Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Balancing European and Regional Interests

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This article argues that long-term changes in Turkish foreign policy are primarily due to the diversification of the country’s political and economic interests. Important international structural shifts such as the end of the Cold War or the broad fluctuations in oil prices have constituted the initial impetus for the changes that we have seen in Turkish policies. Discussing alternative perspectives on new activism in Turkish foreign policy, the article gauges Turkey’s foreign policy affinity (based on voting patterns in the United Nations General Assembly) and trade with other states to place recent trends in the broader context of the past three decades. It shows that, as the “West” has become less coherent in its policies, Turkey moved closer to EU members and distanced itself from the U.S. The data also undermine “shift of axis” arguments as Turkey’s foreign policy affinity with Middle East countries has, in fact, declined. The trade data reveal a diversification of the country’s commercial interests that contribute to Turkey’s increasing regional activism. The country now balances its long term European interests with its recent regional ones.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Europenization, Turkey, trade, Middle East

Turkish foreign policy has been characterized by increasing activism and tempo since the coming of the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) to power in November 2002. The AKP government’s achievement of sustainable economic growth rates and consolidation of its power in domestic politics were accompanied by an increasingly multifaceted and visible foreign policy. While EU membership was central to the AKP since its first years in control of government, an important aspect of the Turkish foreign policy during the second AKP government (2007–2011) was Turkey’s much touted increased involvement in the Middle East. Turkey attempted to facilitate Israeli-Syrian negotiations in 2008, took initiative to resolve the crisis surrounding Iran’s nuclear program in 2009, and considerably expanded commercial, political, and cultural ties with the Arab Middle East.

This study assesses the aforementioned changes in Turkish foreign policy. It utilizes measures of foreign policy affinity (based on voting in the UN) and of trade to evaluate such changes over the past three decades. We suggest that, as the press and even the academic literature have emphasized individual “newsworthy” events depicting Turkey’s strong foreign policy stances, the long-term trends of continuity in the country’s foreign policy have been neglected. By shifting our focus to the broader patterns in Turkey’s foreign policy affinity as well as its exports and imports over the past three decades, we can assess first whether there truly have been any changes in foreign policy and, second, the relative extent of such changes.

Our results show that, in order to understand recent changes in Turkish foreign policy, it is necessary to deconstruct the notion of the “West.” The data suggest that, on the one hand, Turkey’s affinity with U.S. policies has declined. On the other hand, it is now much closer to the European Union in its foreign policy positions than to any other grouping of states. The data also undermine “shift of axis” arguments as Turkey’s foreign policy affinity with Middle East countries has actually declined. Overall, we find that over the past three decades, Turkey appears to have become more “independent,” having moved further away in its foreign policy from the positions of major states such as the United States, China, and Russia, as well as from those of major groups of states.

The trade data discussed in the study reveal a diversification of the country’s commercial interests and therefore reinforce the findings based on foreign policy affinity. We show that there are good reasons for the similar trends in Turkey’s trade and political interests. Our arguments explaining discontinuities in Turkish foreign policy as shifts in the country’s economic interests complement our arguments emphasizing continuities regarding its traditionally European foreign policy orientation. The country appears to be increasingly balancing between long-term European interests and recent regional ones.

The remainder of this article is composed of five sections. The next section discusses the scholarship on Turkish foreign policy. We argue that a “traditional” realist perspective explaining such changes through important modifications in Turkey’s strategic interests should not be overlooked. The following two sections offer an empirically grounded discussion of how Turkey’s political and economic interests have evolved in the last three decades. We first explain the value of using measures of foreign policy affinity based on UN voting for observing long-term patterns in the evolution of Turkey’s political interests and illustrate the evolution of such gauges of affinity with several major countries and groups of countries. The study then analyzes Turkey’s commercial relations showing that some of the recent changes in its foreign policy choices can be understood as an expansion of its economic interests. We then focus on the linkages between the country’s economic and political interests. The final section summarizes our main findings.

**Changing Patterns of Turkish Foreign Policy since 1980**

The debate about the proactive and multidimensional character of Turkish foreign policy centers on two questions: What has been the scope and direction of change in Turkish foreign policy? What are the causes of these changes? According to one view, the AKP government forms alliances with regional countries at the expense of its traditional relations with the West. Its attempt to reorient Turkey toward the Muslim-majority countries reflects its ideological commitments and Islamic identity (Çağatay 2009). In particular, Turkey detached itself from a military alliance with Israel and courted its enemies. In February 2006, Turkey hosted a high-level Hamas delegation despite U.S. and Israeli objections. The AKP government became increasingly vocal in its criticism of the Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. More recently, these rhetorical stances were also accompanied by policy changes. Turkey disinvited Israel from a joint NATO air force exercise in October 2009. After the Flotilla Crisis of May 2010, all military cooperation between the two states came to a halt. However, the deterioration of Israeli–Turkish relations is hardly an indicator of Turkey’s detachment from the West. After all, Israel also has significant differences with European countries, especially regarding its harsh policies toward the population of Gaza and the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Furthermore, Turkey achieved some progress in mediating negotiations between Israel and
Syria in 2008. The negotiations collapsed only when Israel launched a major military operation into Gaza in December 2008.

Another perspective offers a more nuanced argument. Turkish foreign policy under AKP has been characterized by a "shift from a commitment to deep Europeanization to loose Europeanization and a parallel shift to what may be classified as soft Euro-asianism since 2005" (Oniş and Yılmaz 2009:8). Turkey’s recent foreign policy activism is perceived to emanate from its disenchantment with its EU membership bid (Larrabee 2011). By early 2011, Turkey successfully negotiated only one of the 35 chapters of the acquis communautaire that are necessary for membership in the European Union. Yet, the absence of progress in the EU accession negotiations is not due primarily to a lack of willingness on the part of Turkey (Müftüler-Baç 2008). Major European governments, in particular France and Germany, have strongly opposed Turkey’s full integration into the European Union.¹ The difficulties experienced by many European countries to integrate their Muslim immigrant populations are linked to fears of mass-scale Turkish immigration and cloud Turkey’s EU membership prospects (McLaren 2007). Additionally, the economic crisis of 2008 that severely hit the economies of European countries such as Greece, Italy, and Spain raised new questions about the feasibility of further enlargement. Nonetheless, the data presented in the next section suggest that Turkey’s affinity with the foreign policies of EU members continues to be much higher than with any other group of countries.

Furthermore, the AKP is not the first Turkish government that aimed to pursue a more regional and multisided foreign policy. In fact, Turkey’s foreign policy has been characterized by a substantial interest in the Middle East at least since the late 1970s under various governments with different ideological outlooks. Its major political and economic interests have evolved as a result of transformations in the international system. The threat from the Soviet Union highly constrained Turkish foreign policy in the post-WWII period (Aydın 1999). However, the emergence of Cyprus and the rivalry with Greece as central concerns to Turkish national interests resulted in serious tensions with the United States and raised questions about the US commitment to Turkey’s security. The U.S. arms embargo of 1975 and skyrocketing oil prices after 1973 led Turkish elites to seek better relations with the Middle Eastern countries. Meanwhile, the shift from import substitution to export-oriented economic growth policies in 1980 increased the importance of Turkish exports to its foreign policy. The Middle Eastern countries, especially Libya and the Gulf monarchies, emerged as important markets for Turkish exports in construction materials and various forms of consumer goods (Karaosmanoğlu 1983). It is not a coincidence that Turkey allowed the Palestinian Liberation Organization to open an office in Ankara in 1979 and downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel in 1980 given the increasing economic importance of the Middle East. As discussed below, a similar dynamic has characterized Turkey’s relationship with Israel in the second term of the AKP government.

The end of the Cold War generated a new geopolitical environment conducive to a more activist and multisided Turkish foreign policy. The emergence of new states in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia presented both new opportunities and challenges for Turkey (Sayarı 2000). Furthermore, the decline of important states in its region, such as Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and the European Union’s formal rejection of Turkey’s membership application in 1989 reinforced regional tendencies in Turkish foreign policy well before the recent well-popularized ones under the AKP government (Makovsky 1999). Turgut Özal

¹It is not coincidental that Turkey expressed renewed interest in the European Union immediately after French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who strongly opposed Turkey’s membership, lost his reelection bid in May 2012. Reported by New York Times, May 16, 2012.
who served as prime minister between 1983 and 1989 and president between 1989 and 1993 emerged as the chief architect of an activist foreign policy aimed at strengthening the geopolitical position of Turkey and re-emphasizing its importance to Western countries (Mufti 1998). He backed American military plans during Saddam’s occupation of Kuwait, took the initiative for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Zone in 1990, and revitalized the Economic Cooperation Organization involving Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and five Central Asian Republics in 1992. At the same time, the inability of unstable coalition governments that ruled the country during the 1990s to resolve the Kurdish questions and achieve economic stability undermined foreign policy initiatives that would become more sustainable with the AKP’s coming to power.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was another significant event that reshaped Turkish national security interests. Given the fact that the Bush administration pursued an aggressive unilateral foreign policy in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Turkey seemed to join states like France, Germany, Russia, and China in “delaying, frustrating, and undermining” U.S. policies (Pape 2005:10). As U.S. unilateralism became more pronounced in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Turkey moved closer to the European Union to deal with regional security challenges (Oğuzlu 2010–2011). The Turkish Parliament’s refusal to authorize US use of Turkish territory to attack Iraq on March 1, 2003 introduced an element of tension unprecedented in the two countries’ relations since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 (Yetkin 2004; Bila 2007; Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010). Turkey’s denial significantly increased the costs of the invasion and contributed to the insurgency in its aftermath (2005:41).

Once more, it would be misleading to characterize Turkey’s refusal to comply with U.S. demands as an indicator of its split with the Western bloc. There was simply no coherent Western position in 2003. In fact, the parliament’s decision has arguably increased Turkey’s credibility and prestige among many European countries that opposed the war (Davutoğlu 2004; Ozcan 2008:145). Moreover, Turkish political elites were clearly divided. While AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—who was not elected to the parliament until March 9, 2003—was a supporter of the authorization, other leading figures of the party, including then Prime Minister Abdullah Gül and Speaker Bülent Arınç, opposed Turkey’s active participation in the invasion (Ergin 2007). Popular opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq was heightened by widespread concerns that U.S. military actions would indirectly undermine Turkish security by unleashing uncontrollable violence in the region. Instability characterizing post-Saddam Iraq greatly aggravated Turkey’s security concerns.

Given this historical evolution of Turkish foreign policy, arguments highlighting the role of identity in shaping Turkish foreign policy suggest that AKP’s Islamic identity has a strong influence on the foreign policy choices of Turkey and leads to improved relations with Iran, Syria, and the Hamas at the expense of its alliance with Israel (Çağatay 2010). In such arguments, Prime Minister Erdoğan and his Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu emerge as the key personalities behind this ideological transformation of foreign policy making. It can be suggested that that Prime Minister Erdoğan’s denial of the mass killings in the Darfur region of Sudan, despite the overwhelming evidence that the Sudanese government pursued a genocidal policy to root out the insurgency among non-

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6 According to a survey conducted in Turkey <2 weeks after the vote in parliament, 52% of the respondents supported the decision not to allow the U.S. military to use Turkey as a staging ground to attack Iraq. During this period, unfavorable opinions of the United States increased among the Turkish public, similar to trends in European countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. The survey was sponsored by the Pew Global Attitudes Project. Available at www.people-press.org/reports/pdf/175.pdf (Accessed May 15, 2012).

7 Reported by NTYMNSNBC on November 8, 2009.

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Arab Muslim population (Prunier 2008), shows the direct effect of his religious sensibilities on his political vision. After all, Turkey neither has strong commercial linkages nor political relations with Sudan and Arab countries tend to support the Sudanese position.4

However, when used alone, an identity-based approach leaves some very important questions unanswered. First, many leading Turkish politicians representing different positions have expressed sharp criticism of the Western policies and sympathy with the Muslim world even in the 1990s. Turgut Özal’s policies were described as being driven by a “neo-Ottomanist” ideology that prioritized relations with Muslim countries and former Ottoman territories over Western countries (Murinson 2006). The Turkish ruling elites including secularist high-ranking army generals were united in reasoning that Europe’s failure to intervene during the Bosnian War of 1992–1995 was a reflection of its religious biases (Yavuz 1998:38). Then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, a social-democrat, accused Israel of genocide in April 2002.5 Mesut Yılmaz, a liberal center-right politician, argued that the real reason for the European Union’s rejection to consider Turkey as one of the candidate countries is “religious discrimination” while serving as Prime Minister in 1997.6 Hence, foreign policy discourse characterized with strong religious overtones is not exclusive to the AKP leadership, although it may be more visible in recent years.

Second, this discourse has rarely been associated with significant policy changes. The description of Özal’s policies as being “neo-Ottomanist” overlooks his systematic attempts to gain EU membership and enthusiastic support of the U.S. policies in the Middle East. Turkey did not act independently from NATO during the Bosnian War despite its sharp criticism of the European policies. Similarly, Erdoğan’s denunciation of the Chinese repression in Xinjiang was primarily to satisfy domestic public opinion and a response to critics who accused him of not standing up to China. There was no real deterioration of Turkish–Chinese relations. Furthermore, the AKP did not attempt to Islamize foreign policy unlike the RP (Refah Partisi) from which it emerged. When Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the RP, was prime minister from 1996 to 1997, he unsuccessfully sought cooperation with Muslim countries as an exclusive alternative to Turkey’s historical relations with Western countries (Robins 2003:155–60). Highly symbolic and visible discourse and ostentatious acts such as some of the recent ones of the AKP government are primarily the result of domestic calculations that appeal to nationalist and Muslim sensibilities and seldom have an actual impact on intergovernmental relations.

According to another perspective, changes in power balance among domestic actors with different worldviews are crucial to understanding transformations of foreign policy (Müftüler-Baç 2011). The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) was the most enthusiastic supporter of Turkey’s strategic alliance with Israel throughout the 1990s as a countervailing force against both Iran and Syria (Robins 2003:264–9). The EU-induced democratization process that empowered the civilian government and other civilian actors and curtailed the TSK’s political autonomy contributed to a process of desecuritization that undermined the perception of Iran and Syria as threats to Turkish security. The TSK espoused a foreign policy centered on perceived regional enemies in order to sustain its political power (Aras and Karakaya 2008). According to a discourse popular among the TSK elite, Turkey is located in a politically unstable and dangerous region that requires restrictions on political pluralism and the TSK’s political autonomy as the guardian of the regime (Olson

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4Interestingly, Erdoğan described the Chinese suppression of unrest among Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang genocidal during the same period. Reported by Milliyet, July 11, 2009.

5Reported by Milliyet, April 7, 2002.

2000; Bilgin 2007). After a coalition government led by the RP came to power in
1996, the TSK took control of foreign policy and pushed for greater strategic coop-
eration with Israel over the objections of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan. Once
the power of the TSK declined with the EU-induced democratization and the rise
of the AKP, Turkey’s relations with its neighbors including Syria and Iran
improved (Altunışık and Tür 2006). Despite its value, this perspective on Turkish
foreign policy tends to underestimate how security concerns especially related to
the Kurdish insurgency remain central to Turkey and the persistence of authoritar-
ian practices after an initial period of reform during the AKP years (Tezcür
2010a:172–6). In particular, security concerns about Kurdish activism in Syria and
Iraq continue to inform Turkish foreign policy especially after the outbreak of
political violence in Syria in 2011.

Finally, another set of arguments link Turkish foreign policy to the dynamics
of electoral competition (Kösebalaban 2010; Oniş 2011). Prime Minister
Erdoğan’s strong reaction to Shimon Peres at the Davos Meeting in January
2009 contributed to the popularity of his party on the eve of the March 2009
local elections. Similarly, Erdoğan’s sharp criticism of Israel following the Flotilla
Crisis of May 31, 2011, when Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish citizens, was
highly popular among large segments of the Turkish public. However, many
important Turkish actions cannot be explained simply through electoral competi-
tion arguments. Moreover, foreign policy considerations are typically not salient
in voting behavior patterns in Turkey ( Баşлөөөент, Kirmanoğlu and Şenatalar
2009).

A “traditional” realist perspective, emphasizing clear material interests (involv-
ing both security and economic concerns) as the main determinants of Turkey’s
foreign policy, offers valuable insights regarding Turkey’s relations with its neigh-
bors and other states in its region. The only neighboring states with which Tur-
key used to have territorial disputes were Greece and Syria. While Turkey and
Greece were on the brink of war over an uninhabited rock in the Aegean Sea in
1996, the tenure of former Foreign Minister İsmail Cem (1997–2002) saw signifi-
cant improvements in bilateral relations. The rapprochement with Greece con-
tinued under the AKP government and greatly contributed to the mutual
security of both countries. What brought Turkey and Israel closer throughout
the 1990s were their shared interests against Syria. The issues that generated hos-
tility between Syria and Turkey were the Syrian support to the Kurdish insur-
gency, the Syrian claims over Turkey’s Hatay Province, and Turkey’s building of
a series of dams on Euphrates River leading to a significant decrease in the vol-
ume of water available to Syria. Additionally, the alliance with Israel revitalized
the value of Turkey for the United States that pursued the isolation of Iran and
contributed to its value as a U.S. ally in the post–Cold War period (Gresh 1998).
Finally, Turkey benefited materially from cooperation with Israel. Most impor-
tant, the close relations with Israel allowed the TSK to acquire new military
technology.  

The U.S. invasion of Iraq dramatically changed the strategic interests of Turkey as
Kurdish nationalism emerged as a common threat perception bringing Iran, Syria,
and Turkey’s interests closer. These three countries were fearful that the spillover
and demonstration effects of the consolidation of Kurdish rule in northern Iraq
would generate more discontent among their own Kurdish populations. In March
2004, there was a major riot in the Syrian city of al-Qamishli close to Iraqi and Turk-
ish borders. In June 2004, the PKK, the Kurdish insurgent organization fighting
against the Turkish state since 1984, remobilized its armed forces that had mostly
remained dormant since 1999 (Tezcür 2010b). By 2004, the PJAK, affiliated with

7Detailed information about these deals can be found at SIPRI Arms Transfers Database: http://www.sipri.org/
PKK and based in Iraqi Kurdistan, emerged as an armed force challenging the authority of the Iranian state over its Kurdish population. The same Kurdish nationalism that was perceived a threat to Turkey provided a strategic opportunity for Israel to weaken Iran (Kibaroglu 2005). These developments undermined the strategic rationale underlying the Israeli–Turkish partnership (Oguzlu 2010). Turkey and Syria launched a joint small-scale military exercise on their border in April 2009 in a dramatic reversal of the process that brought these countries to the brink of war in 1998 (Kardas 2009). Moreover, Iran and Syria had strong reasons to improve their relations with Turkey given their rather antagonistic relations with the Western countries and important regional actors such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The remainder of this article adopts a longer perspective than generally found in the literature and shows that it is important to emphasize continuities in Turkish political interests, not just highly touted changes. Such an emphasis on continuity derives from a basic understanding of international relations (IR) that is central to the realist approach (Morgenthau 2005). We suggest that, far from representing a major reorientation, recent changes may actually indicate revival or consolidation of several aforementioned activist patterns from the early 1980s.

**Turkey’s Voting Patterns in the UN General Assembly and Its Foreign Policy Affinity**

Voting patterns in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) are seen as powerful indicators of countries’ foreign policy stances (Wittkopf 1973). They therefore represent important gauges of the broad foreign “interests” of states and are used to test predictions deriving from major theoretical approaches to IR such as realism and constructivism (Bearce and Bondanella 2007). Countries’ interactions in this forum and their negotiations on the several hundred resolutions adopted each year offer one of the best possible reflections of global politics. Each year, the UNGA discusses and adopts about three hundred resolutions on a series of diverse foreign policy issues. Turkey’s positions on such resolutions and especially its convergence in voting with each of the other member states offer useful gauges of the kinds of agreements and disagreements on which its foreign policy is based.

UNGA voting patterns were viewed for a long time to be driven primarily by Cold War rivalries (for example, Hovet 1960). Since then, several studies showed that there is a direct link between foreign aid and support for a country’s foreign policies as reflected in UNGA voting (Wittkopf 1973; Rai 1980). One of the first comprehensive studies of the post–Cold War era found that the Global North–Global South rivalries now account for a great degree of the variance in UNGA voting (Kim and Russet 1996). More recent works found that democratic countries are more likely to have high levels of affinity in UN voting. The same studies found that, when controlling for the aforementioned factors, the so-called civilization of a country is not a significant predictor of its votes in the UN (Voeten 2000).

Policymakers have been following such votes very closely as well. As far back as 1986, the United States linked its foreign aid to countries’ voting behavior in the UNGA, despite official and public objections (Kegley and Hook 1991). UN members are aware of such linkages and therefore take them into account when casting their votes in the GA. For example, every year, starting 1992, the General Assembly adopts a resolution initiated by Cuba that proclaims the U.S. trade embargo against it to be illegal. Each year, the United States is joined by a very small number of other states in voting against this resolution. UN diplomats usually interpret the vote against this resolution as signifying that a state is
particularly interested in pleasing the United States in that specific year. It is noteworthy that Turkey has always adopted the position of the clear UN majority on this resolution.

The practical relevance of UNGA votes is also reflected in a “formula” that many East European countries appear to have used in the early 1990s. At that time, when none of the postcommunist countries had joined NATO or the European Union, East European diplomats would decide on their votes on “difficult” resolutions only after finding out the positions of the major “Western” countries: France, Germany, U.K., and the United States. If the three European powers voted in the same way, the East European officials representing their countries at the UN had instructions to go along with that vote, regardless of the U.S. vote. On the other hand, if the three major European countries were split in their vote, East European countries would almost automatically go along with the United States.

The measure we used to gauge broad trends in Turkey’s foreign policy is Erik Gartzke’s Affinity of Nations Index. The above academic and practical arguments support the choice of using such a gauge, based on UNGA voting patterns to assess foreign policy affinities between Turkey and some of the key global and regional actors and groups of actors over the past three decades. The index varies from “−1” (representing two countries that always vote the opposite of each other on all UNGA resolutions during a year) to “+1” (representing two countries that always vote identically on all UNGA resolutions in that year). The measure accounts for differences between voting “yes,” “no,” or “abstaining” on a resolution. The data set includes all votes for all UN members between 1946 and 2008. We also collected data for 2009 and 2010 to update the data set for two very significant years for this study.

Turkey was one of the founding members of the UN in 1945. It held a seat on the Security Council in 1951–1952, 1954–1955, 1961, and 2009–2010. It has served much more often on the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) than in the UNSC. Most recently, it was a member of this body for the terms 1997–1999, 2004–2006, and 2010. As seats in UNSC and ECOSOC are distributed through electoral processes in the UNGA, other countries’ acceptance of Turkey in such UN organs is in great part based on the country’s voting record in the UNGA and on the presumption that the record is an indicator of the proximity of Turkey’s foreign interests to their own.

So, how does Turkey’s voting pattern compare to those of other states? Figure 1 illustrates its affinity with several major developing countries (Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia) as well as with China and Russia. The first group is important because since the 1970s, the UNGA has been dominated by developing countries, which emerged as the clear majority within the organization. The “Non-Aligned Movement” (NAM) voting bloc in the UNGA (in which India and Indonesia have played important leadership roles) has generally been able to carry any resolution it truly wants to pass. The coherence in voting among such countries is consistently high. While one cannot offer a clear set of objective criteria for selecting the more “significant” developing states that represent this UNGA majority, we consider that the important leadership roles that Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia have taken over the past three decades support our choice.

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8Personal communication with diplomat representing a European country at the United Nations, January 2011.
9Personal communication with official from the International Organizations Department of an East European country’s foreign ministry, June 2005.
10The measure is based on voting positions of pairs of countries in the UN General Assembly (Signorino and Ritter 2006).
China is one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council and has always portrayed itself as the representative of developing countries in the UNSC. It has voted closely to this majority in the UNGA. In fact, many of the NAM resolutions in the UNGA are presented together with China. Russia was also chosen for the analysis as recent literature has suggested that Turkey’s foreign policy has drifted closer to some of the more independent-minded non-Western major states, such as Russia (Pape 2005).

Figure 1 suggests that Turkey’s voting behavior in the UNGA indeed was very close to that of the UN’s majority of states during the last decade of the Cold War. Yet, since the end of the Cold War, Turkey appears to be distancing itself from these countries. For instance, in 1980, Turkey’s foreign policy affinity with the developing countries included in this study was about 0.75. By now, this index declined to <0.5. During the same period, Turkey’s affinity with China declined from approximately 0.85–0.5. It is worth noting that over these three decades, Turkey’s trade with China has increased steadily.

Figure 1 also shows that Turkey’s affinity with Russia indeed increased, as one would expect, toward the end of the Cold War. But the index for the two countries has since declined or, at best, remained the same, hovering just above the 0.5 mark. Turkey’s relatively low and even declining level of foreign policy affinity with Russia and China suggest that recent arguments discussing a possible move of Turkish foreign policy closer to these two powerful states are, at best, exaggerated.

Figure 2 suggests a similar trend, of steady if limited decline in Turkey’s voting affinity with Middle East countries. The affinity index for Turkey and this group of countries has gone down from 0.75 to about 0.45 over the past three decades. The decline has been fairly consistent, with a possible exception in the mid-1980s. It is noteworthy that this trend continues under the AKP government. This decline in voting affinity holds true for virtually all countries in the region including Iran. A key UNGA resolution for gauging Turkey’s position on its relationship with Iran is the one that has come up for vote every year since 1985 on the situation of human rights in the latter. This resolution condemns human

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12The Middle Eastern countries are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
rights violations and restrictions on political freedom and civil liberties in Iran. It failed to be adopted only twice since 1985. While most of the Muslim Middle East, including countries having tensions with Iran such as Egypt and United Arab Emirates, usually vote no, Saudi Arabia voted yes in 2009. Not surprisingly, European countries traditionally vote in support of the resolution.\textsuperscript{13} Turkey consistently has avoided participating in voting on this resolution since 1993.

Figure 2 also suggests, as expected, that Turkey’s affinity with Israel has always been lower than the one with Middle East countries, including the one with Iran. Yet, it is relevant to note that, over the last three decades, Turkey has been moving further away from both Israel and Iran, and, of course, from Middle East countries. It is also interesting to note that the affinity index for Turkey and Israel has had more short-term fluctuations than the ones corresponding to Turkey’s relations with other states, consistent with the more visible ups and downs of the two countries’ relations, mentioned in the previous section.

Turkey’s fairly low affinity with Israel is also a reflection of the latter country’s “outlier” status in its UNGA voting pattern compared to the vast majority of UN members. The same can be said with regard to the United States. Figure 3 shows that Turkey is in fact furthest away from the United States in its voting patterns and, implicitly, in foreign policy affinity, than to any other country or group of countries included in this study. While there was a closer affinity level in the early 1990s, the two countries appear to have distanced themselves once more in the past decade.

An even more important observation derived from Figure 3, than Turkey’s recent drift away from U.S. positions, is the fact that this trend mirrors almost identically the one between EU countries\textsuperscript{14} and the United States. In other words, in years when the EU members’ foreign policies appear to have moved further from those of the United States (as in the 1980s and 2000s), Turkey appears to also have distanced itself from the superpower. Conversely, Turkey’s foreign policy affinity with the United States increased during the years when the EU policies experienced greater convergence with those of the United States (as in the early 1990s and over the last few years). Most noticeably, this happened in 2009, possibly reflecting a change in administrations in the United States.


\textsuperscript{14}Only states that were members of the European Union during the specific year considered are included.
Figure 3 also confirms that Turkey has slowly but surely experienced an increased foreign policy affinity with European Union states over the past three decades. The affinity index between Turkey and these countries increased from less than 0.5 in the early 1980s to almost 0.8 in recent years. Like all results based on composite data, the average affinity index needs to be interpreted with some precaution. Even high averages, such as the one of Turkey’s affinity with EU members, do not exclude some important differences on votes. The aforementioned example of Turkey’s reluctance to vote on the resolutions involving the human rights situation in Iran (while the vast majority of EU members voted for it) is one such instance. Due, perhaps, to its own flawed human rights track record, Turkey does not emphasize human rights in its UN stances as prominently as most of the EU members do. Yet, Turkey’s occasional drift from the EU position in some cases is not unique. Virtually all EU members and prospective members have voted differently than the majority of EU states at one time or another for a variety of specific “national” reasons.

The high averages also hide some differences in Turkey’s voting affinity with different EU members. For example, its recent affinity with the UK (that is often the outlier in voting among EU members) is below 0.6. At the same time, its affinity with some of the East European countries that recently became EU members (such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) as well as with some of the smaller Western members (such as Denmark and Portugal) is often above 0.8. It is perhaps also telling that one of the countries with which Turkey has recently had one of the highest levels of voting affinity is Germany. For instance, in 2008, the same year that Erdoğan made a speech in Cologne describing German assimilation of Turks as a “crime against humanity”, the two countries appear to have agreed on a great number of foreign policy issues as their affinity index stood at 0.82. In fact, as Figure 3 suggests, Turkey’s similarity in voting with Germany, as well as the one with France, the two “motors” of European integration have been high and have followed very closely the pattern of the country’s average affinity with all EU members.

Such relatively small differences in affinity with various states can be found in any UN member’s voting record. We can nevertheless infer from the high averages of Turkey’s affinity with all EU members several points. First, of all the states and groups of states included in this study, the European Union is now the one with which Turkey has the greatest affinity. As the affinity index is calculated based on voting on resolutions where a roll call vote is actually taken (and as about 80% of all resolutions are adopted without a vote, by unanimity), Turkey in fact votes on average more than 90% of the time in the same way as EU members. More importantly, the averages indicate that Turkey has shown a fairly consistent increased convergence with the European Union in UNGA voting over the past three decades. Despite small yearly fluctuations, Turkey’s foreign policy affinity with European Union has been surprisingly consistent. Over the entire period of the second AKP government, from 2007 through 2010, the average affinity in voting between the European Union and Turkey is 0.791, almost identical (0.795) to the one for the period 2002–2006, of the first AKP government and slightly higher than the 0.765 average of the previous 5 years. To put these averages in perspective, one should note that over the same 2007–2010 period, Turkey’s average affinity with Middle East countries was only 0.507. Finally, Turkey’s voting pattern with the entire European Union follows very closely the one with France and Germany. This implies that the country’s high affinity with European states is the result of a high level of agreement with the two main forces driving European integration.

The great convergence of Turkish voting with EU members, and the high levels of foreign policy affinity calculated based on such votes, is partly the result of a concerted effort made by the European Union to have a common position at the UN (Johansson-Noguès 2004; Young and Rees 2005; Laatikainen and Smith 2006; Rasch 2008). The quasi-institutionalization of coordination processes was the direct result of attempts to forge the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Article 19 of the 1992 Treaty of the European Union stipulated that “The diplomatic missions of the Member States and the Union delegations in third countries and at international organisations [emphasis added] ... shall contribute to formulating and implementing the common approach.”16 Indeed, representatives of EU members at the United Nations missions in New York have developed mechanisms of coordinating their positions on all issues and, implicitly, on their votes in the UNGA. Most importantly, for this study, in the mid-1990s, the EU members have opened these semi-informal consultation meetings to “candidate countries.” Turkey was recognized as a candidate for full membership and joined the countries coordinating their positions with the EU members in 1999. Such meetings result in common EU statements and positions on many (but not all) issues discussed at the UN.17

Turkey’s Trade Patterns

A second important gauge reflecting Turkey’s relations with other states is the one of its trade. Who does Turkey trade with and how has its trade evolved over the past three decades?

One would expect high volumes of trade with countries in its region as studies have shown that geographic proximity continues to be a significant determinant of economic interactions between states (Frankel 1998). Interestingly, the trend toward economic regionalization has remained very limited in the Middle East.

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17For a complete list of such statements, see http://www.europa.eu-un.org/ (Accessed May 15, 2012).
None of the Middle Eastern countries appear among the region’s top 10 trade partners.\textsuperscript{18} This is in sharp contrast to South-East Asia and Latin America where countries within the region are among the major trade partners of their respective geographic areas. Turkey, which has the most extensive trade relations with the rest of the Middle East, is still ranked below Russia (which was 10th in 2009). As Figure 4\textsuperscript{19} indicates, the European Union remains Turkey’s most important trading partner. It accounts for 46\% of its exports and 39\% of its imports in 2010.

Nonetheless, Turkey’s regional trade linkages experienced a major revitalization in the last decade. The government developed a series of policies to bolster Turkey’s commercial relations with countries in the region including the lifting of visa requirements and high-profile official visits.\textsuperscript{20} The number of visitors from Turkey’s neighboring countries increased 3.5 times between 2000 and 2009 (İçduyu 2008/2009). The emergence of commercial interests (that is, influential business associations such as TÜSİAD, MÜSİAD, TOBB, and TIM) that prioritized economic interaction over traditional security concerns contributed to the improvement of relations with neighbors (Kirişçi and Kaptanoğlu 2011).\textsuperscript{21}

Yet, as Figure 5\textsuperscript{22} shows, Turkey’s trade with its neighbors, which include several major oil producers, had been much higher throughout most of the 1980s. Up to 1985, it represented more than 25\% of its total exports and imports. However, starting with the second half of the 1980s when the collapse of oil prices resulted in the contraction of Middle Eastern economies, it steadily declined and hovered around 5\% throughout the 1990s. When oil prices rose once more after 2002 (as illustrated in Figure 5), and as the oil-rich economies in its region began growing once more, so did Turkey’s trade with these countries.\textsuperscript{23} The link between oil prices and Turkey’s trade with countries in its region is bolstered by an analysis that differentiates between imports and exports. As Figures 5 suggests, the increase in Turkey’s trade with regional partners has been spurred almost entirely by its exports as imports from neighbors remained stagnant until 2010.\textsuperscript{24} Figure 6 shows that Turkey’s trade with the Middle Eastern countries followed a similar pattern as the one with its immediate neighbors. From a peak of around 45\% in 1982, Turkish exports to the region dropped to around 12\% in 2002 before recovering to 25\% in 2009. In this case, as well, the growth in trade has been driven by Turkey’s exports to the Middle East rather than from its imports, suggesting that such trends are primarily the result of demands from booming oil-dependent economies when oil prices increased rather than from developments in Turkey.

Compared to the ups and downs of Turkish trade with countries in the region and Middle East, its economic ties with EU states appear to be extremely con-

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18}Data are obtained from http://www2.imfstatistics.org/DOT for the year 2009. The Middle Eastern category includes all countries listed in footnote 12. The findings are robust to different categorizations. Saudi Arabia is the only Middle Eastern country included in the top ten trade partners of non-oil-producing Middle Eastern countries.\textsuperscript{19}The data include trade figures for all countries that are EU members in a given year. The data for this and the following graphs are obtained from the Turkish Statistical Institute (www.tuik.gov.tr).\textsuperscript{20}The easing of visa requirements with a number of countries in the area such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Russia, and Syria significantly contributed to the bilateral commercial relations. Reported by Radikal, July 5, 2010.\textsuperscript{21}Turkish exports are concentrated in five cities (İstanbul, Bursa, Kocaeli, Izmir, and Ankara) despite the claims that Anatolian cities rise as major export centers (Bilefsky 2006). These five cities accounted for 84 and 79\% of all Turkish exports in 1996 and 2009, respectively. Available at www.tim.org.tr. (Accessed May 15, 2012).\textsuperscript{22}Turkey’s neighbors were Bulgaria, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Soviet Union, and Syria before 1991. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia replaced Soviet Union by 1992.\textsuperscript{23}Data for oil prices are based on 2011 BP Statistical Review of World Energy, at http://www.bp.com/sectionbodycopy.do?categoryId=7500&contentId=7068481 (Accessed May 16, 2012).\textsuperscript{24}The classification of Russia as one of the neighbors of Turkey increases the import share of these countries from 11 to 22\% in 2010 since Russia is one of the primary import partners of Turkey. The magnitude of change in exports is less significant (14\% without Russia and 17\% with Russia in 2010).
stant throughout the past three decades. In fact, the slight increase in Turkey’s proportion of trade with European states in the 1990s and, especially, its slight decline in this proportion in the 2000s are primarily due to the decline and increase in volume of trade with its neighbors, respectively.

**Linkages between Political and Economic Interests**

The above sections discussed Turkey’s international political and economic relations virtually independent of each other. Nevertheless, political and economic interests are, of course, intertwined. In fact, UNGA votes can partially be explained by trade between states (Richardson and Kegley 1980). The literature
has not determined a clear causal direction in the relationship between economic and political interests. It has rather concluded that the two types of interests are mutually reinforcing.

Perhaps most telling of the relationship between Turkey’s economic and political relations is the country’s consistently high level of both political affinity and trade with EU states. Despite some setbacks in relations, the European Union continues to be by far Turkey’s main trading partner and remains very close to the vast majority of Turkey’s international political stances, as reflected in votes within the UN. Meanwhile, Turkey’s foreign policy affinity with the United States appears to have declined after the end of the Cold War, especially starting the mid-1990s. Yet, as mentioned, Turkey’s drift away from the United States in the 2000s should not be interpreted as a move away from the “West.” The post–Cold War era has sometimes led to visible divergent foreign policy stances between the sole remaining superpower and some of its West European allies. Turkey’s increasingly close voting record with France and Germany and the rest of the European Union and its decline in voting affinity with the United States show that, like many other states, it has had to make a choice between the “two Wests.”

The linkage between political and economic interests appears even clearer in Turkey’s relations with countries in the region and the Middle East. In this case, the impetus for change was primarily an economic one. As the decline in oil prices in the 1980s led to a waning of demand for Turkish goods in oil-rich countries, so did its exports (and later its imports). The increases in oil prices in the 2000s enabled the country to boost its trade with such countries once more.

Many of Turkey’s political decisions can be understood as a result of its desire for stability in a region that is increasingly important for its economic interests. For example, Turkish political and economic elites were concerned that political tensions between Iran and the United States may undermine its economic interests. Iraq was a major trading partner for Turkey before its failed invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The war and the UN sanctions regime effectively ended the bilateral commercial relations. Unlike the Gulf War of 1991, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 revitalized the trade between two countries. Turkish companies
became very active in the Iraqi market and heavily participated in reconstruction projects sponsored by both the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) and central government in Baghdad (Shadid 2011). In 2010, Iraq became the third most important market for Turkish exports after Germany and Italy.

On the one hand, increasing Turkish exports to countries in the region contributed to the sustainable growth rates Turkey has achieved since the 2001 crisis and emboldened the Erdoğan government to be more assertive and independent-minded in its foreign policy. On the other hand, the active Turkish foreign policy facilitated exports to the countries in the region. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu’s “zero problem policy toward Turkey’s neighbors” was anchored in economic interdependence. The establishment of new transportation connections with Georgia and a free trade agreement with Syria were central to this policy (Davutoğlu 2009).

An important reflection of Davutoğlu’s vision that linked international cooperation to trade was the evolving Turkish foreign policy toward the KRG. The PKK attacks against the Turkish military stations in the fall of 2007 generated a nationalist wave in the country that demanded retaliation and strained the relations between Turkey and the KRG (Howard 2007). After Prime Minister Erdoğan met with President Bush on November 5, 2007, Turkey received green light from the U.S. government to stage cross-border raids against the Kurdish militants. One reason why the TSK’s cross-border military operation against the PKK camps in the KRG in February 2008 ended rather abruptly was the lobbying of Turkish businesses with considerable investments in the KRG. The perpetuation of the conflict would seriously threaten economic linkages between Turkey and the KRG. The mutually beneficial economic ties and U.S. mediation efforts have since led to a significant improvement in relations between Turkey and the KRG.  

Given these trends, a primary concern for the Turkish government and business sector has been to protect the growing trade with Iran from negative repercussions of UN sanctions. Turkish exports to and imports from Iran increased considerably between 2000 and 2010. 2.67% of Turkish exports went to Iran, and 6.41% of Turkish imports came from Iran in 2010. Turkish politicians were anxious that Turkish companies doing business with Iran may be penalized by the United States and European Union after the UN decision to impose additional sanctions on this country. Most important, the sanctions regime would undermine Turkish energy imports from Iran and further dampen the prospects for a construction of a major pipeline, which would be linked to the Nabucco project, carrying Iranian natural gas to European markets through Turkey (Davutoğlu 2008:91). In fact, President Abdullah Gül highlighted the importance of Turkey as an energy hub linking the natural resources of the Middle East and Caspian basin to Europe when supporting the country’s candidacy for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council (Gül 2007). These concerns were prominent in Turkey’s diplomatic efforts in negotiations between Iran and Western countries. In close collaboration with Brazil, Turkey sponsored the Tehran Declaration of May 17, 2010 that aimed at bringing about a negotiated solution to the dispute involving Iran’s nuclear program. Brazil and Turkey argued that additional sanctions would impede...
the diplomatic path and would be counterproductive.\textsuperscript{28} Turkey also argued that the Middle East should be free from weapons of mass destruction, a position implying that Israel should also dismantle its nuclear capabilities. It is for these reasons that, Turkey along with Brazil voted “no” on the UN Security Council Resolution 1929 that imposed additional sanctions on Iran on June 9, 2010.\textsuperscript{29}

Economic relations between Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries have also affected its relationship with Israel over the last three decades. When Turkey’s trade with Arab countries reached a high in the early 1980s, it strategically downgraded its relations with Israel. Turkey’s close cooperation with Israel in the 1990s did not come at the expense of its trade networks with the Middle East as the importance of the Middle Eastern market to Turkish economy was already in decline since the mid-1980s. Moreover, that this cooperation happened in the immediate aftermath of the Oslo process characterized by optimism regarding the peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question mollified Arab reactions to Turkey. The recent deterioration in Turkish–Israeli relations came at a time when the Arab countries have emerged as very important markets for Turkish exports.

The intertwining economic and political interests Turkey has in its relations with EU states, on the one hand, and with countries in its region and the Middle East, on the other, have led it to walk a fine line in its foreign policy. While economic considerations are obviously not the only factor that affects Turkey’s broader IR, we suggest that they are very informative in making sense of shifts its broader foreign policies.

**Conclusion**

This article offers a long-term analysis of both political and economic relations between Turkey and some of the key states and groupings of states. It complements the conventional focus on short-term changes in Turkish foreign policy. Policymakers are aware of the symbolic value of very visible moments, such as the 2009 Davos meeting, or the UN Security Council vote on additional sanctions on Iran in June 2010. While the Turkish actions on these occasions indeed drew public attention, they did not lead to any actual changes in international outcomes. For instance, Turkey knew when it cast its vote in the UN Security Council that the resolution on Iran would pass even without its support. Although the European Union publicly appeared to be displeased with Turkey’s vote, some EU officials suggested that Turkey’s decision was the right one.\textsuperscript{30} Overall, we suggest that Turkish positions on a handful of individual (yet very visible) votes are far less relevant than the broader pattern established by the thousands of votes it has cast at the UN over the past decades. Turkey’s behavior in the UNGA and, more broadly, its levels of foreign policy affinity with other states suggest that it has been balancing—not replacing—its traditionally strong pro-European stance regarding global issues with an increased interest in forging better economic and political relations with its neighbors. Consequently, the foreign policy affinity index undermines shift of axis arguments claiming that Turkey has been increasingly detached from the “Western alliance.”


\textsuperscript{29}While 12 members of the Security Council, including its 5 permanent members, voted to impose additional sanctions, Lebanon abstained. The resolution notes that the Brazilian-Turkish initiative could serve as a confidence-building measure.

The European Union also continues to be, by far, the most important trading partner for Turkey. At the same time, Turkey has increased economic ties with countries in the Middle East and with those in its neighborhood. Although the increases in trade with its neighbors and the Middle East countries are noticeable, they have not led to the replacement of the European Union as Turkey’s main trading partner. Based on the overall trade volume (rather than proportion), there has not really been a decline in Turkey’s trade with the European Union.

One of the advantages of taking a more long-term view of Turkish policies is that we can more easily note the intertwining of its international political and economic policies. This study has suggested that important international structural shifts such as the end of the Cold War or the broad fluctuations in oil prices have constituted the initial impetus for the changes that we have seen in Turkish policies. Once such system-level political and economic changes took place, Turkey has adjusted its own economic and, respectively, political positions.

A study that operates at a higher level of generalization than most other similar research on Turkey implicitly leaves out important details and issues that necessitate complimentary approaches. While the broad approach suggests that Turkey indeed needed to adjust to changing international material conditions, it cannot single-handedly account for how it made such adjustments. Some of the aforementioned approaches focusing on domestic political developments and ideational factors complement our arguments. Just as important, the present study can only offer a handful of illustrations of the linkages between the political and economic factors affecting Turkish policies. As the relationship between such factors is a complex one, that has already generated much interest, we believe it is important to complement this research in the future with studies that are based on in-depth interviews with policymakers and business community in both Turkey and other countries in its region in order to assess the detailed causal mechanisms linking the two types of factors.

Our arguments also would benefit from tests across developments that are still unfolding at this moment. The popular uprisings in a number of Arab countries in 2011 have altered political and economic conditions in the region and are likely to lead to some changes in Turkey’s policies. These events have already revealed both achievements and limits to Turkey's activism in the Middle East as well as its complementary policies toward EU members and its region. On the one hand, Turkey has appeared as the champion of political change in the region after a period of hesitation. While uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia temporarily harmed Turkish commercial interests, Turkey is well positioned to establish greater economic relations with these countries once political stability is restored.

In this regard, the Arab uprisings produced a geopolitical environment in the region more receptive to Turkish influence. That Turkey pursued similar policies with the Western powers in both the Libyan and Syrian crises is additional evidence that contradicts the shift of axis argument. Overall, Turkey’s position during the turmoil in the Arab world suggests that its foreign policy activism is consistent with the European Union’s broad policies in the region, despite some differences. On the other hand, the uprisings exposed the limits of Turkey’s attempts to establish problem-free relations with its neighbors ruled by authoritarian regimes. In particular, the Syrian regime’s violent reaction to popular discontent and the ensuing uncertainty resulted in a dramatic reversal of Turkish–Syrian relations. Turkey emerged as one of the fiercest critics of the Assad regime in Syria by August 2011. It is primarily concerned about the spillover effects of sectarian and ethnic violence in Syria and aims for an orderly end of the Assad regime. This position puts Turkey at odds with Iran, Iraq, and the Lebanese Hezbollah that support the Assad regime for geopolitical reasons. Consequently, this new geopolitical situation in the region makes it very difficult to sustain the AKP’s gov-
ernment zero problem policy toward neighbors and again highlights the centrality of realist concerns with security to foreign policy making.

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Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy


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