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ARCHITECT OF POWER

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AHMET DAVUTOGLU, *Strategik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position) (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001), 584 pp. 22 YTL.

The recent activism of Turkish foreign policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has caused political waves throughout Europe, the Middle East, and the West. In attempting to decipher Turkey's foreign policy trajectory, serious attention has focused for some time on Professor Ahmet Davutoglu, for good reason. Davutoglu has served as Prime Minister Erdogan's chief foreign policy advisor since 2002, and the enormous respect he commands within the AKP has made him perhaps *the* most important architect of contemporary Turkish foreign policy. This status was affirmed in May 2009, when Davutoglu ascended to the post of Foreign Minister in Erdogan's cabinet.

Yet Davutoglu remains something of an enigma in the West. Given his status as a former professor of international relations, Davutoglu's ideas about the world—and Turkey's place in it—are comparatively well known in Turkish academic circles. But they have rarely been examined more broadly, in part because there is no English-language translation for his seminal 2001 book, *Strategik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position). This is a critical shortcoming, for the ideas contained therein provide the foundation for a large portion of the foreign policy agenda now being put into play by Davutoglu himself.

Strategic Depth argues that a nation's value in world politics is predicated on its geo-strategic location and historical depth. Following this logic, Davutoglu explains, Turkey is uniquely endowed both because of its geographic location, particularly its control of the Bosphorus, as well as its historical legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire. While traditional measures of Turkey's national power tend to overlook the cultural links fostered by a shared common history, Davutoglu emphasizes Turkey's connections to the Balkans, the Middle East, and even Central Asia. In the same vein, Davutoglu argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a "Muslim super power."

Accordingly, Turkey is not simply an “ordinary nation-state” that emerged at a certain point due to political circumstance or the designs of the outside powers—like, for example, many new states in Central Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. Rather, Turkey is a regional power in its own right, having strong traditions of statehood and broad strategic outreach. Thus, Davutoglu concludes, “It has no chance to be peripheral, it is not a sideline country of the EU, NATO or Asia.”

To the contrary, Davutoglu—and by extension the AKP—contends that Turkey is a centrally positioned international player. “Turkey is a country with a close land basin,” he writes, “the *epicenter* of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the *center* of Eurasia in general and is *in the middle* of the Rimland belt cutting across the Mediterranean to the Pacific”[emphasis added]. Such geo-strategic vision reflects the newly-acquired self-confidence on the part of the AKP, which is supportive of a more proactive foreign policy—particularly in what it calls the Ottoman geo-political space—and highly critical of Turkey’s traditional Cold War reluctance to embrace its obvious historical and geographical advantages.

The implications are practical. “Strategic depth,” as applied by Davutoglu, seeks to counterbalance Turkey’s dependencies on the West by courting multiple alliances to maintain the balance of power in its region. Its basic premise is that Turkey should not be dependent upon any one actor, and should actively seek ways to balance its relationships and alliances so that it can maintain optimal independence and leverage on the global and regional stage.

This new reading of Turkey’s history is practical. It neither seeks to sever all ties with Turkey’s pre-republican past, nor rejects all things Ottoman. The appeal of this interpretation has allowed Davutoglu to work with many nationalists and ardent secularists within the Turkish state who actively seek to embrace both Turkey’s Ottoman past and former geo-political space. In this sense, the proposed strategic outlook is not merely national but regional; it replaces Turkey’s perception of being on the periphery of international affairs to an acceptance of its central role in important historical developments.

Of course, the specific policy implications of *Strategic Depth* depend heavily upon interpretation and emphasis. The broad strokes of contemporary Turkish foreign policymaking, however, are clearly visible. Turkey’s most recent interest in cultivating warmer relationships with formerly estranged neighbors such as Russia and Iran while simultaneously building inroads with China and India may have caught Washington by surprise, but are all part of making Turkey a central player in the global arena. Closer to home, there is a renewed interest in re-engaging Turkey’s former Ottoman space, both in the Balkans and in the Middle East. And Turkey’s engagement with Syria and Iraq has followed at a breakneck speed that draws directly on the region’s cultural and historic ties as extrapolated on by Davutoglu and now being implemented by his foreign ministry.

Taking this line of reasoning further, it follows that Turkey will strive to take on a larger role as a champion of its former Middle Eastern colonies—which might welcome Turkey’s “return” to the Middle East with particular focus on healing intra-Arab and Sunni rivalries. A nuanced reading of this same line of reasoning also indicates a Turkey that is willing to take on greater responsibility for regional stability in not just the Middle East, but also in the Balkans and the Caucasus. Part of this paradigm shift is the resolution of historic differences with Armenia

Turkey’s religious identity figures here as well. *Strategic Depth* emphasizes Turkey’s potential role within the Muslim world, given that Istanbul was the last seat of the Caliphate. Davutoglu outlines the logic of using this latent leverage to engage Central Asia by offering an economic model of development through Turkish businesses, construction, education, and NGOs while also reaching out to Afghanistan and Pakistan. While helping Turkey capture its place as a “Muslim super power,” as Davutoglu advocates, may be a bridge too far, stronger connections with places as far away as Malaysia and Indonesia does have tangible benefits for Ankara, allowing it to speak authoritatively on behalf of the Muslim world in the G-20 and at the UN Security Council.

Turkey’s new self-awareness as a regional power coincides with a new administration in Washington. Rather than simply being able to rely on Turkey to be an instrument of U.S. power in its region, the Obama Administration is now facing a stronger and more assertive government in Ankara that can and will disagree on key foreign policy issues, ranging from Iran’s nuclear program to Israel’s Gaza offensive. Davutoglu’s *Strategic Depth* provides an important template for understanding how the current government in Turkey sees these issues, and its own place in the world.

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