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Summary of PhD Thesis

Neo-Ottomanism in the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Turkey

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Reason for choosing the topic of the dissertation

The Republic of Turkey was established on October 29, 1923 as a modern state, which in many respects was to be the opposite of the Ottoman Empire. This pertained both to the domestic policy of the country – where the socio-political life was organized in accordance with the new political forms and ideology (Kemalism) – as well as to its foreign policy which was to be deprived of its former imperial character. In accordance with the tenets of Turkey’s “Founding Father” Kemal Atatürk, outlined primarily in the so-called six arrows of Kemalism, the Republic of Turkey was supposed to be a state with limited international aspirations – revolving mainly around ensuring security – and focused on socio-economic development to join the ranks of the “most civilized countries of the world”. After Atatürk's death (1938), İsmet İnönü sought to continue his legacy in foreign policy. He claimed that Turkey’s “national policy completely rejects the mentality of seeking adventures abroad” which was a clear declaration of his attachment to the tenets of the “Father of the Turks”.

However, Atatürk's project seeking to modernize his country was not fully successful. Several years after his death, new political forces came to power in Turkey. Not only did they have a different idea on the state’s internal affairs – which was evident, among others, from the weakening attachment to the secular character of the country or the different perception of the Ottoman Empire’s legacy – but also on the foreign policy. These views were one of the reasons why the phenomenon of “Neo-Ottomanism (Tur. Yeni Osmanlıcılık) in Turkish foreign policy was increasingly discussed. For the Greeks, who probably were the first to use this term after the Turkish intervention on Cyprus in 1974, it signified the revival of expansionist tendencies in Turkish foreign policy.

However, “Neo-Ottomanism” became particularly popular only a dozen years ago. It became the term frequently used to describe the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). This is also a consequence of the fact that Turkish foreign policy itself – due to the dynamic transformations that take place both within its framework and in the whole country – has become one of the most fascinating challenges for analysts and researchers alike, which is clear from the coverage that topics related to Turkey get in international press or magazines covering international relations.

In this context, it should firstly be noted that, as mentioned above, the very concept of Neo-Ottomanism is much older than the AKP rule. In Turkish literature, it is usually associated
with Turgut Özal (prime minister in 1983-1989, president in 1989-1993) who broke with the tradition of a relatively passive – or rather withholding – foreign policy pursued by republican governments thus far. Secondly, the observers of the Turkish political scene often use this term in the pejorative sense, pointing to Turkey’s growing distance from the West and stressing the allegedly imperial nature of Turkish foreign policy, which aims to rebuild Turkey’s influence in the areas once tied to the Ottoman Empire. These two facts are indicative of the chaos surrounding the endeavors to define “Neo-Ottomanism” correctly and that the concept itself is used by researchers, analysts and journalists as a label to describe changes in Turkish foreign policy. At the same time, there is little indication that the awareness of changes is accompanied by the ability to comprehensively identify their sources and essence or an attempt to assess their impact on the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey and its effectiveness.

This alone lends an interesting perspective to the questions of Neo-Ottomanism and its impact on Turkish foreign policy in terms of contemporary international relations. A deeper look at the problem only intensifies one’s curiosity. First of all, it seems that the transformation of Turkish foreign policy, which is often described as a consequence of Neo-Ottomanism, is the result of both the makeover of Turkey and the shift in the international order. Second of all, there are many indications that these changes were also triggered by the rise of Turkey’s power experienced especially since AKP took over. In this context, a thorough examination of Neo-Ottomanism and its impact on Turkey's foreign policy serve a number of purposes. In terms of Turkish foreign policy, it may give an answer to the question whether the policy under AKP is indeed so much different from the traditional foreign policy of Republican times, show whether the country really seeks to rebuild its influence on lands formerly tied to the Ottoman Empire, help to identify the instruments of Turkey’s international activity, determine their character, and assess whether Neo-Ottomanism makes Turkish foreign policy more efficient. However, an attempt at defining Neo-Ottomanism may also shed some light on the international relations studies. Above all, such examination may also contribute to the analysis of the behavior of post-imperial states which regained power. It may also produce more substantial conclusions regarding much-debated changes in the international order.

The choice of the dissertation’s subject was also dictated by the desire to fill the gap in research on Turkish foreign policy – so far there has been no monographic study that would provide a comprehensive definition of Neo-Ottomanism, identify its sources or impact on Turkish foreign policy. By choosing the topic of this dissertation the author also indulged his
longstanding interest in the foreign and domestic policy of Turkey. In 2011, he defended his BA thesis entitled “The Path of Turkey to the European Union in 1987-2010”, and two years later MA thesis entitled “International Identity and Foreign Policy of the Republic of Turkey in a Constructivist Approach” – both at the Institute of International Relations, University of Warsaw. Thanks to the extension of the MA thesis, a book titled “Turkey’s European Dream. Western Identity and its Influence on the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Turkey” was published (by the Faculty of Journalism and Political Sciences of the University of Warsaw). In addition, the author earned a BA at the Oriental Faculty of the University of Warsaw where in 2015 he defended his BA thesis entitled “Tanzimat as a Time of Exceptional Changes”. For the last several years, the author has been dealing with the issue of Turkish foreign and domestic policy as a professional analyst – in 2014-2016 at the Center for International Initiatives and since 2016 at the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

**Problem, hypothesis and research questions of the dissertation**

The key task of the author is to solve the main research problem: what are the origins of the Neo-Ottomanism, what is its influence on Turkish foreign policy, how is the influence manifested and how does it impact the effectiveness of foreign policy? According to the hypothesis of the dissertation, the Neo-Ottoman tradition served as an ideological inspiration for politicians of the Justice and Development Party to make profound changes in Turkey’s foreign policy which were prompted by the desire to rebuild the country’s superpower status in the changing conditions of the rise in power of the state and the shift in the international order.

In order to answer the questions presented as part of the main research problem as well as to verify the hypothesis, specific research questions were posed: a) what were the factors that caused changes in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey?; b) what led to the formation of Neo-Ottomanism? What changes in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey were connected with Neo-Ottomanism?; c) how did Neo-Ottomanism influence the conceptualization of the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey?; d) whether and how Neo-Ottomanism translates into the implementation of the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey?; e) what were the consequences of Neo-Ottomanism in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey? Does it serve to rebuild the state’s superpower position? In this thesis, the order of the chapters corresponds to the order of the above research questions.
Research methods and theoretical paradigms

One of the elements of the historical method used in political science is the study of the origins of political phenomena. Since the key task of the author of the dissertation is to solve the main research problem, including defining the origins of Neo-Ottomanism, its influence on Turkish foreign policy and its effects, he decided to use this method (in which the genetic method for determining facts is dominant). This is to enable: a) to capture the origins and consequences of changes in Turkish foreign policy; b) to indicate significant trends and regularities; c) to examine the sources and essence of Neo-Ottomanism; d) to investigate the effects of Neo-Ottomanism on the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey. The author sought to give the dissertation a structure reflecting the method he used. Thus, the first two chapters discuss the origins of Neo-Ottomanism, in chapters III and IV the author describes the “essence” of Neo-Ottomanism (the employment of the “Neo-Ottomanism” in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey) and in the chapter V he outlines the effects of “Neo-Ottomanism”.

The elements of the comparative method, used as a complementary tool, allow to examine the differences between the Republican and Neo-Ottoman tradition by confronting the reactions of Turkish decision-makers over the decades of the Republic of Turkey in relation to a similar category of problems (e.g. perception of opportunities and threats, tendency to use force in defense of interests, reception of changes in the international order). Such approach made it possible to highlight the most significant changes in Turkish foreign policy. The comparative method is complemented by case studies that verify whether the Republican and Neo-Ottoman tradition influenced the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey.

The dissertation was written under the influence of Neoclassical Realism, which is a part of the school of Realism in international relations. Neoclassical Realism – in contrast to Neo-Realism (Structural Realism) which assumed the structure of the international system as the basis for explanation in international relations – admittedly, gives a leading role in explaining international relations to the international system, but at the same time it recognizes that the reactions of states to changes in the international system are conditioned by a series of variables that have their source in domestic factors. It seems, therefore, that this is the most adequate theoretical approach to the analysis of the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey. This stems, for example, from the basic conditions of the country. On the one hand – as a so-called middle power – Turkey is particularly vulnerable to fluctuations within the international system. On the other hand, internal factors, such as the reception of these fluctuations by
Turkish decision-makers, play an important role in its case. Neoclassical Realism helps in reconciling these elements in analysis.

**The structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. The aim of the first one – serving at the same time as a synthetic introduction to the subsequent parts of the dissertation – is to answer the question: what factors changed Turkish foreign policy. Given that it can be instinctively observed that Neo-Ottomanism – as a “phenomenon” that appeared in the Republic of Turkey and brought changes to its policy, but which is somehow reminiscent of the Ottoman Empire – is associated inevitably with continuity and change, also the content of the chapter is inscribed in the dialectics of continuity and changes. It describes the most important change in Turkish policy which was of great importance for foreign policy – the transition from the Empire to the Republic – and proves that the break with the Ottoman past was not as unambiguous as the first Turkish decision-makers wished. It also lists the conditions which politicians perceived over decades as reasons for adjustments in foreign policy (changes in international order and increase in power) and factors treated by them as particularly significant at the time of transformation (multidimensional identity, transcontinentalism). It also discusses the most important, according to the author of the dissertation, interpretations of Neo-Ottomanism in terms of foreign policy where Neo-Ottomanism is: a) the expression of the resurgence of expansionist tendencies; b) a new social contract and new foreign policy; c) the paradigm of Turkish strategic culture; d) the tradition of thinking about foreign policy; e) the conception of foreign policy under the rule of the Justice and Development Party.

The second chapter answers the following questions: what led to the formation of Neo-Ottomanism and what changes were caused as a result in Turkish foreign policy. The evolution of the way of thinking of Turkish decision-makers about foreign policy was presented, outlining two traditions; Republican and Neo-Ottoman, indicating their origins and the consequences they brought for Turkish foreign policy. The chapter also answers the question: what led to the eventual domination of the Neo-Ottoman tradition over the way of thinking of Turkish decision-makers about international relations and their foreign policy conceptions.

The third chapter answers the question: what was the influence of Neo-Ottomanism on the conceptualization of the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey. The chapter presents the ideas of Ahmet Davutoğlu – the “architect” of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP who in
2002-2009 was the adviser to the foreign prime minister, in 2009-2014 the minister of foreign affairs and in the years 2014-2016 the prime minister – proving that they are a part of the Neo-Ottoman tradition. The chapter also describes how the Neo-Ottoman tradition prompted decision-makers to set more ambitious goals in terms of Turkish foreign policy. In the chapter, the author argues that Neo-Ottomanism fully deserves to be regarded as a conception of Turkey’s foreign policy under the AKP rule.

The purpose of the fourth chapter is to answer the question: whether and how Neo-Ottomanism translated into the implementation of the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey. To this end, Turkey's approach towards the United States, the European Union, the Balkans, the Middle East, Russia, Iran, Israel, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Africa was analyzed. The chapter also discusses the increased activity of Turkey in international organizations. These vectors, although for various reasons, were key for Turkey’s foreign policy. The United States and the European Union (formerly the EEC) have served as special reference point since the beginning of the Republic of Turkey. The Balkans and the Middle East used to be under the influence of the Ottoman Empire, so Turkey could direct its renewed ambitions towards these areas. Russia has been the most powerful strategic rival who traditionally has influenced the formulation of Turkish foreign and security policy in a key way, while Iran is a rival on a regional scale. Israel, in turn, is a state – not unlike Turkey – with a special status in the Middle East, and therefore Turkish policy towards it has often been treated as a “touchstone” of Turkey's broader orientation in foreign policy. Central Asia, the Caucasus and Africa were defined by the Turks as potential “new” spheres of influence in the face of the end of the Cold War. These directions were not discussed individually, but were included in the main “motives” associated with the implementation of Neo-Ottomanism: balance in foreign policy and assertiveness towards the West; new superpower ambitions; and global aspirations in Turkish foreign policy. The author presented separately the most important issues in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey in the aftermath of the unsuccessful coup of July 2016. His purpose was to test the validity of the popular opinion that after this event – which took place around the same time as Ahmet Davutoğlu lost his office – Turkish foreign policy underwent major changes.

The fifth chapter answers questions about the consequences of Neo-Ottomanism on Turkish foreign policy and whether it served to rebuild the state's superpower status. An attempt was made to show that Neo-Ottomanism contributed to: the “revolution” in the selection of
instruments of the foreign policy; the wider range of international influence of the state; the growth of its international position; the awakening of ambitions and aspirations in foreign policy as well as disappointment and frustration; the renaissance of imperial thinking; growing strength of the AKP and Tayyip Erdoğan in domestic politics; “loneliness in virtue” and Republican reminiscences; and a drift in foreign policy. The chapter ends with an attempt to predict the direction of Turkish foreign policy, especially whether the Neo-Ottoman tradition will continue to shape the country’s foreign policy.

Sources

The work was based on both primary sources – documents, newsletters, statements and publications of Turkish politicians, reports and interviews, statistical data – as well as secondary sources, which mainly included the reports of academic researchers or non-governmental and governmental organizations. The academic works were supplemented by analytical publications of Polish, Turkish and foreign non-governmental and governmental centers. In addition, the current nature of the topic prompted the author to follow the Turkish press and specialist portals on a daily basis.

Although so far there has been no monograph that would thoroughly investigate Neo-Ottomanism and its influence on Turkish foreign policy, there is a rich body of literature on Turkish domestic and foreign policy. The author drawn heavily on the output of both Polish and foreign researchers. As far as the representatives of Polish academia are concerned, the dissertation’s author owes much to Polish historians and their work, especially Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, Tomasz Wituch and Jan Reychman, to say nothing of Polish political scientists: Przemysław Osiewicz, Adam Szymański and Jakub Wódka. In addition, at the stage of formulating the subject, Rafał Ożarowski’s book, which describes the importance of the ideological factor in the Middle East, was helpful. The texts of Jerzy Zdanowski helped to enrich the analysis with the history of the Middle East.

As far as foreign researchers of Turkish internal and foreign policy are concerned, the author is particularly indebted to historians: Bernard Lewis, Erik Zürcher and Carter Findley; as well as political scientists some of whom are of Turkish origin, and therefore have excellent knowledge of local conditions: William Hale, Aaron Stein, Kemal Kirisci, Yücel Bozdaghoğlu and Malik Mufti. The dissertation’s author was particularly influenced by the latter researcher who wrote a monograph which is the most convincing explanation of Neo-Ottomanism and its
influence on Turkey’s foreign policy to date. A dissertation on Neo-Ottomanism could not be written without the analysis of the texts of “architect” of foreign policy under the AKP government, namely Ahmet Davutoğlu.

The author would not be able to argue some of his theses presented here without referring to literature on international relations. Where necessary, the author reached for the oeuvre of the authors of the concepts he referred to – for example, references to the soft power category were presented in the context of the works of Joseph Nye, and the arguments about the position of the so-called middle-powers in international relations were referring to the philosophy of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. Moreover, the publications of researchers from the Warsaw school of international relations were especially helpful, notably works by: Stanisław Bielen’s, Wiesław Dobrzycki’s, Roman Kuźniar’s, Anna Wojciuk’s and Ryszard Zięba’s. The latest book by Alexander Wendt, which encourages the reader to consider the effects of the quantum revolution on social sciences, also had a great impact on the author of the dissertation.

**Research findings**

Neo-Ottomanism should be regarded as a tradition of foreign policy thinking that emerged in Turkey due to the synergy of several factors: a) the changes in the twentieth-century international order and the way they were perceived by Turkish decision-makers, b) the growing power of Turkey and the way Turkish decision-makers perceived this phenomenon, c) the appearance of a new class of decision makers who interpreted Ottoman legacy differently and therefore formulated divergent foreign policy conceptions. The following convictions of Turkish decision-makers step from the Neo-Ottoman tradition: a) the acceptance of Turkey's heterogeneous character, the co-existence of many identities within the country and the possibility of using the diversity as an asset in foreign policy, b) the pursuit of balance in foreign policy between the East and the West and the attempts to use relations with countries from different circles to maximize the effects in foreign policy, c) the desire to become a regional power and a global one in the longer term, d) international activism seeking the status of power, e) interventionism in the most significant issues in terms of foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, f) wider perception of security reaching beyond the territorial integrity of the state, g) the approach to transformations in the international order where they are treated as an opportunity, not as a threat.
The hypothesis put forward by the author proved to be valid following the consideration of several key factors.

First of all, Turkish foreign policy under the AKP rule in terms of both concept and implementation was not created in a vacuum. It was a part of the long-running transformation, visible most clearly during the rule of Turgut Özal or İsmail Cem’s term in office as the chief of Turkish diplomacy, which ultimately led to the Neo-Ottoman tradition. The point made in this paragraph is supported by an in-depth analysis of the writings of Davutoğlu which show that the politician interpreted international reality in accordance with the assumptions of the Neo-Ottoman tradition.

Second of all, Turkish policy makers followed Davutoğlu's ideas in foreign policy making. They tried to employ multidimensional foreign policy at the same time striving to make Turkey's relations with various partners complementary in nature and were highly active in their external activities by undertaking numerous diplomatic initiatives and spreading the state’s international influence. They also perceived Turkey’s security in wider terms, treating it as a category going beyond the country’s borders. Thus, the policy makers of Turkey introduced profound changes in foreign policy – Turkey was no longer perceived in international relations merely as a faithful ally of the West, but as an increasingly independent actor, in some cases even an “model” for the Muslim countries of the Middle East. Turkey was also much more open to the outside world than a few decades ago and that alone was a significant change.

Third of all, Turkish decision-makers did not hide their “ultimate goal” in foreign policy. Even in his earliest articles, Davutoğlu claimed that Turkey should have become a “central state” or a “wise state”, win the status of a regional power and a global one in the future, engaged in the shaping of a new international order. These postulates were also reflected in the AKP election manifestos while the politicians of the party – with Tayyip Erdoğan ahead of the trend – consistently acted as if they believed that these aspirations could be satisfied. This belief is best exemplified by their approach towards the European Union – the AKP politicians tried to convince their partners that Turkey was the “key” to the EU’s status as a global power – and by their later actions during the Arab Spring. During the regional turmoil, they repeatedly suggested that Turkey could have been a “provider of order” and a state capable of changing the architecture of regional security. In a global sense, Turkey’s ambition was expressed, for example, in the slogan “the world is bigger than the five” connected with the invariable claims
of Turkey to play the role of the representative, the spokesman and in some cases even the defender of countries whose voice in international relations is least audible.

Fourth of all, the analysis of Davutoğlu's writings proved that the Turks attached great importance to the transformation in the international order which they perceived as an opportunity to improve Turkey’s international status. This trend was also evident in foreign policy, for example, in the approach towards the EU. Turkish policy makers, especially after the 2008 economic crisis which weakened the EU’s international position, began to call for equal treatment more and more clearly. Undoubtedly, their stance was also influenced by the rise in power of Turkey – while the improvement of its economic position allowed for increasingly ambitious foreign policy, thereby contributing also to the rapid development of foreign policy tools, as a result of the rise of Turkish military power (similarly to the 1990s) the policy makers were more prone to project power. However, when it comes to the power of the state, one should take note of a certain nuance. It seems that the way in which Turkish policy makers interpreted the potential of the state was at least as important as the growth of the power itself. Had they acted within the frame of the Republican tradition – fearing, for example, the effects of their external engagement – perhaps even the growth of the state’s potential would not have sufficed to convince them to make such far-reaching reevaluation of foreign policy.

This conclusion seems valid in light of the analysis of Turkish foreign policy of the last few years. While it would be difficult to defend the thesis that Neo-Ottoman tradition no longer exerts influence on Turkish decision-makers – this assumption is contradicted, for example, by the new “offensive” doctrine of security – it is impossible not to notice that they increasingly often act as if they were still under the influence of the Republican tradition. This duality is best observed in the Kurdish policy, but the echoes of the Republican tradition reverberate as well in their preference to maintain equal distance to the superpowers. It seems this strategy is primarily motivated with the failures that Turkish policy-makers have experienced in foreign policy in recent years. Of particular importance here is the Syrian civil war which, at least for now, put an end to their dreams about restructuring the region in line with Turkish vision.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that in the near future Turkish decision makers will return to fully complying with the Republic tradition only, not least because of the newest foreign policy conception still persistently referring to the vision of a “leader state”, despite obvious difficulties in bringing this vision to life, and actions taken by Turkey such as the expansion of military bases beyond its borders or the strengthening of Turkey’s presence on the territory of
northern Syria or northern Iraq. The ambitions of Turkish politicians will probably still be fueled by the ongoing process of the transformation in the international order which will prompt them to seek a new place for Turkey in global affairs. Yet, paradoxically, the very same process will most probably curb the ambitions of Turkish decision-makers. Under such circumstances, it seems highly likely that Turkey will carry out equally paradoxical, ambiguous foreign policy, and that Turkish policy makers will continue to behave as if they were simultaneously under the influence of both Republican and Neo-Ottoman tradition. On the one hand, they will continue to pursue the desire to make Turkey a regional power, still believing that becoming a global superpower in the future is possible, but on the other, they will be ready to act more cautiously whenever they decide that short-term conditions so require.