

Davutoglu's 'zero problem' policy

By Stefanos Evripidou

THE RECENT visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to the occupied north invited a flurry of critical articles in the press, slamming his "same intransigent" positions and the not so subtle threats made against Greek Cypriots.

Beyond the island, however, Davutoglu has garnered quite a reputation for steering Turkish foreign policy towards a "zero problem" policy, which roughly embodies Turkey's desire to create good neighbourly relations. The ultimate goal being two-fold: first, enhanced political and economic cooperation with the Middle East and the West, and second, to make Turkey of key strategic importance to all.

As an academic and political scientist, Davutoglu wrote a highly influential book called Strategic Depth. He later worked as an ambassador and chief foreign policy advisor to Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, having an influence which some experts argue is most visible when comparing the two men's statements and speeches. According to the Turkish Weekly, Davutoglu played a leading part in the Turkish government's shuttle diplomacy to end the 2008 Israel-Gaza conflict. Today's Zaman puts him firmly behind the Turkish-brokered mediation between Syria and Israel.

On May 1, 2009, Davutoglu came from out of the shadows like a traditional puppet master to take over the Turkish Foreign Ministry from a visible standpoint.

Since then, Turkey has intensified efforts to stabilise and improve relations with most of its neighbours. In this last month alone, Davutoglu has travelled to Iraq and Syria to broker a peace following a regional spat between the two over insurgency in Iraq. He's also been to Cairo and Stockholm, where he met with his British, Italian, Belgian, Swedish and Spanish counterparts. He has guided his country to the brink of a massive breakthrough in Turkish-Armenian relations. And of course, he also came to the north of Cyprus, illegally as the government spokesman reminds us, where he played both good and bad cop, calling on the need for everybody to work for a solution, while warning Greek Cypriots not to reject another one.

The Cyprus Mail asked a number of experts to comment on whether this "zero problem" policy was the real deal.

"He's very serious about this," said Dr James Ker-Lindsay, a Senior Research Fellow at the LSE. "It's very interesting to see how his career has progressed and his influence on Turkish foreign policy, even before the Justice and Development Party (AKP). He's completely reconceptualised Turkey's relations with the outside world, especially in the Middle East and South Caucasus."

The international relations expert said Turkey could no longer afford to have problems with its neighbours, hence the gradual thawing in relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran, to a lesser extent Greece, and Armenia.

"This is vital because it impacts directly on relations with the EU. They are about to break real ground with Armenia, leaving Cyprus as the last piece of the puzzle," said Ker-Lindsay.

"I think Davutoglu realised a Cyprus solution is beneficial to Turkey regardless of EU accession, because it will give Turkey a clear run on the international relations scene. It will strengthen its case as a mediating power in the region, and show it's a responsible member of the IR community. It wants to show it is a factor and a force for stability, an economic bridge, a cultural mediator," he added.

Head of the Turkish Bureau at the Presidential Palace, Nicos Moudouros, agreed that Davutoglu speaks a different language than his predecessors, but argued that his policy was a combination of stick and carrot.

"Yes, his expressions are different from the classic Turkish Foreign Ministry statements on Cyprus, but if you look closely, you can also find a thousand negatives. For example, when he warns Greek Cypriots to be careful, saying 'if you don't accept anything this time, we will proceed with alternative solutions'," said Moudouros.

On the other hand, the President's advisor on Turkish affairs pointed out Davutoglu's statements made on September 1, 2009, where the minister referred to the Treaty of Guarantee.

"He said one of the reasons Turkey wants to keep the guarantees is because if you abolish them, the whole state is abolished. He did not refer to 'virgin birth' or 'coming into being' or a 'new partnership'. Turkey realised this contradiction between seeking a new state and keeping old guarantees."

Moudouros said there did appear to be a shift in Turkish foreign policy the last seven years, with a different language adopted but that this was combined with traditional policies.

"Turkish foreign policy is not the creation of one person. You can see Davutoglu's general philosophy on Greco-Turkish relations. On the one hand you hear a different kind of language and at the same time, Turkish flights over the Aegean. He combines hard with soft power," he said.

The advisor added that Turkey's recent activity in foreign relations was not based solely on its EU aspirations. "No, it's not all EU-related. Turkey wants the Middle East to be a region of peace, and wants to have a new role in this area."

On Cyprus, however, Davutoglu was less dovish, argued Moudouros: "Twice he said this was our last chance. Turkey says it wants to solve the Cyprus problem. But how? That's another question?

"It's seeking a solution close to the Annan plan because it doesn't want any big shift from the boundaries already approved, after huge processes, by various local actors in 2004."

Political analyst Sofronis Sofroniou, noted the contradiction between the more "conciliatory tone and emphasis" of Davutoglu and the "intransigent positions" of Erdogan.

"Possibly Erdogan is pandering to a domestic audience and Davutoglu to a foreign one. From what we hear though, Turkey's positions in the negotiations are very hard, but I don't trust our media. It usually distorts everything and anything. We need to see the texts for ourselves," said Sofroniou.

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