



Emerging Threats and New Trends in Turkish Foreign Policy

By Galip Dalay June 29, 2016

Turkey's foreign policy during most of the republican era was informed by the security imperatives of the Cold War and the crises that ensued from the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. These influences were coupled with the country's republican elites crafting Turkey's identity along the lines of strict secularism, militant nationalism, and a western orientation. As a status quo power, Turkey looked at its neighborhood through the lens of security, becoming highly sensitive to threats of all varieties and seeing itself in a hostile environment—if not surrounded by outright enemies.

Upon coming to power in 2002, successive Justice and Development Party, or AKP, governments tried to change this understanding and minimize areas of friction with Turkey's neighbors. During the early years, they adopted a utilitarian approach, attempting to develop mutual interests and opportunities and to create a degree of interdependency, particularly through economic exchange. This was expressed through then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with the neighbors" principle, which provided the intellectual architecture for much of Turkey's foreign policy. The AKP sought to build an "economy first" approach, which it would later hope to leverage for political purposes.¹

From the beginning of the AKP's second term in 2007 to the early days of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 and into 2011, the party gradually expanded its ambitions and policy toward the Middle East through attempts to achieve regional integration and, later, to build an order centered on Turkey. All of these attempts sought to build on economic relations toward economic integration and political cooperation and were very much in line with the neofunctionalist approach to regional integration theories.²

This policy proved to be relatively successful when the regional context was amenable and not driven by survival concerns and security challenges. However, the violent turn of the Arab uprisings dramatically changed the context of Turkey's foreign policy.

Political demands versus political identities

In the early days of the Arab uprisings, the major struggle was over political demands. The international focus was on the democratic and political demands of Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, and Syrians who had taken to the streets. Democracy, reform, economic progress, and political representation were the vocabulary of the time. Turkey was better-positioned to respond to these demands from people in the Arab world than most countries in the region; it had a functioning democracy, a growing economy, a representative political system, and an open public sphere. With these features, Turkey offered an example to protestors demanding similar things from their governments in the Arab world.

Over time, the nature of the Arab uprisings underwent a dramatic change. Conflicts based on political identities replaced the political demands. No longer were the Arab uprisings mainly about democratization and political reform. Instead, driven by authoritarian crackdowns and radical elements, the revolts shifted toward bloody conflicts between sectarian or ethnic identities. The Syrian and Yemeni crises are the prime examples of such identity conflicts.

Turkey is ill-equipped to deal with this new reality. Unlike Iran and Saudi Arabia, it has neither the political acumen nor the regional infrastructure to effectively shape the identity wars in the region.³ To be able to play a role in these long-term proxy conflicts fought by loyal identity groups, be they Shiite or Salafi—as they are in large part in Syria and Yemen—a country needs to have long ago defined certain identity groups as strategic allies and heavily invested in them. It also needs to have a regional infrastructure for waging political battles through these identity groups. Turkey lacks these characteristics and cannot sustain a successful proxy conflict through identity groups or militias.

In addition, at the onset of the Arab uprisings, the relative serenity of Turkey's domestic political scene, economic growth, and foreign policy ambitions provided a permissive context for Ankara to pursue an ambitious foreign—specifically regional—policy. In fact, the country's regional ambitions required it to pay more attention to its domestic political challenges. The fact that Turkey declared and then embarked on the most ambitious stage of the Kurdish peace process in the closing days of 2012 and early 2013 is a case in point.⁴ One of the main motivations for the initiative was Turkey's belief that the settlement of the Kurdish issue would unfetter Turkey of a major domestic political constraint, remove a point of leverage for regional rivals, and pave the way for a more ambitious foreign policy.⁵

Old fears resurrected

The intensification of the Syrian civil war came with several negative externalities for Turkey, particularly the breakdown of the Kurdish peace process in July 2015. This breakdown was mainly due to disagreements between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, over the Syrian Kurdish enclaves administered by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, or PYD, the PKK's sister party in Syria. These developments brought Turkey's

domestic political concerns to the fore and resurrected old fears. The PKK brought military tactics honed in Syria to Turkey, sparking low-intensity urban warfare with Turkish security forces as part of its attempt to create de facto administrative units in Turkey, with high death tolls on both sides.⁶ Turkey, now wracked with conflict with the PKK, once again views regional developments through the prism of its domestic political challenges.

Ankara justifiably fears that the ethnic and sectarian conflicts which have torn the region to pieces will spill onto Turkey's domestic political scene. Given that Turkey's ethnic-sectarian composition mirrors the region's—particularly Syria's, with Sunni-Alevi divisions alongside Turkish-Kurdish ethnic cleavages—this fear is very real. In fact, numerous terrorist bombings since 2013 have targeted Turkey's political and ethnic fault lines, bringing this bloody reality into stark relief.⁷ The debate in the lead-up to the Geneva III talks on Syria earlier this year showed the extent to which Turkey has been approaching regional issues through the lens of its own domestic political challenges. Instead of proposing a broader strategy toward the Syrian crisis, Turkey's overriding concern was preventing the participation of the PYD—a Syrian sister organization to Turkey's PKK—in the talks, which it achieved.⁸

Downsizing ambitions

Turkey's foreign policy in the medium term will be driven by domestic political fears and considerations; this will, by necessity, result in more limited regional goals. For example, in the early stages of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's primary goal was to topple the Assad regime; today, it is to prevent the PYD-led Syrian Kurds from gaining an autonomous region on its borders, particularly one recognized and supported by international powers. This accounts for Turkey's insistence that the PYD should not be allowed to control the Azaz corridor in Syria, which is close to the Turkish border and would allow the PYD to link the cantons already in its control.⁹

The Syrian crisis has also driven more than 2.5 million refugees into Turkey.¹⁰ Separately, early Turkish support for the Syrian opposition—including civilian and armed groups—and an open-border policy designed to support rebels fighting the Assad regime allowed significant radical networks to take root in Turkey.¹¹ The number of displaced people and levels of political violence have also increased due to the return of the Kurdish conflict to Turkey, exacerbated by tension over the new Syrian Kurdish cantons just across the border. Turkey increasingly feels the pressure of the Syrian civil war—together with an arguably failed Iraqi state—on its borders. The negative repercussions from these two failed states have changed decision-making in Ankara. The previous understanding of untapped opportunities in the region has been replaced by a reactive approach focused on threats and emerging challenges in the country's immediate backyard.

The conceptualization of Turkey as an island of relative stability in a sea of instability, civil war, and radicalism has ushered in an isolationist mindset among Turkish policymakers. This mindset is discernible at both the societal and the elite levels. Turkey's humanitarian efforts to care for Syrian refugees have been herculean. Today, the strain of years of caring for displaced millions is taking its toll, and the emphasis is on how to stem the waves of refugees heading toward its borders and address the threat posed by the Islamic State and other radical groups.¹²

The caveat is that the nature of the developments in its neighborhood prohibits Turkey's isolationist mood from turning into an active policy. Nevertheless, compared with its previous expansionist and engaged streak, Turkish foreign policy is now experiencing what can be dubbed its Syria syndrome, making it more isolationist and cautious.

Strategic limitations imposed by the row with Russia

Turkey's cautious turn was accelerated by Russia's presence on the ground in Syria and its ensuing feud with Turkey over the shooting down of a Russian jet violating Turkish airspace on November 24, 2015.¹³ Besides the economic and diplomatic measures that Russia took against Turkey, Moscow sought more immediate revenge by complicating Turkey's Syria policy. Russia increased its military presence in Syria—deploying the advanced S-400 anti-aircraft missile system—patrolled areas close to the Turkish border, bombed Turkish-backed opposition groups, and aided anti-Turkey groups, namely the PYD forces in the canton of Afrin in northwestern Syria.¹⁴ By taking these steps, Russia de facto ended Turkish hopes of a no-fly zone in Syria, which Turkey had long lobbied for in Washington and at NATO headquarters.¹⁵

Despite a partial withdrawal, the continued Russian military presence in Syria—particularly its airpower—has meant that Russia has imposed its own de facto no-fly zone against Turkey.¹⁶ Turning this around would require firm U.S. and NATO support and involvement, which is not likely to be forthcoming soon, if ever. Additionally, Russia has wooed the Syrian Kurds who are affiliated with the PYD and has sought to turn them more aggressively against Turkey's foreign policy. They have done this primarily by encouraging the People's Protection Units, or YPG—the PYD's military wing—to close the Azaz corridor through which Turkey communicates and supplies Syrian opposition groups in Idlib and Aleppo. The YPG is skeptical of Russia's support but has been willing to use it as a lever in pursuing its own goals.¹⁷ The Afrin branch of the YPG has clashed with Free Syrian Army groups and other opposition groups backed by Turkey.¹⁸ Further east, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, the backbone of which is formed by the YPG, have crossed west of the Euphrates River, which Ankara had previously said would provoke a Turkish military intervention in order to prevent the YPG from uniting the cantons.¹⁹ Turkey has shelled YPG positions from the Turkish side of the border in retaliation.²⁰

Despite the YPG's advances, however, it is yet to fulfill its aim of taking over the areas between Jarabulus and Azaz in Syria, which would connect the Afrin and Kobani cantons it already controls and create a contiguous and autonomous enclave along the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey regards this as a national security threat of high magnitude.²¹ Despite risking further escalation of the crisis with Russia, Turkey will do its utmost to prevent the Kurdish autonomous enclaves from uniting across the length of the border.

Reluctant return to the West?

The confrontation with Russia has reminded Turkey of the value of its ties to the West and its NATO membership. Despite deep frustration with the United States' and NATO's reluctance to become more involved in Syria, Turkey's confrontation with Russia has returned it to the NATO fold to a large extent. Turkey wanted a clear message of solidarity from NATO—which it largely received—and a much more decisive NATO and U.S. approach in Syria to balance the Russian presence and strategy there—which it did not. In particular, despite dispatching some military personnel to supposedly undertake training and advisory roles with vetted groups, the United States shows no inclination toward changing its policy of “no boots on the ground” in Syria.²² This puts Turkey in a rather difficult position. Overall, the United States has consistently urged Turkey not to take any steps that would further heighten tensions with Russia, fearing a wider escalation and the risk of miscalculation.²³

Compartmentalization of relations

Confronted by Russia and receiving very limited support from the United States, Turkey has once again attempted to divide the West into its component parts: Europe and the United States. While questions of refugees and radicalism push European countries and Turkey to work more closely together, disagreements over Syria—particularly over the approach toward the PYD—are likely to continue to remain a sticking point for both the West and Turkey. As the March 18 EU-Turkey deal on refugees illustrates, both sides are facing similar challenges and have reasons to cooperate.²⁴ The European Union is more likely to be receptive to Turkey's concerns given that it bears more of a political and humanitarian burden from the refugee crisis than the United States and has been more open to Islamic State terrorist attacks, like Turkey. Still, despite these overlapping interests, real progress in Turkey's EU membership talks is unlikely as the process is as much technical as it is political and as there remains serious political opposition to Turkish accession within the European Union, particularly in light of the rise of right-wing, nativist sentiment across the continent. Furthermore, Turkey doesn't seem to have any appetite or motivation to pursue the accession process in earnest.

Turkey's and the United States' perceptions of threats and challenges only partially overlap. Both sides have different priorities in Syria and the wider region. Therefore, the nature of relations between Turkey and the United States can be described, at best, as managed tension. Unless the United States or Turkey makes a major policy reappraisal in Syria and with regard to the Kurds, which both seem unlikely, relations are likely to remain tense for some time to come.

Rethinking the regional equilibrium

The Arab uprisings were born out of local grievances and domestic demands. Yet the evolution of these uprisings has largely been shaped by the policies and projections of regional and international powers. Egypt, Yemen, and Syria clearly exemplify this process, which has pitted regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran against each other. The coup in Egypt drove a wedge between Turkey and Saudi Arabia as the two countries supported opposing sides in Egypt's domestic political struggle.²⁵ But the Syrian crisis put Turkey and Saudi Arabia on the same side—both striving to topple the Assad regime—against Iran, the main regional sponsor of the Assad regime.²⁶ With the change of ruler in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have put aside their earlier disagreements and focused on cooperation in areas of mutual interest. Despite overlapping interests in Syria, however, the driving force of this cooperation is not shared region-wide interests or values: Rather, it is shared opposition toward Iran's regional activism. Hence, Turkish-Saudi relations will remain ad hoc, issue-based, and compartmentalized; their cooperation lacks the necessary ingredients to become a lasting strategic relationship or formal alliance. In the end, both countries have different and contending visions for a future regional order. Saudi Arabia is likely to be a temporary partner.

In regards to Iran, Turkey now pursues a two-level policy. On the one hand, Turkey tries to devise policies and form alliances to curtail or balance Iran's influence in the region.²⁷ Balancing Iran is another major factor, together with the confrontation with Russia, that is pushing Turkey to revitalize relations with Israel and improve relations with Egypt, though the latter has not yet borne fruit.²⁸ This trend of mending ties with old foes is likely to continue.

On the other hand, unlike Saudi Arabia, Turkey does not see Iran's expanding regional role as a threat to its own survival. It sees Iran as a traditional rival but not as a sectarian and existential menace. Moreover, Turkey does not view Iran solely as a threat; it also sees in Iran a source of energy, a business opportunity, and a potential partner in forming a new regional order.²⁹ Cognizant that regional disputes will not be conclusively settled unless Iran agrees, Ankara is also trying to create some kind of understanding and working relationship with Iran, on issues ranging from Syria and Iraq to the regional Kurdish questions. The deterioration of Turkey's relations with Russia has made Turkish-Iranian energy relations more important. Iran is Turkey's second-largest provider of natural gas,

only behind Russia.³⁰ With the lifting of the Iran sanctions following the nuclear deal, Iran's burgeoning middle class makes an enticing market for Turkish business, again made more important following the loss of a significant export market in Russia. With these factors in mind, former Prime Minister Davutoğlu, accompanied by a large business delegation, visited Iran March 4–5, 2016, to stress the necessity of Turkey and Iran increasing their areas of mutual interest and keeping the channels of dialogue open.³¹ It is apt to describe Iran as a long-term rival as well as a partner for Turkey.

Conclusion

Regional geopolitics is shifting at an accelerated pace. While some of Turkey's traditional security concerns and foreign policy challenges still linger, new threats are also emerging. Nevertheless, Turkey's foreign policy has not kept up with these dynamic new challenges, though Ankara's attempts to adjust to new realities and recalibrate in the face of emerging threats are gradually taking shape. It seems plausible to expect Turkey to downsize its foreign policy ambitions and reduce its confrontational style in favor of a cooperative one to a certain extent in its surrounding region. It will be more enmeshed in its domestic political challenges, above all the Kurdish issue, and will craft its foreign policy engagements with these domestic political challenges in mind. On this front, Turkey needs to adopt a holistic approach to the regional Kurds. It should answer the following question: Does Turkey see the regional Kurds as a barrier or a bridge to the rest of the region? Surely, the regional Kurds, particularly the PKK and PYD, have to develop a well-thought and constructive policy in order to live alongside Turkey; the Kurdish issue remains the number one constraint on Turkey's regional policy. Lastly, Turkey's relations with the West, but particularly with the United States, will remain transactional and compartmentalized.

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The Voices from Turkey series is part of "Turkey in Europe and the World—A Trilateral Initiative," funded by Stiftung Mercator. The project is organized by the Center for American Progress (Washington), the Istanbul Policy Center (Istanbul), and the Istituto Affari Internazionali (Rome) and aims to outline a long-term prosperity vision for Turkey, explore its role in Europe and the trans-Atlantic relationship, assess the state of the republic and its institutions 100 after its foundation, and examine its position in the region and the world.

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