

## Commentary

### **Navigating into Troubled Waters: Turkey's Foreign Policy in 2019**

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The Turkish foreign policy has endured a challenging year in 2019. The challenge against Turkey in 2019 had several dimensions. One is about Turkey's traditional alliance relations. The other is related to Turkey's concerns and interests in its region. In addition to that the dynamic nature and hastened transformation of the international order defines the atmosphere that Turkey finds itself within.

The current period in the international politics is marked by increasing uncertainty. The actors in the international system feel encouraged to embrace unilateral activism in the absence or inefficiency of multilateral mechanisms that foster cooperation or resolve conflicts. Such multilateral mechanisms still exist, yet they receive inadequate support from the major powers. There is little enthusiasm on the part of the United States of America to uphold such mechanisms or processes that seek to provide venues for international actors to resolve their conflicts of interest or cooperate for mutual benefit. This situation is deemed to be the decline of the 'liberal international order'.

The international system has been undergoing significant transformation at least since 2016, the year when Donald Trump was elected the president of the United States and the United Kingdom voted in favor of leaving the European Union (EU). These developments signify an important change in the international system as we know it. The Trump administration in the U.S.A. proved to be unpredictable in many aspects particularly in the U.S.

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foreign policy. Britain's decision to leave the EU, also known as Brexit, poses a substantial challenge to both the Union and itself. It has also been regarded as a defining moment for the future of the European Union.

Turkey's transatlantic relations and its bid for membership to the EU constitute two important anchors of the Turkish foreign policy. Turkey was having problems in both issues for quite some time, yet in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, the Turkish decision makers felt increasing levels of distrust toward both the U.S.A. and the European allied countries. For Turkey, its traditional Western allies were late in condemning the coup attempt and astoundingly eager to criticize the Turkish government's response against the perpetrators of the coup. Nevertheless, Turkey has maintained its EU membership bid and continued to value the NATO alliance. Its European allies continue to be its main trade partners despite intermittent strains in the relations.

### **Reaching across the Mediterranean: Turkey's commitment in Libya**

In November, Turkey and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya signed two important agreements, one about the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas and the other on security cooperation. These agreements mean a larger involvement by Turkey in the in Libyan civil war, which has been going on since 2011.

After the downfall of Muammar Qaddafi's rule in Libya, successive attempts at forming a stable government failed and the ensuing disagreement resulted in violent fighting across the country. The conflict between various factions in Libya has further deteriorated into political fragmentation. The UN-facilitated political negotiations brought about the Libya Political Agreement in 2015 known as the Skheirat Agreement. The Presidential Council (Head of State), the Government of National Accord (executive body) and the House of Representatives (legislative body) were formed after this agreement as instruments of a political solution to the conflict. Yet, the fighting in the country has not stopped after the agreement.

The Libya Political Agreement of 2015 has been endorsed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2259 (2015), which recognizes the GNA as the legitimate government of Libya. The UNSC Resolution 2259 also

calls for the member states to support the bodies formed by the Skheirat Agreement and to cease support to the groups that do not take place in the agreement.

Warlord Khalifa Haftar, leader of the faction called the Libyan National Army (LNA), who controlled large territories in the east and south of the country, is supported by the Libyan House of Representatives since 2015. Haftar's militia often clashed with the forces of the GNA based in the Tripoli. As of 2019, Warlord Haftar and the GNA constitute the two major adversaries of the conflict. Haftar launched an assault against Tripoli in an effort to bring about a military solution to the conflict. Demonstrating an open defiance against the political solution efforts facilitated by the United Nations Special Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Haftar's assault interrupted a national conference that was to be held on April 14-16, 2019 by the sides of the Libyan conflict.

As of fall 2019, Haftar's forces advance against the GNA forces and are stationed at a distance of 15-20 kilometers from the capital city of Tripoli. According to news reports, the civilian infrastructure and settlements are frequently targeted by the LNA forces of Haftar, who receives support from various countries such as France, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Under these circumstances, the memorandum of understanding signed by Turkey and Libya on security and military cooperation in November 2019 provides legal basis for Turkey's military support to the GNA.

The course of the conflict in recent years has tipped the balance in favor of one side in Libya as mentioned above. This situation has increased the likelihood of a military solution to the conflict which would entail the elimination of one side by the other. Yet, military solutions to conflicts of this scale are likely to bring about dire humanitarian consequences. Mass movement of people, forced displacement, torture, looting, kidnappings, enslavement massacres and other forms of violence are frequently witnessed under such circumstances. The Libyan territories, which are recently captured by the LNA, already experience deteriorating conditions of similar nature. Such a scenario would be in total contrast to the efforts by the international community to bring about a negotiated political solution to the Libyan conflict. Turkey's intervention in favor of the GNA may help achieve a military balance on the ground by boosting the capabilities of Tripoli. As a desired military solution becomes too costly for the LNA, the likelihood of cease-fire on the ground increases, which then would stop the loss of life and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Such a scenario depends on the level of commitment that

Turkey is willing and capable to undertake in Libya as well as responses and policies of other actors both regional and international.

Regardless of its scale, Turkey's commitment to support the GNA in Libya is a major development in terms of foreign policy. It is an overseas endeavor in a country several thousand kilometers away. In military terms, logistic and resupply issues may pose a challenge to the sustainment of Turkey's military cooperation with the GNA. Yet, the real challenge is likely to be about the diplomatic and political aspects of Turkey's support. Even though his forces are accused of war crimes, Warlord Haftar maintains good relations with many countries. He is expected to bring stability to Libya albeit with military instruments. Therefore, the consequences of his methods are overlooked. In this context, Turkey may find itself isolated against a host of opponents in Libya. Navigating such a course will require a great deal of effort on Turkey's part.

### **Eastern Mediterranean Predicament**

Turkey's support to the GNA in Libya is also closely related to its maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, which has become a hotspot with potential hydrocarbon reserves. Turkey has the longest coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean which is approximately 1,600 kilometers at length. Therefore, it feels entitled to sovereign rights and legitimate interests in the maritime zones situated to the west and north of the island of Cyprus. Since 2003, the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA) has signed delimitation agreements on maritime jurisdiction areas with several regional countries and has issued licenses for searching oil and gas in the maritime areas of the island.

Delimitation and deconfliction in maritime areas primarily involve institutions and processes such as international law and political negotiations. While Turkey is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a comprehensive regime governing the uses of oceans, seas and their resources, it adopts some of its provisions in its national law. The other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean base their claims on the UNCLOS. In addition to that Greece seeks to extend its maritime jurisdiction area to the east of the islands of Crete and Rhodes, thereby confining Turkey to a narrow zone around the Bay of Antalya. Turkey opposes the notion that islands are entitled to maritime jurisdiction areas on the same scale as mainlands. Therefore, in Turkey's view, the islands of Crete, Rhodes, Meis and

others cannot generate maritime jurisdiction areas beyond their territorial waters. Such disagreements remain unresolved for a long time as dormant issues. States such as Turkey maintain the position of 'persistent objector' to international norms in order to avoid their binding effects.

In the case of the Eastern Mediterranean, the conflicting interests and claims would have remained dormant if no hydrocarbon reserves had been discovered. Nevertheless, the region has become a potential supplier of natural gas with the discovery of natural gas in the Tamar (2009) and the Leviathan (2010) gas fields located in the Israeli maritime zone; and in the Aphrodites (2011) field in the maritime zone of the island of Cyprus; and in the gas field of Zohr located in the Egyptian exclusive economic zone. The scale of these reserves is potentially above the domestic consumption of these countries, therefore there are prospects of energy exports from the region to Europe, which involves natural gas pipeline projects. Eager to benefit from the potential gas wealth in the region, the regional countries except Turkey and several big energy companies seek to cooperate further in the field of energy.

Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus are excluded from these regional initiatives concerning energy supplies. Since the GCA retains the international status of the now-defunct Republic of Cyprus, it enjoys international recognition and seeks to portray itself as the sole owner of the island. Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots oppose what they perceive as the Greek Cypriots' hijacking of the political power and the wealth of Cyprus. Therefore, the Turkish Cypriots think that they are entitled to share the potential natural gas wealth in the maritime areas surrounding the island. Yet, the issue has never been negotiated among the sides and the negotiations for a political solution are on deadlock as well.

Against this backdrop, Turkey signed a memorandum of agreement with the GNA of Libya on delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean. With this agreement Turkey extended its maritime jurisdiction area has partially encircled the islands of Crete and Rhodes from the east. Therefore, the agreement practically prevents Greece from extending its jurisdiction areas further east into the Eastern Mediterranean.

Provisions of agreements and memorandums remain on paper unless secured by the consent of all parties involved or enforced by military means. Both of these ways have its own difficulties. The first method requires shrewd diplomatic efforts yet is increasingly difficult given that there is little room for

concessions amidst conflicting interests. The second way necessitates a strong commitment endowed with political will, economic capability and military capacity.

The Turkish-Libyan maritime agreement has already been opposed by various actors in the region and beyond. While Turkey is not bound by the provisions of the UNCLOS regarding islands, some critics of the agreement claim that it is against the international law for the reason that it breaches the maritime areas of the islands. Other critics question the legitimacy of the GNA for signing such an agreement.

Turkey's endeavor in Libya is therefore closely connected to its efforts for defending its maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. For the short term; Turkey needs to rely on its resolve in order to safeguard its interest in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean. If Turkey manages to contribute to a cease-fire in Libya, the UN-facilitated political negotiations will have more chance to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Such a scenario is likely to bring Turkey much needed diplomatic leverage as well. That is because contributing to the resolution of the Libyan conflict that has been going on for almost nine years entails a great deal of international prestige.

### **Incursion into Syria**

The Syrian crisis continued to be a major challenge in 2019 for Turkey. The course of the Syrian crisis brought about security concerns for Turkey on a significant scale due to the fact that Turkey shares an approximately 1,000 kilometers long land border with Syria. It is not possible for Turkey to isolate itself from any development within Syria in the context of a civil conflict. The violent crackdown by the Assad regime against popular uprisings in 2011 initiated internal displacement of people within the borders of Syria. Yet, as the popular uprising turned into a full-scale civil war, Syrian people started to flee repression and many of them sought shelter in the neighboring countries as well. As of the end of 2019, Turkey hosts more than 3.5 million Syrians seeking shelter from the Assad regime and the terrorist groups that operate in Syria. The flow of people from Syria to the Turkish border has put great strains on Turkey's capacity to host.

In addition to mass movement of people, the Turkish territories have been frequently targeted by conventional and terrorist attacks from inside Syria.

Both the regime forces and the terrorist groups along the border such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the PKK resorted to attacks against Turkey over the course of the conflict. Turkey has for a long time carried out initiatives in cooperation and coordination with the international community for finding a solution to the Syrian crisis and fighting against the terrorism threat from inside Syria.

Turkey has continued the Astana process initiated with Russia and Iran in 2017 that is focused on finding a solution to the Syrian crisis through meetings on several levels including summits. These meetings initially aimed at facilitating the ceasefire agreed in December 2016. The parties agreed upon establishing de-escalation zones in Syria to halt the fighting between the regime and the opposition. Only the Idlib de-escalation zone remains at the end of 2019. After taking over all other de-escalation zone, the Syrian regime sets its eyes on Idlib where more than 4 million Syrians live and various opposition groups including some extremists such as the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as al-Nusra Front) are based. The Russian-Turkish agreement in September 2018 had provided a halt to the regime operations against the region, yet Damascus relaunched assaults on Idlib with the support of its allies. Turkey maintains ceasefire observation posts with military units deployed in the region. The Idlib problem remains a thorny issue for both Turkey and the region with an increasing risk of military confrontation and mass movement of people. Turkey's increased commitment serves to heighten this risk for itself, yet it has little choice given the proximity of Idlib and millions of Syrians to the Turkish border.

In parallel to the international efforts to defeat ISIS, Turkey has launched the Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 and cleared a strip of land from terrorists in the north west of Syria. Turkey also targeted the PYD and YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist group, with the Operation Olive Branch in January 2018 clearing the area around Afrin along the border. The removal of the PKK affiliates from the Turkey-Syria border had for a long time been a point of negotiations between the USA and Turkey. The USA support the PKK affiliates in Syria and utilize them as ground forces in the fight against ISIS. Turkey had for a long time argued that the PYD presence along its border in the north east of Syria must be eliminated. In December 2018, President Trump announced its decision to withdraw from the north east of Syria. Since then, the Turkish and the American sides were holding talks on the issue of the north east of Syria albeit with no outcome. At last, Turkey

launched the Operation Peace Spring on 9 October 2019 against the PKK affiliated groups in the east of Euphrates after US President Donald Trump ordered the US troops out of the north east of Syria on October 6. .

Turkey managed to secure a strip of land between the towns of Ras al-Ain and Tel-Abyad through negotiations with the United States (October 17) and Russia (October 22), effectively partitioning the areas controlled by the PKK affiliates. These agreements ensured the withdrawal of the PKK affiliates from the border with Turkey, and introduced Russian military presence to the north east of Syria via joint patrols with Turkey that oversees the withdrawal of YPG forces.

Turkey has taken one more step for its objective of removing the terrorist threat from its border and denying the PKK a base of operations in Syria. Even though, the infrastructure built by the PKK and its affiliates in Syria since 2012 has not been totally eliminated, it was greatly degraded with the Olive Branch and Peace Spring operations. Before 2016, the Turkish concerns were largely about a PKK presence all along its southern border. Military resolve as well as diplomatic maneuvers ensured the end of a threat on such a scale yet Turkey's military activism in the north of Syria posed quite a challenge to the relations with its traditional western allies. USA and the European countries who criticized Turkey's policies in Syria are yet to come up with a comprehensive policy for addressing the current Syrian crisis. Still they condemned Turkey's actions and sought to impose an embargo on arms sales to Turkey. The U.S. government also declared sanctions against the Turkish government officials during the conduct of the operation, which were removed after the Turkish-American agreement of ceasefire on October 17. The worst blow against the Turkish-American relations came on October 29 when the U.S. House of Representatives voted in favor of recognizing the so-called Armenian genocide. It should also be remembered that the U.S. had decided to remove Turkey from the F-35 program in Summer 2019 due to Turkey's acquisition of S-400 air defense systems from Russia.

### **Conclusion**

There are growing risks in Turkey's immediate neighborhood and all involved actors are expected to take action in accordance with their perceived benefit. In addition to that there is little incentive for actors to pursue genuine cooperation. For Turkey, the major foreign policy issues outlined in this article



are likely to set its foreign policy and security agenda in 2020. The developments in recent years show that Turkey is increasingly compelled to act in unilateral resolve to address its security concerns in the region. While its traditional alliance relations maintain its strategic value for Turkey, there are some issues that Turkey has always found difficult to address within that framework. It is of course unjust and unrealistic to expect that one single alliance network would provide ways to resolve all security issues of its members.

Turkey's increased capabilities and resolve may provide intensives for further unilateral action in accordance with its interests. The challenge ahead for Turkey's diplomacy will involve spending efforts in order to avoid the risk of alienating current allies and potential partners in the region. Unless Turkey avoids that, it may risk diplomatic isolation even in its rightful and legitimate policies. There is also the issue of costs related to Turkey's foreign and security policy initiatives. The hardships that the Turkish economy is going through pose serious obstacles before further foreign policy initiatives. Therefore, the year 2020 is expected to be more challenging than 2019 for Turkey in terms of foreign policy.