

Conference Report

Turkey's Foreign Policy: New Directions and Challenges

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

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This is a report of a closed session titled 'Turkey's Foreign Policy: New Directions and Challenges', held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. Being an off the record session, it allowed speakers and participants to freely use the information received. However, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, was to be revealed. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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Summary

The closed session, 'Turkey's Foreign Policy: New Directions and Challenges' was held on October 18, 2017 with the participation of highly esteemed politicians, academics and policy experts from all over the globe. The session primarily dealt with the general landscape and contours of Turkey's foreign policy, its main pillars and its changing dynamics. After presentations by Turkish foreign policy decision makers on the forces of continuity and change in Turkey's relations with the US, the EU and the Middle East; discussion was opened to the floor and distinguished participants shared their analyses.

The debate revolved around Turkey's main principles in its foreign policy, its alliance structure, main security concerns and recent changes in all of these. It has been argued that Turkey's foreign policy has significantly shifted after the Cold War, similar to many other countries. This has been due to the removal of the Cold War's security and ideological constraints over the country. Once the strict confines of the Cold War were vanquished, Turkey has enjoyed a freer hand in diversifying its foreign relations and in opening up to new regions. When it comes to the recent dominant sentiment of Turkey's foreign policy makers, it is marked by frustration emanating from the failures of its traditional allies to stand by Turkey in times when it needed support the most. Turkey, being an actor in a volatile and unstable region, tries to strike the right chord between its interests and promoting global good.

The assertion that Turkey's relations with two of its firmest allies have taken a curious twist in the last few years was an agreed upon issue among the participants. The relationship with the EU became tense due to difficulties in Turkey's negotiation to become an EU member, the EU's failure to share the burden of refugees with Turkey and the blemishing of Turkey in Europe, which is interpreted by the Turkish government as a result of the rising far-right. Turkey-US relations which was regarded a model and strategic partnership in the past have been tainted with the US' rapprochement with the PKK in its fight with DAESH. Furthermore, the US' indifference to Turkey's demands to extradite Gülen, head of the organisation, which orchestrated the July 15 coup attempt, has been taxing the relations. All the more so, troubled relations with these partners have been apparent in the Middle East where Europe was mostly incompetent in helping refugees and the US was inconsistent in its strategy. As a result, Turkey's attempts have been twofold: first, to try to continue and normalise the relations with its partners, second, to build regional initiatives to address the region's problems rather than seeking cooperation elsewhere.

Introduction

As a key player, whose policies affect both Europe and the Middle East, Turkey has long been an interest to both academic and political circles. In the last two decades, Turkey's foreign policy has notably changed because of both domestic reorientations and regional-global landscape shifts. Most analysts were swayed by the ease of interpreting these changes as a major break-up of Turkey's ties with its former allies. However, Turkey's top decision-makers have consistently argued that Turkey was not abandoning its former ties; it was just establishing new ones. In the session 'Turkey's Foreign Policy: New Directions and Challenges'; politicians, academics, regional experts and analysts came together to discuss the dynamics of the country's foreign policy.

The Outlook of Turkey's Foreign Policy

A significant portion of the session was devoted to Turkey's alliance structure and whether it is going through a major change. Most participants agreed that there are changes but this trend should be contextualised with the dynamics of the Cold War. During the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy was plagued by two pervasive constraints. The first constraint was the impact of global ideological polarisation. Turkey, being a member of the Western camp, was also influenced by this ideological conflict. This kind of ideological influence over foreign policy evaporated after the Cold War and, Turkey's foreign policy was liberated. The second constraint has much to do with security. During the Cold War, the USSR constituted an existential threat to Turkey. Now, threat perceptions have changed. Hence, Turkey's foreign policy became much more dynamic after the Cold War.

Currently, Turkey enjoys cordial relations with a wide array of countries. Though Turkey remains loyal to its previous alliance commitments, it follows a path of diversification of its international relations. One reason behind this is Turkey's perception that its allies are not fulfilling their part of the deal. Nevertheless, Turkey's current affairs with other actors are not mutually exclusive to those with the EU and the US. Accordingly, Turkey fosters relations with non-negligible regional players such as Russia and Iran. Likewise, Turkey's relations with developing countries are quite important. There is an ongoing opening to Africa, East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

Regarding the backbone of Turkey's foreign policy, the concept of 'moral rationalism' came to the fore. The concept represents two prominent trends in Turkey's foreign policy: Turkey as a humanitarian state vs. Turkey as a realist player, that faces existential threats. On the one hand, Turkey is a humanitarian state that prioritizes humanitarian values. It proudly takes the burden of Syrian refugees together with Jordan and Lebanon. On the other hand, deep-seated uncertainty brings strategy to the table where being moral is not enough.

Turkey is forced to be a realist power which, not only relies on soft power, but also hard power. Lack of a conceptual framework makes Turkey unsuccessful in convincing others to the sincerity of its foreign policy. So, the usage of the concept 'moral realism' might elevate
Turkey to the moral higher ground. And this would be a convergence between Turkey and the EU as well as other regions.

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Turkey and the EU: Shifting Currents

Although there is a widespread belief in the absence of progress in the EU-Turkey relations, there has in fact been remarkable progress. In the 1990s, the EU had a number of objectives and concerns about Turkey. Certain issues were presented as obstacles to amelioration of relations between the two sides. Among these were human rights violations; rights of the
Kurdish, Alawite and non-Muslim minorities; and finally economic problems such as inflation and unemployment. These were the main concerns for the EU-Turkey relations from the
EU perspective.

Especially after 2002, the government has done a lot to solve these problems. A reformist agenda was pursued. In 2005, the EU declared negotiations for full membership, which was a huge development. However, the trend did not continue. Although Turkey has made a lot of progress in the many problems mentioned, the EU has started following a 'culturalist' agenda. Some EU politicians saw the question in civilisational terms. Accordingly, Turkey was not considered a member of the European civilisation. Despite Turkey doing its own homework, the evaluation of the EU had changed. During the negotiation process, many chapters were opened and closed, but unfortunately the EU stopped opening new chapters. Erdoğan and Turkey in European institutions became the new trend. As a result, despite enduring an overall vision of Turkey, the EU's attitude had shifted and Turkey's path to the EU encountered serious obstacles.

An important point to acknowledge here is the rise of populism within the EU, which has hijacked the EU agenda. Although domestic issues affect foreign policy on both sides, recent developments are telling in terms of European politicians' new concerns as a response to the new wave of populism. For example, a significant portion of TV debates between Merkel and her rivals was on Turkey. Furthermore, the far right party in Germany gained considerable influence in the parliament and the racist party in Austria came second in elections. This indicates a very unusual trend, which is telling in terms of a new shape in the relationship between two parties.

Another problem was the refugee question. In the years 2013-2014 there was a working relationship between the EU and Turkey but it deteriorated over time. The agreement on refugees had four main points: stopping human flow from Turkey to the EU, readmission of refugees back to Turkey, financial assistance to Turkey and visa liberalisation between Turkey and the EU. Since the EU demanded significant changes in Turkey's terror law in order to implement its part of the deal, the arrangement is in near collapse.

The July 15 coup attempt also had a negative impact on relations. When there was an extensive attack on all democratic institutions, Turkey expected more decisive support and a degree of solidarity from its allies. The response from the EU to the coup attempt was neither democratic nor appropriate for an ally. It took two months for EU leaders to come to Turkey. It was either bad intentions or a failure to understand the importance of the coup attempt for Turkey. The EU focused exclusively on dismissal of civil servants who were implicated with FETÖ, the criminal network behind the coup attempt.

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Shockwaves of the Crises in the Middle East

As part of its plan to open up to the rest of the world, Turkey initiated regional and international groupings such as the D-8 and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in the early 1990s. Among others, Turkey's relation with Middle Eastern countries is regarded extremely highly by policy makers. This is because Turkey is affected mainly by all developments in the region. Yet, within the strict enclaves of the Cold War camps, cooperation was not an option. Consequently, Turkey was negatively influenced by regional spillovers of instability.

In the initial period, the PKK threat from Iraq and Syria were the main concerns. Later on in the 2000s, a new trend for engagement developed between Turkey and the Middle East. New political consultations, new economic contacts and new trade channels with the Middle Eastern neighbours were established. Furthermore, visa liberalisation had led to increasing humanitarian contact. When all trends were positive, the region faced new challenges with the Arab uprisings. Turkey believed that the demand for change was genuine and that the region deserved better governance. Therefore, transitions in the right direction were met with praise from Turkey. However, after the resurgence of some of the old regimes, instability in the region has never been more prevalent.

A participant pointed out that after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United States had effectively presented Iraq on a golden plate to Iran. Today, the entire political arena of Iraq has been penetrated by the Iranian influence. Furthermore, responding to the Arab uprisings, Iran has chosen to make use of the disorder and employs tactics that are inhumane but nevertheless profitable in chaotic environments. Therefore, they enjoy regional influence in a vast region in the Middle East. Turkey, on the other hand, has been averse to the use of tactics, costs of which are paid by the people of the region. Instead, it is bearing the brunt of the negative outcomes brought about by the turmoil. Among these are the refugee crisis and its on going security challenges.

Firstly, despite numerous attempts, Turkey could not convince the international
community to find a solution to save the Syrian people from persecution. As a second option,
Turkey offered no-fly zones and protected zones in Northern Syria to prevent mass exodus of people from the country. As both of these were ignored, millions of people became refugees.
This phenomenon constitutes a serious challenge to Turkey for it currently hosts the largest number of refugees in the world. Secondly, fragmentation of state authority in the region has played into the hands of terror organisations such as the PKK and DAESH. To deal with these problems Turkey initiated Operation Euphrates Shield and also took diplomatic steps within the framework of the Astana peace talks.

Turkey's final concern in the Middle East has been the referendum in Northern Iraq. In 2000s, with the decline of security threats, there has been increasingly more engagement with Kurds in the region. Especially after 2008, relations with the KRG have gradually improved. There has been a strengthening of economic ties, high-level political visits and an overall positive atmosphere. Yet, Barzani's referendum decision tipped the balance. Turkey declared that it supports the rights of Kurds within the Iraqi constitution but it would consider independence in Northern Iraq as a security threat - stating that this had to do with preserving Iraq's territorial integrity. Furthermore, Turkey had already proven it had no bias against Kurds by both improving relations with the KRG and holding talks with Salih Muslim before the PYD set out to carve itself a region in Northern Syria.

Future of the Strategic Partnership with the US

Turkey-US relations has been suffering since the end of the Cold War. The main reason behind this is the lack of direction in relations. In order to alleviate this problem of direction, several concepts have been developed such as model partnership and strategic partnership but, mere naming of the relationship did not clarify the nature of bilateral relations.

Participants have identified three main challenges that compromise Turkey-US relations. Firstly, there is a significant lack of clarity in the US foreign policy. The fact that the policy orientation and intentions of the US are vague creates confusion in all of the US' allies such as Poland, Japan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Secondly, there have been changes in Middle East politics. This trend of change that started with the 2003 Iraq War has created several challenges, amongst which are failed states and terrorism. Thirdly, there is a considerable change in Turkish foreign policy. Partly stemming from the change in relative powers of the US and Turkey, Turkish foreign policy has been diversified. During this time, whilst heated debates regarding US decline were taking place, the world was beginning to increasingly recognise Turkey as a powerful regional power, with potential to play a constructive role. As a result, Turkey no longer wanted to invest only in one bloc. Accordingly, since Ismail Cem's initiative in 1999, Turkey aimed to maintain cordial and improved relations with neighbouring countries.

Some current issues have kept the relations of Turkey and the US problematic. The Syrian
Crisis is the first one of these. The US had previously acknowledged that there was strategic convergence and tactical divergence in policies on Syria for Turkey and the US. Yet, this tactical divergence could have been managed with more tact. Besides, the US foreign policy exhibits a clear strategic ambivalence. An example is the fact that, Obama's red line speech, which promised a firmer stance in case of a WMD attack, has proven empty. The second issue is the US's collaboration with the YPG. Everyone in DC accepts that there is no difference between the YPG and the PKK, which is on both Turkey's and the US' terror list. Yet, the US chooses to fight DAESH with them. This could have been considered a tactical alliance.
However, once they got tactically successful, it turned to become a US strategy. Again, this is related to the lack of a clear strategy of the US. Internal rivalries within the US, causes tactics rather than strategy, to be the rule.

Finally, the lack of sympathy from the US regarding the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey constituted a major problem. In strong semblance to Europe's reaction, the US did not treat the coup attempt as the existential threat that it was. Instead, the first reaction from the US was about the stability of foreign policy of Turkey. In another statement, the US representatives did not use the coup word at all. In fact it took forty-five days for a US official to visit Turkey. In addition to this, Fethullah Gülen, the head of the FETÖ lives in the US. Despite numerous requests from Turkey, the US does not accept his extradition, which from Turkey's perspective compromises beliefs in the US' sincerity in its alliance with Turkey.

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Conclusion

Regarding the general outlook of Turkey's foreign policy, there was an agreement among the participants that Turkey's foreign policy has been changing after the Cold War. Yet, the dominant line of thought was that this change has been more of a liberation from former shackles of the Cold War than a total reorientation of the country's position. Furthermore, in pursuit of more security and economic benefits, Turkey has been diversifying its cordial relations. A vital point here is that the process is conducted not at the expense of former alliances but in parallel to them.

The EU and the US being traditional partners of Turkey, have failed on numerous occasions to fulfil their commitments to the alliance with Turkey. This has also created a major impetus to increase the number of alliance frameworks that Turkey is a part of. Nevertheless, there is a decades-long understanding between Turkey and its allies. Once outstanding issues such as the extradition of Gülen, the US tactical alliance with the PKK and the surge of the far right in Europe are settled, genial relations are likely to stay. All things considered, if these relations are to be restored, Turkey's allies will have to sympathise with its apprehensions and show more cooperation in their resolution.

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