

Turkey's Foreign Policy Challenges

Tarık OĞUZLU*

As the dynamics of international and regional politics have been changing dramatically over the last couple of years, Turkish foreign policy will face important challenges in the years to come. These challenges concern not only Turkey's relations with key western actors, such as the EU and the United States, but also the geopolitical heavyweights of the non-western world, such as Russia and China. The coming years will demonstrate Turkey's growing difficulty in striking a right balance between its efforts to remain as a western country on the one hand and the need to develop functional cooperation with the non-western world on the other. This is whilst global competition between the established powers of the West and the rising powers of the East intensifies.

The apparent shift of power from the traditional West to the emerging/rising powers of the East makes it difficult, if not impossible, for Turkey to strike a balance between its western partners within NATO and the European Union on the one hand and countries such as China and Russia on the other. One could argue that forging long-term strategic and cooperative relations with the rising powers of the non-western world is much easier than sustaining such relations with the West as relations with the western countries is based on both moral/ideational factors as well as interest related considerations. Trying to become a part of the West, acting with the West, challenging the West are all particular courses of action that involve material/interests calculations along with identity-related issues. On the other hand, having similar relations with the eastern countries appears to be much easier given that identity related considerations are not apparent. Because the so-called non-western rising powers emphasize the principle of non-interference in

* Prof. Dr., Antalya International University, Head of Political Science and International Relations Department, tarik.oguzlu@antalya.edu.tr

the internal affairs of other states, identity related differences or diverging morality claims are unlikely to act as potential obstacles before forging cooperative relations in different policy realms as well as acting under the same institutional platforms.

The challenge facing Turkey in this regard is how to strike a balance between moral/identity related factors and pure materially conceived interests while seeking positive relations with western and eastern countries simultaneously. At stake is whether Turkey would hastily bandwagon onto the East whenever it faces strong criticisms about its western identity in the West. For example, the enthusiasm of the Turkish government to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be interpreted as suggesting Turkey's disillusionment with its never-ending journey to join the West. The coming years will increasingly see Turkey's traditional western partners accuse Turkey of flirting with the East to avoid the responsibility of paying the ideational/moral and material costs of (trying to) becoming a part of the West.

The alliance relations that Turkey established with the West, particularly within the framework of NATO, can no longer be taken for granted, as identity/value-based long term interstate commitments have already been replaced by interest-oriented short term strategic cooperation schemes across the globe. This suggests that neither Turkey nor its partners within NATO can take each other for granted. Turkey might be exposed to a barrage of criticism concerning its partnership with the West in NATO whilst it tries to improve its strategic relations with Russia, China and Iran. Turkey's preliminary decision to cooperate with a Chinese company in order to develop a long-range anti-ballistic missile defense capability should be seen as a harbinger of future developments in this regard. The years ahead will also demonstrate that Turkey's decades-long membership within NATO will not constrain and shape its strategic behaviors to the extent which was the case in the past, particularly during the era of the Cold War. As multi-polarity strengthens and the United States and the EU members find it difficult to unite around common threat perceptions, no one should expect Turkey to view the Alliance the way it did in the good old days of the Cold War. The rise of alternative political-economic ideologies and worldviews, apart from the ones espoused by the liberal democratic Western world, makes it easy for Turkey both to develop cooperative relations with non-western countries and view the West more through the prism of interests than identity. AKP's instrumental approach towards the European Union is a prime example of this interest-driven understanding.

The years ahead will demonstrate that rather than ideational commitment, Turkey's approach towards the West will be increasingly shaped by conjectural needs and developments. Sometimes, Turkey will criticize the West vehemently, whereas at other times Turkey will turn to the West to seek protection against conventional and non-conventional security threats. The need on the part of Turkey to

define itself as part of international alliance relationships, such as NATO, would increase if Turkish rulers conclude that Turkey's internal capabilities will not allow it to deal with external security challenges alone. Similarly, the more Turkey has experienced political and economic chaos at home, the more valuable the EU accession process and NATO membership would appear to be. That said, it is worth mentioning that Turkey has come closer to its western partners over the last two years, as the deteriorating security environment in the Middle East has underpinned NATO's value in the eyes of Turkish decision makers. Turkey does not have the capabilities, hard or soft, to deal with the emerging security challenges of the new Middle East.

The ongoing political atmosphere at home seems to have also pushed Turkey somehow closer to the West, particularly the European Union, as Turkey's own dynamics do not appear to provide credible incentives for its liberal democratic transformation. The EU accession process seems to have once again regained its status as being the most important leverage in terms of Turkey's democratization.

It is also important to emphasize that the revitalization of the Cyprus negotiations and the gradual improvement in the EU accession process have occurred in the wake of the current political crisis at home. It would not be wrong to argue that the ruling government might have seen an exit from the current internal crisis through a rapprochement with the West.

A related challenge facing Turkey in this regard is that as of today it does not appear as a credible role model or source of inspiration for other countries to emulate in their efforts to get economically developed and politically stable. Like it or not, the domestic sources of Turkey's soft power abroad have to a great extent eroded in recent years. Turkey appears to be far from consolidating its own liberal democracy, let alone proving that its model of economic development is now sustainable and immune from moral hazards, such as corruption and relations built on patronage. In 2014 and beyond it will become extremely difficult for Turkish rulers to boast the country's soft power/power of attraction unless it goes through a radical restoration period at home.

An important factor that needs to be taken into account in terms of Turkey's foreign policy trajectory in the years to come is the manner in which Turkey's internal developments unfold. The impact of internal developments on Turkey's foreign policy will likely be felt more profoundly in near future. Whether Turkey transforms into a truly liberal democratic country or the ongoing illiberal autocratic practices gain strength will have a lasting impact on Turkey's soft power identity. Given the current state of Turkish domestic politics, it is now more difficult to argue that Turkey still stands the chance of providing a successful example of peaceful coexistence between Islam, democracy and liberalism. For Turkey to be a credible role model for the countries in the Middle East, its march to liberal/

pluralist democracy should be irrevocably institutionalized with the strengthening of the principles of 'accountability', 'separation of powers', 'constitutionality', 'transparency' and 'rule of law'. The revitalization of the Europeanization process will not only help Turkey meet these goals but enhance Turkey's image in the Middle East.

More than any other factor, be it structural change at the international or regional levels, Turkey's internal development will most likely determine its foreign policy. This does not mean that Turkey's foreign policies will not reflect strategic adjustments to emerging developments at the regional and international level. However, the way those external developments are interpreted will likely be influenced by the ideological positions of the power holders at home. The more the current policies of the governing party are exposed to internal criticisms, the more they are likely to spill over into foreign policies and the more the ruling party will resort to foreign policy in order to help secure its place at home. Domestic policies affecting the foreign realm and vice versa will be observed more frequently at a time when Turkey is scheduled to experience three important elections in the near future; the local elections, the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections.

One of Turkey's assets, which is also a liability too, is the degree to which its power of attraction abroad hinges on an 'in-between' status amid the West and the East. This is an asset so long as Turkey's partners in the West view Turkey's links to the East as significant in the materialization of their interests and vice versa. Turkey would certainly benefit from its positive image in the West in its relations with the countries in the East, particularly the Middle East, and vice versa. Its historical legacy suggests that Turkey does not have the luxury of choosing the West at the expense of the East or the East at the expense of the West or having negative relations with any of them. Three years since the so-called Arab Spring began, Turkey's image in the west is not a positive one. Deteriorating relations with Iraq, Syria, Israel and Egypt in recent years seems to have caused a great deal of erosion in the degree of confidence that western countries have had in Turkey's potential to contribute to regional integration and stability. Turkey and western countries have adopted diverging views on Iraq's internal affairs. Her increasing reliance on cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government concerning energy and PKK problems appears to have been at odds with the western countries' preference to do business with the Maliki government in Baghdad. Her reluctance to restore relations with Israel to its pre-Mavi Marmara level while the leading western actors, most notably the United States, were trying to broker a face-saving deal between the two counties is another example in this regard. Its unyielding support to the Muslim Brotherhood while regional and international actors have been adjusting their policies to the new developments in the aftermath of the military coup against the Morsi government offers another example as to how Turkey and the western actors seem to have parted ways in Egypt. Lastly,

recent years have also witnessed Turkey and the western actors support different policies in Syria. Turkey's anti-Assad stance seems have been leveled a serious blow as the United States appears to have softened its anti-regime position in Syria in the face of rising religious terrorism moving closer to Russia as to the merits of prioritizing a political-diplomatic solution over a military one.

As Turkey's policies in the Middle East have increasingly differed from those of the West, this has not caused a simultaneous improvement in Turkey's image in the eyes of the regional countries either. The latest public opinion polls undertaken with a view to measuring Turkey's popularity in the Middle East demonstrated that Turkey appears to have lost some ground in recent years. For example, in one of those polls undertaken by TESEV, a think tank based in Istanbul, Turkey came third among the countries which are perceived most positively in the region in the year of 2013. Turkey had for some time been first in the pre-Arab Spring era. The deterioration in Turkey's relations with the European Union with growing internal instability and illiberal practices seem to have diminished Turkey's positive ratings in the Middle East.

It proves that unless Turkey improves its relations with the European Union and revitalizes the much needed and delayed liberal democratic reforms at home, its diminishing status in the Middle East will not change soon. Turkey's signing of the re-admission agreement with the European Union in late 2013 and the opening of the accession negotiations on the chapter of regional polices seem to bode well for the future. Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Germany and the French President's visit to Turkey are clear examples of belated Turkish and European efforts to mend fences. Recent Turkish efforts to reactivate the still-born protocols with Armenia, boost the inter-communal negotiation process in Cyprus in favor of a bi-zonal/bi-communal federal arrangement, disengage from the religiously radical groups in Syria's opposition block, soften the rhetoric on the need to topple Assad through a military operation, support the interim nuclear deal between Iran and the P5 countries plus Germany, and to pay more attention to Iraq's territorial integrity and sovereignty while improving relations with the KRG should be interpreted positively.