

CLOSED SESSION

Turkish Foreign Policy: Facing Regional and Global Shifts

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The TRT World Forum 2019, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 21st- 22nd at the Istanbul Congress Center with over one thousand esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of nine keynote speeches and exclusive talks, 12 public sessions, and 15 closed sessions this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the rise of far-right terrorism, populism and nationalism, environmental issues, the future of the Middle East, trade wars, the future of the European Union and cooperation of emerging powers. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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Introduction

Foreign policy is a dynamic process and requires adjustments and re-tuning from time to time depending on regional and global shifts of power, alliances, the emergence of new windows of opportunities as well as threats to national interests. Developments in Turkish foreign policy over the decades testify to the fact that tectonic changes in geopolitics, security, defence, conflicts, humanitarian crises and economic competition have transformative effects on foreign policy. Turkey's foreign policy decisions and practice, especially in the last two decades, have demonstrated the adaptive capacity of Turkey as a regional power to the new realities of the world and its capacity to navigate in stormy waters. The shifts and challenges in global and regional politics were discussed in the Closed Session, including the key opportunities and challenges for Turkish foreign policy in this transition period. According to the panel, which was comprised of academics, researchers, politicians and diplomats, Turkey has become a more potent actor in international diplomacy and has managed to play a key role in several multilateral organisations. Turkey has sought to share the burden of the great powers by contributing to the resolution of some of the more persistent conflicts and crises worldwide. These include the fight against ISIS, the refugee crisis, contributing to the development of African countries and Iran's nuclear development program.

It was argued that the debate about Turkish foreign policy should take note of the changing regional and global context for international relations, including key tectonic shifts and transitions affecting regional and global levels. These include the decline of US hegemony; the retreat of multilateralism; the emergence of new windows of opportunity for emerging states and the rise of populism on a global level. The legitimacy crisis and counter-revolutions in the MENA region, combined with state failure in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen at the regional level, were mentioned as variables with potential impact on Turkey-West relations and on Turkey's foreign policy decisions, both within the region and beyond.

Still, over the last decade, Turkey has managed to become a central actor within its region and a major regional power in international politics. One speaker mentioned that Turkey has not only become a key power in Middle East politics, but has also succeeded in portraying itself as the voice of oppressed people in the Middle East and the Global South in general, including Palestinians and Syrian refugees.

It remains that the international system and international organisations have been unable to bring peaceful resolutions to many of the pressing issues of our day. Today, the world faces uncertainty at the international level as right-wing populism, nationalism, Islamophobia and far-left extremism are on the rise around the world. One of the most central international organisations, the UN, seems to

be particularly restricted in bringing about or enforcing consensus. As one speaker posited, the world is less safe than it was five years ago. In this broad picture, Turkey finds itself in a troubled local and international environment. It was argued that while addressing multi-faceted challenges in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond, Turkey has established new partnerships with Russia, China and Iran, in

addition to its traditional allies, namely NATO and the EU. These alignments were interpreted by some as a departure of Turkey from its conventional foreign policy paradigms. Others, however, argued that Turkey has not gone through a shift of its axis, but had rather re-tuned its policies in the face of new realities on the ground.

Historical Challenges for Turkish Foreign Policy

Turkey has been regarded as a model Muslim democracy throughout the 2000s. Turkey's foreign policy initiatives toward its neighbours played a key role in conflict resolutions, support for free movement and encouragement of free trade among Middle Eastern countries. However, the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 dramatically changed the landscape of the region; it turned into a conflict zone, and the rise of non-state armed groups caused instability in Turkey's neighbourhood (Keyman, 2017). Significantly, Turkey continues to host more than 4 million refugees and has spent more than \$35 billion on refugees since 2011. The downturn in economic trends combined with the refugee crisis, which affected domestic politics, have put the government in a difficult position. Opposition parties have been pressing the government about the presence of Syrians, seeking to leverage the situation in domestic political discourse.

Historically, there has been significant foreign policy change during the Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule. Broadly speaking, Turkish foreign policy was largely shaped by security concerns and ideological underpinnings during the Cold War. The priority for the founding ideology of Turkey was to have close

relations with West as a secular, modern and aspiring democratic state. Security threats, on the other hand, pushed Turkey to have its place under the NATO umbrella. Such an ideological position and perceived security threat coupled with the long westernisation project left its mark on the foreign policy choices of Turkey. In the mid-1980s, and especially in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkish foreign policy recorded some degree of change. However, the liberation of Turkish foreign policy from its ideological constraints began with the rise of JDP to power. The JDP has embraced neighbouring countries and the nations of the former Soviet bloc, aiming for collaboration and negotiation instead of conflict. During the first decade of the JDP leadership, from 2002-2011, negotiations were made to resolve even long-standing conflicts, for example with Armenia and Syria. During this period, the new approaches in Turkish foreign policy included democratic advances and the mending of relations with Iraqi Kurds as well. Progress with Iraqi Kurds and the Oslo peace negotiations with the PKK were aimed at resolving the Kurdish issue in Turkey, thereby attempting to solve Turkey's chronic problems, including at the regional and international level.

During the second term of the JDP era, the military lost its dominance over civilian government and subsequently over domestic and foreign policy. The JDP followed a more active and open foreign policy when compared to its predecessors. The JDP's engagement with Russia, Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood movement

in Egypt, as well as less favourable relations with Israel in 2010, were criticised by Western countries. There were some discussions that there had been a shift in the axis of Turkish foreign policy and that Turkey was turning its face from the West to the East.

Regional Instability and Its Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy

Turkey's neighbourhood was turned into a war zone after 2011. Conflicts in Syria and Iraq impacted Turkey's national security and its relations with global powers. Non-state armed groups, including ISIS and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), raised security challenges for Turkey. Turkey had been following a more liberal policy at that time; it had been engaged with neighbouring countries, supported freedom of movement and signed free-trade agreements with some Middle Eastern countries. However, Turkish policies changed dramatically in the post-Arab Spring era as the region became more volatile and unstable (Aras, 2017).

The uprisings in the Middle East have substantially challenged the mainstream and historical continuity of foreign policy in many countries, including Turkey. Relations between Turkey and Syria have deteriorated, while Iran has sought to increase its influence in the region. Turkey and other regional countries have recalculated their foreign policy goals as a result of these conflicts. Global and regional powers have failed to halt the violence in the Middle East and the chaotic situation has posed great challenges for Turkey. In addition, the PYD in Northern Syria, which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has gained ground with the help of the US.

The challenges of the Syrian civil war to Turkey are not only from the threat of terrorism issuing from Syrian territory; the more than four million refugees who have crossed the border into Turkey have also contributed to instability. The refugee influx is one of the hottest items in domestic as well as international politics. It has put pressure on the government in elec-

tions, and opposition parties have harshly criticised the government's refugee policies.

Following the collapse of the peace process in Turkey, the PYD, the sister organisation of the PKK, began to challenge Turkey's national security. From the beginning of the uprising in Syria, there was collusion between the Assad regime and the PYD so that the regime withdrew its military from northern Syria and the PYD refrained from joining the anti-Assad coalition. This undeclared agreement between the PYD and the Assad regime created room for the PYD to put its ideology into action and train its militias, including PKK militants in Syria. During this period, the PYD forced some Kurds and Arabs who did not share its policies or ideology from their homes in certain territories under the PYD rule. According to human rights reports in 2014, there were human rights violations committed by the People's Protection Units (YPG) against Arabs and local tribes in areas of northern Syria who would not accept the groups undisputed authority (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

The challenges from northern Syria proved that national security is certainly at the centre of Turkish foreign policy. The long-standing conflict between Turkey and the PKK has cost the lives of thousands of people and has developed the a potential upcoming more brutal with the PYD in Syria.

The demise of the central authority and the withdrawal of Syrian soldiers from northern Syria has created an opportunity for the PYD to consolidate its power in northern Syria, creating the potential for the forma-

tion of a regional autonomous regime. The PKK's sister organisation, the PYD, and its de-facto autonomous status along the Turkish border has been perceived as a grave danger by the Turkish government. The strengthening position of the PYD has created room for the PKK to implement its ideology in northern Syria. More importantly, the PYD's canton in the region has bolstered possible PKK attacks against Turkey.

After the establishment of the cantons in northern Syria, the PYD has begun to implement its leftist ideology and governance model in schools, community centres and military training centres. The PYD shares the same ideology with the PKK regarding governance style, leadership and organisational structure (Baykal and Öğür, 2018). This situation clearly produces a national security threat for Turkey.

Turkish-EU Relations and the Refugee Crisis

In the early 2000s, Turkey reached a tremendous point for entering the European Union (EU) membership process. Many reforms were launched during this golden era of Turkish-EU relations, within the context of EU membership negotiations. Although Turkey carried out comprehensive structural reforms and harmonised its legal system with that of the EU, thus meeting the fundamental expectations of the Union for full membership, EU leaders started talking about cultural and civilizational differences between Turkey and the EU. The rise of culturalist discourse disrupted the negotiation process. In this context, Germany and France came out with a 'privileged partnership' proposal instead of full membership for Turkey. The privileged partnership offer slowed the membership process as the Turkish government continued to insist on full membership. However, the picture has become more nuanced and complicated when one looks at the fields of convergence between the two sides: trade; financial flow; knowledge flow; migration; energy and security (Kaya, 2018, cited in Tocci and Aydın-Düzgit, 2015).

In addition, the rhetoric of right-wing political parties in the EU has impacted the direction of Turkey-EU relations. These political parties have increased their voter share in the EU Parliament in recent years, and their anti-immigrant and Islamophobic discourse

has had a huge influence on the public. These populist parties and extremist political groups have acted against EU enlargement, diversity, multiculturalism and Islam. Turkish and Muslim minorities in the EU have been targeted verbally and physically by these extremist groups. In total, these occurrences have affected the relations between both sides regarding immigration and Turkey's membership process.

One speaker stated that far-right extremism, increasing anti-immigration sentiments and Brexit have lessened the problem-solving capacity of the EU in regional and global crises. Although the EU still remains an actor for the liberal order in international politics, its liberal-democratic identity has been called into question.

Turkey has historically been a strategic ally of western countries and a NATO member, which means that Turkey occupies a vital place for EU security and is an indispensable partner for the prevention of illegal immigration to the EU, particularly from the Middle East. It was argued that, given the number of immigrants who entered EU countries in 2015, Turkey's pivotal role to stop a large-scale refugee flux into Europe should be better acknowledged.

After the long negotiations between Ankara and Brus-

sels, both signed a deal in March 2016 to prevent refugees flow via Turkey. However, the refugee flow might continue if the civil war in Syria and instability in the region continue unabated.

One of the biggest security concerns for the EU was Turkey's increasing relations with Russia, particularly

regarding military arena and the refugee influx from Syria through to Turkish soil. One speaker stated that the EU does not understand Turkey's concerns about Syria and the Kurdish issue and criticised Turkey's close relations with Russia.

Turkish-US Alliance under the Shadow of the PYD

It has been argued that US hegemonic power has been questioned in recent years. One speaker stated that the world has been witnessing the decline of US hegemony and the gradual transition from unipolarity to multipolarity. Moreover, there is a global power shift from West to East and North to South.

Turkey-US relations have consisted of a long strategic partnership since World War II. One speaker expressed that the golden era of Turkey-US relations was during the 1950s and 1960s. During the Cold War era, Turkey was a bulwark against Soviet expansionism into the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Although Turkey found room to manoeuvre in its neighbourhood during the post-Cold War period, the state elite consistently avoided engagement with Middle Eastern countries. In the early 1990s, foreign policy was redefined by President Özal, who followed an active foreign policy toward Turkey's neighbours, including the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caspian region, which had a potential to be significant for Turkey-West relations. His foreign policy initiatives were not appreciated by the security elite and were interrupted by his death in 1993. During that period, Turkey improved its relations with some neighbouring countries. However, there was no profound change in Turkish foreign policy due to the Turkish army's huge influence, especially toward the Middle East, due to security reasons. Turkey's foreign policy approach re-

mained more or less the same until the JDP leadership. As mentioned above, Turkey embraces its neighbourhood and improved relations. It even took part in some processes of conflict resolution. This policy change has been welcomed by the US and European countries due to its liberal orientation.

Although some problems have occurred between Turkey and the US during the Trump administration, the US did withdraw some of its soldiers from Syria and opened the way for Turkish operations against the PYD. During Obama's second term, relations became tense due to differences regarding approaches to Middle Eastern politics, namely their different stances towards the Arab Spring and the coup in Egypt. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the security of Turkey's borders has been a priority. Turkey followed the open-border policy for refugees. Early on, Turkey suggested the creation of a buffer zone to prevent Syrian regime attacks against civilians along the Turkish-Syrian border. However, Turkey's allies and other countries who initially supported the Syrian opposition did not buy into the buffer zone idea.

US-Turkish relations worsened during the Obama administration. The anti-ISIS coalition was formed by the US in 2014 and under the name of the 'Train and Equip' program, 500 fighters were trained to fight against ISIS. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was

formed by mainly pro-PKK or PYD militants who took on active roles in this program. Turkey voiced its opposition due to the PYD's organic link with the PKK, which is considered to be a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the EU and the US (Dalay and Keyman, 2019). One speaker stated that Turkey had protested many times against cooperation with a terrorist organisation (PKK) to defeat another terrorist organisation (ISIS). The anti-ISIS coalition provided military equipment and training to the SDF despite Turkey's strong opposition. Within this picture, according to one speaker and also stressed by session participants, Turkish-US relations experienced their most significant low during the Obama administration.

Obama neither brought a solution to the advances of ISIS nor to the broader problems in the Middle East. Within this context, the speakers agreed that US hegemony has been in decline, which was elaborated on by one of the participants in the context of the economy and newly emerging powers. The US no longer acts as a superpower and its foreign policy has been prioritised based on the prevention of immigration

and trade wars with China. At the same time, the US has been escalating with China and losing dominance to Russia in the Middle East.

Relations with the US have worsened over foreign policy choices concerning Russia, Syria and Iran. Turkey's close dealings with Russia during the Syrian crisis and the purchase of S-400 missiles have increased their relations as strategic partners. The Turkish government's request to buy Patriot missiles from NATO members was not granted. Therefore, the government decided to buy missiles from Russia. NATO-members, including the US, threatened Turkey with sanctions.

The failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016, organised by members of the FETÖ (Fethullah Terrorist Organisation), further complicated the relations between Turkey and the US. The coup attempt caused the death of more than 250 people and hundreds were wounded as a result of the putschists' attacks. Turkey's extradition request for the leader of FETÖ, Fethullah Gülen, was refused by the US and relations between the two countries have worsened as a result.

The Turkish Approach to the Syrian Crisis

The crisis in Syria is one of the most significant contemporary challenges for Turkey. As mentioned above, Turkey opened its borders to refugees in the early days of the civil war, from 2011 to 2015. During that period, millions of refugees crossed the border, leading to criticism from Turkish opposition parties. Currently, there are three main groups that Turkey has aimed to deal with in the Syrian conflict: the elimination of ISIS, which has lost most of its previous capabilities; the PYD, sister organisation of the PKK; the political transition of the Assad regime.

The demise of central authority and the withdrawal of the Assad regime from northern Syria in 2012 created a power vacuum which was filled by both the PYD and ISIS. The Turkish government has supported moderate opposition groups, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), against Damascus since the beginning of the civil war. However, Turkey has taken on a more proactive position and launched operations against the PYD and ISIS after the 15 July coup attempt. The increasing instability within its neighbourhood and the risks to Turkish national security have led Turkey to resort to

increased military action for building a safe zone in its borderlands, clearly illustrated in the following figure.

The relationship between the Syrian conflict and the PKK is one of the significant topics discussed during the session. The Syrian conflict and its implications for Turkey have played a role in influencing domestic politics, particularly as it relates to the peace process with the PKK (2013-2015). Following the collapse of the peace process in 2015, two police officers were killed by the PKK on 22 July 2015, and the PKK declared 'The Revolutionary People's War' against the Turkish state. Negotiations officially ended thereafter. Turkey launched an official military operation against PKK targets in Qandil, northern Iraq, in the same year. Following the collapse of the peace process, some PKK militants infiltrated into Turkey from Syria and launched urban warfare in what became known as the 'Barricade War', between 2015 and 2016. As a result of the Barricade War, tens of thousands of people left

their homes for safe cities in the eastern and western parts of Turkey. Hundreds of Turkish security officials were killed, and thousands were wounded.

At the same time, ISIS appeared in Iraq and Syria. Turkey was targeted by ISIS attacks in various cities. These caused the deaths of over 300 citizens between 2014 and 2017 (Akman, 2019). In 2015, Ankara launched a construction project along its southern border, roughly 785 kilometres in length, to prevent illegal infiltration into Turkey. However, the walls did not prevent either ISIS or the YPG attacks from occurring. Turkey took actions against the threats posed by these two organisations. Turkey launched the cross-border Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIS in August 2016. The operation ended the presence of ISIS along the Turkish-Syrian border. Following the operation, Turkish security officers raided ISIS cell locations in Turkey and arrested hundreds of ISIS members.



Source: TRT World Research Centre

After Operation Euphrates Shield, the Turkish army launched another cross-border operation against the YPG in northern Syria, as it perceived a grave threat to Turkish national security. One speaker stated that the PYD-controlled area along the Turkish border posed a threat to Turkey, and some of its militants and PKK members had infiltrated Turkey to attack military positions. The Turkish city of Kilis was targeted by missiles fired from the PYD-controlled town of Afrin. More than 20 people were killed in Kilis. On 18 March 2018, the Turkish army and the Free Syria Army entered Afrin for the second time to eliminate YPG militants who were in control of the city.

Lastly, it was discussed how the PYD challenged Turkish national security and how President Erdogan has criticised the US Syrian policy and military support for the PYD. President Erdogan openly threatened the PYD with a military operation. Following the withdrawal of US soldiers from the Turkish border, Turkey launched a military operation against the PYD on 9 October, 2019. The Turkish army cleared some of its border from the PYD and other are currently being monitored via joint Russian-Turkish patrols.

Roundup: Despite Challenges, Turkey Seeks Stability

In the context of instability and challenges at the global level, Turkey as a middle power has two options: One is to act as a neutral power, which means to avoid any conflict within its sphere. This choice, however, is not feasible for Turkey. The second option, according to one speaker, is for Turkey to follow a proactive foreign policy. Turkey has engaged with regional and global powers to bring an end to the Syrian war and the resulting humanitarian crisis.

It has been said that Turkey has shifted its axis from the West to Eurasia. Over the last decade, Turkey's relations with Israel have deteriorated due to the Palestine issue. Turkey has improved its relations with Russia in terms of energy, security and military cooperation. Along with these developments, one speaker

stressed that Turkey's neighbours, Syria and Iraq, are failed states that have impacted Turkey's security, stability and economy. In order to deal with these issues, Turkey must deal with Russia and Iran as they have great influence in Damascus and Baghdad. The speaker also indicated that the EU has not given enough attention to Turkey's security concerns regarding the PKK/PYD and ISIS.

It is important to note that Turkish foreign policy has changed after the uprisings in the region, as explained above. One speaker defined Turkish foreign policy as 'defensive realism', which means that a state must seek power in order to be secure and survive in an anarchical international system.

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