

Turkish Foreign Policy In A Changing World

Gülrü GEZER¹

After the end of the Second World War Türkiye became embedded to the Euro-Atlantic institutions. It joined the Council of Europe, fought in Korea and became a member of NATO where it played a crucial role as the Eastern Flank of the Alliance. Nevertheless, during the same period its geo-strategic location necessitated it to have friendly relations with the USSR and further its ties with the countries in the Middle East.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall the world entered a new era. Several theories were put forth. Did democracy prevail? Was it the end of history? Would there be a clash of civilizations? After the turbulence of the 1990's when all countries big and small, old and new were trying to adapt to a major shift in the international world order, the US tried to establish itself as the only superpower. The Russian Federation was in the process of trying to regain its old strength and glory, while China was growing in double digits with an aim to challenge the US by the beginning of the 21st century.

This period was a big challenge, yet also an opportunity for Turkish foreign policy. On the one hand, with the former Soviet republics gaining independence Türkiye was able to re-establish and foster its ties with the Central Asian Republics and Azerbaijan, on the other hand, the independence of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict created tensions in the South Caucasus. Micro-nationalism in the Balkans, a region where Türkiye has strong historical and cultural ties, unleashed the deadliest of wars seen on the European continent since World War II.

Understanding that it could no longer follow a foreign policy solely looking at the world from the Western perspective, Türkiye started to pursue a multi-dimensional foreign policy. While taking part in all the NATO and EU missions in the Western Balkans, Türkiye in the coming years also initiated tri-lateral mechanisms to foster peace and economic prosperity in the region. Furthermore, with former President Süleyman Demirel's historic trip to Central Asia, Türkiye reached out to these countries with whom it has ancestral ties. Today there are several mechanisms that bring the Turkish speaking countries together. Until the "Arap Spring" Türkiye had become an important power in the MENA region. Moreover, during the time when İsmail Cem was Foreign Minister Türkiye reached out to the African continent, and established ties with regional organizations in Asia. In line with its foreign policy objectives Türkiye over the years expanded its network of Embassies in these regions.

¹ Former Diplomat & Consul General of Türkiye to LA/Foreign Policy Analyst/ Worked and lived in Damascus, Brussels, LA and Moscow

In addition, Türkiye steadily developed its relations with Russia. Türkiye after the death of Stalin had gradually improved its ties with the Soviet Union. In the 1980's and early 1990's many agreements were signed, including the first long term gas deal. These developments laid the foundation for a strong partnership that later emerged when Putin came to power.

All of these policies were complementary not contradictory to Türkiye's role in NATO, as well as its EU accession process.

Over the past three decades, the US despite its aspirations, was not able to become the sole superpower, Russia re-emerged on the world scene much faster than expected and China became perceived as a threat in the Indo-Pacific region.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine has accelerated the anticipated tectonic shifts in the world. While Russia's true strength is being tested as the West is doing its utmost to weaken Moscow militarily and politically, China, albeit economic challenges in the past couple of years, remains strong.

Once again, questions arise about the world being divided between democracies and autocracies, and the emergence of a multipolar world with the US on one side and Russia and China on the other. As previous assumptions have shown, it is too early to predict how the world scene will be shaped.

Regardless of the discussions taking place, Türkiye is once again in a position to re-evaluate its foreign policy objectives and priorities. However, this time, there are additional challenges such as climate change, pandemics and nuclear proliferation which Türkiye should take into consideration.

What Lies Ahead?

According to many, Türkiye is seen to be trapped in a position where it has to decide whether if it wants to be a part of the West or a part of the East. Today's challenges require Türkiye to be a part of both. To date, Türkiye's foreign service is still among the world's best, thus it has the well-equipped human capital necessary to pursue a multi-dimensional foreign policy.

In a world in which global energy, health and food security are among the new risks facing all countries, Atatürk's "Peace at home, Peace in the world" motto has become even more important.

Therefore, first and foremost, Türkiye should strive to secure its own well-being by addressing the obstacles brought forth by these new set of challenges. It should develop the

means to become increasingly self-reliant on energy, set clear and ambitious targets for transitioning to green energy, use its water resources carefully and adapt to modern agricultural methods, as water and food will become scarce in the region, being the potential causes of future conflicts.

Türkiye's EU accession process has been stalled. Many commitments have not been fulfilled. The war in Ukraine has shown the weaknesses of the EU and the European continent as a whole. The more inward the EU turns, the faster it will become irrelevant on the world stage. Thus, it should be in the interest of the EU to re-engage in dialogue and push the accession negotiations forward. Needless to say, Türkiye should also play its part in this process. Türkiye is a part of Europe and it will remain so. The EU cannot be taken hostage by some countries within the Union which want to exclude Türkiye.

Türkiye's importance for NATO is apparent. In return, Türkiye expects NATO to understand its security concerns and act in solidarity.

In its region and beyond, Türkiye as it has done in the past, should continue to contribute to peace via the already existing mechanisms and by establishing new ones. Türkiye's stability is directly affected by the stability in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia. Consequently, it is only natural for Türkiye to be a part of the initiatives that will contribute to regional peace and economic prosperity.

Yet, the biggest challenge for Türkiye in the coming years will be its ability to balance its relations with the US, Russia and China. If the US does not want its power to diminish on the global arena it needs regional allies like Türkiye. Türkiye's improving ties with the US will also keep its relations with Russia in an equilibrium. While Türkiye supports China's "one-China" policy, it continues to raise concerns about the Uyghurs in the Xinjian province. Pursuing its traditional policy towards China, Türkiye can continue to foster its economic relations and cooperate with Beijing in areas of common interest. However, Türkiye must be careful not to be drawn into the global rivalry between the US and China.

Many uncertainties lie ahead, nevertheless located at a tumultuous geography for a very long time, Türkiye has the necessary expertise and means to preserve its own security and play a constructive role in the efforts to safeguard and foster peace in the world.