

Closed Session

Turkey's Foreign Policy in an Age of Crises

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The TRT World Forum 2018, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd- 4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, 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 future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. 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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Background



On October 4th, 2018, TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting with the title of 'Turkey's Foreign Policy in an Age of Crises'.

This was part of a series of roundtable meetings forming part of the two-day TRT World Forum 2018, which included 8 public sessions and 11 closed sessions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English and under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

This session aimed to discuss Turkey's foreign policy in the light of the most recent developments in the Middle East. In the course of the first two decades of the 21st century, Turkey has arguably faced a more challenging foreign policy environment than at any other time in its

modern history. In turn, each of the successive crises has uniquely shaped various aspects of Turkey's developing foreign policy. While Turkey has taken proactive roles in regional and global affairs, a seemingly never-ending tide of change has continually swept over the global landscape. From unpredictable leadership in the United States, to various humanitarian crises, financial uncertainties in Europe and an ever more complex and turbulent Middle East, there emerges an acute sense of global uncertainty. Any productive analysis of Turkish foreign policy today must take these multifaceted and complex issues into account. In this session, Turkey's foreign policy will be analysed in light of its diplomatic policies and practices as well as the discursive constructions related to Turkey's geopolitical and cultural positioning in the world. How can we better understand changes in Turkey's global positioning vis-à-vis its geopolitical and cultural positioning beyond the trope of the East-West divide? This question is at the heart of this session and will be explored in detail in the sections that follow.

Discussion themes of the session:

- The future of the Turkey-EU partnership.
- Turkey's involvement in the Middle East and the role it plays in contributing towards stability in the region.
- The Russo-Turkish relationship beyond its historical parameters and implications of this relationship for Turkish foreign policy.
- Change and adaptation in Turkish foreign policy in light of an unpredictable US administration.

Introduction

Turkey's foreign policy in the 21st century has become more active and multidimensional. Beyond its traditional Western alliances, Turkey has strengthened and diversified its foreign policy agenda in various countries, ranging from the Middle East to Asia and Africa. Strategic, political, and economic factors, as well as energy interests, have been the main drivers of Turkey's external engagement. In an age of multiple regional and international crises, the question then arises: how has Turkey's foreign policy been reshaped to adapt to changing global dynamics and how does it face these challenges coming from a troubled region?

The first speaker began by highlighting some pivotal points in the history of world politics, including the fall of the Soviet Union and the resultant downfall of communism in Europe as an important backdrop. Despite early successes in terms of industrialization and reduction of economic inequalities, the Communist Party was not able to maintain the status quo, contributing to the process of disintegration, and a shift to multiparty politics in Russia and beyond.

The economic crisis of 2008 was also mentioned in the session. Low-interest rates, low inflation rates and monetary expansion since the early 2000s led to macroeconomic stability and increased confidence in the U.S. central bank. The fact that investors ignored risks in the financial market due to this "safe environment" led to an increase in mortgage loans and unqualified credit risks, particularly in the last quarter of 2007. In 2008 the global financial system crashed with the EU being one of the worst affected economic zones.

The 'Arab Spring' and its aftermath was identified as the most recent global shockwave. Beginning in Tunisia in late 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest police corruption, throughout 2011 and into 2012 the Middle East and North Africa witnessed a wave of uprisings, revolutions, wars and ultimately counter-revolutions. Countries such as Libya, Yemen and Syria continue to suffer from instability and conflict. In addition to these global and regional crises, Turkey experienced

a wave of terror attacks, a deterioration in relations with Russia following the downing of a Russian fighter jet in 2015 and the attempted coup of July 2016, all of which contributed to shifts in Turkey's foreign policy orientation.

With various shifts in Turkey's approach to regional and world politics since the early 2000s, traditional allies, such as the United States, have at times questioned Turkey's intentions and whether or not Turkey is undertaking a shift towards the 'East'. Rather than representing a fundamental shift in orientation, the first speaker emphasized Turkey's actions post-Arab Spring were necessary in order to adapt to a shifting world order. In other words, they were based on a 'realpolitik' assessment rather than a strategic reorientation. Some of Turkey's recent internal affairs were also mentioned, such as the 2013 Gezi Park protests. The protest was initially to contest the urban development plan for the iconic park in Istanbul's Taksim Square. However, it quickly transformed into a general anti-government movement that spread beyond Istanbul.

The December 17-25 2013 so-called 'judicial coup' attempt orchestrated by the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation (FETO) was also mentioned. A fictitious graft probe against top government officials designed to overthrow Turkey's democratically elected government was followed by a large-scale raid on December 17-25, 2013. The response initiated by the government to take legal action against FETO proved to be vital in limiting the damage of the July 15 coup, which was undertaken by the group three years later. Turkish citizens vehemently opposed the coup attempt and risked their lives in order to stop it. Gulenist who infiltrated the high-ranks of the armed forces were arrested. In light of these circumstances, changes in the local, national and international political landscape have undoubtedly shaped Turkish foreign policy into what it is today.

Speakers and participants highlighted Turkey's foreign policy orientation to the following regions and countries:

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The European Union

As a result of the economic crisis and consequent rise in unemployment, radical views started to flourish - which resulted in parliamentary representation of right-wing discourse in the political arena. Radical ideas were threatening governments in various EU countries and this begged the question, will the EU start to lose its values and political understanding?

Turkey and the European Union's strategic relationship stretches back over 60 years. Following its initial application in 1959, Turkey has yet to be granted EU membership, and still remains a candidate for full membership, despite having undertaken numerous political, economic and social reforms required by the EU. There are numerous reasons why this is the case, however, one speaker pointed out that it positively indicates Turkey's determination to uphold its values and interests.

Beyond the dynamics of Turkey-EU relations, shifting global geo-political dynamics, such as the rise of emerging economies and crises in intra-EU relations, have informed Turkey's foreign policy, which now, more than ever in Turkey's modern history, looks beyond Europe. At the same time, the speaker argued, economic and security ties with the EU remain a top priority for Turkey and that full membership is advantageous for not only Turkey, but ultimately for the EU as well. Turkey's orientation towards Europe can be seen in its continued push for a customs union, which would of course lead to increased trade volume. Turkey also has a large, skilled and young labour force, something that represents a major advantage for the EU. Whilst Turkey's EU accession negotiations are ongoing, it is also important to mention that Turkey has benefited from this long political process and has made significant gains in the meantime.

One participant argued that, due to the significant issues within the EU itself - Brexit, the rise of xenophobia, and the rise of the far right - it would perhaps be in Turkey's best interest to look for alternative partnerships. However, there was a general agreement among the panellists that Turkey is not eager at this point in time to accept anything short of full EU membership.

In Turkey, public opinion is very important and it seems likely, after certain remarks made by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, that a referendum may take place in order to decide whether Turkey continues to pursue EU membership or not. Despite the long-term relationship with the EU, Turkey was disappointed with the level of support received the failed coup attempt on the 15th of July, 2016.

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Russia

The speakers also emphasized the importance of Turkey-Russia relations. Turkey has managed to establish a good relationship with Russia based on mutual understanding and benefits. These good relations have helped Turkey overcome many difficulties which it may have otherwise struggled to deal with, such as the assassination of Andrei Karlov, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, by an off-duty Turkish police officer, and the downing of Russian Sukhoi

Su-24M jet by a Turkish fighter jet (both believed to be plotted by FETO affiliates). The collaboration between Turkey and Russia provides an environment that is useful for both countries in terms of dealing with the barriers in the international arena. It was claimed that Turkey has been able to solve certain problems in Syria due in part to having good relations with Russia.

The United States

One speaker highlighted that the Trump administration's impulsive diplomacy has taken the world by surprise. Some countries are still trying to figure out how to handle the new US administration. The Trump administration has set out to replace old trade arrangements with new ones, like in the case of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Recently, after a year of intense negotiations, the United States, Canada and Mexico have updated the NAFTA agreement.

The US administration has also withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal, the functioning of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). These ongoing issues has caused uncertainty in the world as Trump continues to adopt a policy of strategic ambiguity. Additionally, it is worth mentioning Turkey's opposition to the U.S. in terms of the declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. President Erdogan has continued to raise awareness on the importance of Jerusalem for Muslims and the fact that it should be protected. If Trump's unilateral aggressive politics continue in the Middle East region, Turkey's prediction of an upcoming crisis might become reality.

Thus, the Trump presidency has brought more

uncertainty to the international order. Many across the globe have been watching carefully to assess whether the "America First" doctrine of increased protectionism, unilateral sanctions and increasing disengagement from international cooperation will remain a lasting feature of the U.S. government's foreign policy. As a result, Turkey has also adapted its foreign policy to seek its national interests first and foremost. However, maintaining good and mutually beneficial relations between the two countries is a shared goal between the two governments, as it is vital for the preservation and consolidation of peace and security in the region.

One of the speakers pointed out that Turkey's changing foreign policy approach can be seen as an adaptation to a shifting world order. Until 2013, Turkey had good relations with the US but these relations were dented when the US started supporting and arming the Syrian arm of the PKK terrorist organisation in Syria, the YPG. In 2015, the Obama administration made several agreements with non-state actors such as the YPG and PYD and named these groups as "coalition partners". However, some American decision makers acknowledged publicly that in hindsight such actions were undermining their strategic partnership with Turkey.

The War in Syria

Syria has represented Turkey's greatest foreign policy challenge since the outbreak of the country's civil war in 2011. The Syrian revolution began with peaceful demonstrations against the Assad regime. The street protests quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war with regional and international involvement. The price of the civil war has been 350 thousand deaths and counting, decimated cities, destruction of Syria's infrastructure and 5 million refugees, mainly seeking refuge in neighbouring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon as well as Europe. The speaker pointed out that a divided Syria does not reflect Turkey's objectives and interests in the region. Turkey seeks sustainable peace in the region and appreciates that a comprehensive and long-lasting solution will require multilateral collaboration of.

Turkey maintained a relatively cordial relationship with Syria for many years, however, the civil war caused a major rift between the regime and Turkey. Whilst in the beginning of the conflict, the West and its allies mostly shared the same ideas towards a Syrian revolution, as time went on and no decisive action was taken, Turkey was left alone to shoulder the responsibility of defending the opposition. The speaker emphasised that the reason why the US is not a major actor in Syria anymore is because of its political and military inaction. While much of the world was disengaged in Syria, Turkey, Russia and Iran took decisive diplomatic action in hopes of resolving the conflict in the country. Turkey in its own right conducted military operations to protect its borders with Syria, namely the Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch and lastly the Idlib buffer zone in conjunction with Russia.

Turkey sought to collaborate with the United States in the fight against Daesh in Syria, but ultimately understood that it could not rely on the US and had to take matters into its own hands. When Turkey offered to fight alongside the United States in Raqqa, the US refused their help, preferring instead to work in collaboration with the YPG, the Syrian arm of the PKK

terrorist organisation. In the context of international conventions adopted by the UN and other regional organisations, arms and financial support for terrorist organisations are prohibited. According to the Speaker, Turkey has brought stability to the regions where it has conducted operations and maintains the objective of ensuring the territorial integrity of a united Syria.

Turkey's humanitarian aid

Although little mention was made of the humanitarian concerns in the region, one speaker highlighted how Turkey has taken on a significant share of the humanitarian burden. The Interior Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Maarif

Foundation, and various other foundations have been active in Syria on several fronts, including education and emergency assistance. Turkey has also managed to integrate Syrians into Turkish society, for example Syrian children can now go to public school in Turkey.

China

With the challenges that faced the Turkish economy over the summer 2018, China was the largest and the most obvious, potential source of support for Turkey, especially in the light of China's massive geopolitical and geo-economic projects, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative, which presents favourable conditions for deepening the two nations' economic relations. Turkey, as a bridge between Europe and Asia, occupies a key strategic position in the Belt and Road Initiative.

Therefore, it is within Beijing's interests to expand its political and economic relations with Ankara. In addition, open-mindedness from the Turkish side towards an enhanced relationship with Beijing, and prospects of sizable Chinese investment in Turkish companies are important from Ankara's viewpoint. This does not mean, though, that this relationship will be privileged at the expense of others, as Turkey will continue to maintain good diplomatic ties with as many countries as possible.

Closing remarks

Even in an era of upheavals, rapid changes and uncertainties, the panellists concur that Turkey believe in "enterprising and humanitarian" approach in international relations. While the issues confronted by Ankara are complex and multi-layered, Turkey pursues a peace-oriented and principled foreign policy and is committed to making use of all its means and capabilities towards this twin objective. To this end, the Turkish foreign policy utilises all means possible, political, economic, humanitarian and cultural to make a positive impact in its neighbourhood and worldwide.

Turkey is therefore widening its cooperation with various actors around the globe. Ankara also seeks to become

even more active in multilateral and cooperative bodies to extend the influence of its foreign policy and benefit from multilateralism and internationalism. International bodies, such as the UN, NATO, EU, G20, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and BRICS, present such opportunities. Through these memberships, as well as numerous other fora, Turkey actively contributes to the efforts aiming to address the numerous challenges confronting the world. Equally important, Turkey has used every opportunity to promote the humanitarian/development nexus, as well as inclusive economic growth and equitable distribution of wealth.

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