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Turkey's endless search for power

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The idea of power has been the most hotly debated concept in the literature of international relations. In its societal context, it means the ability to influence or change the behavior of others in a desired direction. In its purest realist form it indicates the sum of military, economic, technological, diplomatic and other capabilities at the disposal of a state. Some also use it to mean influence, capability, control or authority. Also, one needs to look at power in terms of whether it is real or simply potential and whether a state that possesses it is, in fact, willing to use it.

Although the nature of power has changed over time and has sometimes been shunned even as an analytical tool, it has kept its attraction in international politics as the favored instrument of policy making. American political scientist John Nye developed the concept of “soft power” to distinguish one’s ability to coerce others by military means (hard power) from persuading them by cultural attraction, political values and quality foreign policy (soft power). Later, his notion of “smart power,” the ability to combine hard and soft power into effective strategies, became popular with the use of the phrase by the Clinton and more recently the Obama administrations.

It also caught the imagination of Turkish decision makers and has been increasingly employed in foreign policy since 2007, referring to the general activism of Turkey in the international arena, mainly in the Middle East. Though nobody doubted Turkey’s potential power in its vicinity, not much thought was directed towards whether it actually had the ability to influence. It’s geopolitical, cultural, historical and welfare-related qualities trumpeted to create an area where Turkey’s ability to order is recognized by others.

With this vision, Turkey followed a (pro)active foreign policy employing mostly soft power tools between up until 2010. However, the Arab Spring and developments leading to it have changed everything. The changed status quo in its vicinity had a serious impact on Turkish foreign policy. As Turkey realized a transformation is indispensable in the region and its former interlocutors were not willing to change, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu started to talk about an “order builder” role for Turkey in the Middle East, echoing the earlier (hard) power-seeking Turkey, rather than more recent cooperation-seeking Turkey. While he now refers to moral/humanitarian dimensions of power, it still includes using coercive force “if necessary” to achieve the desired transformation. The deployment of further Turkish and NATO military force with Patriot Missiles on the Syrian border only reinforces this reading.

Davutoğlu still uses the concept of “smart power” while evaluating the situation: “Turkey is neither a hard power nor a soft power; it is a smart power. We would neither act impulsively nor would we let such a threat go.” Obviously this sounds more like a warning, a response to a perceived threat than a smart power strategy. When smart power is employed, the parties that are exposed to other’s usage of smart power tools can rarely realize that they are facing such instruments and comply with the wishes of their opponents more or less willingly. This is clearly not the case for Turkey in Syria.

President Abdullah Gül, in a recent interview, used the term “virtuous power,” meaning that it is neither ambitious nor expansionist. According to Gül, this is “a power that prioritizes the safeguarding of human rights and interests of all human beings in a manner that also entails the provision of aid to those in need without expecting anything in return.” In a world that international politics still looks very much like “a struggle for power,” being a virtuous power would be highly difficult and distant goal to achieve.