



Reports

What is driving Turkish oreign policy today?

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan returning the Turkish foreign policy to its cautious, pragmatic, risk-averse and less-ideological roots. [Reuters]

Abstract

Three radically different judgments have been made about the nature of Turkish foreign policy in recent years. It was described ideologically-driven, expansionist, and adventurous by some at certain period, and cautious, pragmatic and risk-averse by others. In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt and after Turkey and Russia patched up their relations, Turkey's alleged shift of axis—this time away from the West towards a putative alliance with Russia, dominated the discourse on Turkish foreign policy. All these depictions of Turkish foreign policy can at best be described as partially accurate, and at worst completely faulty. One of the common shortcomings of all these conceptualizations and characterizations of Turkish foreign policy is that it puts excessive emphasis on a single actor, whether Erdogan or Davutoğlu. Yet, the main driver of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in recent years, has neither been the worldview of one particular per-sonality nor the party's overall Islamist identity. Instead, the imperatives of regional geopolitics, coupled with Turkey's domestic political concerns and security challenges, have shaped the main contours of Turkish foreign policy.

Introduction

In less than one year, three radically different judgments have been made about the nature of Turkish foreign policy. (1) During Ahmet Davutoğlu's premiership, Turkish foreign policy was depicted as ideologically-driven, expansionist, and adventurous, which generated tension between Turkey and regional and international powers. When the new

prime minister, Binali Yildirim, took over, The AK Party and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan struck a more conciliatory tone. Erdogan famously declared (2) that Turkey needed to make more friends and decrease the number of foes. This was portrayed as Turkish foreign policy returning to its cautious, pragmatic, risk-averse and less-ideological roots, and Turkey publicly patching up its relations with Israel and Russia at this time gave credence to this reading.

Yet this narrative too soon reached its limits. Particularly after the failed coup attempt on July 15, Turkey's criticism of western apathy towards the coup, coupled with improving relations with Russia have led to the reemergence of an ever-present debate on Turkey's alleged shift of axis—this time away from the West towards a putative alliance with Russia. On top of this, Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation in northern Syria—which is aimed at clearing ISIS from border regions and preventing the PKK-affiliated Kurdish People's Protection Units' (YPG) linking the territory under its control—and its insistence (3) on joining any operation to liberate Mosul have shown that Turkey is neither downsizing its foreign policy ambitions nor striking a conciliatory tone in the region, when it feels its national security interests is at risk. This latest trend has been further strengthened by President Erdogan's declaration (4) of a new pre-emptive security doctrine for both domestic and foreign threats. Speaking to public, Erdogan said that Turkey will no longer wait for security threats to reach Turkey's borders. Instead, the country will tackle and pacify these security threats wherever they emerge.

All the above depictions of Turkish foreign policy can at best be described as partially accurate, and at worst completely faulty. One of the common shortcomings of all these conceptualizations and characterizations of Turkish foreign policy is that it puts excessive emphasis on a single actor, whether Erdogan or Davutoğlu.

Yet, the main driver of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in recent years, has neither been the worldview of one particular personality nor the party's overall Islamist identity. Instead, the imperatives of regional geopolitics, coupled with Turkey's domestic political concerns and security challenges, have shaped the main contours of Turkish foreign policy. And currently, the overarching objective is to lessen the impact of the negative security externalities of regional crises on Turkey.

The derailing of the Arab uprisings: from political demands to identity wars

At the outset of the Arab uprisings, the main struggle focused on political demands. Though troublesome, Turkey has the longest history of a functioning parliamentary democracy in the region, and hence was able to relate to the Arab people's democratic and political demands and aspirations. The fact that some of the leading groups within these protests were Islamically-oriented was a further motivation for Turkey's pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AK Party) to support these groups and the process of change, believing that common identities and political demands would create foundations for common action once the regional dust settled.

Back then, Turkey believed that change was inevitable and firmly threw its weight behind the uprisings. As Turkey saw the battle in binary terms, it adopted a comprehensive language and region-wide vision, foreseeing a new regional order in which it would play a lead role.

Four main factors have led Turkey to revisit these foreign policy assumptions: First, the Syrian uprising becoming militarized and turning into a fully-fledged civil war in 2012 and early 2013. Second, the coup in Egypt that occurred in July 2013. Both these events showed that the waves of change shaking the Arab world could be reversed. Third, the rise of ISIS from 2013-2014 onwards in Syria and Iraq, which led the international community to re-secure the region rather than support and nurture newly emerging democratic transitions. In addition, ISIS was successfully used by countries of the region to further polarize the Arab uprisings along sectarian lines and delegitimize even mainstream Islamist movements and their demands. ISIS activities and attacks led to an ill-considered debate in the west pitting secularism/social liberalism against democracy, and this in return decreased Western support for the Arab uprisings in general and Syrian opposition groups in particular. Finally, ISIS has also been one of the most important factors in Kurdish movements both in Syria and Iraq gaining international sympathy, legitimacy and military aid, and expanding the territory under their control. The most iconic case in point was the ISIS siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane (5) in September 2014 and its later defeat by the YPG, which was aided by the US and Iraqi Kurdish peshmergas at the beginning of 2015. The YPG's eventual victory over ISIS in Kobane gave them international prominence and legitimacy as a capable fighting force against ISIS. Moreover, the Kurds' fight against ISIS both in Iraq and Syria has animated (6) Kurdish nationalist sentiments in the region and led to the emergence of a regional Kurdish public sphere, for which ISIS has served as the constitutive other.

Capitalizing on this sentiment and newly-found international sympathy and legitimacy, coupled with the YPG's territorial gains in Northern Syria and the PKK's in Shingal region in Northern Iraq, the PKK has adopted a more maximalist bargaining position vis a vis Turkey.

Conflictual form of the Kurdish issue

With the break-down of the once-hopeful Kurdish peace process and the PKK launching a Syria-inspired urban warfare strategy in Turkey's Kurdish-majority east and south east regions since July 2015, Turkey has prioritized national security over political initiatives and has begun to see its regional policy through the prism of national security and domestic security challenges.

Turkey's national security was now being threatened by the PKK as well as the ISIS. The crumbling of the Kurdish peace process in mid 2015 coincided with when Turkey began experiencing a surge in ISIS attacks. It is clear that these attacks were first motivated by ISIS battles with the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. With the Suruc (7), Diyarbakir(8) , and Ankara Train Station (9) attacks, ISIS targeted Kurdish and left-wing groups sympathising with the YPG in Syria, hence bringing the conflict into Turkey and disturbing its ethno-sectarian faultlines.

In its other attacks inside Turkey, such as the Sultanahmet (10), Istiklal Street (11), and Ataturk Airport (12) incidents, the ISIS has mostly targeted tourists and other non-Turkish elements. In these attacks, ISIS has appeared to target Turkey's tourism industry, economy and international image, apparently motivated by Turkey joining the international anti-ISIS coalition, providing bases for its coalition partners, and its overall support for the Syrian opposition.

Looking at these two categories of attacks, it appears that ISIS has transformed its strategy (13) from sporadically to systematically attacking Turkey. These attacks, combined with Turkey's fight against the PKK, have been a major radicalizing factor in Turkey and have aggravated Turkey's national security challenges. These rising domestic security challenges in return had major ramifications for Turkey's regional policy.

The Decoupling of Turkey and the US priorities in the region

At the moment when Turkey's sense of security threat emanating from PKK-YPG activities was at its highest, the US and its western allies appeared to gloss over

Turkey's concerns in engaging and supporting the PKK's sister organisation YPG in Syria in its fight against ISIS. This came on the top of the changing nature of the Arab uprisings, which had already driven a wedge between Turkey and many of its western allies. With the rise of ISIS, the international effort was refocused on fighting this new threat instead of supporting opposition groups for regime change, as Turkey advocated. These two points of contention, particularly support for the YPG/umbrella organization SDF, have led to constant friction between Ankara and Washington.

Despite Turkey's uneasiness, the United States has maintained its alliance with the SDF and used it as the primary ground force in the liberation of Manbij, bringing the YPG one step closer to achieving its ultimate goal of capturing the remaining gap between its territory in Kobane and Afrin. This westward YPG expansion in northern Syria led Turkey to intervene to prevent this happening. All this has contributed to already tense relations and to decreasing the level of trust between the two countries.

Therefore, the unfulfilled expectations of friendly regimes emerging as a result of the Arab uprisings, coupled with diminishing trust between Turkey and its traditional western allies and growing domestic security challenges have paved the way for Turkey to search for issue-based, ad-hoc, and compartmentalized instances of cooperation rather than well-crafted alliances.

At this stage, Turkey has ceased to see the regional conflict through a binary lens. Instead, it now sees raging identity wars and its own domestic political/security challenges, effectively narrowing Turkish regional policy to its policies in northern Syria and northern Iraq. And in both contexts, the primary issue Turkey is grappling with is the regional Kurdish issue and PKK militancy, and the country with which it is primarily contending for influence is Iran.

Balancing Iran

The turning of Arab uprisings into zero-sum identity wars, most ominously in Syria, have pitted Turkey and Iran against each other. Turkey was better equipped to deal with the Arab Spring phenomena when it was mostly about socio-political and socio-economic demands, but Iran was better prepared to deal with the morphing of these Arab uprisings into ethnic-sectarian/ideological wars, given its decades old investment into proxy identity groups and Shia militias. Unlike Turkey Iran has well-motivated and ideologically-oriented strong Shia militias or sub-state entities as committed allies from Iraq to Yemen and from Syria to Lebanon. This gives its regional policy powerful legs.

To counterbalance Iran's growing influence, Turkey has sought to cultivate local and regional allies. Within the Syrian context, Turkey aimed to achieve its goals by steadfastly supporting anti-Assad, and hence anti-Iranian, forces, but with limited success. In Iraq, Turkey has tried to limit Iran's considerable influence over the country through its alliances with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Sunni Arabs. Turkey's rationale in seeking a role in the Mosul operation was both to curtail Iran and its ally the central government's domination of Iraqi politics by preventing any demographic engineering in and around Mosul, and to forestall the PKK benefiting from a possibly chaotic operation, given its presence in Shingal, which lies west of Mosul. At the regional level, Iran's expansionist foreign policy was the main motivation for Saudi Arabia and Turkey to set aside their differences and engage in ad-hoc cooperative relations in resistance to Iran's expanding influence across the region.

Mending ties

The cumulative effect of all the aforementioned factors has been a form of regional and international isolation for Turkey over the last few years. Beside other material and energy factors, Turkey's policy of mending ties with old and new foes, Israel and Russia, meant breaking this cycle of isolation and to some extent freeing Turkey's hand in Syria, and on the larger international scene.

Turkey now appears to be more self-centric, engaging in issue-based, ad-hoc alliances. Institutionally, there hasn't been any meaningful change from its NATO, and by extension, western orientation, but there have been more questions and soul-searching about Turkey's foreign-security policy orientation. Turkey no longer has the clarity of vision regarding its regional policy that it had at the heyday of the Arab uprisings. Turkey's expectation that the old regional order would crumble and be replaced with a new one remains unmet. The old order may have been shaken to its foundation, but the new one is yet to emerge. What the region is experiencing at present can be depicted as an interregnum, generating all sorts of negative externalities, challenges and threats for the countries of the region.

Therefore, increasing geopolitical threats coupled with rivalry with Iran and a turbulent domestic political scene in the absence of a status quo security architecture in the region has put Turkey's foreign policy on a reactive footing. This trend is set to continue. In this

fluid, crisis-ridden regional context, managing the negative security externalities of regional transformation has out of necessity taken priority over all else.

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