

The Post-Election Trajectory of Turkish Foreign Policy

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(Mehmet Kaman - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook examines how post-election Turkish foreign policy will chart its course across regional and global flashpoints. The paper will also review the core themes defining Türkiye's international relations, exploring key cooperation, conflict, and mediation areas.

Introduction

In the last two decades, Turkish foreign policy has pursued a growingly proactive foreign policy in line with the geopolitical transformations and challenges in the world. As a member of NATO, Türkiye has embarked on a journey spanning over seventy years, weaving mutually profitable relationships with the Western World. In the past two decades, Ankara has opened up to its neighbouring countries, balancing its relations as best as possible to leverage its crucial geopolitical position.

Given these dynamics, the 2023 Turkish Presidential elections captivated both Western and regional commentators, who rushed to foresee how the result of these elections could shape Ankara's foreign policy, specifically in dossiers such as Syria, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, NATO, and the EU. The candidates' divergent foreign policy visions fuelled speculations that a change is expected in Ankara's orientations in the event of the opposition's victory. Consequently, analyses of the 2023 election's impact on foreign policy have become salient, particularly within the Western media and think tank circles.

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The Main Themes of Türkiye's international policy

Understanding Türkiye's international policy tenets is fundamental to foreseeing how the Turkish state will behave in the post-election period. Various factors are important, including the geopolitical constraints stemming from Türkiye's geographical position, internal and external threat elements, and the dynamics of cooperation and coexistence within the international system.

Counterterrorism

For over four decades, Türkiye has been engaged in a fierce battle against terrorism, primarily against the PKK, affiliated groups like the YPG and PYD, and other terror groups such as Daesh. Thus, counterterrorism has been a principled stance and an overarching theme in safeguarding the country's national interests. President Erdogan, who frequently [emphasises](#) the fight against terrorism on domestic and international platforms, consistently highlighted that support for terrorism could never be justified.

The Western pretext that the fight against some terrorist groups justifies using other terrorist proxies has not gained currency in Ankara. Terror groups like the YPG, which continue to receive support from the United States to allegedly combat Daesh in northern Syria, are a case in point. The importance of counterterrorism is expected to persist in the next five years. This situation extends far beyond the context of temporary interest maximisation; it has a strategic significance.

Examining the new characteristics global terrorism has acquired in the post-9/11 era, compared to its past forms, reveals an increasing asymmetrical threat dimension, as reflected in NATO's strategic concept [documents](#). This phenomenon, which could be [characterised](#) as "new terrorism" to a certain extent, has led terrorist groups to become more inclined to cooperate with other terrorist groups and form networks when their temporary strategic calculations are at play, regardless of whether they have an organic connection. Consequently, terrorism's international scope has transcended previous hierarchical forms, with an increased disregard for borders and an observed rise in the possibility of finding common ground with other terrorist organisations through collaboration. In an environment where the forms of terrorism are rapidly evolving, placing counterterrorism as one of the fundamental elements of an independent foreign policy vision is of utmost importance for Ankara.



Operation Peace Spring in northern Syria. (Emin Sansar - Anadolu Agency)

Mediation, Normalisation, and Balancing Acts

Mediating conflict is a long-standing position within Turkish foreign policy. In the last two decades, Ankara's endeavours in this regard have garnered considerable attention. Examples of these efforts include the Pakistan-Afghanistan talks in 2007 and the Syria-Israel normalisation discussions in 2008. Mediation initiatives will persist in the forthcoming period to enable the cessation of hostilities and attain peace in contemporary conflicts. This steadfast commitment reinforces Türkiye's image as a responsible power and aligns with the core principles stipulated by the United Nations for international peace.

Normalisation is also high on the agenda. It is imperative to underscore the necessity of normalising diplomatic relations through a well-calibrated formula that is in sync with national interests. In this regard, implementing multi-layered diplomacy proves beneficial, as diplomatic negotiations involving diplomats, ministers, and heads of state in the pursuit of normalisation can take a long time. Nonetheless, these processes can be facilitated through diverse layers of bilateral relations, such as trade and cultural exchanges, wherein formal authorities do not assume primary roles. For instance, the Türkiye-Egypt [normalisation](#), which laid its groundwork several months before the elections and has progressed to the point of establishing embassies at present, owes its significance to some extent to the unimpeded continuity of economic relations that remained resilient even before reaching a diplomatic level.

Ankara will also continue to play a balancing act in several situations. Central to this approach is Türkiye's steadfast stance against broad-ranging sanctions on conflicting parties (unless stipulated by the United Nations) while upholding the principles of respect for the territorial integrity of sovereign states. Within a balanced foreign policy paradigm, Türkiye assumes a position that underscores the perceived costs rather than the benefits of punitive measures, notably exemplified in instances such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Implementing comprehensive sanctions, spanning economic, political, and even cultural and sports domains, though often viewed as a response to decisions made by a nation's political authorities, ultimately bears a significant burden upon people. The ramifications are evident, impacting global food chains, commodity prices, and international trade routes. Furthermore, humanitarian concerns, and the realities of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, further affect this reality. Consequently, the motivation for a balancing act emerges as a coherent axis, endorsing a diplomatic approach that explores avenues of mediation in inter-state conflicts.

Compassionate Realism

Another pivotal aspect consists of incorporating humanitarian values into decision-making processes regarding certain foreign policy initiatives. In this context, Türkiye has consistently [demonstrated](#) the necessary sensitivity in humanitarian assistance, both independently through the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) and the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC), as well as through participation in multilateral organisations such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

When examined within the realm of diplomacy, the humanitarian dimension exhibits a complementary relationship with the themes above of balancing act and mediation. Thus, Türkiye has adopted an active stance to minimise the adverse consequences on food and aid in various conflict zones worldwide, which is expected to persist.

Therefore, in addition to establishing communication channels for the diplomatic resolution of issues, the country's simultaneous focus on humanitarian concerns effectively contributes to the construction of a significant and favourable international image that characterises Türkiye as a reliable power which does not underestimate the impacts of any diplomatic initiative on the people.

The World is Bigger than Five

Another key theme of Turkish foreign policy is the inability of international organisations to act effectively. In this context, President Erdoğan frequently voiced [criticism](#) of the decision-making mechanism of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The Turkish President's motto, namely "The world is bigger than five," is critical towards the UNSC five permanent member structure. The motto stands out as a significant anti-hegemonic discourse aiming to promote global justice and peaceful resolution. The underscored point here is the ineffectiveness stemming from the UNSC's decision-making mechanism, which often fails to transcend self-interest maximisation and falls short of providing solutions that promise global justice. Moreover, due to the potential conflicts of interest among these countries, the effectiveness of the UNSC is highly contested. A passage from Ian Hurd's [piece](#) on the subject succinctly summarises the situation:

"The reaction to Syria helps show some truths about the Security Council that liberal internationalists sometimes forget: The Council was created to help the Great Powers impose their vision of global order on the rest of the world. The veto was added to ensure that when they did



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. (Mustafa Kamacı - Anadolu Agency)

not agree on what should be done, the Council would do nothing. Therefore, the Council oscillates between complete irrelevance and imperial domination, with Great-Power consensus providing the switch determining which condition obtains on an issue. Neither result offers much help to regular people who are suffering as a result of global forces.”

When placed within a broader framework, this structural critique demonstrates a complementary relationship with the analyses of structural realism concerning the general equilibrium of global power. The increasing multipolarity in the international system becomes evident through the ascendance of China as a key actor in world politics, starkly contrasting its comparatively weak position in the aftermath of World War II. Likewise, the military capabilities of Russia demand attention, and it is crucial to acknowledge that the United States can no longer assert its position as the sole dominant pole in global politics, as it once aimed to do following the conclusion of the Cold War.

Countries such as China have been progressively voicing criticisms of the Western-conceived rules-based international system, highlighting its perceived lack of inclusivity and its tendency to reflect exclusively the interests of major power stakeholders. Consequently, rather than further splintering through establishing additional mechanisms for resolving global conflicts, there is a growing consensus that genuine reforms should be pursued within the United

Nations and its associated bodies to assume a more efficacious leadership role.

President Erdoğan’s criticism of the UNSC in his efforts to establish global peace also carries a constructive aspect due to its aim of generating solutions. In this regard, it has been [proposed](#) to establish a transparent and democratic structure for the UNSC, which is not limited by the veto power of the five members but rather consists of a rotating membership of 20 countries with time restrictions. By adopting a pluralistic and inclusive approach in international institutions, steps can be taken to address the often observed criticism of ineffectiveness directed towards these bodies. It is expected that the emphasis on global justice and peace within Turkish foreign policy will continue to be highlighted during the following five years, and it will be frequently articulated on various national and international platforms, particularly in the United Nations.

Case Studies

Counterterrorism, mediation, normalisation, balancing act, humanitarian considerations, and the advocacy for global justice constitute crucial pillars of the future direction of Turkish foreign policy, which have been evident in previous periods and are expected to persist in Ankara’s diplomatic course over the next five years. It is important to look at specific cases to discern how these principles manifest in Türkiye’s foreign policy objectives.

1- The War in Ukraine

One can discern the manifestations of the aforementioned central themes when examining Türkiye's foreign policy stance in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, which has persisted for a year and a half. Notably, Türkiye has adopted a delicate balancing act and pursued mediation to establish a calibrated equilibrium that secured its national interests and alleviated human costs. By describing the war as unacceptable, the country has shown its respect for international law and expressed its commitment to respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, there has been no indication of a pause or regression in Ankara-Moscow relations to prevent this stance from casting a shadow over the relationship with Russia. Consequently, Turkish diplomacy has opposed Russia's complete isolation and drawn attention to the potential ramifications of implementing large-scale sanctions.



Türkiye, UN, Russia, Ukraine sign deal to resume grain exports
(Murat Çetinmühürdar - Anadolu Agency)

In this context, humanitarian considerations as one of the main themes have exerted a significant influence. Particularly, the [Black Sea Grain Initiative](#) has taken the lead in addressing the food crisis that emerged during the war, given the pivotal role played by both countries as substantial grain exporters. Türkiye has extended humanitarian aid to Ukraine and succeeded in bringing the parties together to ensure the secure logistical transportation of regional grain to the requisite ports. Simultaneously, Turkish diplomacy has been instrumental in persuading the parties to facilitate the [exchange](#) of 200 prisoners of war, thus contributing to the successful resolution of this matter. Indeed, during the interlude between the two encounters, President Erdoğan's [announcement](#) regarding the extension of the Grain Corridor for an additional two months indicated Ankara's trajectory in this regard. This development highlighted a case where humanitarian considerations converged within the framework of a balancing act and the mediation-oriented bilateral relationship.

Overall, the general approach to the Russia-Ukraine War exhibits a nuanced and multifaceted stance, characterised by a calibrated balance in its relations with both sides while upholding the principles of international law and emphasising the importance of humanitarian considerations in addressing the crisis.

2- NATO Enlargement and Sweden's Candidacy

Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, Finland and Sweden swiftly expressed their interest in joining the security alliance, prompting discussions regarding their membership. Both countries submitted requests to participate in the coalition, urging for an expedited process and highlighting their commitment to bolstering regional security. Türkiye, in principle, acknowledged the aspirations of Finland and Sweden to become NATO members. However, Türkiye also emphasised that their inclusion in the alliance would be contingent upon their unwavering dedication to combat terrorism, thus adopting a [strategic approach](#) focusing on counterterrorism.

Türkiye underscored the significance of Finland and Sweden curbing the activities of terrorist organisations, particularly the PKK and its affiliates and FETO, within their territories. These activities, [cloaked](#) under the pretext of freedom of expression, necessitated strengthening domestic legal frameworks to effectively counteract the dissemination of plans and propaganda orchestrated by these terrorist groups. Additionally, Türkiye emphasised the importance of meeting extradition requests to prevent the evasion of justice by fugitives and sympathisers of such organisations. By encouraging Finland and Sweden to align their policies with the counterterrorism agenda, Türkiye was in sync with its national security interests.

A [Trilateral Memorandum](#) was signed between Türkiye, Finland, and Sweden during the NATO summit held in Madrid last year. Within the framework of this memorandum, one of Ankara's primary objectives was for these countries to comprehend Türkiye's concerns regarding counterterrorism efforts and to facilitate legal reforms on this issue.



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - Jens Stoltenberg meeting in Istanbul.
(Murat Kula - Anadolu Agency)

Türkiye's strategic positioning of establishing effective legislation on counterterrorism as a bargaining tool has brought to the forefront the deficiency in the principled stance against terrorism held by these nations, thereby emphasising the principled significance attached to counterterrorism by Turkish foreign policy.

The integration of counterterrorism as a pivotal element in Turkish foreign policy bears significance on two fronts. Firstly, Türkiye is a country profoundly affected by terrorism, substantiating its dedication to combating this menace through operations spanning over four decades. Consequently, the authenticity of efforts in counteracting terrorist groups emerges as a critical criterion for any security alliance. Such a stance not only fortifies the spirit of the coalition but also reinforces collective action and cohesion among member states.

Secondly, the emphasis on counterterrorism resonates beyond Türkiye's specific circumstances, assuming a broader global significance. The evolving and asymmetrical nature of terrorist acts transcends national boundaries, indiscriminately targeting innocent civilians, as evidenced by multiple incidents. Moreover, this issue is detrimental to Ankara-Washington relations. The YPG factions, backed by the US under the pretext of combating Daesh, openly manifest an organic affiliation with the PKK, thereby undermining the bilateral ties. Türkiye rejects any strategy employing one terrorist organisation to confront another, exhibiting a categorical opposition to such approaches.

Returning to the Nordic countries' bids for NATO, Sweden recently [enacted](#) a new anti-terrorism legislation and strengthened measures for those involved in terrorist activities or collaborating with terrorist organisations. This development addresses one of Ankara's crucial requirements for endorsing Sweden's membership. However, Finland, perceiving fewer issues with Türkiye than Sweden, opted for an independent application process. To expedite the fulfilment of demands by Swedish authorities and avoid prolonged waiting, Finland took the initiative to proceed independently and joined the alliance on April 4th. In the midst of this, the presence of purported PKK flags being waved and pro-terrorism slogans being chanted during the recent anti-NATO [protest](#) and demonstrations in front of Stockholm's parliamentary building serves as an indication of Sweden's ongoing need to substantiate its resolve in this regard. While one may contend that protests constitute a minority viewpoint and do not reflect the official position of the Swedish government, the emphasis lies in establishing a threshold against even the slightest demonstration of sympathy and fortifying the legal framework to ensure that the freedoms of speech and assembly are not exploited as justifications.

3- Normalisation with Egypt and Syria

The focus of the next five years will be on normalising relations with countries such as Egypt and Syria. The Ankara-Cairo relationship has already begun to develop with the reopening of embassies and the expansion of bilateral trade. This case exemplifies the importance and effectiveness of employing a multi-layered approach to normalisation, bringing together government officials and business actors who can act as "advance forces" or a group that works in tandem with official teams. In the case of Türkiye-Egypt normalisation prospects, this approach is relevant due to Egypt's deteriorating economic situation, which has become a matter of survival. Consequently, Turkish foreign policy in this context will be based on ongoing economic initiatives and creating favourable conditions for normalisation.

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant aspects influencing the prospects of Türkiye-Egypt normalisation is the situation in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Cairo has been concerned about Ankara's close ties with Libyan Prime Minister Dbeibah, which has hindered the establishment of communication channels between Türkiye and Egypt. However, recent signs of improving relations between Tripoli and Cairo suggest a promising outlook. In this normalisation process, the Libyan and Egyptian sides have identified areas of economic improvement and emphasised the benefits of bolstering cooperation. As relations between Tripoli and Cairo strengthen positively, this will greatly contribute to Türkiye-Egypt normalisation. All regional actors recognise the necessity of coexistence and enhancing economic ties to advance further normalisation. In other words, reducing diplomatic conflicts can be partially achieved by engaging in multi-layered diplomatic tactics as extensively as possible.

Another top issue for Turkish diplomacy regarding the normalisation is Syria, as it is closely related to Türkiye's two grand themes defining its foreign policy axis. The first is mainly about the resolved stance against terrorism across the Türkiye-Syria border. Establishment of a safe buffer zone through consecutive military operations such as Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, Operation Claw-Sword, and Operation Spring Shield. In these operations, the top priority was cleaning Northern Syria from being a safe haven for terror groups, especially YPG and PYD, both of which are the regional [extensions](#) of the PKK.

Last month, Türkiye and Syria [convened](#) under the auspices of Russia's initiative, with Iran's participation, to engage in a high-level meeting at the Foreign Ministers' level. During this quadripartite foreign ministerial meeting, emphasis was placed on Syria's territorial integrity and counterterrorism imperative. Although the presence of Turkish military forces in the region constitutes a red line for the



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. (Aytaç Ünal - Anadolu Agency)

Assad regime in its pursuit of normalisation, this concern assumes a pivotal position in safeguarding Türkiye's national interests, rendering it seemingly unyielding as long as the presence of the YPG persists in the area.

When contemplating the trajectory of normalisation with Syria, it becomes imperative to acknowledge Russia as a salient actor, as its diplomatic relations with Türkiye have gained considerable weight since the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, surpassing in significance and effectiveness the connection that Moscow upholds with the Assad regime, which is to some extent vital for the regime's survival. Nevertheless, discerning a path for normalisation that adheres to the aspirations of the Assad regime remains elusive, given Russia's desires.

Consequently, the Assad regime seemingly adopts an [ap-proach](#) of commencing negotiations by trying to raise the stakes, notwithstanding the arduousness of fully ensuring its territorial integrity anymore. Therefore, the resolute opposition of Türkiye to terrorism, together with the frequency and constructive nature of its diplomatic engagement with Russia, integral components of the normalisation discourse, appear to steer Türkiye-Syria rapprochement towards a trajectory that aligns closely with Türkiye's national interests.

Moving Forward

After President Erdogan's re-election, his strategic appointments to key positions garnered significant attention in domestic and international media outlets. Of particular note was the elevation of Hakan Fidan, the Director of the National Intelligence Organisation, to the coveted Minister of Foreign Affairs position, while Ibrahim Kalin, the former Presidential Spokesperson, assumed Fidan's former role.

These appointments were far from arbitrary, as both Fidan and Kalin have been instrumental in shaping Türkiye's proactive diplomatic initiatives in recent years, encompassing vital concerns ranging from the Syrian conflict to engagements with NATO, the war in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh War, and Qatar Crisis.

The subsequent appointment of these two figures into foreign policy and intelligence signals a continuum that is in synergy with the main tenets of counterterrorism, balancing acts, and normalisation. Consequently, these developments not only disprove speculations about potential shifts in Türkiye's geopolitical postures but also signify the continuation of a determined trajectory.