

Commentary

Institute of Diplomacy and Global Affairs

Turkey's "zero-problem" foreign policy is working...

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2012 is the year some might remember as the 100th anniversary of the Balkan Wars. No, not the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s, but the real Balkan Wars which did away with much of what had been known as "Turkey-in-Europe". Walk around any big town in Bulgaria and you might bump into streets named "Chataldja" –after Istanbul's suburb of **Çatalca** where Bulgarian troops arrived in November 1912.

A century later, Turkey's mercurial foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is calling for joint commemoration of the armed conflict together with erstwhile adversaries of the Balkan League (Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and, not to forget, valiant Montenegro which was then an independent state). Serbia's Vuk Jeremić is fully onboard (but let's hope he keeps his job after the forthcoming elections). There will be a flurry of events in the coming months – do expect lots of wise words on the region's troubled past and bright future.

War is a distant memory in Turkey's Balkan flank but, sadly, a daily reality in the provinces bordering Syria with thousands of refugees escaping Bashar's violent crackdown. If the **zero-problems** with neighbours policy was conceived mainly with the Middle East in mind, it is fully working solely in the Balkans. Over the last few days, Ankara hosted the Montenegrin PM **Igor Lukšić** and then, yesterday, a delegation of nine Bulgarian ministers accompanying the head of cabinet, **Boyko Borisov**. Holding a joint session the two cabinets inaugurated a "High-Level Cooperation Council".

Turkey has already tried this format with other neighbours – notably **Greece**, **Russia**, **Iraq** and, well, **Syria**. But unlike those two, Turkish-Bulgarian relations have been friendly since the early 1990s. Despite occasional frictions on issues such as delimiting sections of the boundary, managing cross-border waterways or the pension rights of the 400,000 dual citizens residing in Turkey, there are few bilateral questions that could derail the relationship. Back in January, Bulgarian Parliament finally **condemned** the assimilation campaign carried out by the communist authorities against the country's Turkish minority in 1984-89. Booming Turkey was Bulgaria's third most important export market in 2011 after Germany and Romania, and holds the promise for alternative gas supply from the Caspian to help Sofia deal with its overwhelming dependence on

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Russia. Hence the huge emphasis on the gas interconnector at yesterday's joint session.

For Turkey warming relations with Balkan neighbours (including Serbia which embarked on a rapprochement in 2010) are symbolically important. It demonstrates that Turkey's neighbourhood policy is alive and well, **setbacks** in Syria, Iran and even **Iraq** notwithstanding. Neighbourly markets matter as well. The dark side of Turkey's strong performance in 2010 and 2011 is the **soaring current account deficit**. It is now at 10% of GDP or USD 77.6bn. Improved export performance is **key for a "soft landing"** in 2012 as growth is slowing down (**IMF** says the government target of 4% is not realistic and projects half that figure). Stagnant Balkan economies and even crisis-stricken Greece are prospective targets. Even as it contracted by 7% last year, Greece imported 7% more goods from Turkey. Not to forget: zero-problems started for real with the **Greek-Turkish rapprochement of 1999** – long time before Davutoğlu changed his trade from academia to diplomacy