

# Changes in Türkiye's Perception of International Regions and Main Reasons

Xiaolai Han <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University

**ABSTRACT.** Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, it has two options for the international regions, "westward" and "eastward", one of which has dominated at different times in its history. The change of the Republic of Turkey's Perception of International Regions encompasses the period from Kemal to the post-Kemal era, from a 'westward' to an 'eastward' strategy, from a Euro-Western focus to a return to the Middle East-Islamic world. Turkey regional perspective is rooted in its national characteristics including geography, history, and ethnicity, religion and language, while the core reason for the specific changes is national interests. Nowadays, as a regional power, Turkey is on its way to becoming a global power. With some regional achievements, it sees itself as the centre of Eurasia-Africa and works on a comprehensive regional cooperation strategy. However, Turkey is not strong enough to support its ambitions, which might cause new problems in the future.

## 1 Introduction

It's hard to deny that globalization helps countries break the geographic limits and establish the relationship with farthest one in the world. However, globalization is still a process instead of a result, and international region is still a crucial connection between countries and the world. International regions have various criteria for the classification. From the highest level, the basic one is that international regions can be divided based on different continents. In addition, regarding geopolitics, countries can also form sub-regions and small regions. [1] These countries in the same region has established regional mechanism to be closely linked, which may create a new region in the future with an increasing number of countries involving in.

Any country will think about the international regions where it is located from its own position and perspective, which is the foundation to formulate its international region policies. Türkiye is no exception. After the establishment of republic of Türkiye, it manifested different even opposite perception for its location in the foreign policy and specific practice in the different historical period.

## 2 Changes in Türkiye's Perception of International Regions

### 2.1 Kemal Government: 1923 Establishment of the Republic of Türkiye - 1970s

Since its establishment in 1923, the Turkish Republic has positioned itself as residing in Europe but not belonging to the Middle East. [2] First and foremost, the ruling elite, led by Kemal, believed that European civilization is one superior civilization in the world at that time. So, they studied the West and reform themselves comprehensively to make Türkiye a modern secular state. They abolished the sultanate and the Muslim caliphate. That meant severing the institutional and spiritual ties of the Turks with the Islamic world and removing themselves from the region of Islamic civilization.

Furthermore, Türkiye is in the great triangle of the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Due to the intricate contradictions between history, ethnicity, and religion, any one of these three volatile zones could involve Türkiye and directly trigger a deterioration of its internal security situation. In that condition, taking "Westward" strategy and avoiding getting involved in disputes in neighboring countries could safeguard the Türkiye's core security interests. The only option for maintaining national security and independence was to ally with the West, which caused an institutional dependency gradually developed between Türkiye and the West.

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\* H980202305@163.com

In practice, Türkiye entered into a military alliance with the United States in 1952 through its membership in NATO. In the global network of relations during the Cold War, Türkiye was considered a "peripheral country" by the West and was the southern gate of the Western camp to contain the Soviet camp. [3]Türkiye is inextricably linked to Europe in its political and economic development path. Türkiye joined the Council of Europe in 1949 and later, in order to meet the conditions for full membership in the EC, Türkiye signed the Ankara Agreement with the EC to change it according to its standards of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Türkiye became a typical example of the West's push for democratization and secularization of Islam, wanting to further strengthen its ties with Islamic countries through Türkiye.

## 2.2 Özal Government: 1983-1993

By the end of the bipolar pattern in the 1990s, middle powers gained more space and autonomy to operate, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc created a vast geopolitical space for Turkish diplomacy, which provided an unprecedented opportunity to adjust Türkiye's foreign strategy and transform Türkiye into an active regional player.

Under Özal government, Türkiye actually underwent a strategic transformation from a "westward" to an "eastward" orientation, a return to the Islamic world.[4]

Former president Özal positioned Türkiye as a "bridge state" between the East and the West, adopting a multilateral diplomatic strategy, strengthening multilateral cooperation, and pursuing a "balanced foreign policy" which means the government advocated the consolidation of relations with the West while actively re-establishing its unique influence in the Islamic countries of the Middle East and the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia in pursuit of Türkiye's great power status.

Türkiye sought to shift from dependence on the West to an interdependent mechanism of cooperation with the West, emphasizing Turkish autonomy and subjectivity and seeking a more active role in Middle Eastern affairs, with the goal of turning Türkiye into the center of the Islamic world. During this period, Türkiye also actively participated in Islamic organizations, gaining great influence and support. [5]At the same time, Türkiye was active in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, Özal encouraged the Islamic religious communities in Türkiye to strengthen their religious activities in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Central Asia. And during the Gulf War, Özal criticized NATO's stance on Islamic fundamentalism and emphasized his own unique values.

## 2.3 Justice and Development Party (JDP) government: 2003-

In the late 1990s, Türkiye briefly opted for European identity and rejecting Islamic civilization again. However,

Türkiye's accession to the European Union faced many obstacles, and the West has not shown a receptive attitude. There was growing skepticism about the "westward" strategy in Türkiye, as Islamist political forces continued to grow and overtook the old secularist force. Finally, Islamist parties entered the political arena. Since JDP government came to power, Türkiye has pursued a new national positioning, thinking about the international region mainly in terms of geography, history and civilization, seeing itself as the center of Eurasia and Africa and defining itself as the "central country" of several neighboring regions.

From a geographical perspective, former Prime Minister Dautoglu who was the chief architect of the JDP government's foreign policy pointed out that because Türkiye's geographical location gives it a multi-regional identity as a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country, it is both a European and Asian country, while being close to Africa through the Eastern Mediterranean. From a historical point of view, Türkiye's ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious ties and closeness to the countries formed on the territory of the former empire, the cultural and historical heritage of the Ottoman Empire make Türkiye a central state. From a civilization point of view, Dautoglu believes that Türkiye can dialogue with both Islamic and Western civilizations and is therefore an effective arbiter and peacemaker in these troubled regions of the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans.

In practice, Prior to 2010, Türkiye emphasized a "zero problem policy" with its neighbors, tried to build a regional order through peaceful cooperation. Türkiye's "soft power" was used to promote regional conflict resolution and de-securitization of relations with its neighbors, strengthen regional economic and trade cooperation, people and cultural exchanges, enhance relations with neighboring countries. The Turkish model - a perfect combination of Islam and democratization - is considered a model for progressive countries in the region, attracting countries in the region to voluntarily associate with Türkiye in a combination of cultures, paths, models, interests and rules.[6]

Following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010, the geopolitical landscape has become increasingly complex as conflicts and rivalries between major powers in the Middle East have intensified. Spurred by its ambition to act as a regional leader and global power, Türkiye has favored an "aggressive" foreign policy in response to the complex and volatile international situation. Türkiye began to reinforce its Sunni "messiah" status, forcibly intervened in regional affairs, and increasingly chose to shape the regional order through hard power like military.

## 3 Main Reasons of the Changes

One researcher in China argues that the factors for countries' perception of international regions are geopolitical perception, national interests, foreign relations, ethnic, culture, history, religion. [7] The changes

in Türkiye's perception of international regions under different rulers show two main lines, being a member of the west and returning to the East. The main reasons for why Türkiye can shape these perception changes include geography, history, and ethnicity, religion and language. While the core reason for the specific changes in different period is the national interests.

### 3.1 Geography

Türkiye's special geographical position between the East and the West determines that it can have two strategic options: "westward" Europe and "eastward" Asia. Türkiye is a country straddling the Eurasian continent, holding the Turkish straits, at the union of the Eurasian continent, with a unique geopolitical advantage and a very important strategic location. Its territory includes the Asia Minor Peninsula in West Asia and the Eastern Thrace region in the Balkan Peninsula in Southern Europe. Türkiye is between four seas, west of the Aegean Sea, north of the Black Sea, south of the Mediterranean Sea, winter to the Persian Gulf region; from a continental perspective, Türkiye is north of Russia, east of the Caucasus region, Central Asia, west of Europe, its south and southeast is North Africa, the Middle East.

### 3.2 Ethnicity, religion and language

Based on the Turkish ethnic, religious and linguistic identity, it can be seen that it is Islam that is the primary and intrinsic attribute of Türkiye and Europeanity is the secondary and extrinsic attribute of Türkiye.[8] That means that even if Türkiye saw itself only as a European state and was detached from the Middle Eastern world for a long time, it would eventually return to its Islamic identity. As of December 2020, Türkiye has a population of 83,155,000, with over 80% Turkish and about 15% Kurdish. Turkish is the national language. 99% of the inhabitants practice Islam, 85% of which are Sunni and the rest are Shia, with only a minority of Christianity and Judaism. Only a very small percentage of the Turkish population is of Turkic origin, but Turks have long considered themselves to be Turkic, mainly on the basis of cultural and linguistic ties; Turkish is a branch of the Turkic language. In addition, although Türkiye is an Islamic country, it is not an Arab country, as the main ethnic group is Turkish.

### 3.3 History

Historically, Türkiye's predecessor was the Ottoman Empire (1299~1922). The Ottoman Empire was founded by the Ottomans, a Turkic tribe from Central Asia, and emerged as a state on the peninsula of Asia Minor, at the crossroads of Eastern and Western civilizations, inheriting the political civilization of the Eastern Roman Empire and embracing the culture of Islam as a feudal and military power. The traditional identity of the Ottoman Empire was

Islamic civilization, which at its peak was considered superior to Western civilization. [9] Thus, as a great power that once practiced Islamic civilization for a long time, modern Türkiye has always had deep ties with the Islamic world. Since the 18th century, with the development of modernization in Europe, the Ottoman Empire was unable to resist the impact and tended to decline. Faced with the rise and threat of the West, the Ottoman Empire was able to realize what modern Europe had to offer, internalize the idea of European nationalism, and expand the options for Westernization. The Ottoman Empire learned from the West and attempted modernization and secularization reforms. In the late Ottoman Empire, faced with the threat of colonialism and ethnic divisions within the country, Pan-Islamism was introduced in an attempt to become the spiritual leader of Muslims and to unite the Islamic world in order to counter colonial aggression and resolve internal conflicts. Later, the ruling Young Turk party promoted pan-Turkism, expanding eastward to Central Asia, in order to unify all Turkic-speaking peoples culturally and politically.[10] In 1919, Kemal led the Turkish War of Independence, repulsing the European forces and preserving the territory around the peninsula of Asia Minor and Istanbul. After the anti-colonial struggle, Türkiye was established as an independent nation-state. After independence, Türkiye was given the relative autonomy to choose between Westernization with Europe and Islamic civilization, and to choose between different rulers during their periods of rule.

### 3.4 National Interests

Countries in different historical contexts have different national interests, at the same time, the rulers also had different perceptions of the national interest. During the Kemal era, the core interest of the republic after its establishment was to maintain the security of the country and the stability of the regime. So, Türkiye chose to see Europe as its centre, abandoning its Islamic identity and fully integrating into Western civilization. As the international configuration changed and its overall power increased, Türkiye returned to the Islamic world of the Middle East from the time of Ozal to the time of the JDP, wanting to revive the culture and traditional values of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, as a regional power, Türkiye was moving towards a global power with dreams of empire in the context of a new international regional perception. Türkiye sees itself as the centre of Europe, Asia and Africa and believes that its national interests can only be realized by taking full advantage of its geographical position, so it has embarked on a full range of regional cooperation.

## 4 Conclusion

Türkiye has had the ambition to use its neighborhood as a springboard for all-round regional cooperation, including the Middle East, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Balkans, Africa and other regions, to build a large

neighborhood and create a secure, stable, prosperous, friendly and cooperative neighborhood, while attaching importance to the development of relations with the Asia-Pacific region, especially China, and promoting diplomatic diversification.

All in all, Türkiye, positioned as a global power, has regained its imperial ideals, engaged in active diplomacy, and is extensively involved in dealing with issues in the neighborhood, but there have been instances of over-involvement that have caused discontent among regional states. In the words of Fadi Hakkila, a Türkiye expert at the British think tank Royal Institute of International Studies: "Türkiye is forging a new Turkish imperial foreign policy, but its ambitions remain limited, a confrontation between ambition and capacity, and the future of Türkiye's ambitions will require radical political reforms if they are to match its capacity. The implication is that the identity of a 'global power' is not necessarily in line with Türkiye's real interests. Türkiye is only a medium-sized regional power, far from being a global power.

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