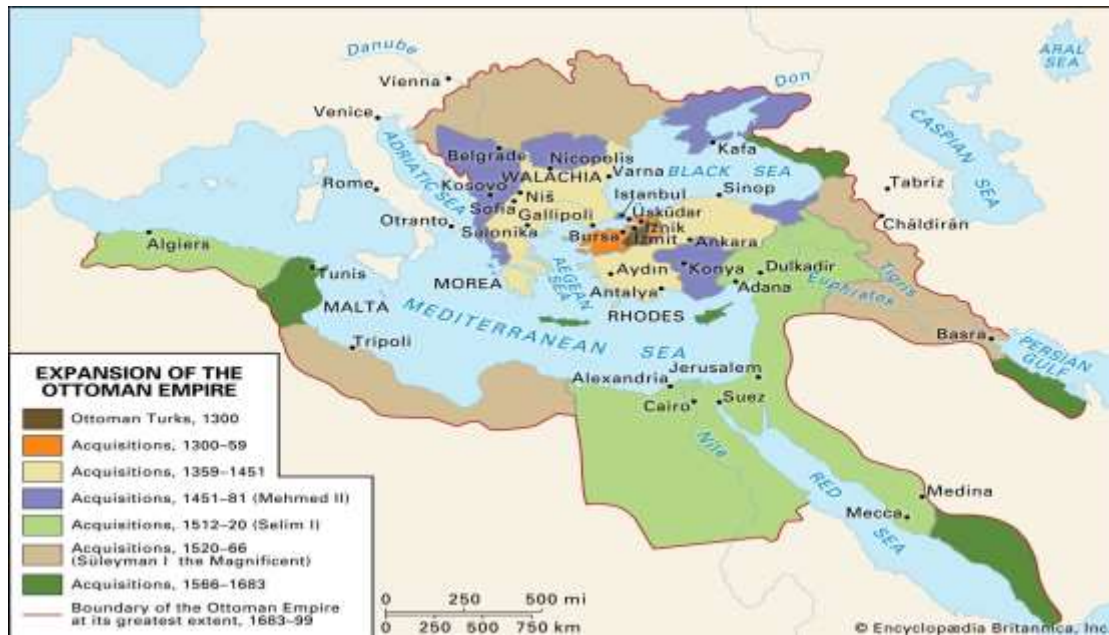
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Introduction

- This presentation will focus on Turkey's Role in Southeastern Europe by focusing on the Western Balkans (Albania, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo). By giving a historical overview of Turkey's foreign policy in the region, I will try to show how different global events either inspired or influenced Turkey's foreign policy towards the region.

Historical ties and Geography

- Southeastern Europe and Turkey neighbour each other and a large part of the region was formally part of Ottoman Empire between the 14th and 19th centuries.
 - the term “Balkan” itself is a Turkish word meaning a series of mountains
 - The first major battle was the Battle of Kosovo (1389) between Serbia and the Empire.
 - The Conquest of Constantinople (1453) saw the end of the Byzantine Empire.
- Ottoman settlement policies contributed to the multicultural and multi-religious nature of the Balkans



The Disintegration of the Ottoman Empire

Formation of Balkan States: The establishment of the national boundaries and identities that exist today.

The borders of present states were drawn as a result of their wars with the Sublime Porte:

- **National Movements and Independence (19th century):**
- **Balkan Wars (1912-13)**
- **World War I (1914-1918)**
- **Republic of Turkey (1923)**

The formation of nation-states followed a discourse of ‘othering’ the Ottoman past to strengthen national consciousness



Republic of Turkey Foreign Policy 1923 -1991

1. Early Republican Period (1923–1945)

Turkish national and foreign policy ignored the Ottoman period as much as possible and acted as if the Ottoman legacy did not have any influence on Turkish society

Pursued Secularism

Non-interventionism adopted: ‘Peace in the World, Peace in Turkey’ – Kemal

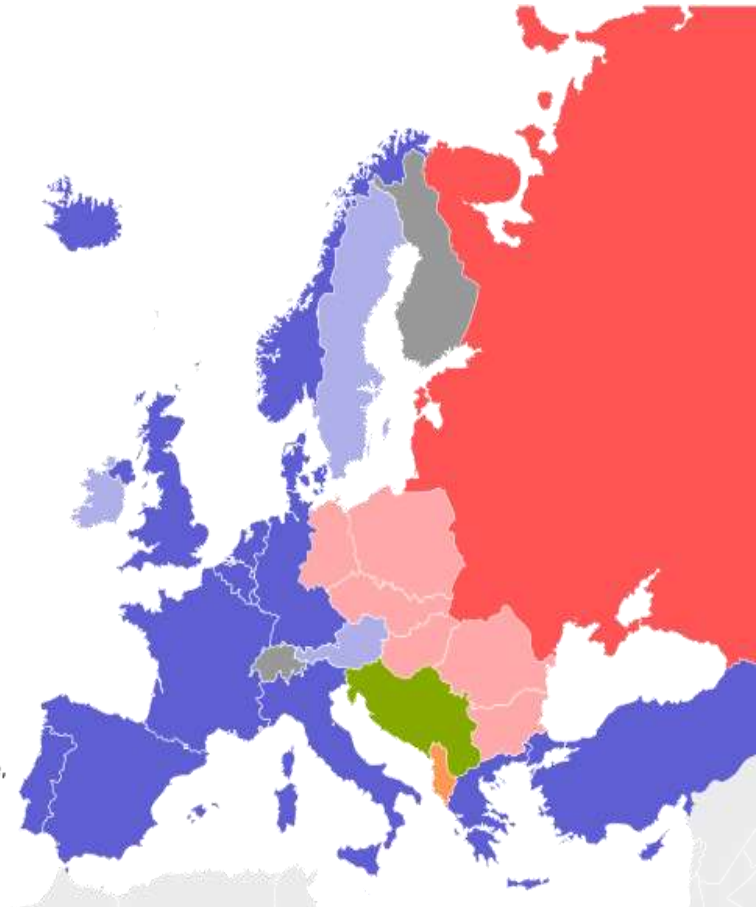
European and Western Orientation

Balkan Pact (1934): Turkey signed the Balkan Pact with Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia to promote regional stability and mutual defence, reflecting a shift towards collective security in the Balkans.

2. Cold War Period (1946–1991)

In 1952 Turkey Joined NATO. Its foreign policy was largely in sync with Western interests, especially concerning Soviet containment.

In 1987 Turkey submitted its application for formal membership in the European Economic Community



End of the Cold War and Bi-Polar World Order

Significant Switch in Foreign Policy and Turkey's rediscovering of the Balkans

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War prompted Turkey to reassess its foreign policy. It offered an opportunity for Turkey to pursue a more independent foreign policy.

- The emergence of new nation-states on its borders, Turkey faced the challenge of redefining its external engagements and internal identity.
- It opted for a multifaceted approach, seeking to balance its Western orientation with a renewed emphasis on Turkish cultural identity and a leadership role within the Islamic world.
- During the 1990s, Turkey engaged in the region primarily through participation in international missions and operations
- Bosnian War (1992), forced Turkey's decision-makers to realise that they could no longer ignore the Ottoman legacy

Bosnian War (1992-1995)

Turkey faced pressure internal from its people to support the Bosnians on the basis of Muslim brotherhood.

•Diplomatic Support:

- Turkey was among the first countries to recognize Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence.
- Advocated for Bosnia and Herzegovina in international forums, including the United Nations.

•Humanitarian Aid:

- Provided substantial humanitarian assistance to Bosnian Muslims.
- Sent convoys with food, medical supplies, and other aid to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

•Military Assistance:

- Part of the international effort to lift the arms embargo against Bosnia and Herzegovina, allowing it to defend itself.
- Involved in covertly supplying arms and military training to Bosnian forces, despite the UN embargo.
 - CIA (1994) satellite images of Iranian Aircraft on Turkish airfields at Zagreb International Airport

Kosovo War (1998)

Turkey was forced to play a more low-key role given the nature of the conflict being within a state

•Diplomatic Support for the Kosovo Albanians:

- Supported Kosovo Albanian demands for autonomy and later, independence, within international forums.
- Advocated for international intervention to stop the humanitarian crisis and ethnic cleansing.

•Participation in NATO Operations:

- Turkey participated in NATO's Operation Allied Force, contributing air forces and facilities.
- Offered the use of its airbases and airspace for NATO operations against Serbian forces.

•Humanitarian Aid:

- Provided refuge to thousands of Kosovar refugees fleeing the conflict.
- Sent humanitarian aid to support the Kosovo Albanian population during and after the conflict.

•Post-War Reconstruction and Stabilization:

- Contributed to peacekeeping and stabilization efforts in Kosovo post-1999 as part of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR).
- Engaged in rebuilding efforts, focusing on infrastructure, education, and health services.

2000s and the AKP

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was elected to power in 2002. Led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's policy has been characterised by efforts to strengthen bilateral relationships, increase Turkey's influence in the region, and promote stability and cooperation.

Initially a Pro-Western and Pro-European Period (2002-2009), Turkey strengthened ties with NATO and EU.

- ‘No conflicts with neighbours’ policy of Ahmet Davutoglu
- Turkey began developing new instruments of foreign policy and alternative channels for diplomatic gains launching different Balkan initiatives for participation in newly established structures
- **Masterminded by Ahmed Davutoglu (former Minister of Foreign Affairs, also Prime Minister)**
 - *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position (2001)* ultimately shaped Turkey's approach to the Western Balkans
 - Focus anchored in Turkey's Ottoman Past – priority was given to Ottoman heritage and Muslim Kin Communities
- Turkey assumed a mediator role in the regions:
 - Established trilateral consultation mechanisms between Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia and Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia
 - first-ever meeting between Serbian President Boris Tadić and Bosnia Herzegovina President Haris Silajdžić.
 - Bosnia and Herzegovina sent an ambassador to Belgrade following a three-year absence.
 - In 2010 the Serbian parliament adopted a declaration condemning the crimes in Srebrenica.
 - Following the Trilateral Balkan Summit, held in Istanbul in April 2010, an Istanbul Declaration was adopted
- Turkey was among the first countries to acknowledge Kosovo's sovereignty 2008



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan



Ahmed Davutoglu



Turkey and the Western Balkans during the 2000s

- Turkey has supported Western Balkan countries in joining NATO
 - Mentoring Bosnia
 - Pledged support for Northern Macedonia (joined in 2020)
- Turkey supported North Macedonia with its name dispute with Greece
- In 2013, during a visit to Kosovo, Erdogan made a statement saying, "Do not forget that Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo."
 - Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic declared Serbia's exit from the trilateral discussions that involved Turkey and Bosnia
- Ottoman history is remembered with mixed feelings in the Balkans. National memory has raised doubts about Turkey's intentions.
 - There have been criticisms that Turkey was pursuing a Neo-Ottoman policy

The waiting corridor for EU accession has left Turkey with a window of opportunity to capitalise and assert influence – Alida Vracic (2016)

- Networks of Religious and cultural institutions have found fertile ground in WB
- Reviving demographic linkage

Soft Power in The Western Balkans

After the Conflicts in Yugoslavia Turkey Switched from Public Diplomacy to Soft Power instruments

- **Religion and Islam:** Turkey has used shared religious ties as a means of cultural diplomacy, emphasizing its role as a leader in the Muslim world. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) engages in various initiatives, from renovating mosques to supporting religious education.
- **The Yunus Emre Association:** starting in 2007, Centres have been opened in five Balkan countries; Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Romania.
 - Turkish language courses offered
 - cultural activities organised
- **Hizmet (Gulen) Schools:** These had been founded and growing since the 90s but actively supported by the Turkish state in the 2000s
- **Turkish Universities:**
 - Epoka University in Albania,
 - International University of Sarajevo
 - International Burch University in Bosnia Herzegovina
- **Soap Opera TV Shows:** Turkish TV dramas, known as 'Dizi', have gained massive popularity in the Balkans. They not only entertain but also serve as cultural ambassadors for Turkish lifestyle, values, and language, deepening the cultural affinity and understanding between Turkey and the Balkan countries.
- **Media Presence:** The state broadcaster TRT has a version specifically for the Balkans (TRT Balkan), which helps project a positive image of Turkey and provides a Turkish perspective on news and current affairs.
- **Economic Investments:** Turkey's economic footprint in the Balkans is substantial. Investments range from construction projects and infrastructure development to direct investments in various industries like banking and telecommunications. Such investments have strengthened economic ties and increased dependency on Turkish investment, which translates into political influence.
- **TIKA's Role:** The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) focused on restoration projects and development aid, significantly contributing to the preservation of Ottoman heritage



TRTBALKANS



**WE HELPED
BALKANS EX
ITS TEAMS IN
SARAJEVO AN
SKOPJE!**

Balkan Reception

- **Divided Perspectives:** Opinions on Turkey's role in the Western Balkans vary widely, largely split along ethnic lines.
- **Ethnic Differences:** Turkish influence is viewed differently by Christian and Muslim communities, with the latter often seeing the Ottoman era as a high point.
- **Focused Relations:** Turkey has built strong ties with Muslim-majority areas, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia.
- **Challenged Influence:** These efforts have alienated non-Muslim communities and have not convinced the broader Western Balkans of Turkey's unbiased intentions.
- **Perceptions of Ottoman Legacy:** The narrative of a glorious Ottoman past is met with suspicion in the Balkans, where historical memories often associate Ottoman rule with oppression.



2016 onwards

- **Erdogan's Leadership (2016-present):** Marked by the attempted coup in 2016, leading to a crackdown on Gulenists and increased authoritarianism domestically, alongside a pragmatic approach in foreign policy focusing on personal relationships with Balkan leaders.
- Davutoglu is no longer Prime Minister and also resigns from AKP
- **Shift in Foreign Policy:** After 2016 the emphasis on the Ottoman past shifted towards a pragmatic approach under Erdogan's direct influence.
 - **Focus on Serbia:** A special emphasis on strengthening relations with Serbia, showcasing the pragmatic nature behind Turkey's approach in the region.
 - Erdoganism (Aydintasbas) and Sultan Erdogan Era (Koppa)
 - No longer a mediator
 - Relations with countries based on Erdogan's relations with heads of state:
 - *Erdoğan's relations with Vucic [Serbia], Thaçi [Kosovo], Bosnian leader Bakir Izetbegovic, and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama form the backbone of the newest phase of Turkey's outreach in the Western Balkans"*
- **Diplomatic Role:** Turkey fills a gap left by the EU in the region, particularly visible in Bosnia, yet is seen as a divisive actor with limited universal impact outside Muslim communities.
 - ***"I don't want a Balkans that turns toward Turkey or Russia, but I don't want a Europe that, functioning with difficulty at 28 and tomorrow as 27, would decide that we can continue to gallop off, to be tomorrow 30 or 32, with the same rules" – Macron 2018***
- Government directives prioritising the pursuit of Gülenists in Western Balkans countries (Aydıntaşbaş 2019)
 - Reports of Kidnapping by Turkish Secret Service
 - 107 Alleged Gülenists brought back to Turkey (2019)
- Military cooperation:
 - Arms sales and the training of soldiers, particularly in the Balkans with countries like Albania and Bosnia Herzegovina
 - Aims to create dependencies on its military products



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