Türkiye and its current position in NATO

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How relations with the MENA Countries and the Russo-Ukrainian war are crucial

Türkiye's foreign policy regarding the Middle East and North African countries can be divided into three different eras: the pre-Arab Spring period, the post-Arab Spring era, and the last: the Russo-Ukrainian war period. In the first decade of the 2000s, the emphasis on the Mediterranean Sea attracted both European countries and Türkiye. First, the Mediterranean Sea is crucial to Eurasian countries' global economic transportation routes. Particularly the Eastern Mediterranean Sea has grave security importance for Türkiye. Second, recent natural gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea has reinforced the importance of this region. Türkiye's geographical position, and therefore its interwoven interests in the Middle East and North-Africa as well as in the Russo-Ukrainian war, is central in understanding its current position in NATO.

The governing Justice and Development Party (JDP) declared 2005 an African year. This initiative paved the way to establish and improve relations with a number of regional states. In April of 2005, Türkiye obtained observer status in the African Union. On May 2, 2009, in a speech, Ahmet Davutoglu, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, pointed out the main pillars of the new Turkish foreign policy as three-fold. The most important one is that Türkiye, from now on, should act to obtain maximum benefit from the 'zero problems with neighbors' approach. Davutoglu also mentioned expansion in Africa and Latin America in his speech. Part of his objective was that Türkiye should rise to the position of a country whose opinion is sought as an order-instituting country by others.

In the pre-Arab Spring period, the Turkish government defined its relations with the Middle Eastern and North African countries according to the regional and global conjuncture. Foreign policy before the Arab Spring was formed in compliance with the abovementioned zero problems towards neighbors strategy put forward by Ahmet Davutoglu. He defined a new strategy underlying several principles such as rhythmic diplomacy, multi-dimensional foreign policy, zero problems with neighbors, order-instituting actors, international cooperation, or proactive foreign policy.

However, all those strategies failed when the Arab Spring emerged in Tunisia and spread to the Middle Eastern states in early 2011. The Arab Spring considerably impacted Egypt, Libya, and Syria through its efforts to transform their authoritarian regimes into democracies, affecting Ankara's foreign policy towards those regions and departing from the zero problems with neighbors concept. In the framework of the Arab Spring, all Middle East and North African (MENA) countries experienced turmoil and revolt within their territories. Moreover, Ankara had to review its foreign policy in light of those countries' individual internal developments. Türkiye's involvement in the Syrian civil war was the most dramatic foreign policy event during the Arab Spring.

Türkiye's position regarding the Ukraine-Russian War has involved balancing. On the one hand, Ankara maintained good relations with Ukraine and supported it as a NATO member state without any conditions. On the other hand, it worked on maintaining its existing relations with Russia and chose not to participate in the EU and US sanctions. Moreover, it has not ceased natural gas imports from Russia. Furthermore, Turkish airspace is not closed to Russian civil aircraft. Nevertheless, Türkiye supported the expansion of NATO with Finland and Sweden but had posed some preconditions to accepting those countries into NATO.

Türkiye's geographical position, and therefore its interwoven interests in the Middle East and North-Africa as well as in the Russo-Ukrainian war, is central in understanding its current position in NATO. Pictured are NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during the Madrid Summit (photo: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Association)

President Putin decided to use natural gas supply to the EU as a weapon which forced the EU to search for alternative energy resources immediately. Aware of this necessity, Ankara reviewed and diversified its foreign policy toward MENA countries to improve good relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt. In this framework, Türkiye tries to be a transportation hub for conveying natural gas by pipelines to the EU countries through its territory.

This article, which like the other articles in this issue is inspired by NATO's new Strategic Concept, examines Turkish foreign policy before and after the Arab Spring period and the success of Ankara's efforts to establish good relations in the MENA region during the Russo-Ukrainian war.

TÜRKIYE'S RELATIONS WITH THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES BEFORE THE ARAB SPRING

Until 2010, Türkiye adopted a foreign policy designed to solve all the problems with the neighboring countries in cooperation and goodwill in order to establish mutual security and economic and political relations appreciated in the West and Arab World. However, whenever Ankara began to show strong reactions to Israel's aggressive regional policy, the West changed its approach toward Türkiye, claiming that Ankara had shifted its axis to the Islamic world.

Because of its historical and geographic location, the Middle East is a 'hinterland' for Türkiye. For that reason, the JDP's political aim was that Türkiye would be a "central state" in the Middle East. Since every problem would significantly impact Turkish security and stability, Ankara should follow all developments closely in the region and strive for good relations with the countries in the region. Türkiye fostered economic and political relations with numerous countries where then Prime Minister Erdogan emphasized Türkiye as a role model for the region as the only Islamic country based on secularism, democracy, and a free-market economy while demonstrating Islamic values.

Davutoglu's speech at the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye on April 26, 2012 clearly explains the policy toward the Middle East: "The new Middle East is being born. We shall keep being the master, leader and servant of this new Middle East. In this new Middle East, not suppressions, oppressions or dictates shall reign, but the popular will, people's voice and the voice of justice shall. Türkiye shall be the strong advocate of this voice, and a new zone of peace, stability, and wealth shall be created."

Although the JDP's main target was the Middle East as an area of interest, Ankara initiated an attempt to improve political and economic relations with the North African countries during this Millennium. An exception was relations with Israel. Relations with Israel deteriorated after Türkiye objected to Israel's invasion of Gaza in 2008 and especially after Israel's violent military seizure of the Mavi Marmara humanitarian aid vessel and the Davos incident in which Erdogan clashed with Israel's President Shimon Perez.

ANKARA'S POLICY DURING AND AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

Türkiye is in a highly insecure and unstable geopolitical region. The concept of 'zero problems with neighbors' that Ankara was implementing lost its function in the unsettled environment due to the dynamics brought about by the effects of the Arab Spring. Due to the demonstrations and uprisings, constitutional changes took place in Morocco with regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt, while uprisings evolved into civil wars in Syria and Libya.

The impact of the Arab Spring that originated in Tunisia with great expectations did not turn out as expected in the Middle East. Especially in Syria, it turned into a civil war with tremendously destructive impacts, making the region a playground for foreign powers. The West got interested in the popular uprisings with the hope that regimes based on democratic institutions, respect for human rights, and supremacy of law would replace authoritarian regimes. However, the movements had different results in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. While Tunisia was advancing towards a democratic structure, uprisings in Libya, in the Benghazi region specifically, overthrew Gaddafi with the assistance of a military operation by NATO. Subsequently, as the clash between tribes turned into a civil war, Libya was dragged into an environment of political instability.

As for Egypt, in the military-controlled democratic environment provided by the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the first free elections were held in 2012, in which a wide range of political parties, from the Liberal to the Islamic wing, participated. Nonetheless, the US and the West did not recognize Mohamed Morsi as the President, as he stemmed from the Muslim Brotherhood. However, he came into power after the 2013 elections; in his first year as President, the Egyptian Armed Forces overthrew Morsi. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, took over as the President and once again, military rule prevailed. The US, the Western allies, and Türkiye observed this rapid change in Egypt with varied reactions. Türkiye refused to recognize the al-Sisi administration, and relations between the two countries ceased.

Türkiye has national security and peace problems within and close to its borders. It has confronted these issues and worked to establish a secure and peaceful environment in Türkiye and in the northern Middle East. While doing that, Ankara has made some political decisions unpopular with its NATO allies, Russia and the regional countries like Iraq, Iran and Syria, which have led to confrontations. This has given Türkiye a "lousy man" role in the Syrian conflict, even though Ankara has been trying independently to protect its interests and national and regional security and to balance challenges with the US, Russia, and other states involved in the Syrian conflict. Ultimately, an uncompromising posture was given to Türkiye's Syrian foreign policy.

More friends than enemies

On May 22, 2016, Binali Yildirim was appointed as Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye following Ahmet Davutoglu's resignation. Moreover, he formed a new government and became Prime Minister on May 24, 2016. On June 16, 2016, he announced that a comprehensive shift in Ankara's foreign policy had been made based on 'earning more friends than enemies'. This new foreign policy suggested that Ankara could quickly restore ties with countries like Russia, Israel, and Egypt. This new policy was also aimed at solving the Syrian crisis with the involvement of all players. This meant reconciliation with Russia and improving ties with Iran and with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

According to this new approach, there would be two main principles of Ankara's foreign policy. **First**: awareness of the current situation that left the country isolated on many fronts as its relations with almost all neighboring countries had been strained in preceding years. **Second**: maneuverability and diplomatic flexibility, which means assessing the situation to solve the problems and obtaining results that would meet the mutual national interests of all countries. "Our responsibility as rulers is to turn extraordinary situations normal," Yildirim told his parliamentary group on June 28, adding, "Crisis is the exception; normalization is essential".

After a Cabinet meeting in Ankara, Yildirim told reporters: "From Russia to Israel, Egypt to Syria, Iraq to Iran, EU countries to the US, we are determined to develop peaceful, friendly and practical relations with everyone. We will keep doing this." With this new approach, Ankara is keen to re-

Ankara has been trying independently to protect its interests and national and regional security and to balance challenges with the US, Russia, and other states involved in the Syrian conflict. Ultimately, an uncompromising posture was given to Türkiye's Syrian foreign policy. Pictured is a Turkish tank in Arfin, Syria in 2018 (photo: quesions123 / Shutterstock.com)

store ties with everyone. Using maneuvering flexibility Türkiye has emphasized normalizing relations with Russia and working with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Gulf Countries to settle the crisis.

Energy security

Türkiye has a great deal of impact and a unique role in Eastern Mediterranean energy security, mainly in two different but intertwined aspects. In the second decade of the 2000s, new hydrocarbon energy resources were exploited in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea region, near Israel, Egypt, and the island of Cyprus. This development has brought a new aspect to the geostrategic importance of Türkiye because of its proximity to the exploration area and the overlapping Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with (Greek) Cyprus.

Those newly explored recoverable energy sources in the region would be a vital driving force for the coastal countries in the area. In late 2011, across the so-called maritime border between Israel and Cyprus consortium members of Israel found the Aphrodite field of the Israeli and Palestinian coast, in which there are proven natural gas reserves that would bring a new perspective for energy outlook and regional relations of countries which have coastlines on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

In 2013, Egypt signed a deal with Cyprus allowing both countries to explore oil and gas in their economic zones. Italian company Eni discovered the largest gas field off Egypt's coast in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2015. However, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that Ankara did not recognize a maritime boundary demarcation agreement between Egypt and Cyprus, allowing oil and gas exploration in its territorial waters. Because Ankara does not recognize the southern Cyprus government and therefore its EEZ, this declaration caused high tension between Egypt and Türkiye. Cairo accused Ankara of an assault on its sovereignty in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara argues that a substantial portion of the gas field lies on the Turkish continental shelf.

Against Türkiye's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, Israel signed a military cooperation agreement with Greece in 2015 while improving solid defense and military relations with Cyprus. The three nations declared a commitment to develop deep military ties, and the tripartite leaders paid a joint visit to Washington in May 2018. Furthermore, the US Senate ratified a bill to promote security and energy partnerships with Greece, Israel, and (Greek) Cyprus with French support.

Upon this development, Türkiye and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) signed two separate Memoranda of Understanding on November 27, 2019. One is about the demarcation of a maritime border, and the other is a security cooperation agreement. On October 1, 2021, the UN registered the Türkiye-GNA deal on the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean. Türkiye supported the GNA in keeping with the terms of the security agreement between two legitimate administrations. This changed the fate of the second civil war as rival forces led by General Haftar were forced to withdraw from Tripoli. Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Tunisia, and Egypt all objected to the agreements between the two states. Thus, Türkiye remained isolated in the region.

Even though Türkiye gradually has made diplomatic efforts to improve its relations with Israel, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt since 2016, no positive result was obtained on this issue by the time of the start of Russian military operation in Ukraine in February 2022.

RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Turkish foreign policy has taken a new form in the context of the new world order that emerged with the Russian military operation in Ukraine beginning February 24, 2022. Since the start of this war, Türkiye has taken an assertive and neutral policy, even though it is a NATO member. On the one hand, Türkiye declared that it would not accept the Russian invasion of Ukraine and supported Ukraine in a military and diplomatic way. On the other hand, Türkiye has refused to support the West's sanctions against Russia, and Türkiye continues to buy Russian oil. Unlike its Western counterparts, Türkiye has kept its airspace open to Russian civilian flights because Türkiye is not an EU member and is a country that can get in touch with Moscow directly.

Türkiye's assertive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and intervention in Libya's civil war have unsettled rivals, including Egypt, France, and the United Arab Emirates. Ankara's policy on Ukraine's war strengthens its ability to reestablish good relations with all those countries. The main reason for this attempt is to work with Israel and Egypt as the main transportation hubs to carry natural gas using Turkish territory. In this context, Ankara will also regain a critical position in NATO and the EU.

Today Europe has minimal options for importing natural gas except from Russia. However, with the Russo-Ukrainian war Russia has the opportunity to use this fact as leverage on European countries. In this regard, building new transit routes to reduce dependence on Russian gas has assumed new importance and the geographical position of Türkiye becomes critical because of its exact central location between the European continent, the Middle East and the Caucasus, which have a tremendous amount of energy resources.

Since European countries are trying to find alternative energy sources to become less dependent on Russia, this paves the way for Ankara to strengthen its position as an energy transportation hub. In addition, Ankara has done its best to improve relations with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Egypt and Israel, which have massive resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, need to cooperate with Türkiye to realize the most realistic pipeline project to convey energy to the European continent. Knowing this, Türkiye needs to break out of its regional isolation and has taken further steps to repair relations with the MENA countries. Ultimately, Ankara adopted a new foreign policy, and relations with many countries like the UAE, Egypt and Israel were restored.

One other issue emerging from the war in Ukraine is the expansion of NATO with Finland and Sweden. Türkiye is not against this. However, it has some reservations that those countries support the PKK terrorist organization and its affiliates. In NATO's new Strategic Concept, the central theme of this issue of *Atlantisch Perspectief*, it is clearly stated that international terrorism remains one of the main threats to the Alliance. The PKK was declared a terrorist organization indirectly by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg on June 28 when he said: "No ally has suffered more brutal terrorist attacks than Türkiye, including from the terrorist group PKK." Mutual solidarity is a must within NATO. New candidate states must show empathy. Had they been in the same position as Türkiye they would insist on protection against terrorist organizations. For that reason, Ankara has a reasonable position regarding this matter. However, negotiating this issue behind closed doors would be better.

CONCLUSION

The Turkish government and the ruling Justice and Development Party adopted in its second term a 'zero problems with neighbors' policy in the MENA region. This strategy failed in the context of the Arab Spring. Since early 2011, Ankara has adopted an assertive policy in line with its national interests in the Middle East, particularly in the Syrian civil war, which caused the deterioration of its relations with NATO countries and the US.

Additionally, Ankara had broken relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE based on various issues. Nevertheless,

During the Madrid summit Türkiye, Sweden, and Finland signed a memorandum. Most significantly, Finland and Sweden promised "to not provide support" to the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia that Ankara considers an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Pictured are leaders of Türkiye, Sweden, and Finland and NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg after signing the memorandum (photo: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

Ankara signed two separate Memoranda of Understanding with the Libyan UN-recognized GNA. One was on maritime delimitation, and another was on defense and security. In this framework, Türkiye secured its Exclusive Economic Zone in the Eastern Mediterranean against that of Greece and (Greek) Cyprus. Ultimately, Ankara asked the UN to register this officially.

However, as a result of these actions, the government in Ankara remained isolated in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa regions. Just before the Russian military operation in Ukraine, Ankara was aware of its isolation and decided to change its foreign policy towards different MENA countries. Thus, Türkiye successfully improved damaged relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

Due to European Union sanctions on Russian oil and natural gas imports because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU seeks new alternative natural gas resources. The natural gas needs of the EU could be met by using the reserves in the Egypt-Tamar region and Israel's Leviathan gas field. However, transportation seems costly and problems arise if a pipeline follows the sea basin of the Mediterranean towards the island of Cyprus and Greece.

Türkiye could have a crucial role in solving this issue. Pipelines could be built on the sea basin up to the Tarsus-Mersin region and follow Turkish territory to reach EU countries. On the other hand, Türkiye has a crucial position within NATO as it could block the accession of Sweden and Finland. Therefore, Ankara follows an assertive and neutral policy, both in the MENA region and in relation to the new world order after the Russian offensive operation in Ukraine. Balancing its positions, which means good relations with MENA countries and a productive relationship with both Russia and NATO countries, is in its own interests.

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