

The Shift in Turkey's Foreign Policy

Introduction

For almost 20 years, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have dominated Turkey's political scene. Under the "zero problems" doctrine, initiated by former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ankara's initial objective was to improve relations with all its neighbours. While the country was considered an example of a moderate and modern Muslim state, merely a decade ago, during the so-called "Arab Spring", the situation began to change, especially after the failed coup attempt in 2016. A nowadays more assertive and nationalist Turkey is increasingly at odds with its Western allies over Libya, Syria, the South Caucasus, and in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹ The shift in Turkey's foreign policy as well as its increasing military assertiveness is best seen in the country's involvement in the gas dispute with Greece, the Libyan crisis, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and not least in its troubled relationship with NATO. The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the aforementioned shift in Turkey's foreign policy.

Relations with NATO and the US

Turkey is one of NATO's oldest member states and the most important troop contributor to missions and operations next to the United States (US). Due to its special geographic location - being at the crossroads between Europe and Asia - the country is also of considerable strategic importance to the Alliance. Although NATO would undoubtedly be weaker without Turkey, the country is increasingly turning into a source of insecurity.

In recent years, Turkey's foreign policy has become more independent and confrontational: Turkey procured the Russian air defence system S-400 (2017), which, if deployed, might give Russia access to information about NATO air defence systems and could thus pose a considerable risk

to the Alliance. As a result, the US reacted by removing Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program.² The country's military actions in northern Syria in the autumn of 2019 were also heavily criticised by the Alliance. Furthermore, President Erdoğan repeatedly threatened to reject defence plans for Poland and the Baltic countries (also known as Eagle Defender), if the Alliance did not classify the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG militia) as a terrorist organisation.³ Finally, the opening of Turkey's borders to the European Union (EU) back in February 2020, causing a new influx of migrants trying to cross into neighbouring Greece, led to additional tensions between the two NATO allies, who already share a complicated past.

Tensions further intensified when the US imposed sanctions against Turkey over the S-400 purchase under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).⁴ The sanctions put a ban on all US export licenses and authorisations to Turkey's Defence Industry Directorate as well as an asset freeze and visa restrictions on the organisation's president, Ismail Demir, and other high ranking officials.⁵ The timing of the sanctions (more than a year after the delivery of the missile system) could further complicate relations with Ankara for the new US administration - Joe Biden has often been critical of Erdoğan's policies in the past. Nonetheless, appreciating Turkey's geostrategic value and in an attempt to avoid additional confrontation, President Biden is expected to explore areas of potential US-Turkish cooperation, particularly against Russia. In close coordination with the EU, he might try to alter Turkey's foreign policy course in an attempt to preserve a solid diplomatic and security relationship.⁶ Efforts to restore relations with NATO allies (which have been strained during the term of Donald Trump) will be high on Biden's agenda - and Turkey is one of those allies. However, with topics like human rights and the rule of law expected to return to the centre of US foreign policy, friction with Ankara seems almost inevitable.

For the EU, a fully functioning transatlantic Alliance - which Turkey is an integral part of - is of paramount importance because NATO will continue to represent the main framework for European security. The importance of close EU-NATO cooperation on all defence-related issues and the effective addressing of the complex security challenges facing both sides of the Atlantic cannot be overstated.

The gas dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean

Greek-Turkish relations are especially difficult and have been marked by various crises over the past decades, one of them concerning natural oil and gas reserves and maritime rights in the Mediterranean region. Tensions between the two neighbours ran high with Turkey surveying for potential energy reserves in an area Greece claims to be part of its continental shelf.⁷ The EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF)⁸, established by Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan in order to create a regional gas market, and Turkey's exclusion from the negotiations, as well as the maritime deal between Turkey and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya⁹, further inflamed Mediterranean geopolitical tensions. After a brief easing of relations, where both sides expressed their readiness to take up talks under the NATO umbrella, the dispute intensified again. In autumn 2020, Turkey announced that the *Oruc Reis* survey vessel would continue operations near the Greek island of Kastellorizo, which is located just two kilometres from the Turkish mainland.¹⁰ Eventually, both Greece and Turkey have been conducting military drills and sending war ships to the region, and the Mediterranean quickly became a multi-stage theatre for demonstrating military power and engaging in geopolitical competition, confronting the EU with a particularly difficult mediator role.¹¹

The crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean will remain a pressing issue for various reasons: With energy taking up the largest share in

the country's overall imports¹², Turkey sees securing its share in a growing contest over this region as vital.¹³ Additionally, even though the dispute between Turkey and Greece over exclusive economic zones (EEZ) is long-standing, the mounting tensions during 2020 clearly showed that a military collision between NATO allies is not just a remote possibility. Regarding Cyprus, Ankara argues that it should not be allowed to exploit its gas resources until a deal with the Turkish Cypriots is reached. However, the possibility of a mutually satisfactory agreement regarding the status of the divided island remains very slim. In case of a renewed escalation of the gas dispute, a deadlock situation could arise, which would have a negative impact on both EU-NATO relations and on Turkey's bilateral relations with individual states.

The diverging interests of the EU member states vis-à-vis Turkey have revealed once more the difficulties the Union faces in adopting a unified and solid approach towards Ankara. Pushing for a more independent European security policy and strategic autonomy, France insisted on showing solidarity with Greece and Cyprus (France's joint military training exercises with Greece, Italy and Cyprus are a case in point).¹⁴ Paris is concerned that President Erdoğan's reinsertion of Islam into politics could spread in North Africa, encourage Islamist militias, and consequently damage the French sphere of influence. Germany, home to Europe's largest Turkish diaspora, is encouraging a constructive dialogue-based approach, whereas the Baltics are in favour of a smooth relationship with Turkey; being a long-standing NATO ally, Ankara plays an important role in their national security. Other EU member states like Spain or Italy seem to prefer a more balanced approach. The latter has, for example, conducted separate military drills in the Eastern Mediterranean not only with Greece and France but, also with Turkey.¹⁵

Therefore, although Greece and Cyprus have the theoretical backing of the EU, the bloc has so far refrained from stringent action against Ankara, apart from limited sanctions targeting individuals and com-

panies responsible for drilling in contested waters in the Mediterranean.¹⁶ The main reasons for this are concerns that President Erdoğan would retaliate by reinforcing ties with Moscow, reducing counter-terrorism cooperation or even by encouraging more migrants to pass through to Europe – the continued Turkish adherence to the migration deal of 2016 remains of paramount importance to the EU.

Turkey and Libya

Turkey's engagement in Libya is yet another example of the shift in Ankara's foreign policy, stretching from Eurasia to the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁷ In November 2019, President Erdoğan convinced the UN-backed GNA to sign a maritime agreement, declaring the naval corridor between Northeast Libya and Southwest Turkey an exclusive economic zone, which violates the maritime boundaries of Greece and Cyprus.¹⁸ In return, Ankara promised to provide the GNA with military equipment and training personnel. However, this was not the first time that Turkey pursued an agreement with Libya that would define the boundaries of both countries' continental shelves. Ankara has tried to reach such an agreement already in 2010, which was then rejected by Libya. Turkey continued to pursue its ambitions and used the unstable situation in 2018 to its advantage, widening its interests and influence in the region. It was not until November 2019, when Libya agreed to the demands in return for military support.¹⁹

In early January 2020, shortly after signing the agreement, the Turkish parliament decided in an emergency session to deploy troops to Libya, despite harsh criticism from the European Union and NATO that such a military involvement could further destabilise the country.²⁰ The operation's first and foremost objective was to put an end to the enduring attacks by the Libyan National Army (LNA) and their attempt to overthrow Tripoli, the capital of Libya.²¹ In late spring 2020, the Turkish forces, as well as Syrian militants that were deployed by Turkey to fight in the Libyan conflict, together with the GNA succeeded and ended the struggle over Tripoli.

The reasons why Turkey is actively engaged in the civil war in Libya are of geostrategic as well as of economic nature. While Turkey is increasingly isolated in the Eastern Mediterranean, its involvement in Libya poses the possibility of an advantageous geostrategic repositioning of the country.²² Moreover, economic ties between Libya and Turkey have been strong in the past. Not only the vast natural resources, such as oil and gas reserves, made Libya an appealing economic partner, but also the potential in the construction market has attracted Turkish firms during the Muammar al-Ghaddafi era.²³ However, after the fall of Ghaddafi and due to the "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011, Turkey had to withdraw from the majority of its economic projects in Libya, which resulted in an estimated loss of \$19 billion.²⁴ Since then, Turkey has repeatedly tried to resume negotiations and took advantage of the precarious situation in Libya in 2018, which ultimately led to an agreement between the two countries. In the face of the current Turkish national crisis, with a declining foreign direct investment (FDI), a plummeting lira, as well as the inaction of the government during the COVID-19 pandemic, the active involvement in Libya could potentially offer Turkey significant medium-term economic advantages. These include possible lucrative gas discoveries as well as opportunities to establish a long-term exclusive relationship with Libya's Central Bank. The latter would turn Istanbul into a hub for regular and irregular financial services linked to the Libyan economy.²⁵

Although Turkey sets high hopes on the cooperation with Libya, it remains questionable whether it will yield the much-needed strategic leverage. Moreover, the growing impatience of various international actors such as France is putting further pressure on Turkey.²⁶ However, not all European states are as sceptical towards Turkey. Italy, for example, is aware of the need to protect its economic and security interests in Libya, which is why it sets a more conciliating tone towards Turkey. The separate military drills Rome conducted with Ankara, as well as with Athens and Paris, being a case in point.²⁷

Turkey's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in conflict for more than 30 years, dating back to the collapse of the USSR.²⁸ Prior to that, in the Joseph Stalin era, the region of Nagorno-Karabakh had been placed in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, although the majority of its population was, and remains, Armenian.²⁹ Later, in 1991, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh declared their independence, which resulted in a war with Azerbaijan, as the latter refused to alter its borderlines. The war was won by the enclave with Armenian support and was temporarily brought to a hold by a cease-fire in 1994. Nonetheless, the region was never recognised as an independent country – not even by Armenia – and is up until today considered as part of Azerbaijan by the United Nations.³⁰

On July 12th, 2020, the combat flared up again when the Armenian military attacked Azerbaijani troops causing several casualties.³¹ More than two months later, fighting between the two opponents started once again and lasted for six weeks. This time, however, the military conflict was different. Turkey actively supported Azerbaijan and remained consistent with its recent battle strategy, as demonstrated in the Libyan conflict – providing military equipment, especially high-tech drones, training, and deploying Syrian militants. The counter party, Armenia, was supported by Russia through military assistance,³² such as a military base in Gyumri, an Armenian city.³³ This active involvement transformed the local dispute into a regional one.³⁴

Turkish interests in the conflict are manifold. Ties between Ankara and Baku have always been strong based on a shared culture and Turkic language, as well as the fact that Turkey has actively supported Azerbaijan after the separation from the Soviet Union and with its integration into international organisations. Moreover, an active interference in the conflict is also in alignment with the new Turkish foreign policy strategy. The effective support of

Azerbaijan puts Ankara in the position of a direct opponent to the Armenian supporters, which are, from the Turkish point of view, the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group – the US, France, and Russia. Additionally, Turkey shows ambitions to become an influential international actor alongside, and competing with, the United States and Russia. A Mutual Assistance Agreement as well as the establishment of a Strategic Partnership between Ankara and Baku signed in 2010 settled the legal aspects of the involvement. These documents lay down that both countries can conduct joint military exercises and show active support in case of an intrusive intervention by a third party. Similar agreements exist also between Russia and Armenia.³⁵

The battle came to a halt when a peace agreement, initiated by Moscow, was signed by the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders. Nonetheless, Baku left the battlefield as a clear victor, while Armenia has suffered a bitter defeat. However, the real winner of this war is Turkey.³⁶ This triumph represents a substantial geopolitical shift for Ankara, which is not least due to the establishment of a road between Nakhchivan (an Azerbaijani enclave) and Azerbaijan that crosses Armenia and therefore creates a direct way of transportation between Ankara and Baku.³⁷ While Turkey has gained significant influence in this region, especially in Azerbaijan, the peace agreement and in particular the way it took place was a diplomatic success for the Kremlin. About 2,000 Russian peacekeepers are deployed to protect the remaining Armenian population, as well as to patrol the corridor that was established to connect Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the treaty expires after five years and then both Armenia and Azerbaijan are able to voice their withdrawal.³⁸

The involvement of Turkey in yet another war once again demonstrates the shift in Turkey's foreign policy and puts the country at odds with Russia.³⁹ It is not the first time for Ankara to find itself as the rival in a foreign (proxy) war against the Kremlin. This is also the case in Libya as well as in Syria, where Russia and Turkey (similar to Nagorno-Karabakh) have split the areas of

conflict into zones of influence. Furthermore, the fact that the pipelines, which connect Azerbaijan with Turkey and supply the European Union with oil and natural gas, closely pass by the conflict zone raises additional international interest and draws once more Brussels attention on Turkey's actions.⁴⁰ However, the EU's engagement in this conflict should not be determined by its troublesome relations with Turkey, but rather through the resolutions of the UN Security Council.⁴¹

What is particularly alarming with regard to Turkey's new foreign policy strategy, is that Ankara decides to send foreign militants, namely Syrian proxy fighters, to act on their behalf in foreign battles. This bluntly illustrates the country's growing influence in Syria, where Ankara is in direct opposition to Moscow. This competitive constellation was observed repeatedly during the past year. The conflicts in Libya and the South Caucasus, for example, can be interpreted as an expansion of the dispute between Ankara and Moscow in Syria. The active involvement of Turkey in the Libyan crisis can be connected to Russian airstrikes in Syria, which caused fatalities in the Turkish camp in early 2020.⁴² However, in Syria as well as in other conflicts where they are opposing parties, both countries are aware of the necessity to maintain constructive cooperation. In the South Caucasus, for instance, both Ankara and Moscow have overlapping interests, such as establishing a new, more cooperative, Armenian government. Moreover, Turkey's involvement in the conflict helped Russia gain more influence in Armenia, as it has pursued since 2018. Another aspect of this unique partnership is the fact that both countries aim to disassociate themselves from the West. For Russia, strengthening Turkey is a risk it is willing to take, especially when this in return means excluding the US from its battlefields.⁴³ The above briefly illustrates the complexity of the rivalry between Ankara and Moscow.

Conclusion

There has been a striking shift from Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" approach to an overtly confrontatio-

nal foreign policy over the last couple of years. Nowadays, Ankara seems to reject the regional status quo ante and is pursuing an expansion of its sphere of influence. This significant change in Turkey's foreign policy can be traced back to two main points: Especially after the limited solidarity in relation to the 2016 failed coup attempt, Ankara established the narrative that it can no longer trust its Western partners.⁴⁴ It also perceives the West to be in (geopolitical) decline, largely due to the power vacuum created by the US withdrawal from various multilateral commitments under the Trump administration. Additionally, a more assertive foreign policy deflects domestic attention from the country's deteriorating economy. Although Ankara's actions can be interpreted as an attempt to establish Turkey as a major regional power with an autonomous foreign policy, at the same time they also expose the country's increasing international isolation.⁴⁵

From a European perspective, a (future) common line regarding Turkey seems unlikely – as it is the case also with Syria and Libya. Some European countries, such as Germany, follow a more cautious policy towards Ankara, while others, like France and Austria, resolutely call for heavy sanctions or are in favour of officially terminating the EU accession process.⁴⁶ Events like the gas dispute in the Mediterranean or the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have clearly shown how vulnerable peace and stability really are. Although the relationship between Turkey and the EU has been strained during the past year due to several rifts, Ankara is currently trying to set a more conciliating tone. Despite the fact that talks, which are aimed to resolve the disagreement between Ankara and Athens, have restarted on January 25th this year, Turkey still shows latent hostility. This was made clear by the warning it voiced towards Greece to avoid any steps that could cause further escalation.⁴⁷ Therefore, it is imperative that the EU pursues a careful balancing act between successfully confronting Turkey's unilateralism and at the same time preventing bilateral tensions from influencing effective policymaking at the EU level.

Even though nowadays Turkey is pursuing a more resolute and dangerous foreign policy strategy, it remains an important player on many current global challenges, like migration and regional stability. Therefore, the EU should engage more actively and steer its relationship with Ankara in a constructive direction, in order to find common ground instead of simply downplaying Turkish concerns.

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