



Turkish Army soldiers stand guard around Zubin Potok municipality in Northern Kosovo upon the request of NATO Kosovo Force on June 15, 2023. (Erkin Keci / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Limitations of Turkey's Western Balkans Policy Since Erdoğan's Reelection

Reuf Bajrović

Two generations of foreign policy observers, pre-Erdoğan Turkish policy did not venture out of its immediate surroundings, concerning itself with border states such as Greece and co-nationals in Northern Cyprus while serving as a strategic power projection base for the United States. Such policy direction could hardly be viewed as having anything to do with the current Turkish foreign policy approach, which some Turkish and foreign observers have branded the neo-Ottoman approach. Before Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two-decade-long rule, Turkish foreign policy paid little attention to matters beyond its immediate borders, forfeiting its wider regional policy to major foreign actors.

Critical Absence

The post-Cold War breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars during the 1990s went almost unnoticed by Turkish foreign policy. Turkish ties to Balkan Muslims remained [symbolic](#) for more than a century; the Balkans region was at times almost completely forgotten by Turkey, despite having ruled the region for half a millennium in its previous incarnation as the Ottoman Empire. Such policy direction could hardly be viewed as having anything to do with the Ottoman legacy, which was perhaps a conscious effort on behalf of the former secular ruling elite, which largely ignored the



devastating wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The war in Bosnia culminated in genocide against Bosnian Muslims, who were referred to as “Turks” by the Serb forces committing genocide. Such atrocities attracted attention from faraway state actors such as the United States.

However, Turkey remained largely absent from the conflict in this region close to its borders that was fought along both religious and historical lines. Even at the conflict’s end — during the brokering of the United States-backed Dayton Agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia — Turkish involvement was [relegated](#) to serving as a U.S. liaison without any meaningful policy input of its own. Simply put, the projection of political, financial, and especially military power potential in the Balkans was visibly lacking during the region’s most dramatic period.

The Change Within

Turkey’s century-long avoidance of greater regional issues was perhaps not so much grounded in disinterest or ideological avoidance as it was lacking basic power projection tools due to its decades-long weak economy. Its newfound economic growth in the early 2000s began to change all this at an impressive pace. Its rising economy made it more ambitious, self-confident, and assertive. Its cultural outlook was also changing fast, with the religious, conservative current of Turkish society replacing the secularist nationalists then in power. The success of conservative elements was attributed to their successful fusion with modern Turkish nationalism, a cultural shift that had been a century in the making. Perhaps first set off by the [1974 Cyprus conflict](#), the secular national elite co-opted the conservative religious Turkish community for a greater national struggle against its neighbor and rival, Greece. The Cyprus conflict unavoidably led to religious framings of the centuries-long rivalry, as most Turks saw themselves not only as members of a nation but also as members of a single faith that would trace its identity beyond the modern republic and to its Ottoman-Islamic past.

Neo-Ottomans Rise

The rise of this new, conservative Turkey was personified by the arrival of Erdoğan in 2002 at

the head of the Turkish political scene. Erdoğan’s policies started a slow shift of the old paradigms concerning both internal and foreign policy by returning an old but never-forgotten political tradition of Ottoman imperialism, which foreign observers dubbed [“neo-Ottomanism.”](#) This term was almost an accusation when used abroad, but inside Turkey, it meant refocusing Turkey’s role in the Islamic world, given that the Ottomans were the last bearers of the khalifate, giving Turkey religious [legitimacy](#) in the broader Islamic world. The premise of the term “neo-Ottoman policy” alludes to the restoration of modern-day Turkey’s political influence in the former provinces of the long-gone Ottoman Empire. The memory and notion of empire within wider Turkish culture have been persistent elements of historic nostalgic identity. Its reemergence as a dominant political force caused a profound shift in both the national consciousness and leadership of Turkey and ushered in a new era of Turkish foreign policy, which aimed to return to its influence in the former Ottoman space as a meaningful if not decisive actor.

The Shift

Turkey’s foreign policy shift from focusing exclusively on its immediate neighbors to focusing on broader regions of the Balkans, Caucasus, the Levant, and North Africa came as a surprise to many foreign actors and observers. Erdoğan’s first decade of rule was marked by the reintroduction of the Ottoman legacy to Turkish society, even as Turkey’s foreign policy goals remained [focused](#) on EU integration.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s initial foreign policy platform of [“zero problems with neighbors”](#) was partly implemented in practice, paving a constructive path to the resolution of the Cyprus issue via the Annan Plan as well as attempts to mediate between Turkey’s ally Azerbaijan and neighboring Armenia. In the shadows, however, speculations about a more ambitious Turkey were starting to emerge during Davutoğlu’s time as Erdoğan’s key foreign policy adviser. Davutoğlu, mostly known for his book [“Strategic Depth,”](#) envisioned a new foreign policy course: a Turkey that was assertive well beyond its borders to encompass the former space of the once-vast Ottoman Empire. Davutoğlu was Turkey’s foreign minister from 2009 to 2014, overseeing



Turkey Retreats

For a time, it seemed imminent and game-changing that Turkey, through political influence, could help install friendly and ideologically close political allies in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt. The Turkish government under Erdoğan had struck at the opportunity and almost succeeded in restoring the modern equivalent of the Ottoman Empire by supporting friendly and democratically legitimate governments in place of Western-friendly but democratically illegitimate regimes. Turkey, by chance, almost became a world power overnight, subverting [Western-friendly dictatorships](#), despite Turkey's membership in NATO and decades of close policy ties with the West vis-à-vis the Middle East. Perhaps Erdoğan had little sympathy for Western-friendly military dictatorships because he had to overcome Turkey's very own military dictatorship at the ballot box. However, the consequences for Turkish and Western relations, particularly with the United States, had shifted fundamentally. The U.S. administration, then under President Barack Obama, decided it could no longer see Turkey as a dependable ally; its secular elites with military backing were gone. Turkey was now a competitor to the West, and competitors naturally need to be contained.

Turkey's ambitious foreign policy play almost completely unraveled due to the overestimation of its own political resources, its political experience, and its lack of military projection. U.S.-led efforts gradually reversed political gains made by Turkish-supported, [democratically elected](#) Islamist or Muslim Brotherhood parties through measures such as supporting the Egyptian military coup led by Abdel Fatah El-Sisi via billions of dollars in military aid [assistance](#), as well as the latest heavy [IMF financial support](#) package for Tunisian dictator Kais Saied to insulate his dictatorship from economic collapse. The Assad regime in Syria managed to hold onto power due to Russian military intervention, whereas Syrian Kurds received support from Western governments, which prompted the Turkish-supported Syrian opposition to retreat to the northern confines of Syria close to the Turkish border.

Libya remains the only [success](#) story for Turkish policy, albeit a partial one. Turkey continues to back the only remaining democratically elected government that

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (C) gestures upon his arrival to address a press conference after attending the closing session of the G20 summit in New Delhi on Sept. 10, 2023. (Money Sharma / AFP via Getty Images)

the first breakthrough of Turkish foreign policy in almost a century.

The first real opening was certainly opportunistic, coming on the heels of the 2010 surprise emergence of the Arab Spring revolts against established secular dictatorships. The Arab Spring created power vacuums in the former historical Ottoman provinces of Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt due to demands for the democratization of the state by their populace. These power vacuums gave the new Turkish leadership an [opening](#) and opportunity that they were perhaps waiting for but were inexperienced and unprepared to fully exploit. Erdoğan openly adopted the policy of supporting political parties and organizations that were termed by Western observers "Islamist" or were derivative of or successors to the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). These Islamist parties have long had a large following but were unable to come to power due to established military dictatorships financially supported by Western nations, particularly the United States, as well as Gulf Arab nations such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which themselves feared being overthrown by a popular uprising.



emerged from the Arab Spring, propping it up with military and financial aid. However, the power of the Turkish-backed government only encompasses [half](#) the Libyan state, while the rest is controlled by French- and Russian-backed military dictatorships. The sum of Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring events is a clear net minus, in terms of both its accomplished goals and its relationship with Western states. Davutoğlu's failed ambitious policy led to his falling out with Erdoğan and his eventual dismissal as minister of foreign affairs in 2014.

Enter Containment

The legacy of Davutoğlu's policy has shifted Turkish relations with the West toward regional strategic competition instead of cooperation. This has led to a policy of containment by Western states shifting to further political engagement. For example, the U.S. and Germany are [refusing](#) to continue the policy of military hardware sales to Turkey, signaling a further decoupling between the Turkey and the West.

Turkey, in turn, has attempted to offset containment by committing to [military hardware purchases](#) from Russia and China as well as heavily investing in its own domestic defense industry, which has been showing dividends, particularly during the [Azerbaijani–Armenian conflict](#) over Nagorno-Karabakh province. Economic ties have also seen deterioration, including Turkey accusing the United States and other Western nations of purposely devaluing the Turkish lira to force regime change and the U.S. accusing Turkey of circumventing Western sanctions on Russia and stalling NATO's enlargement.

Where Is the New “Empire” Heading?

In comparison to Turkey's ambitious breakout as a power player in the Middle East, its policy in the Balkans has been timid and lackluster. The Balkan region theoretically should be one of the main focuses of neo-Ottoman foreign policy; however, Turkey has had the weakest presence and a mostly incoherent political allegiance. Furthermore, ties between Turkey and the Balkan states today are mostly economic and cultural, with only a symbolic political presence. In contrast, Turkish activity in Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East and Caucasus is clearly illustrated

by Turkey's willingness to engage politically and militarily in major regional political events such as the Arab Spring and support Azerbaijan in its [military conflict](#) with Armenia.

Turkey has also had an active role in the Persian Gulf region, [establishing military bases in Qatar](#) and even in the Red Sea region in [Sudan](#), by helping government forces in Ethiopia [fight off](#) a rebel advance and face down PMC Wagner troops in Libya. The lack of political engagement by Turkey and its neo-Ottoman policies can at least be partially explained by the fact that most Balkan states have not had majority Muslim populations since the inception of neo-Ottomanism. It could be that Christian-majority countries are not considered to have “neo-Ottoman” strategic depth in the new Turkish worldview and are therefore of no strategic interest other than for economic cooperation.

However, this does not explain why Turkey is so visibly absent from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania, which do have Muslim-majority populations and have historically been considered as equally “Ottoman” as the Turks themselves. The Turkish economic and political presence has increased in these states since Erdoğan came to power. These ties have mostly been symbolic in terms of political support, with Erdoğan backing political parties that share ideological ties with his AK Party in Turkey. Turkish state investments have mostly focused on reconstructing the [Ottoman cultural heritage](#), which was especially [welcomed by the region's Muslim communities](#); however, meaningful infrastructural or government investments were mostly declaratory and were rarely realized. Private investment from Turkey did not appear to have state backing or direction to invest in Muslim-majority Balkan states; quite the opposite occurred, as Turkish private investment mostly flowed to [Christian-majority states such as North Macedonia and Serbia](#). These were perhaps the first steps Turkey was taking to engage itself in a region it had dominated for centuries in preparation for more meaningful engagement in the near future; however, meaningful strategic and security involvement was visibly missing.



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's chief adviser Akif Cagatay Kilic (3rd R) meets with U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Jeffrey Flake (2nd L) and U.S. Special Presidential Coordinator for Global Infrastructure Amos J. Hochstein (out of view) at the Presidential Complex in Ankara on Aug. 29, 2023. (Rasit Aydogan / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

The Balkan Chessboard

Given that U.S. policy in the Middle East during the Obama era was mostly reactive to Turkish advances, U.S./EU-led Western containment policy toward Turkey was not extended to the Balkans region until recently. The U.S. has proactively and visibly engaged in preemptive moves toward Erdoğan's Turkey in the Balkan and Aegean regions since the [Biden administration](#) took office, expanding on containment policies toward Turkey enacted by the Obama administration.

Recently, the U.S. [announced](#) the construction of a military base in the Greek Aegean coastal town of Alexandroupolis, 40 kilometers from the Turkish border and the Bosphorus Strait. France, too, announced a security cooperation agreement with Greece against Turkish ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean region, in a disagreement over the extent of the [Turkish and Libyan Exclusive Economic Zones \(EEZ\)](#) at the expense of Greece's, and therefore the EU's, EEZ.

The U.S. also has aggressively entered political theaters in all the Western Balkan countries, with activities mostly at odds with those that consider Turkey and Erdoğan allies. It is impossible, therefore, not to look at any meaningful entry of Turkish foreign

policy into the Balkan area without the contextual backdrop of Turkish containment policy by the U.S./EU alliance, a policy that may continue at least until a more favorable regime comes to power after the 2028 elections in Turkey.

Turkey Lacks Meaningful Presence in the Balkans

Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman approach is seemingly centered on focusing, finding, and building alliances with conservative or Muslim elements in former Ottoman provinces that are now independent states in their own right. The Turkish strategy is to offer these states a level of protection and economic cooperation that would in turn give Turkey decisive influence. Only three such states qualify in the Balkans today: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania. Turkey has managed to make contacts with both conservative and leftist parties in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania. The largest Bosnian party — the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), whose founder is known for having Muslim Brotherhood ideological sympathies — has nurtured close [political ties](#) with the AK Party; they consider each other to be sister parties with common ideological roots. Erdoğan has many times personally visited or been hosted by the SDA's head in the Bosnian capital to publicly display these political ties.



Despite these close ties and other contacts, one cannot escape the conclusion that Turkey currently [lacks the strength](#) for a major political engagement in the Western Balkans. This lack of a meaningful presence can be best exemplified by events during the tumultuous period after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which prompted the U.S./EU alliance's heavy involvement in the internal politics of the Western Balkan states, especially Bosnia and Kosovo. Insofar as Muslim-majority states in the Western Balkans are concerned, a clear policy of containment was established toward preempting Turkish influence in the region.

The West's Preemptive Political Strike

U.S./EU policy in the Balkans became glaringly apparent in May 2023, when the SDA was pushed out of government via decrees imposed by the Office of the High Representative — a mechanism controlled by the U.S. and EU. The intention was clear: a push to [secure](#) EU member Croatia's political role to implement, at least temporarily, minority rule through its proxy co-national Croat minority in Bosnia. The decree imposed has been labeled by the majority-Muslim community as "[apartheid](#) minority rule" over a Muslim-majority country. Despite this de facto coup, Turkish officials have only quietly protested and have visibly left Bosnian politics outside demands set by Turkey in order to allow for further NATO enlargement.

What happened next in the nearby Republic of Kosovo confirmed the policy of preemptive containment of Turkey. Kosovo — in order to gain leverage over Serbia's encroachment of Kosovo's sovereignty in its northern, Serb-majority areas — recently purchased [Bayraktar drones](#) from Turkey, which has given its prime minister, Albin Kurti, more room to maneuver in his push to extend government [control](#) over the separatist Serb-majority areas in the north of the country, which is supported if not led by neighboring Serbia.

However, the newfound confidence and independent action of Kosovo's government has not sat well with U.S./EU officials, culminating in the U.S. ambassador to Kosovo publicly threatening Pristina's status to be relegated to that of Palestine at worst and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus at best, a glaring

reference to Kosovo's Muslim-majority country status and ties to Turkey.

The third Muslim-majority country in the Western Balkans is Albania, whose political leadership has proven its own loyalties to the U.S./EU led alliance in the Western Balkans so thoroughly that Albania's (non-Muslim) prime minister, Edi Rama, [broke ranks](#) for the first time ever with Kurti, joining U.S. and EU diplomats in denouncing Kurti's attempts to take control of the secessionist northern Kosovo region.

The Ball Is in Turkey's Court

The U.S. and EU are acting to prevent Turkish foreign policy influence in Muslim-majority states surrounded by the EU's member state borders. Brazen minority rule and apartheid principles established in Bosnia and threats of "Palestinization" to Kosovo show if not a determination to act decisively to prevent an adversarial Turkey from involving itself with states that are positioned deep within the European continent and the Western world in general. Simply put, Turkey has been beaten to the punch.

One possible limitation is geography. Both Bosnia and Kosovo lack coastal access. It should be noted that in Bosnia's case, a small strip of sovereign coastline does indeed exist; however, the state does not fully control the tiny strip, as evidenced in 2014, when a Turkish naval vessel was [denied access](#) by the Croat minority, which de facto controls the country's only strip of coastline. No further attempts to dock were made by the Turkish navy. Kosovo, on the other hand, could compensate for its lack of coastline via Albania, which at least for now is firmly in the U.S./EU camp.

It remains to be seen what Turkey's reaction will be, if any. One possible option is for Ankara to financially and politically support parties in Bosnia that compete for the support of the Muslim majority, including any other allies that have been disenfranchised by the latest U.S./EU policies in Bosnia. In Kosovo, Turkey can stand behind Kurti by securing more advanced weaponry to heavily leverage his position by giving Kosovo self-reliance for its territorial defense, a burden carried by U.S./EU states via the Kosovo Force mission. Kurti, in turn, would have a lot more room to [maneuver](#) if defense of the country did not depend on the U.S./



EU commitment. In Albania, Turkey could also throw resources behind the opposition Rama in order to bring Albania's and Kosovo's security policies closer together in the spirit of Albanian cooperation. In all cases, Turkey can use national and religious grievances to gain more influence.

Perhaps more strategically, Turkey can also foster alliances with non-Muslim-majority states such as North Macedonia and Montenegro, which fell victim to

the latest round of U.S./EU [policies](#) that seek a regional détente with adversarial Russia and find themselves without a backer. Turkey, in this regard, has options. Both North Macedonia and Montenegro are declared and potential political allies. However, Turkey needs to decide if it wants to enter the Balkan fray at all. The U.S./EU alliance has made sure to make it an uphill battle from the start. Now the ball is clearly in Turkey's court, and Erdoğan must decide on the play.



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