

BACK TO THE GEOPOLITICAL FUTURE OF THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST: WHAT TURKEY COMES TO REMIND US VIA ITS MISTAKES

Markos Troulis

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Abstract: Classical geopolitical analysis comes to remind us that it is still present as a tool for decoding the inter-state antagonisms as well as the global and the regional re-distributions of power. To be accurate, this never stopped happening; the post-Cold War 'neo-liberal vertigo' simply permitted many well-known figures of the greater academia to forget, to ignore and to doubt. The evolutions, during almost the last decade in the Greater Middle East, have made geopolitical analysis timelier than ever. The subsystem of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey is the operator of the geopolitical factor of the Islamist movement and, in these terms, it represents a main set of forces behind the pressures for re-distribution of power and roles in the region. The current paper refers to the systemic geopolitical analysis to focus on Turkey's historical role in the Greater Middle East, its current ambitions and the mistakes having led its strategy to a stalemate. In this context, it is questioned which mistakes Turkey made, whether the overall neo-ottoman geostrategic policy recommendations are feasible and which elements of power are available for Turkey. Undoubtedly, power is the key towards an effective maximization of gains and a substantial increase of influence. For instance, Turkey's emphasis on the energy reserves of its greater region is still reasonable, while their nature itself underlines the worth of geopolitical analysis since it is identified with the ontology of space and the intervening roles of group interests.

Keywords: geopolitics, Turkey, the Greater Middle East, systems, subsystems, super-system, Islamist movement, energy, geostrategy, power

The current paper focuses on Turkey's historical role in the Greater Middle East, its ambitions and the mistakes having led its strategy to the last years' stalemate. The systemic geopolitical analysis¹ is the tool for overviewing these issues confirming that modern methods of classical geopolitical conceptualizations may contribute decisively. The structure of the paper begins with the description of the value of the relevant geopolitical theoretical legacy of main past figures. This comes to explain the part of the title 'Back to the geopolitical future' making a theoretical linkage between classical concepts and the current Great Powers and Turkey's strategy-making in the Greater Middle East. In subsequence, Turkey's historical and present geopolitics is described underlining the pivotal position of Ankara on the North-South and East-West geopolitical axes.

Moreover, timelier issues are analyzed; Turkey's opportunities, stakes and failures in the Greater Middle East. In this part, Turkey's strategy is analyzed in the light of what it was dedicated to achieve during and after the so-called 'Arab Spring' turmoil and the mistakes having driven it into a stalemate. Last but not least, the US power pole of the super-system and its implications for Turkey is one more crucial variable since Washington has represented the traditional 'patron' of the Turkish 'client' and therefore, the - potentially changing - role of the US may affect straightway Turkey's overall capabilities and more specifically, its capabilities to project power within the geopolitical limits of the Greater Middle East. The research questions are as follow: Which are the mistakes Turkey has made with reference to

1. See indicatively: Mazis I. T., *Geopolitics: The theory and the praxis (in Greek)*, Papazisis publishers, Athens, 2002. Also: Mazis I. T., *Meta-theoretical critics of international relations and geopolitics. The neo-positivist framework (in Greek and in French)*, Papazisis publishers, Athens, 2012.

the Greater Middle East and they have driven its strategy into a stalemate? Are the overall neo-ottoman geostrategic policy recommendations feasible? What has the real world shown? Which are the available elements of power for Turkey and how is the strategic partnership with the US placed among them?

Back to basics

Geopolitics represents the common theoretical ground referring to 'territory, natural environment and people who live in this context'.² As it is cited by Vidal de la Blache, a 19th century French geographer, 'man and nature perform the dialectics of the observed world around us. Man, by his occupance creates distinctive countries, be they states or minor unit areas. In an area of human settlement, nature changes significantly because of the presence of man and these changes are greatest where the level of material culture of community is at the highest level. The same environment has different meanings for the people with different heritage and objectives (*genres de vie*)'.³ Beginning with this basic definition and the description above, the state and its behavior is analyzed in the light of geography as an actor acting in a certain geographical framework. Furthermore, the anthropological subject is the crux of the matter as far as geography is shaped by power and power is produced by policy and strategy makers. Thus, everything is about man into geography and the peculiarities of these two interactive elements.

Undoubtedly, territoriality is the main concept with regard either to geopolitics or international relations. Inter-state antagonisms give emphasis on power and especially military power, while territory is considered the main aspect of survival. The concept of sovereignty is often identified with the one of territorial sovereignty. Great powers focus on land forces, as the most important means of coercion, since we continue to live in a world of territorial states.⁴ Thus, conquering and controlling land as well as geographical checkpoints is the main prerequisite for defining a great power and the main goal for a middle power in order to become a great power. Geopolitical analysis gives emphasis to all this problematique 'reading, describing and forecasting behaviors and the consequences of competing relations and distinct international actions of re-distribution of power and the ideological metaphysics which they cover them under the lenses of geographical blocks where such actions are found and take place'.⁵

In the case of the Greater Middle East, the geopolitical theoretical legacy becomes more and more significant. First, this periphery is positioned at the epicenter of Spykman's rimlands.⁶ Nicholas Spykman's recommendations followed normally Sir Halford Mackinder's acclaimed Heartland theoretical conceptualization and all this constituted the explanatory tool for the diachronic Anglo-Saxon grand strategy at the Eurasian perimeter. The Greater Middle East is positioned at the epicenter of a series of geographical checkpoints, which have been crucial for the Soviet/Russian containment for centuries, such as Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz as well as the South Caspian region, the Balkans and of course, the Turkish mainland. Essentially, for years, the Soviet/Russian expansion has been contained and the relevant threat has been balanced through a system of alliances and regimes aligned with the Western powers. In the post-war era, political instability, Israel's security and the variety of group interests in the region have given reasons to the US to prioritize their Greater Middle East policies. In this sense, Turkey is a pivotal state due to its central geographic position on the North-South and the East-West directions as well as the US interest in this region.

2. Mazis I. T., *Geopolitics: The theory and the praxis (in Greek)*, op. cit., p. 15.

3. As cited in: Dhaka A., *South Asia and Central Asia: Geopolitical dynamics*, Mangal Deep publications, Jaipur, 2005, p. 64.

4. Toft P., "John J. Mearsheimer: An offensive realist between geopolitics and power", *Journal of international relations and development*, 2005, vol. 8, p. 384.

5. Mazis I. T., *Meta-theoretical critics of international relations and geopolitics. The neo-positivist framework (in Greek and in French)*, op. cit., pp. 350-359.

6. Spykman N. J., *The geography of peace*, Brace & company, Harcourt, 1944.

Second, the Greater Middle East is recognized as the main hydrocarbons reserve of the consuming western powers. The countries of the region possess some 72% of the world's proven gas reserves and some 73% of the world's proven oil reserves.⁷ Given that western production – for instance in North Sea – steadily declines and the relevant consumption steadily increases, the mass reserves of the Greater Middle East steadily increase their significance. This characteristic and its correlation with geopolitics has made Ülke Ariboğan and Mert Bilgin to talk even about 'energeopolitics' underlining the growing significance of energy in analyzing geopolitics.⁸ Besides, economic elements are main variables of the main analytical field of geopolitics. The Middle Eastern energy reserves represent the perfect case study for anyone desiring to focus on the importance of economy for state empowerment and the strategies of manipulation implemented by Great Powers against militarily weak states with high energy revenues.

In this geopolitical gamble and especially in the aftermath of regimes decline or even collapse, Turkey has sharpened its rhetoric and broadened its offensive intentions vis-à-vis the region and especially, Iraq and Syria. The decline of the Iraqi and the Syrian power, the internal fragmentation in these two countries, the rise of the Kurdish separatism in all these countries including Turkey and the presence of DAESH (al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) have created many new challenges for Ankara. The main challenge has been whether Turkey could render all this situation into an opportunity or it would become a part of the problem with all the relevant consequences. Turkey could have an opportunity to acquire the role of a new stabilizer maximizing, at the same time, its gains from energy trade.

Instead of that, Turkey failed to become a great peripheral power with a mediating role and it has found itself entrapped into an antagonism among much greater powers. Essentially, its obsessive – up to a point justified – fear of the Kurds urged it to adopt a strategy near to John Mearsheimer's 'bait and bleed' analysis. The 'bait and bleed' military strategy has been introduced, as a term, by Mearsheimer in his acclaimed 'The Tragedy of Great Power Politics' in order to describe a state's initiatives to engage rival states or groups into a war of attrition against each other.⁹ In this sense, Turkey cultivated the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in order decisive victories against the Kurds to be implemented,¹⁰ but its hegemonic vertigo just ignored the real distribution of power and the Great Powers' consistent inclinations to defend their interests in the region. Reasoning the title of the current paper, such an ignorance of the real situation is identified with an ignorance of geopolitics, a domain which examines by definition the distribution of power, strategic roles and interests.

Turkey's historical and present geopolitics

The importance of Turkey's position on the map has been emphasized multiple times. Indicatively, Neoklis Sarris has noted that the absence of an 'answer' to the 'Eastern Question' as well as the continuous extension of the 'doctrine for the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire' represent two absolutely inter-linked concepts which contribute to modern Turkey's 'pivotal state' status.¹¹ In these terms, Turkey

7. Roberts J., "The Turkish gate: Energy transit and security issues", *Centre for European policy studies: EU-Turkey working papers*, 2004, vol. 11, p. 1.

8. Ariboğan Ü. and Bilgin M., "New energy order politics, Neopolitics: From geopolitics to energeopolitics", *Uluslararası ilişkiler*, 2009, vol. 5, no. 20, p. 110.

9. Mearsheimer J. J., *The tragedy of Great Power politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001, pp. 153-154.

10. On the relation between Turkey and the Islamic State, see indicatively: Totten M. J., "The trouble with Turkey: Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds", *World affairs*, fall 2015. Also: Zanotti J. and Thomas C., "Turkey: Background and US relations in brief", *Congressional Research Service report*, August 26, 2016.

11. Sarris N., *Foreign policy and political developments in the First Turkish Republic: The rise of military bureau-*

continues to own the role that the Westerners had given to the Ottoman Empire for centuries. This role is identified with the containment of Russian-Soviet intentions for accessing the warm waters of the Mediterranean, while the strategic relation between Turkey and the West – or NATO and the US – has been built in the light of the afore-mentioned reality of the need for balancing a major common threat. The Turkish-Russian relationship has given essence to Ankara's position in the international and the regional arenas, while it has defined its status within the Western block.

It is indicative that even the expansionist ideology of panturkism has been reasoned by the Russian-Soviet historical geography. A panturkist is defined characteristically as 'a Turk believing in the superiority of the Turkish race, respecting its national past and being ready to be sacrificed for the ideals of the Turkish race, especially in the war against Moscow; the unforgiving enemy (emphasis mine)'.¹² Jacob Landau links even the Armenian Genocide to the Russian-Turkish strategic relation underlining that the 1915 massacre took place due to Turkey's urgent need to avoid the establishment of a powerful Armenian state which could be a Russian 'satellite state'.¹³

Dated back to Enver Pasha's campaigns, the expansionist strategies towards the Russian-Soviet historical backyard of the Caucasus have been identified with the survival of the Ottoman state or later, the Turkish state. Thus, the panturkist visions have been brought into reality with reference to Russia's destiny from time to time, while the success of panturkism has been also defined by the cohesion of the interior of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey as far as the fragmented anthropology could be potentially replaced by a 'powerful Turkish empire' racially defined. Turkish expansionism against Russians-Soviets has been activated historically in times that Moscow had to balance substantial threats, such as Nazi Germany during the World War II.¹⁴ Therefore, Turkish efforts for power maximization in Central Eurasia have been always resulted from large re-distribution of power, world wars, great regional wars that could threaten Russia's sovereignty. External balancing through allying with the West or Moscow's engagement into 'bait and bleed' have been pre-suppositions for Turkey's strategy-making vis-à-vis the Greater Caspian Region or, in other words, the northern part of the Greater Middle East. A main reason for this strategic choice is the Turkish priority to avoid any counter-alliances and consequently, its problems proliferation.¹⁵

Similarly, Turkey implemented an offensive strategy during and straight after the collapse of the USSR. The former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit envisioned Turkey's power maximization after the end of the Cold War and the existence of an 'opportunity window' in the former soviet area and beyond. The newly independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus represented new potential partners for Ankara and even quasi 'younger brothers'. Turkey would be able to own a multi-dimensional and broad role under the lens of the so-called 'Eurasianization'.¹⁶ Accordingly, İsmail Cem wrote in 1998:

It is worthwhile to note that there are twenty-six countries with which we shared for centuries a common history, a common state and a common fate... In this vast socio-political geography, Turkey... has optimal conditions to contribute to stability and to enjoy the opportunities presented by the new 'Eurasian order'. By virtue of its historical and cultural attributes and its-privileged double-identity, European as well as Asian, Turkey is firmly positioned to become the strategic 'center' of Eurasia.¹⁷

cracy (1923-1950) (in Greek), Gordius, Athens, 1992, p. 16.

12. As cited in: Landau J., *Pan-Turkism: From irredentism to cooperation (in Greek)*, Thetili, Athens, 1981, p. 175.

13. Landau J., *Pan-Turkism: From irredentism to cooperation (in Greek)*, op. cit., p. 87.

14. See: Weber F. G., *The evasive neutral: Germany, Britain and the quest for a Turkish alliance in the Second World War*, University of Missouri Press, Missouri, 1985.

15. Tziampiris A., *The emergence of Israeli-Greek cooperation*, Springer, New York, 2015, p. 58.

16. Kramer H., *A changing Turkey: Challenges to Europe and the United States*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, 2000, p. 222.

17. As cited in: Kramer H., "AKP's 'new' foreign policy between vision and pragmatism", *German insti-Civitas Gentium* 5:4 (2017)

Geopolitically, Turkey attracts the political and the strategic attention of the Great Powers desiring to own a global strategic vision. At the same time, Turkey itself owns a series of potential capabilities to become a key factor in its greater periphery. Osman Nuri Aras writes that:

Turkey is situated in a critical geographic position on and around which continuous and multidimensional power struggles with a potential to affect balance of power at world scale take place. The arcs that could be used by world powers in all sorts of conflicts pass through Turkey. Turkish territory, airspace and seas are not only a necessary element to any force projection in the regions stretching from Europe and Asia to the Middle East, Persian Gulf and Africa, but also make it possible to control its neighborhood. All these features made Turkey a center that must be controlled and acquired by those aspiring to be world powers. In the new process, Turkey's importance has increased in American calculations. With a consistent policy, Turkey could capitalize on this to derive some practical benefits. Turkey has acquired a new opportunity to enhance its role in Central Asia.¹⁸

Ankara's Cold War strategic role, as NATO's frontier state, has come to an end. However, newer challenges, such as the Gulf War, made clear that Turkey has been still important for the US and NATO and Turkey's cooperation has been vital. This characteristic has offered a significant continuity to Turkey's strategic behavior without taking into consideration any internal turbulence. In other words, Turkey has been merely rational in its diachrony due to the stable data defining its strategic environment with geopolitics to be the first and foremost.¹⁹ In the Defense White Paper 2000, it is underlined that:

Turkey has a special place within the Atlantic-European and Eurasian zones. She is in the position of aiming at integration with the western society, in addition to being a democratic, secular and contemporary country of the Islamic world. Turkey is also at the centre of a population of 200 million people who speak Turkish in the Balkans, Caucasia and Central Asia. She forms a model which is taken as an example by the new independent states, led by the societies that speak the Turkish languages. Turkey, with her existence and successes, is a concrete evidence that the Islamic religion and democracy are compatible with each other and that social and cultural development can also be realized in a democratic environment. The reconciliations sought in the world are existing in the structure of Turkey. Turkey is determined to continue the effectiveness of her foreign policy with her function of bringing together reconciliation, peace and cooperation obtained from this structure.²⁰

Respectively, Ahmet Davutoğlu refers to Turkey's pivotal positioning on the East-West and the North-South directions highlighting the meeting of the Balkans and the Caucasus as two important regions of transit routes, which link Eurasia to the warm waters and Africa.²¹ In this sense, Minor Asia represents the most crucial linking point of Spykman's rimlands as far as it controls the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles, which are the main passages towards Mackinder's Heartland.²² Davutoğlu has been the main figure behind the activist practices and rhetoric of the AKP with his acclaimed book 'The strategic depth: The international position of Turkey' to represent the theoretical background of what

tute for international and security affairs, 2010, p. 5.

18. As cited in: Bağcı H. and Kardas S., "Post-September 11 impact: The strategic importance of Turkey revisited" in: Balı (ed.), *Turkish foreign policy in post Cold War era*, Brown Walker press, Boca Raton, 2004, pp. 433-434.

19. Aydın M., *Turkish foreign policy framework and analysis*, Center for strategic research, Ankara, 2004, p. 25. Also: Davutoğlu A., "Turkey's foreign policy vision: An assessment of 2007" *Insight Turkey*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2008, pp. 78-79.

20. Turkey: Ministry of National Defense, *Defense white paper 2000*, Ministry of National Defense, Ankara, 2000, p. 9.

21. Davutoğlu A., *The strategic depth: The international position of Turkey (in Greek)*, Piotita, Athens, 2010, p. 190.

22. On the Davutoglian analysis on geopolitics and specifically, the geopolitical position of Turkey, see: Mazis I. T., "Theoretical perception of geopolitics in Davutoğlu's work: A critical presentation", *Civitas gentium*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 9-50.

we know today as 'neo-ottoman policy vision'. In his book, Davutoğlu just encoded the strategic destiny of Turkey making efforts to give answers to the post-Cold War debate within Turkey considering the country's fate.

After the end of the Cold War, two strategic visions dominated the debate on Turkey's strategic future.²³ On the one hand, scholars such as Ian Lesser viewed Turkey's approach to the Greater Middle East as an alternative to its rejection from the European Union or as a simple change of strategic priorities. According to this view, Turkey may increase its gains in the Greater Middle East implementing an autonomous geopolitical role and thus, without sharing these gains in a system of alliances. On the other hand, scholars such as Paul Henze and Ziya Öniş, analyzed the re-distribution of power in the greater region as a significant 'opportunity window' for expansion but always under the US security umbrella. The approach of the Greater Middle East could be complementary and not disjunctive; in this case, Turkey could become a bridge between the East and the West increasing its value for its western partners. To put it briefly, Paul Henze writes that the new opportunities for Turkey in the post-Cold War strategic environment are 'not contradictory or competitive, they are complementary'.²⁴

Ahmet Davutoğlu argued that one-sided perceptions are not compatible to Turkey's geopolitical position which is by definition multi-dimensional. For this reason, he adopted two main principles; multi-dimensional and rhythmic diplomacy.²⁵ Turkey has to act in a multi-dimensional way due to its geopolitical position and respectively, it has to implement a rhythmic - and not one-sided - diplomacy. In the line of thought of a changing strategic culture, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan notes that 'America is our ally and the Russian Federation is an important neighbor. Russia is our number one trade partner. We are obtaining two-thirds of our energy from Russia. We act in accordance to our national interests. We cannot ignore Russia'.²⁶ The rise of its elements of power has urged Ankara to look for autonomy in its foreign policy with the simultaneous increase of quid pro quos from the US. Turkey's refusal for cooperation prior to the US invasion of Iraq has been an indicative example of rhythmic diplomacy as well as the support of Syria, at the same period when Damascus was criticized for its Lebanon policy.²⁷ The AKP government made efforts to act independently believing that such an inclination could make Ankara more valuable to its western strategic partners. Turkey's participation in 'the Qatar - Saudi Arabia - Turkey triangle', which is 'the operator of the geopolitical factor of the Islamist movement',²⁸ persuaded Turkish strategy-makers that this could be an adequate form of external balancing for the country or at least, a diplomatic asset in its relations with the West.

Neo-ottomanism in practice

The post-Cold War Turkish hegemonic inclinations have been identified with the term 'Neo-Ottomanism'. Neo-Ottomanism is a maximalist strategy recommendation presupposing an adequate level of self-help. In this line of thought, hegemony in the Greater Middle East is viewed as incompatible with dependencies from other actors-patrons. The neo-ottoman ideas underline autonomous strategy-making aiming to hegemony not necessarily in territorial terms. Neo-Ottomanism proposes the establishment of a sphere of influence or a sphere of common interests and not necessarily annexation. In these terms,

23. Hale W., *Turkish foreign policy: 1774-2000*, Frank Cass, London, 2003, pp. 193-194.

24. As cited in Hale W., *Turkish foreign policy: 1774-2000*, op. cit., p. 194.

25. Davutoğlu A., "Turkey's foreign policy vision: An assessment of 2007", op. cit., pp. 79-83.

26. As cited in: Aras B., "Davutoğlu era in Turkish foreign policy", *SETA policy brief*, 2009, vol. 32, p. 12.

27. Oktav Ö. Z., "The limits of change: Turkey, Iran, Syria" in Guney N. A. (ed.), *Contentious issues of security and the future of Turkey*, Ashgate, London, 2007, p. 91.

28. Mazis I. T., "Geopolitical analysis of the Greater Middle East system in the present juncture", *Regional science inquiry journal*, vol. V, no. 1, 2013, p. 163.

'Turkey sees itself as potential leader of a loose Turkic-speaking community, taking advantage to that end of its appealing relative modernity, its linguistic affinity, and its economic means to establish itself as the most influential force in the nation-building processes underway in the area'.²⁹ In this direction, its rhetoric has been about the so-called 'Turkish model' as the ideal tool for influence maximization in the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus. The 'Turkish model' refers to a Turkey being a country of reference for the rest of the countries of the Greater Middle East in the light of the linkage among Islamic tradition, liberal economy and western-style democratic polity.

Turkey's engagement in the Middle East in the AKP era is merely anti-western and always under a neo-ottoman cloak. In 2006, Abdullah Gül stated indicatively that 'we possess all of the deeds and archives of Palestine, Israel, Jerusalem, and all of this geography... We made a gift of all these [deeds] to Palestine last year'. At the same time, the AKP Minister of International Trade between 2002 and 2009 Kürşad Tüzmen emphasized that there are 30 countries on 24 million square kilometers which are in need for a country of reference and this could be Turkey.³⁰ Consequently, up to the so-called 'Arab Spring', the AKP governments' great interest in the Middle East took place via soft power tools (promotion of the 'Turkish model') as well as economic diplomacy initiatives. Turkey is a member of the G-20 owning the economic tools to institutionalize its economic primacy in its region. In other words, its initiatives were decided with the aim to stabilize a certain balance of power, which was in favor of Turkey at that time. An example was the proposal for an establishment of a free trade zone based on the fact that the Turkish exports to the Middle Eastern countries went seven-fold between 2001 and 2008. Furthermore, the visa status was suspended, Arab tourists' arrivals to Turkey increased and the Arab investments in Turkey reached 24 billion dollars in 2010.³¹

Turkey's soft approach to the Middle East made scholars, such as Ziya Öniş, to refer to a transition of its strategic behavior from a coercive regional power to a benign regional power.³² However, others underlined the hegemonic substance of Ankara's initiatives recognizing the strong relation between interstate economic diplomacy and hard power.³³ This aspect of the AKP's foreign policy can be explained in various ways.³⁴ First, the AKP has made substantial efforts to interact with the Turkish society, which is basically Islamic. Obviously, this has influenced its strategic choices in the international arena. Second, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's party exercises dynamic foreign policy with the aim to find allies in order to survive and achieve its international legitimacy. Besides, funding from Arab peninsula countries is a common secret. Third, the Islamic movements in the Turkish interior drive the AKP governments' activism in the Middle East as far as they have multiple economic and trade interests. Generally, the period of the AKP governance has been identified with a sharp rise of the country's power elements and a simultaneous turmoil in the neighboring regions. This systemic coincidence has offered the ideal 'opportunity window' to a political elite, which has anyway hegemonic inclinations towards the region.

During the period before the 'Arab Spring', Turkey made several political and economic agreements

29. Brzezinski Z., *The grand chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives (in Greek)*, Livanis, Athens, 1998, pp. 236-237.

30. As cited in: Criss N. B., "Parameters of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP governments", *UNISCI discussion papers*, vol. 23, 2010, pp. 14-15.

31. Kujawa K., "Turkey and democratization in the Arab world: Between an inspiration and a model", *PISM policy paper*, vol. 12, 2011, p. 3.

32. Öniş Z., "Turkey and the Middle East after September 11: The importance of the EU dimension", *Turkish policy quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2003, p. 2.

33. Raptopoulos N., *The current trade and economic transactions between Turkey and the countries of its region: The case of Syria (2002-2009) (in Greek)*, University of Macedonia press, Thessaloniki, 2011, p. 126.

34. Raptopoulos N., "Rediscovering its Arab neighbours? The AKP imprint on Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East", *Les cahiers du RMES*, vol. 1, 2004, pp. 3-4.

especially with Syria. An indicative example refers to the 'High Level Strategic Cooperation Council' in the aftermath of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Turkey on September 2009. At that time, the upgrade of the bilateral relations between Turkey and Syria was the upmost aim of Ankara's foreign policy.³⁵ The evolution of the bilateral relations summarizes the aims, the priorities and the problems of the Turkish foreign policy with regard to the Middle East. In its beginning, there was enthusiasm and dedication to an increase of economic interdependence followed even by political-strategic partnership. In the following years, we noticed an absolute rupture between Erdoğan and Bashar al-Assad with the first demanding the second's withdrawal from Syria's presidency. Undoubtedly, this has been one more episode of Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' policy failure.³⁶

The post-Arab Spring instability in Syria and the continuing civil war influenced Turkey reasonably. The Syrian regime's weakness empowered the Kurdish demands for autonomy in the north of the country, something directly problematic for Turkey's territorial sovereignty. A potential independence of this geographical zone and its unification with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Northern Iraq could pave the way for oil transportation to the Mediterranean and the West without Turkish territory intermediacy. In addition, the refugee crisis is of Turkey's interest as far as millions of people abandon Syria, cross the Turkish borders and finally, they render into a political tool for Ankara's relations with the EU member-states. In the case of Syria, Turkey has found itself entrapped due to multiple strategic failures. Al-Assad's military and diplomatic capabilities were underestimated as well as his internal legitimacy. Turkey expected the Syrian President's isolation, but on the one hand, Iran kept offering economic and military aid and on the other hand, Russia remained intent on the Syrian regime status. Turkey's trust and aid to the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian National Council and the Syrian Opposition forces has been a key reason behind the Western perception that Turkey has been aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra. Due to the hegemonic character of Turkey's strategic behavior and its foremost aim to approach the Sunni Islamist groups of the Middle East, the 'zero problems with neighbors' declarations have been proven false introducing Turkey into a high risk strategy.

Regarding the Kurds of Northern Iraq, until 2007, Turkey pushed for their isolation since they had already succeeded in their de facto autonomy. Fearing of a potential spill-over and a continuing instability in the Middle East with the participation of Turkey's Kurds, Ankara first acted against the KRG and afterwards, tried to associate with them in order to gather gains from the oil trade and the transit through its territory. Reversely, this complicated the Turkish-Iraqi relations, since Baghdad wanted to continue to have a say on the oil extractions from Mosul and Kirkuk regardless of the common interest in preventing the establishment of an independent Kurdish State.

Another important factor in the Greater Middle East is Iran. In the recent past, Turkey has refused to define Iran as a 'danger for global peace' underlining that Tehran has the right to develop nuclear energy for Peaceful Nuclear Explosions (PNEs). What is more intriguing is that Iran's nuclearization could take place regardless any US reactions. In parallel, Turkey and Iran cooperated in natural gas trade and they share common views with regard to the Kurdish issue.³⁷ Turkey's past experience from full alignment with the US interests without taking into considerations its own stakes became timelier than ever. The embargo against Iraq in the 1990s cost billion dollars to Turkey mainly from the suspension of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline. The same could happen in the case of new sanctions against Iran referring to the Tabriz-Erzurum gas pipeline. Thus, Turkey hesitated to follow the US strategy choices. However, the

35. Raptopoulos N., *The current trade and economic transactions between Turkey and the countries of its region: The case of Syria (2002-2009) (in Greek)*, op. cit., p. 127.

36. On this issue, see indicatively: Kouskouvelis I. I., "The problem with 'Turkey's zero problems'", *Middle East quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2013, pp. 47-56.

37. Oktav Ö. Z., "The Gulf states and Iran: A Turkish perspective", *Middle East policy*, vol. XVIII, no. 2, 2011, p. 144.

recent escalation of the antagonism between Shiites and Sunnis in the Greater Middle East has offered a new field of suspiciousness between Iran and Turkey. The most indicative example refers to Syria, where Tehran and Ankara own completely diverging strategic aims and interests. Moreover, Turkey's intention to be included among other countries under the US Anti-Missile Shield has increased Iran's perception of threat. Additional problems include the failure of a common balancing of the Kurdish threat in the operational level, the competition for influence in the Caucasus and basically Azerbaijan as well as Turkish assistance to the US to implement their strategy in Georgia. Last but not least, it should not be neglected that Iran's nuclear program poses another serious security dilemma against Turkey.³⁸

Furthermore, Israel is the crucial factor determining Turkey's fate in the Middle East. In broad terms, Israel continues to be the main US strategic partner in the region. Keeping in mind that Erdoğan has chosen to 'Islamize' its foreign policy using religion as a soft power tool; it is an undisputed fact that deterioration in the Turkish-Israeli relations was the sole solution. Referring to the anthropological background of the Middle Eastern societies as well as many of the regimes' priorities, anti-Israeli sentiments represent a common ground. It is characteristic that the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) charter includes the aim for its member-states 'to support and empower the Palestinian people to exercise their right to self-determination and establish their sovereign State with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, while safeguarding its historic and Islamic character as well as the Holy places therein'.³⁹ Therefore, in a way, the approach of the Muslim world presupposes an anti-Israeli stance.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has supported consistently Palestinians' independence in the framework they demand, while he keeps a moderate stance regarding Hamas. Also, his rhetoric against Israel is sharp and this became obvious in the 'Davos incident' in February 2009 when he left the Summit blaming Israel's President Shimon Peres for the Gaza Operations in 2008. During those operations, 1,300 Palestinians died and 5,300 people were reported missing.⁴⁰ A year later, Israeli special forces operated against the Turkish ship 'Mavi Marmara' and killed nine people. The ship was about to approach Gaza breaking the Israeli blockade and delivering humanitarian aid – as the Turks supported – to the Palestinians in the city. Turkey demanded compensation and an apology from Israel, but the true reasons behind Ankara's changing foreign policy were structural and reflected the overall approach strategy to the Muslim World. Another parameter refers to the US and Turkey's belief that Israel could be isolated and Ankara could become the main US strategic partner in the region.⁴¹ Thus, Turkish strategy against Israel is reflected on three levels: the international as far as the US factor is engaged; the regional since they are made efforts for the public opinion and the Islamist regimes to be approached; and the internal as far as the public support to Erdoğan's decision-making confirms its Islamic substance.

The US-Turkey-Kurds triangle

Turkey and the US are strategic partners in the Greater Middle East but with many diverging points making difficult this partnership to be preserved. Some important diverging points refer to the Turkish support to Hamas, Ankara's critique to Israel, its identification with Muslim Brotherhood and especially, the support to Muhammad Morsi in 2013 in Egypt. Another diverging point concerns the Kurdish issue

38. Outzen R., "From crisis to cooperation: Turkey's relations with Washington and NATO", *Policy notes*, vol. 12, 2012, p. 9.

39. Organization of the Islamic Conference, *Charter*, Organization of the Islamic Conference, Dakar, 2008, chapter I (aims), article 1, paragraph 8, pp. 3-4.

40. Kujawa K., "Turkey and democratization in the Arab world: Between an inspiration and a model", *op. cit.*, p. 2.

41. Litsas S. N., "Bandwagoning for profit and Turkey: Alliance formations and volatility in the Middle East", *Israel affairs*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2014, pp. 133-134.

and the American material aid to the Kurds of Syria. At this point, Turkish support to Syrian Jihadists operating against the Kurds is significantly problematic for Washington.⁴² The Kurdish issue attracts the special interest of both the US and Turkey as far as it summarizes the whole Middle Eastern distribution of power antagonisms. A potentially independent Kurdistan affects Turkish-Iranian, Turkish-Syrian and Turkish-Iraqi relations. In the last case, it has already affected them.

An independent Kurdistan is surely unwelcome for Ankara, since its territorial sovereignty would be under danger. However, the US have found among the Kurds a credible and militarily effective ally in a region that anti-Americanism is the rule. In this sense, the Kurdish issue dominates the US-Turkey relations determining their strategies vis-à-vis Iran, Syria, Iraq as well as Israel. Thus, any security issue in the Middle East contains the Kurdish factor and the relevant Turkish fear. The Turkish elites were always afraid of any idea against the common ideological, identity and historical roots of their nation. Süleyman Demirel stated indicatively on the coherence of the Turkish nation that:

We have a multiple cultural heritage and in some ways a multiple identity. As individuals, identity cannot be summed up in one word. It is the same for our nation's identity. We certainly do not have, as outsiders sometimes claim, an identity crisis. Turkey and the Turks are very conscious of their identity and heritage. Ordinary people in Turkey do not see themselves as living in a land torn between east and west. They relish variety and they see their country as a land enriched by a multiple heritage.⁴³

Turkish fear is resulted from a variety of reasons. First, an independent Kurdish state in Iraq or Syria could be a state of reference for the Kurds in Turkey, who represent the majority. Second, an independent Kurdish state could be an important and reliable US – and Israel's – partner in a geostrategically crucial periphery limiting, in this way, Turkey's role. Third, an establishment of a coherent – and thus, powerful – Kurdish state could be against the common post-colonial rule of state-building in the Greater Middle East. Most of the post-colonial states, characterized by a low level of internal cohesion, have been dependent on global and several regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Fourth, Turkey would lose its natural access to the Middle Eastern resources. Apart from hydrocarbons, Turkey could lose its access to the water of Tigris and Euphrates becoming dependent on the transit role of the Kurdish state. Fifth, Turkey's interior is so fragmented that a beginning of further destabilization could be harmful for its territorial sovereignty and its capability to project power even near its borders.

Erdoğan's activism in the greater region has been remarked as the most important diverging point with the US grand strategy. Turkey's role as a pivotal state for the US in the region has its own limits as far as no regional hegemon can be let to exist especially in such a crucial periphery as the Middle East. In other words, a Turkey's autonomous strategic status is against the US interest. Nevertheless, it is worth to be noted that Erdoğan, in the beginning of his governance, criticized past mistakes of Turkey concerning the Kurdish issue insisting that democracy and not pressure could be solutions to – the existing – problem. He recognized the Kurds' right to speak free their language, to establish their parties and to participate in electoral processes.⁴⁴ The evolutions in the Middle East and the 'opportunity window' for the Kurds to establish an independent state as well as basically Turkey's assertive stance in its near abroad gave the excuse to the AKP to inhibit its moderate rhetoric.

In the case of Syria, Bashar al-Assad's regime has been weakened significantly as far as the Syrian

42. Zanotti J., "Turkey: Background and U.S. relations", *Congressional Research Service report*, October 5, 2015, p. 14.

43. As cited in: Waxman D., "Islam and Turkish national identity: A reappraisal", *The Turkish yearbook*, XXX, 2000, p. 3. On the issue of culture in international politics, see indicatively: Mikelis K., "Culture in global politics: Theory and practice" in Vasileiadis N. and Boutsiouki S. (ed.), *Cultural diplomacy (in Greek)*, Hellenic academic libraries, Athens, 2015, pp. 189-215.

44. Gordon P. H. and Taspinar O., *Winning Turkey: How America, Europe and Turkey can revive a fading partnership*, Brookings institution press, Washington D.C., 2008, pp. 64-65.

Opposition forces implemented several attacks. Turkey and the US seemed to share a common interest; al-Assad's removal and the end of the Syrian-Iranian – Shiite – strategic partnership. Turkey and the US disagree regarding the position of the Kurds in the post-war balance of power as well as the post-Assad regime. Turkey works for the rise of a Sunni regime which could be a pillar for its own economic and trade penetration in the Middle East countering, at the same time, the idea of an independent Kurdistan at the northern part of the country. In this line of thought, Turkey has been supporting not only the – few – moderate forces of the Syrian Opposition but also a variety of extremist and radical groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, which is an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Syria as well as Ahrar al-Sham.⁴⁵

Such armed groups represent de facto enemies of the US policy in the Greater Middle East and consequently, they cannot be supported by a NATO member-state. As it happened in the case of Iraq, the US have supported a pluralist state structure under which the heterogeneous anthropology of Syria could be embodied. At the same time, they are negative to implement an intervening strategy with ground forces on the one hand due to the cost of it and on the other hand, because of the US administration's incapability to get the necessary internal legitimacy especially after their experience in Iraq.⁴⁶ As the US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter noted with regard to the situation in Syria and the post-war framework:

The outcome that we are aiming for is one in which Bashar al Assad and those who have been associated with his atrocities in Syria are removed and -- but the structures of government in Damascus and in Iraq [sic] that remain continue on our -- in an inclusively governed way that is multisectarian to get -- to include Alawites and others and that can then turn to the task of regaining its sovereign territory from ISIL to the east in a project that would look like what we are working with Baghdad to accomplish to its west in Iraq. That is the post-Asad transition that will be the best for the Syrian people and the best for our counter-ISIL strategy.⁴⁷

In the opposite, Turkey is stable to its position for the establishment of a Sunni state, which will be against a Kurds' autonomy setting aside the Shiite groups. From September 2015 on, the then Prime Minister of Turkey Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that 'by mounting operations against [IS] and the PKK at the same time, we also prevented the PKK from legitimizing itself. Until the PYD changes its stance, we will continue to see it in the same way that we see the PKK'.⁴⁸ In this sense, Turkey's strategic aim has been to identify DAESH with PKK as two terrorist groups, which have to be eliminated. For Turkey, PKK should be set aside; it cannot be considered a US partner in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism as it happened in the case of Northern Iraq. As Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has mentioned, 'for us [the] PKK is what ISIL is'.⁴⁹

Conclusive remarks

In the current study, we made efforts to describe in brief the current geopolitical gamble in the Greater Middle East with an emphasis in Syria and Iraq under the lens of Turkey's grand strategy. A theoretical conclusion is that geopolitics still matters. The evolving Turkish policies in the region prove that there is a clear connection between Ankara's historical role as a frontier state for the Westerners in their struggle to contain Russia and its current initiatives against the Assad's pro-Russian regime. Furthermore, Recep

45. Abramowitz M. I. and Edelman E. S., "From rhetoric to reality: Reframing U.S. Turkey policy", *National security program – Foreign policy project*, 2013, p. 37.

46. Blanchard C. M., Humud C. E. and Nikitin M. B. D., "Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. response", *Congressional Research Service report*, 2015, p. 15.

47. As cited in: Blanchard C. M., Humud C. E. and Nikitin M. B. D., "Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. response", op. cit., pp. 15-16.

48. As cited in: Zanotti J., "Turkey: Background and U.S. relations", op. cit., p. 20.

49. As cited in: Gunter M. M., "The Kurdish issue in Turkey: Back to square one?", *Turkish policy quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2016, p. 81.

Tayyip Erdoğan's activism is explained by his country's geopolitical destiny to interact with Western interests, Islamist movements and Russian maneuvers in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans and North Africa.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Turkey had a great opportunity to expand its sphere of influence in the greater region. However, it failed to implement it due to its internal incapability at the levels of leadership, hard power and economy. More or less, this was repeated after the so-called 'Arab Spring' when the 'Turkish model' was again promoted. Currently, this seems to come to a failure again due to overexpansion of engagement. To put it simply, Turkey asks for many gains without offering the necessary quid pro quos to correctly chosen allies. Ankara has preferred to drive its relations with Israel into a stalemate, to lose its credibility vis-à-vis the US and increase suspiciousness with Russia. At the same, its 'Syria strategy' has put obstacles to its rapprochement with Iran. The AKP ambitions for 'zero problems with neighbors' have proven to be mistaken mainly because of Erdoğan's false perceptions that he can act autonomously with limited external balancing.

In this sense, the overall neo-ottoman geostrategic policy recommendations prove to be infeasible. Neo-ottoman visions represent a high-risk strategy. In such a case, they can lead Turkey either to the rise to a great power status or to the failure with remarkable implications for its sovereignty and overall survival.⁵⁰ The infeasibility of neo-ottomanism has been viewed, first, via Turkish leadership's mistake to over-increase its claims. Second, Turkey has failed to create credible alliances even with its traditional partners. Third, Turkey has been engaged into a 'bait and bleed' war with the Kurds. Thus, it has been entrapped into what it planned to do for them in Northern Syria and beyond. Fourth, apart from its incoherent interior, Turkey has lost its effective bureaucracy due to the Persecution of the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement. Therefore, it needs time to acquire again effective political and military personnel. Fifth, Erdoğan's leadership has doubtful results due to his inclination to open several fronts. This is possibly explained by the irrationality of not always focusing on the state interest but also on religious criteria. In this line of thought, Erdoğan has invested many of Turkey's diplomatic assets to its close relations with the Muslim World and for this reason, he finds himself incapable to make any necessary maneuvers from time to time.

In the last part of this study, I referred to the US-Turkey strategic partnership. The crucial point for a hegemonic state to make the next step is when it perceives the right time. A regional hegemon with a multi-dimensional geopolitical role has to act autonomously without being one-sidedly dependent on Great Powers. This is the prerequisite for Turkey to rise to such a status. However, if it starts to act in this way early, then it is put under a risk. Due to its leadership's irrationality, Turkey is driven into an excessive increase of strategic risk via the loss of its credibility to the US, Israel and the rest Western powers. The ongoing re-distribution of power and roles in the Greater Middle East signify a return to the basics; a reminder that Turkey is even the most crucial chain link of the Anglo-Saxons' containment strategy historical initiative. What should not be neglected is that Turkish landmass and its perimetric geopolitical checkpoints matter; as far as geopolitical standards difficultly change, the partners are the only ones who change.

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