

# Neo-Ottomanism as a Key Doctrine of Modern Turkey

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Neo-Ottomanism is a new unofficial foreign policy strategy that is being implied by The Republic of Turkey. It is very closely related to such terms as “Neo Pan-Turkism,” “Pan-Turanism” and “Turkish Eurasianism.” It was actively implemented towards new born Turkic states after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, today it is mostly aimed at strengthening Turkish position within the Arab world, African countries and on Balkans. “Soft power” used to be the main mean of embodying Neo Ottoman strategy, but failed due to the developments of the “Arab spring.” This article looks closely at the very nature of Neo-Ottomanism and its elements and brings out its demonstration within the Turkish foreign policy decisions. The author also analyzes the place and role of the Neo-Ottoman doctrine taking into account the changing realities of the Turkish foreign policy.

*Keywords:* Turkey, Russia, geopolitical strategy, neo-ottomanism, foreign affairs

## Neo-Ottomanism as a Foundational Ideologem and Geostrategy of Turkey

“Yes, we are the ‘New Ottomans’. We are compelled to be engaged with the neighboring countries. We are even going to Africa. The superpowers are watching us with confusion” Ahmed Davutoğlu, Turkish president.

Turkish foreign policy has recently undergone some significant changes. Its both theoretical and practical principles have been transformed. The term “Neo-Ottomanism” has emerged in academic circles in the context of the expanding Turkish foreign policy. International community interprets it in different ways but the term definitely has a certain ideological connotation. At the same time, Neo-Ottomanism is the best term to describe the ideology of Turkish current foreign policy and the way it is being implemented.

The end of the Cold War and the era of bipolar confrontation have originated some peculiar forms of a new post-bipolar system of international relations. The disintegration of the Soviet Union turned out to be a *carte blanche* for the United States of America, which tried to become a global hegemon (or as many think, a leader) (Bogaturov, 2004). As time passed by, the world moved on to the “underdeveloped” (Martynov, 2009) pluralistic (Bogaturov, Hrustalev, & Kosolapov, 2002) multipolarity. The world political system, that used to be divided by the affiliation to a super power, became more multiform. New centers of power, supra-regional mini-empires of a new type, seeking to expand their influence over neighboring territories, started to emerge everywhere around the system’s most powerful state—the USA (and even against its will) (Shakleina, 2011). Moreover, shifting from the policy of “hard power” to “soft power” (Nye, 1990) or even the “smart power” (Nye, 2007), one has become a founding feature of the existing international relations system.

Under such circumstances, Turkish political life has been undergoing some transformations. With disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Turkey has acquired an aspiration to fill in

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the vacuum of power that emerged across its borders. When the moderate Islamic and conservative Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power, Turkish political field started to show its Ottoman roots which were deep in the hearts of people and in the statements of politicians.

It is worth mentioning that JDP has made a true revolution in both domestic and foreign policy of the state. The major actor of Turkish policy since the origins of the Republic that used to ensure the country's secular path—Turkish military—was gradually moved out of the political field. The regime managed to remove the military by initiating “Balyoz” and “Ergenekon” cases, the military was accused of organizing a coup d'état. As a result, high ranked military personnel and rectors of the universities (the secular elite) were arrested. It was done in line with the aspirations of the political (and some military) elite to join the European Union and democratize the state government. However, moderate Islamic forces that formed JDP under such “democratization” were hiding their true aspirations of usurping the authority and depriving the military of the ability to organize another coup as it used to in Turkish recent history (Avatkov, 2012).

Strong accent on the economic development of the country and straightening of the “Turkish model” resulted in growth in popularity of the ruling party and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. One more factor of the party's fame is a formation of a new imperial mindset among both the nation and the authorities. All those factors gave an impetus to the promotion of Neo-Ottomanism as an official Turkish foreign policy doctrine during the era of Justice and Development Party.

In the modern system of international relations, there is a trend of transformation of the role of its subjects. The key international processes are beginning to transfer to the world regions—and within these regions begin to form the new centers of power. The Middle East is no exception in this context.

Recently, Turkey has been trying to play an increasing role in resolving global and regional issues. At this stage, the Republic positions itself as a reformer and transformer of the entire system of international relations. Primarily, in this context, it is worth noting the concept of “The world is more than five”, which did Recep Tayyip Erdoğan propose in the framework of the 73-rd session of the UN General Assembly in October 2018. “The World is more than five<sup>1</sup>” means more than the five core members of the UN Security Council.

Turkish leader said:

Over time, the UN has moved away from its mission to rise to the expectations of people in matters of peace. The Security Council has served the interests of the five permanent members, but it ignores the interests of people in other places... we emphasize the need to reform the UN, especially its Security Council. The world is more than five, we are the voices of conscience of all mankind.

It was impossible to imagine about 10-20 years ago, because Turkey, being the right hand of the United States in the Middle East region, could not and did not want to influence the world political process. Disappointed in its own dreams of building a mutually beneficial dialogue with the United States, Turkey, moving away from its Pro-Western policy, becomes a more independent player on the world stage.

Now, the Republic is conducting its own independent policy with regard to the Middle East and Africa, which, in turn, causes great dissatisfaction in Washington and alertness among other international political players. In many ways, this is one of the results of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's activities as head of state. Moving away from the American-centric policy, Turkey reoriented itself to the “Erdoğan-centric” policy, which based

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<sup>1</sup> Erdogan prizval transformirovat SB OON, Rossiiskaia gazeta, Sept. 25, 2018, URL: <https://rg.ru/2018/09/25/erdogan-prizval-reformirovat-sb-oon.html> (accessed 20 October 2018).

mostly on the personal ambitions and purposes of the leader. Imperial ambitions and a return to the concept of Neo-Ottomanism brought the country to an own and independent foreign policy.

The active Ministry of Foreign Affairs is functioning under the Law on establishment of the Ministry and its goals of 7 July 2010. The very first goal of the Ministry among listed in the Law is “to support a stable formation and strengthening of an atmosphere within the region and the world that would promote justice and development”<sup>2</sup>.

Symbolically, at the very first paragraph of the Law, Turkey declares to be a power capable of making and aspiring to make world politics, acting as a policeman and taking responsibility for the fate of the region and even the world. It is also necessary to emphasize that the term “justice and development” is an allusion to a new Turkish model of a moderate Islam expansion exercised by the JDP.

The current course of Turkish foreign policy was shaped under Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkish politician and former prime-minister, who held office of Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2008-2014. His most remarkable work among the books and articles under his authorship, the “Strategic depth” (The Economist, 2010) comprises all goals and objectives of current Turkish foreign policy. During Davutoğlu’s term the “zero problems with neighbors”, (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016a) doctrine was adopted. Initially, it had been a symbol of a piece-oriented policy, but eventually, it was transformed into an aggressive concept of changing a neighboring county’s status by taking under control it is domestic processes.

The founding document that defines current Turkish foreign policy is a confidential “Red Book” or a “secret constitution” in other words. The book covers all essential threats and challenges Turkey faces, its enemies, and allies. The National Security Council updates the “Red book” once every five years and its fragments are often leaked to the press. Significantly, the 2010 book *The Document on National Security Policy* was drafted not by the military as it used to be, but by the civil administration (Tarasov, 2016). According to the then Turkish president Abdullah Gül, the 2010 document (unlike the previous one) does not name any group as posing a threat to national security.

In comparison, such threats as Islamic radicalism, separatism, left-winged groups’ activity and international terrorism were considered in the 2005 document. The fact that JDP’s actions could have been regarded as an Islamic radicalism and separatism (implying its Kurdish policy) explains that both why the mentioned above threats are not considered in the 2010 document and the aspiration of A. Gül to eliminate them from the text. It is also worth mentioning that Russia, Greece, Iran, and Iraq were removed from the list of countries that pose a threat to the security of the Republic. Yet, Moscow defined as a potential partner (Avatkov & Druzhilovsky, 2013). In addition, this partnership presupposes cooperation in the spheres of politics, economy and security in modern conditions — in particular, it demonstrated by the “Astana format” on the Syrian case, demonstrating the unique case of the presence of Iran and Turkey at the same negotiating table. Such this format of dialogue could be apply to other countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, which has not very smooth relations with Iran.

Despite a number of political and historical contradictions that divided Russia and Turkey, at the present stage, the two countries actively cooperate in the sphere of economy and security. Over the last 20 years, it was formed a similarity of discourse and positions in relation to the resolution of key international issues. Today, Russia and Turkey have raised their authority as independent subjects of international relations. Therefore,

<sup>2</sup> 6004 Dışişleri bakanlığının kuruluş ve görevleri hakkında kanun (Law on establishment of the Ministry and its goals of July 7, 2010, No.6004), URL: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/BAKANLIK/mevzuat-2013.pdf> (accessed 22 August 2016).

today other world powers should take into account their opinion when making important geopolitical decisions.

However, despite all the economic successes and the establishment of dialogue after the incident of downed Russian aircraft in 2015, it is necessary to understand that the imperial habits of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan extend to the border to Russia territories—the North Caucasus, the former CIS countries. The spread of the concepts of “Neo-Ottomanism” and “Neo-pan-Turkism” is also affects these territories.

The history of Neo-Ottomanism originates in the Ottoman Empire—the state contemporary Turkish leaders seem to associate themselves with. In contrast, the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal, believed that new Turkey had to be founded on new principles and broke up all connections with the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottomanism emerged being a protective doctrine in mid 20th century along with the “new ottomans”—a secret political organization of the Ottoman Empire. The organization sought strengthening of power through the adoption of constitutional principles and shaping a united ottoman subjects society (Kudryashova & Matyuhin, 2013). According to an intelligent part of the society, the Ottomanism was supposed to become a part of democratization process within the Empire (in order to prevent its disintegration) but in practice, it leads to even greater enslavement of the nations, first of all, on Balkans and in Eastern parts of the state. The doctrine was implemented by the “zulüm” (oppression) policy. Modern Turks tend to associate Ottomanism with self-dignity, and with the right to be an Empire. Thus, it can be used as a composite of renewed consciousness of a new Turk, that many Turkish ideologists and politician’s eager to create (Nadein-Raevsky, 2016; Avatkov, Druzhilovsky, & Fedorchenko, 2013).

English researcher David Barchard introduced the term “Neo-Ottomanism” in 1985. It was revived during Necmettin Erbakan’s term by Stefanos Konstantinidis, who highlighted the fact that Turkey had once again switched to “foreign policy based on imperial traditions” (Bahrevsky, 2016). Livaneli, Uluengin, Çandar, and Yavuz are among analysts that contributed to the development of the “Neo-Ottomanism” ideologeme (Kudryashova & Matyuhin, 2013).

Neo-Ottomanism is an unofficial Turkish foreign policy doctrine that implies extension of its influence over neighboring territories by means of “soft power”, economic and social leverages, and a supranational concept. Atatürk’s domestic nationalism has obviously lost its essence and is currently being replaced with new supranational binds based on new imperial cognition, moderate Islam, Turkish Eurasianism, Pan-Turkism, and Pan-Islamism.

Thus, Neo-Ottomanism is a virtual concept that combines a range of foreign policy beliefs and their practical implementation. The major elements of the Neo-Ottomanism system are Neo Pan-Turkism, Pan-Islamism, Turkish Eurasianism, and cooperation with Arab, Balkan, Asian, and African countries. Though it is being exercised through each of the mentioned above elements, Neo-Ottomanism has a general goal of shaping the supranational identity of new Ottoman imperialism that alludes “involvement” and “inclusion”, both carried out by means of “soft power”.

Taking into account the transition of political relations between states in the humanitarian sphere, at the present stage cultural and educational projects, which are part of the “soft power”, play an important role. The Republic of Turkey, which announced the importance of cooperation in the field of humanitarian cooperation at the last Russian-Turkish public forum in Antalya (November 2018), did not stand aside in this context. There was proclaimed policy of “insani” that means human-oriented policy. That corresponds to the principles of Turkey’s promotion of its own ideologies, which were described above. In turn, Russia is also stepping up its work in the area of humanitarian cooperation and cultural interaction, as demonstrated by the Russian-Turkish

public forum.

Neo Pan-Turkism is one of the Neo-Ottomanism elements. It implies integration of all Turkic states due to their ethnical, lingual, and religious affinity, embodied through economic involvement and social means.

Pan-Turkism, in its turn, is closely related to Pan-Turanism. “Turan” is a mythologic historic affinity of Turkic nations within the territory of their settlement from Baikal to Balkans. It denotes that it is Turkish duty to support Muslims of Turan, to construct roads, build factories, airports, and to promote the formation of thuggish in its essence state of Kosovo (Ponomaryova & Rudov, 2013) and debilitation of the Christians.

In addition, Pan-Turkism is a more accurate idea than Pan-Turanism, it approaches ideas of the future rather than the past. The Pan-Turkism doctrine takes origins in works of Vambery within the frames of “Cadid” movement (Burashnikova, 2013). Ismail Gasprinski, the Turkish Eurasianist, was the first ideologist of Pan-Turkism. He was a Crimean who called for a consolidation of all Turkic and Slavic nations within Russia. Moreover, Gasprinski emphasized the necessity of forming a unified Turkic language based on free of Arabism Turkish. The propaganda of that sort of ideas was conducted via “Interpreter—*Terciman*” newspaper that had been published until 1918 when closed by Bolsheviks.

Turkism—the Turkic ethnocentrism—was an element of the Young Turks ideology. Its spokesmen, a philosopher Ziya Gekalp, stood for shaping a unified Turkic nation, free of Pan-Islamic accents within frameworks of the European civilization. Later on, the Pan-Turkic ideas were expressed by Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) that was formed in 1969 under the leadership of Alparslan Turkes. Nowadays, it is the third major party of the Turkish parliament headed by Devlet Bahçeli.

Pan-Turkism gained an impetus after the disintegration of the Soviet Union due to the emergence of new independent Turkic states—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Turkey was one of the first states to acknowledge these countries and moved on to building special relations with them. Yet, Ankara gradually realized that such relations could not be based on the principle of “elder fraternity”. As a result, Turkey proceeded with the Neo Pan-Turkic strategy (Svarants, 2002). It is a growing tendency of Turkey using means of “soft power” towards Turkic states and Turkic regions of the Russian Federation. It appears to be consistent with Ankara’s strategic goals to form a new subsystem of international relations of the Turkic world. Turkey’s return to “Imperial greatness” is the desire to spread influence where historically is nothing connected with Turkey. As an example, an attempt to link the Turkish people and the Turkic peoples of the Russian Federation based on “community” by blood, history, and the factor of self-consciousness.

Meanwhile, Turkish authorities did not follow the footsteps of the European Union that was gradually drifting from struggling with economic problems to solving ones of a political matter for a long period. They developed their exceptional ways of forming a supranationality. In order to achieve its goals, Turkey commenced creating various “integration fields” in culture, education, economy, and policy after all. The aforementioned “fields” are to pursue one long-term goal of Turkic integration. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan, and Turkic regions of the Russian Federation are to some extent involved in the process. For those purposes, an extensive network of governmental, private, and joint organizations that shape Turkish lobby and are designed to contribute to the embodiment of Ankara’s interests in the long run are being created.

Statements made by Turkish leaders after the disintegration of the Soviet Union played a stimulative role in the rise and activation of the above mentioned organizations. Turgut Özal, Turkish ex-president, proclaimed the 21st century to be the “Turkish century” and Süleyman Demirel, the ex-prime-minister, was speculating on

Turkish expansion from Adriatic to the Great Chinese wall and on Turkey being a “cultural and historic magnet for the new sovereign states”.

On the state level, regular Summits of Turkic countries became one of the mechanisms of developing and strengthening ties between Turkey and Caucasian and Central Asian Republics. Within the first 10 years of the 21st century, nine Summits were held. According to A. Gül, Turkish former president, the Summits are the platform for expressing solidarity and exchanging opinions on both relations between Turkic states and global issues.

The 9th Summit of Turkic states was held on 2-3 October 2009 in Nahichevani. The establishment of a new institutional structure of Turkic cooperation, the Turkic States Council (Turkic Council) was announced at the Summit, the Founding Treaty of a newly formed organization was signed. The headquarter of the Turkic Council is located in Istanbul. After the Treaty signing ceremony, A. Gül stated that the event had a historical meaning since it was the first institutional structure that unified Turkic nations (Avatkov, 2014).

Various concepts of Turkish Eurasianism have not yet acquired an explicit and integral structure but are closely related to Neo-Ottomanism. Hasan Selim Özertem, the Energy Security coordinator of the Organization of International Strategic Studies (USAK), highlights that

the term “Eurasianism” is frequently used by the National movement party within the context of Turkic cohesion. It implies the Eurasianism of Caucasian, Central Asian and Turkish Turks that can and should act in concert. At the same time Eurasianism is an ideology that suggests unity of Russia, Turkey and China previously voiced by Tuncer Kılınc Paşa. On the other hand, Eurasianism is a term used in Turkey in economics and politics to define diversification of the foreign economic and political course of the country (Avatkov, 2016).

One of the particular aspects of the Neo-Ottoman policy is Turkish cooperation with Arabic countries. Its primary goal is to strengthen Turkish position in the region and to broaden the area of Ankara’s influence by enhancing Turkish economic, political, and cultural presence. Turkey has mainly benefited from the developments of the “Arab spring”, except for the unclear stance of Turkish government on Libya. The coming to power of the “Muslim Brotherhood” leaders in Egypt and Tunisia who share a common vision with JDP led to flourishing of bilateral relations; the majority of Syrian opposition rely on Turkish military and political support. However, due to the military upheaval in Egypt, a complicated political situation in Tunisia as well as the long-lasting war in Syria, the JDP’s success in the region seems to be questionable.

Ankara’s policy towards Middle East countries and the countries of Northern Africa is very complex and multilayered; it implies building up Turkish influence within the region. Business ties and investments form a base for Turkish presence in Arab world. This base that has successfully been built for the past decade serves as a platform for the development of the social and political ties that frequently occur in military industrial cooperation. Flourishing of Turkish-Arabic cooperation is accomplished by further establishing of Turkish cultural, educational, and social presence in the region.

The direct relation between Turkish economic activities in the region, strengthening of its political influence and intensification of Turkish political involvement in regional processes, becomes visible. The aforesaid contribute to the better image of Turks among Arabs, which in its turn, has a positive impact on economic ties.

Economic and trade relations with African countries are gaining an exceptional meaning for Turkey. The trade volume with those counties is growing rapidly. In 2008-2009, it increased by eight times. In 2008, the trade volume with the countries of Tropical Africa amounted to 5.7 billion dollars (Republic of Turkey Ministry

of Foreign Affairs, 2016b). Turkey has declared an “African strategy” (Svistunova, 2016) and started to work out projects on Tropical Africa’s development, Turkish leaders are paying visits to African countries.

Turkish embassies operate in seventeen African countries south of the Sahara. The Republic is developing relations with the African Union, since 2005, Turkey has been an observer of the organization, and in 2008, it was identified as a strategic partner. Ankara seeks to create permanent mechanisms of consultations with the Union. In this respect, the first Turkish-African summit of cooperation was held in 2008 in Istanbul, which was aimed to expand relations in different fields of cooperation and to set a course for their gradual institutionalization.

Turkey pays special attention to cultural and religious ties with countries South of Sahara. Trying to win its spurs, Turkey highlights that it “does not have a colonial record at the continent”. Ankara prioritizes education in strengthening its positions in Tropical Africa: The scholarships and grants for education in Turkish universities are provided to African students annually. Fethullah Gülen Schools successfully operate in Africa. For instance, over 1,400 students study in four Turkish schools in Tanzania (Mosaki, 2016).

Therefore, Turkey actively implies such “leverages” as education and cultural cooperation towards Tropical African countries. Due to these means of “soft power”, Turkish image within African continent is very positive and Turkish prestige as a model state is growing.

Turkish Neo-Ottomanism rests upon four fundamental principles of blood, soil, language, and Ottoman cognition. The blood principle primarily refers to Turkic nations. The principle of soil is related to the Ottoman history. Atatürk had dissociated himself from it; however, it was recognized by new Turkish leaders. The aspiration of Turkish leaders to cultivate the new Ottoman cognition and a supra-Turkish identity, which would make Turkey an over-regional leader, is closely connected with the aforementioned ideological principles. In this regard, the Turkish language, for instance, once again is being enriched by Arabism which used to be substituted owing to the Turkish Language Association.

Neo-Ottomanism appears through certain actions which themselves represent a specific tactic aimed at embodying the portrayed strategy. Thus, numerous functions in enhancing international influence are being de facto exercised by various Funds and non-profit organizations. Turkish lycées, the Yunus Emre Institutes which represent instruments of Turkish “soft power” abroad, gained world-wide recognition. The Turkish Republic is working on shifting emphasis from exclusively economic cooperation to social ties. Furthermore, Ankara is extending its interaction with neighboring countries and seeking to reduce its dependency on the US (however, not always consistently or successfully).

Although, the “Arab spring” caused some significant challenges for Turkish foreign policy, to respond to those challenges, Ankara undoubtedly launched a tendency of using “hard power” means for solving problems across its borders. Ironically, Turkish “soft power” policy of “zero problems with neighbours” turned out to be a “zero neighbours—zero problems” policy. It especially refers to the Turkish policy towards Syria where after failing to achieve its long-term goal—to establish a loyal regime—by “soft power” means, Ankara proceeded with use of “hard power”. Turkish activity towards Syria and within the region is a clear evidence of Turkish proactive foreign policy aimed at broadening area of its influence.

The main danger of the spread of such ideologies in the Middle East and beyond (including Turkic-speaking States and Turkic-speaking peoples of the Russian Federation) is that, unlike Western States, traditional attitudes—religion, blood, ethnicity, etc. play a huge role in the territory of the East and often such installations are above the law and protocols of inter-state cooperation. Just on the commonality “by blood”, ethnic group and religion are built concepts that revives Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. And the influence of the

leaders of individual countries and international and regional organizations (for example, through “soft power” and cultural and educational projects as through the programs of the cultural center of Yunus Emre) in the regions of the world can lead to the creation of potential security threats to the entire world community.

Neo-Ottomanism is an attempt to form a new supra-identity by means of social and economic influence. It represents a geostrategy, the basic ideologeme for all strategies and tactics of Turkish foreign policy. It is a matter of great importance to consolidate the majority of Turkish population under the aegis of the aforementioned foreign policy ideology in order to promote it.

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