



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Turkish Foreign Policy In the Context of Regional Security

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When official Ankara used to conduct foreign policy that was parallel to that of Washington and the West in general for almost the entire XX century (especially during the Cold War), its actions on the international arena were clear and rather easy to predict. The common goal of Ankara and the West was to contain the Soviet Union and their actions stemmed from this strategic task.

The situation changed starkly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union when the aforementioned danger declined. As a result, Turkey started exercising an independent foreign policy. At the same time, many observers point out that the so-called Neo-Ottoman policy, which means restoring Ankara's influence on the territories that were once under the banner of the Ottoman Empire, started to be strengthened in Ankara's foreign policy at the beginning of the XXI century.¹

Conducting this policy is not easy since it quite often not only excludes the interest of the great powers (USA, Europe, Russia) but in most cases stands in opposition to them. Hence, based on the differing situations in different time periods, Ankara temporarily becomes closer to either Washington or Brussels, even to Moscow or other political poles (Beijing, Delhi, Tehran and so on) which in the bigger picture creates the impression of zig-zagging.

Such a situation has already been followed by serious foreign policy fluctuations both regionally as well as globally.

Turkey and the Syrian Civil War

One of the main problems for Turkish foreign policy is the civil war currently taking place in Syria.

When the Arab Spring that started in 2010 much like the other countries of the region spread to Syria as well, Ankara's main goal in this regard became to remove the Assad regime from power and replace it with its preferred Sunni powers for which it actively strived from 2011.² From autumn 2015, Russia also got involved in the Syrian civil war, managed to turn the situation around and save the Assad regime.

Taking this factor into account, it became impossible for Ankara to replace the Assad regime. Therefore, Turkey "narrowed" its goals. At this stage, Ankara considers the possible formation of a Kurdish state entity in Northern Syria to be one of the main challenges to its security and is doing everything in its power to prevent this from happening. In pursuit of this, it does not shy away from diplomatic as well as direct military interventions in Syria.³ To this day, Turkey has conducted three large military operations in the northern part of Syria (Euphrates Shield in 2016-2017, Olive Branch in 2018 and Peace Spring in 2019).⁴

Turkey often has to confront the West because of this. The issue is that Ankara considers the YPG (pro-Kurdish People's Protection Units) that operate in Northern Syria to be the continuation of a terrorist organization, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). Even though Washington and the European countries have put the PKK on the list of terrorist organizations, they are in no hurry to

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/erdogan-balkans-neo-ottoman-quest-171011094904064.html>

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-idUSL5E7MD0GZ20111122>

³ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2661>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-operations-time/timeline-turkeys-military-operations-in-iraq-and-syria-idUSKBN1WQ274>

do the same with the YPG which is one of the main allies of the West in Syria in the fight against Daesh (so-called Islamic State) and has received solid military and political assistance from these countries. Ankara has for years been demanding from the West to stop supporting YPG, so far to no avail.⁵

Turkey and the Great Confrontation in the Middle East

Turkey is also actively involved in the processes taking place in other Middle Eastern states. For example, together with Iran, it starkly opposed and eradicated the attempts of Iraqi Kurdistan to declare independence based on the 2017 referendum that was conducted there.

A separate topic is the great confrontation between the so-called pro-American and pro-Russian forces taking place in the Middle East for the past decades. The first camp consists mainly of Sunni states led by Saudi Arabia (also in the group are Egypt, the UAE, Bahrein, Kuwait, Jordan and Morocco)⁶ while the second group includes mostly Shia forces led by the Islamic Republic of Iran (also in the group are Iraq, the Assad regime, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Hussites and so on).⁷

At first, Turkey was naturally being considered to be part of the first camp; however, due to a disagreement about leadership that later arose in the Sunni camp, Turkey and Qatar formed a small group of “outcasts” which has lately been more and more inclined towards the pro-Russian Shia group.⁸ It should be noted here that this is more of a tactical rather than a strategic alliance as the parties have differing long-term interests and plans.

In the same period, Turkey’s attitude towards the Israeli-Arab conflict also changed. If previously Ankara maintained neutrality and often appeared as a mediator in the conflict resolution process, from 2009 it sided with the Palestinians which was, therefore, followed by Turkey-Israel relations becoming more tense.⁹

Turkey-Western Relations

The main problem is that the US and Turkish political leaders and elites have philosophies which are very much different. They perceive both the connections with other states, as well as the weight and place of their countries in international relations, in differing ways. Consequently, many problems have accumulated in US-Turkey relations over the years and resolving them has been prolonged.¹⁰

⁵ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2661>

⁶ https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/uae

⁷ Brian Katz, “Axis Rising: Iran’s Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East,” www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategyand-non-state-partnerships-middle-east

⁸ https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/turkey#menuarea
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2009/01/20091291976879610.html>https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/turkey#menuarea

⁹<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2009/01/20091291976879610.html>https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/turkey#menuarea

¹⁰ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2661>

In terms of the situation in Syria, apart from the differing interests of the parties, there is a host of issues where Turkey and the West have fundamentally different positions and opinions and have had for years.

The Government of Turkey has long been demanding the transfer of an Islamist spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen, who currently resides in Pennsylvania, but to no avail. Turkey accuses him and his supporters of attempting the July 15, 2016 coup.¹¹

The December 3-4, 2019 NATO summit in London once again illustrated how much the foreign policy and security priorities of Turkey and the West are far from one another.

Before the beginning of the summit Turkey openly demanded from NATO member states to include the YPG in the list of terrorist organizations, threatening to veto the Polish-Baltic defense plan prepared by NATO, if its demands were not met.¹² Even though ultimately Ankara was forced to compromise and did not utilize its veto power, this did not alter the clearly divergent views of the parties.

A separate problematic issue is the acquisition of the Russian-made S-400s by Turkey against which Washington is especially active (the US has already stopped the supply of F-35s to Turkey). At this stage, the US is in the process of legislating further sanctions against Turkey. In case if the sanctions are adopted, Ankara threatens to close down not just the Incirlik US Air Base but also the Kürecik US Radar Station.¹³

Yet another problematic issue in Turkey-US relations is the so-called "Armenian Genocide." On December 12, 2019, the US Senate recognized the so-called "Armenian Genocide" with 405 votes in favor and 11 against.¹⁴ Even though President Trump has yet to sign it, this has already caused a sharply negative reaction from the Government of Turkey. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, stated that the recognition of the so-called "Armenian Genocide" by the US Senate is a political show and the individuals, who are using history for political reasons, are cowards. According to his assessment, the resolution has no legal power.¹⁵ President Erdogan also hinted that in this case, his considering closing down the Incirlik US Air Base and the Kürecik US Radar Station should not be excluded.¹⁶

Even though President Trump can block both the expected S-400 sanctions against Turkey as well as the issue of the recognition of the so-called "Armenian Genocide,"¹⁷ the attitude towards Turkey has, on the whole, turned negative in the United States. At the same time, the presidential elections are approaching in which the US public opinion on various issues will be very important.

¹¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/02/erdogan-accuses-west-of-writing-the-script-for-turkey-coup/>

¹² <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/turkey-united-states-nato-summit-exposes-ankara-isolation.html>

¹³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/turkey-united-states-can-americans-be-barred-from-incirlik.print.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/turkey-united-states-can-americans-be-barred-from-incirlik.print.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/577200-mevlut-chavushoglu-senatis-mier-somexta-genocidis-agiareba-shoua-da-adamianebi-romlebic-istorias-politikuri-miznebisvis-igeneben-lachrebi-arian>

¹⁶ https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-50804208?ocid=socialflow_twitter

¹⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/senate-recognize-armenian-genocide-turkey.print.html>

Hence, those seeking office will have to take public opinion into account regarding many topics. Therefore, no one can surely say in which direction the situation will develop in this regard.

Relations with Europe remain yet another painful issue in Turkey's foreign policy. European states and institutions harshly criticize Ankara on issues such as human rights, democracy, freedom of the press and minority rights. Due to this, the decades-long negotiations for Turkey's membership in the European Union are currently practically frozen. The problem of Cyprus also remains unresolved at this stage.¹⁸

Turkish-Russian Relations

The main question in Turkish-Russian relations is how much the parties will manage to become close to one another.

Given the background of rising tensions with the West, Turkey is periodically forced to get closer to Russia and other powerful political poles (Beijing, Tehran, etc.) and this is most clearly reflected in trade and economic ties. Lately, these connections have also manifested themselves in the arms trade (for example S-400s) which has caused real problems in relations with the West.

Ankara's distancing itself from Washington does not automatically mean that it will have harmonious relations with Moscow on all international issues – Ankara and Moscow have diverging long-term goals which are in opposition to each other's interests. This is why they are currently tactical, not strategic allies.

And it is also due to these diverging interests that the parties often hold radically different positions with regard to a number of important international problems, be they Syria, Kosovo, Crimea, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region, Transnistria or others.¹⁹

Conclusions:

- Ankara will not easily renounce its desire to conduct a maximally independent foreign policy. Hence, it is highly likely that its zig-zagging in this regard will continue;
- Impending US sanctions and the issue of the so-called "Armenian Genocide" show that negative attitudes towards Turkey are growing significantly in Washington;
- The dynamics of developments show that these problems and difficulties in Turkish-Western relations are likely to persist for quite some time;
- Despite numerous difficulties in relations, Turkey's complete distancing itself from the West in the nearest future is rather unlikely;
- Ankara cannot naturally become Moscow's strategic ally as the two countries have divergent and often opposed long-term interests;
- The actual approximation between Turkey and Russia can only start if Turkey is no longer a member state of NATO;

¹⁸ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/710>

¹⁹ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2702>

- Strong approximation between Russia and Turkey and also Turkey's distancing itself from the West is not in the interests of Georgia;
- It is in Georgian interests to have Turkey as a democratic and successful country as it neighbor which will be close to the West;
- In the case of further tensions in Turkish-Western or Turkish-Russian relations, it will be important for Georgia not to get involved and its territory not be used in this confrontation;
- Given the increasingly more complicated relations between Turkey and the West, the alternative that Georgia will be able to offer to the West is important.