

## ARTICLE

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# 100 Years of Continuity in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Constructivist Perspective

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### Abstract

*Turkish foreign policy displays a distinct identity and certain characteristics that are continuous over the span of a century. This continuity and ideational permanence can be thoroughly explained via a social constructivist theoretical framework. This article employs a conventional constructivist lens to explain and analyze how Türkiye has adopted humanitarian and enterprising qualities in its foreign policy-making since the early Republican era. The initiatives, approaches and practices that have been recently put into effect by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye can indeed be traced back and interpreted as the marks of a distinct foreign policy in the international arena. The applied constructivist framework, which provides a broader analysis of Turkish foreign policy, facilitates a better understanding of its continuity and consistency, encompassing interests defined based on the Republic's distinct identity and guiding principles throughout a century of constant evolution.*

### Keywords

Republic of Türkiye, Turkish foreign policy, social constructivism, diplomacy, continuity

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## Introduction

The Republic of Türkiye, which was founded by the Turkish people led by the great statesman and visionary Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, will celebrate its centenary on October 29, 2023. Given all these years of significant changes, dwelling on possible prospects of the Republic for the present era and beyond certainly requires a retrospective approach, focusing on the general patterns of the country's foreign policy throughout the decades in a comparative manner to the full extent possible.

In this cognitive journey, one should begin with a prevailing observation: Nothing is static; everything is in constant evolution in social life. Cultures engaging in the formation of norms and values are also the product of such evolution. The guiding culture prevalent in Turkish foreign policy is no exception.

Foreign policy is all about pursuing, attaining, preserving and improving the defined national interests of a state.<sup>1</sup> In foreign policy, mainstream schools generally tend to work on analyses based on facts, i.e., outcomes that can be seen and perceived on the ground as the results of a country's policies. However, such outcomes are not exhaustive in providing a good understanding of a state's foreign policy.

## Social Constructivism

Social constructivism as a complementary tool can provide a better and more comprehensive understanding of foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Social constructivism enables us to provide answers to “why” and “how” questions in foreign policy analyses, whereas mainstream approaches can only provide partial analyses to “what” questions. In a social constructivist approach, both practitioners and academics are brought together to analyze the backgrounds and causes of the prevailing outcomes that are seen on the grounds. ‘Background’ in this context means the whole process leading to the facts of a certain situation, such as the outbreak of a war

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for example. In that sense, background consists of material elements such as history, geography and all the other factors that affect decision-making processes, including the identity of decision-makers.

Social constructivism also helps us better analyze the differing rationales of decision-makers, whereas mainstream schools tend to accept one pattern of rationality governing all situations. Although we can talk about one material reality based on what is seen on the ground, the understanding or interpretation of such a reality can differ according to one or another state, as states are formed and run by humans. This assumption leads us to argue that states are in fact living mechanisms whose rationalities can differ based on their understanding of given situations.

Constructivism lies between the positivist material world as to ontology, and the post-positivist or reflectivist constitution of this world as to epistemology. In this context, to better explain the utility of constructivist theorizing in a positivist, material world, by underlining the fact that things are not fixed or given, but that what is understood as a fact might change according to inter-subjective formation, one can give the following example:<sup>3</sup> When throwing a stone into the air, it is easy to predict its route according to the rules of nature and physics. However, when one throws a bird into the air, the route that the bird will follow cannot be predicted *a priori*. The epistemological formation of the bird, i.e., its knowledge and experience, will determine which direction the bird would take. Thus, in order to predict the bird's behavior, one should know the factors shaping the epistemological formation of the bird based on its identity, values, experience etc., all of which are inter-subjective by nature. The same holds true for states, which are formed by human beings whose perceptions of the outside world are based on inter-subjectivism and reflectivism rather than positivism.

The bird-versus-stone metaphor enables us to distinguish states' behaviors as living mechanisms from the understanding of states from a positivist perspective. Additionally, when it comes to comparing different states acting on different rationalities, the following metaphor could provide more illumination: The famous "theatre on fire" scenario of Arnold Wolfers. The scenario is a fire in a theatre in which everyone runs for the exits. Yet, even in these seemingly over-determined circumstances,

the lack of knowledge with regards to social practices or constitutive norms and structures still could not lead us to determine conclusions. Who goes where in the same situation, which affects many at the same time? Answering this question would require knowing more, such as the norms, culture, institutions, social practices and thus identities that constitute the participants, whether humans or groups of humans—states—in a given situation.<sup>4</sup>

These examples are meant to provide a good indication of the utility of constructivism in foreign policy analysis. It is clear that constructivism is not an alternative to, but complementary to the realist understanding of the world and international relations. It provides additional explanations of the realist world outside without rejecting it. Constructivism in its conventional form thus functions on the premises of mainstream scholarship but also complements them with societal premises stressing the importance of identity, culture, norms and interests in shaping states' foreign policies in International Relations (IR). Constructivism does indeed help contemporary IR to provide a more complete picture of “what makes the world hang together.”<sup>5</sup>

In this article social constructivism serves as a theoretical framework in providing some insights about the evaluation of Turkish foreign policy across the span of a century.

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## Turkish Foreign Policy

Turkish foreign policy is a story of continuity in evolution as the national interests of the Republic remain intact. Thanks to a centennial experience, coupled with the legacy of an institutionalized diplomacy of 500 years,<sup>6</sup> the foreign policy of the Republic of Türkiye has developed its own characteristics composed of various assets and practices that make it distinct in the international arena, while always adhering to the principles of international law and customs, such as *pacta sunt servanda*. Today, Turkish foreign policy can be defined as humanitarian and enterprising and is conducted in a wise and compassionate manner.<sup>7</sup> It is multifaceted and multidimensional, reaching out to all corners

of the world. In addition to the country's traditional areas of interest and interactions in its adjacent regions, such as Europe including the Balkans in the West, the Black Sea basin in the North, the Caucasus and Central Asia in the East, the Mediterranean basin in the South, as well as the Middle East and its Euro Atlantic ties, Türkiye's policies focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as Asia, as a whole, contribute to implementing a holistic approach. Naturally this requires an active diplomacy both at the negotiating table and on the ground. Promoting regional ownership, taking timely initiatives, supporting localized responses to local needs while strongly engaging in multilateralism are still the general patterns today.<sup>8</sup>

Although Turkish foreign policy today might seem to reflect the new approaches of recent times, they are in fact the testimony of continuity. The young Republic, as early as the 1920s, managed to establish its first embassies in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, namely Ethiopia

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in 1926 and Brazil in 1929. Similarly, already in the 1930s, on the eve of the Second World War, Türkiye initiated the formation of regional organizations in its adjacent geographies, in the Balkans and the Middle East; the Balkan Pact<sup>9</sup> and Saidabad

Pact<sup>10</sup> are early examples of such regional engagement. The country also worked to improve its relations with the Western powers, many of whom had been its foes during its war of liberation. Atatürk's strategy can be described as an attempt to understand those countries and their perceptions of the world, i.e., the identities leading to their foreign policy strategies, by acting together with them in regional and multilateral settings—which can indeed be considered a constructivist approach to such matters.

The above examples clearly attest to the fact that the current Turkish foreign policy reflects continuity and consistency. Naturally, since the advent of the present millennium, all these attributes of Turkish foreign policy have progressed; the country has taken a strong leap forward leading to a foreign policy more advanced and efficient, thanks to certain facts, such as increased state capacity in all possible areas, from

administration and institutions to economic and technological progress. Türkiye's 260 diplomatic/consular missions abroad, making it the fifth leading country<sup>11</sup> in this category, is a good testimony to its increased capacity. Naturally a network of diplomatic/consular representation of this size enables the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be on the ground and thus better understand the realities and rationalities behind the foreign policies of many countries and international organizations, which in turn paves the way for designing tailor-made policies. Similarly, this global presence helps Türkiye function as a genuine connective force between the East and the West and implement a 360-degree approach to issues in the international arena.<sup>12</sup> As we have seen above, these are useful tools in implementing social constructivism in the conduct of foreign policies.

The preceding analysis, conducted in a comparative and retrospective manner, tells us a story of continuity in Turkish foreign policy, empowered with the capability to adjust to the ever-changing conditions of over a century. Certainly, this capability has grown thanks to the country's increased capacities.

The general patterns of Turkish foreign policy have not changed despite their growing multi-dimensionality. On the contrary, they have been enriched by it. Although this policy has been increasingly challenged by the difficulties and constraints of both endogenous and exogenous events, it has nonetheless maintained an unbroken continuity and consistency thanks to the guiding principles of the Republic. The founding principle, "Peace at Home, Peace in the World," touted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has provided an identity, indeed a roadmap, for the Republic to follow since its inception to date. Türkiye has always sought to prioritize peace, stability and prosperity in its neighboring geographies and beyond in the attainment of its national interests in international relations.

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Yet this consistency should not lead to a conclusion that Turkish foreign policy suffers from *neophobia*. In fact, it has become even more open to novelties in the post-Cold War era, thanks to its multi-dimensionality and multi-faceted responses to the issues of international politics. To cite a few, the UN Alliance of Civilizations initiative, which is co-sponsored by Türkiye, the Asia Anew Initiative, initiatives towards Latin America and Africa, the country's mediation/facilitation efforts and humanitarian assistance programs (Türkiye ranks as the most generous country on the basis of per capita humanitarian assistance spending) display the multidimensional, proactive, peace-oriented, humanitarian and enterprising aspects of Turkish foreign policy.

## Conclusion

In short, one can say that in a world run by political realism, Türkiye has conducted a pragmatic but consistent and principled foreign policy guided by rationality that functions depending on how the state has perceived the outside material world, through the lenses forming its own identity.

One can thus argue with confidence that thanks to its experience and expertise gained over a century, Türkiye will continue to implement its foreign policy in responding to the challenges of the future ahead, with the increasing use of new tools such as mediation,<sup>13</sup> digitalization<sup>14</sup> and even AI,<sup>15</sup> all of which have already been put to use by the Turkish MFA. In this journey, the Antalya Diplomacy Forum<sup>16</sup> of the Turkish MFA, whose distinctive functions and characteristics have been acknowledged by global society, will likely be highly instrumental in bringing all relevant actors together to deliberate and contribute to the quest for providing common responses to common challenges and needs in the interest of the common future of humankind.

## Endnotes

1. See for details, Marijke Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; and Jean-Frédéric Morin & Jonathan Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Toolbox*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
2. Constructivism in its conventional form complements mainstream scholarship by giving a fuller account of world affairs that are still governed according to realist parameters. The importance of conventional constructivism is that it does not disregard the existence of a world out there. Yet, despite its existence, constructivists argue that this world is socially constructed. In other words, conventional constructivism does not reject the positivist world but approaches it with post-positivist tools to better explain the situation. See: Hasan Ulusoy, *One Policy, Many Identities: The Consistency of Turkey's Foreign Policy with Special Emphasis on its Security Dimension in the Post-Cold War Era, A Constructivist Appraisal*, Istanbul: Isis Press, 2007; Hasan Ulusoy, *A Constructivist Analysis of Turkey's Foreign and Security Policy in the Post-Cold War Era*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 2005.
3. Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), pp. 319–363.
4. Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998), pp. 171–200.
5. John Gerard Ruggie, "What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Autumn 1998), pp. 855–885.
6. See the speech of H. E. Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, at the Budget Debates of Turkish Grand National Assembly on December 12, 2022, Ankara, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-mevlut-cavusoglu-nun-tbmm-butce-gorusmelerinde-yaptigi-konusma-12-12-2022.tr.mfa>.
7. See the Opening Speech of H. E. Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, at the 10<sup>th</sup> Ambassadors Conference on August 13, 2018, Ankara, where he described Turkish Foreign Policy as enterprising and humanitarian. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/BAKAN/sayin-bakanimizin-acilis-konusmasi-bkon.pdf>. See also the Opening Speech of H. E. Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, at the 13<sup>th</sup> Ambassadors Conference on August 8, 2022, in Ankara, where he announced the theme of the Conference as "Wise and Compassionate Turkish Diplomacy on the Eve of 2023 and Beyond." <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-mevlut-cavusoglu-nun-xiii-buyukelciler-konferansi-acilis-hitabi-8-8-2022.tr.mfa>.
8. See the Opening Speech of H.E. Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, at the 13<sup>th</sup> Ambassadors Conference on August 8, 2022, Ankara, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-mevlut-cavusoglu-nun-xiii-buyukelciler-konferansi-acilis-hitabi-8-8-2022.tr.mfa>. Also see the speech of Mr. Çavuşoğlu at a meeting with diplomacy reporters on September 14, 2022, Ankara, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-mevlut-cavusoglu-nun-diplomasi-muhabirleriyle-bulusmada-yaptigi-konusma-14-09-2022.tr.mfa>.
9. The Balkan Pact was signed by Türkiye, Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia in 1934 as a way to ensure regional stability and cooperation.
10. The Saadabad Pact was signed by Türkiye, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in 1937 as a non-aggression pact to ensure regional stability and cooperation.
11. See the Opening Speech of H. E. Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu the 13<sup>th</sup> Ambassadors Conference on August 8, 2022, Ankara, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-mevlut-cavusoglu-nun-xiii-buyukelciler-konferansi-acilis-hitabi-8-8-2022.tr.mfa>.
12. Ibid.
13. Türkiye plays a pioneering role in mediation efforts for the peaceful resolution of conflicts all around the world. While Türkiye launched the "Mediation for Peace" initiative with Finland in 2010 at the UN, it also assumes co-chairmanship of Groups of Friends at the UN, the OSCE and the OIC. To ensure dialogue and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, Türkiye has actively exerted efforts in various



geographies and contexts such as Iraq, Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia and South Philippines. Most recently, Türkiye played the role of a mediator/facilitator in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War. The first direct political contacts between two sides following the outbreak of conflict were the Grain Agreement, a large-scale exchange of prisoners and the negotiations for the protection of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant—all of which were made possible through Türkiye's timely efforts.

14. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye announced the “Digital Diplomacy Initiative” in 2019, and has taken steps in areas such as consular services, public diplomacy, cyber security and foreign policy analysis in this context. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs effectively uses social media tools to inform wider audience with regards to Turkish foreign policy. The Ministry has Twitter accounts in Turkish, English, French and Arabic, and has accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Youtube. The official website of the Ministry is available to audiences in 10 different languages, and the Turkish missions abroad use social media accounts effectively.
15. To strengthen the country's digital infrastructure, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs used an AI-based Chatbot application called “Hızır” for communicating with its citizens.
16. The Antalya Diplomacy Forum (ADF) was initiated and is organized by Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and aims at providing a platform for dialogue. Heads of state and government, ministers, diplomats, members of the business world, the press, academia and youth participate in the Forum to exchange ideas on various issues of common interest in international relations. The first ADF was held in June 2021 under the theme of “Innovative Diplomacy: New Era, New Approaches,” and the second was held in March 2022 under the theme of “Recoding Diplomacy.”