



## Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Age of Uncertainty

*By Hidajet Bišćević*

### Introduction

From the early period of post-Cold War world order in the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, through challenges and changes over the two decades of 21st century, Turkey's foreign policy has been characterized by the need and ability to adapt to the changing, and ever deteriorating global conditions. Changes in the structure and nature of international order and the way Turkish foreign policy evolved are directly related. During the initial period of undisputed unipolar order, Turkey shaped its foreign policy in a way

to align its national goals with the main Western partners and alliances. But, as the international system gradually moved from unipolarity to the current "unfinished new system", characterized by renewed competition and confrontation among a rising number of actors, Turkey started to pursue multi-dimensional and multi-directional foreign policy strategy and practice. In sum, it could be argued that there were "two phases" of Turkish foreign policy approach: during the Özal – Demirel era, until the beginning

of Erdoğan's period in 2002, coinciding with the beginning of gradual erosion of weight of western powers, prompting Turkey to seek new avenues and partners to preserve and enhance its national interests.

## **Shaping the foreign policy in the age of the West**

Over the last three decades, the world has changed so immensely that the entire architecture of the international relations, and even its social and emotional pillars, shifted from high and enthusiastic expectations and hopes to the gradual lapsing into the old patterns of alienations, tensions and confrontations. With the fall of communism, dissolution of the Soviet Union and the breakdown of bipolar world order in early nineties, it has been expected that, probably for the first time in history, the international relations and relations among states could be shaped by the shared and common values and jointly accepted international legal rules, thus opening a way for a world without competition and confrontation. A common global cooperative order was in sight. Euphoria even announced the "end of history". European Union engaged with Russia over the new continental security and stability landscape. NATO was offering some forms of cooperation and even participation to Russia. Enlargement policy of the EU and NATO has been perceived as a tool of bringing back the

security order in Central Europe and the Baltic that existed before the Soviet post- WW2 geopolitical advancement. That period shaped and marked the foreign policy management of all countries, including, inter alia, Turkey. With its geographical position, its role in the geostrategic theatre during the Cold War, its regional policies and, last but not least, its socio-political profile as a secular state with modest social role of Islam, Turkey at the times set priorities in accordance with the broader developments and expectations.

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The calculus has been rather simple: the unipolar world at the time, with absolute dominance of the United States and growing role of the EU made these directions of Turkey's foreign policy a top priority. Bilateral relations with the US were growing and expanding, including also within NATO, where Turkey's half-a-century "guarding role" of eastern flank of the Alliance has been strong awarding pillar. After a long stalemate, lasting for decades since the first customs union deal with the EU, Turkey and the Union rekindled their negotiations and cooperation. The end of bipolarity on the world scene enabled Turkey to develop strong

new regional policies, reinventing its historical role from the Balkans to Central Asia. By way of illustration, it is important to note how Turkey upgraded its international level and its strategic assets in relations with other actors during the wars in former Yugoslavia and prolonged crisis in the Balkans: playing on the lukewarm and often divided EU policies towards the region, Turkey asserted itself as an unavoidable partner, in some cases taking even a leading role in search for the crisis resolution, in parallel also using subtle diplomacy to gradually engage the then distant US.

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In parallel, the emerging hopeful cooperative global order, and in particular strong social aspiration for the EU membership, underscored efforts of internal evolution and modernization, with growing Turkey's economy, in a process that only added to strong self-confidence of the country. In sum, a vivid example of how a proper reading of the global security and stability landscape influences the shaping of any country's foreign and domestic politics. But, gradually, over the last three decades, that landscape has dramatically changed. The world also strayed away from initial expectations - hopes and even early euphoria of the Common

New World, and gradually spiraled into lost opportunities and chaotic disorder. Aspirations failed, expectations crushed, dark sides of globalization and technological advancements won over the rules and principles-based democratic order and the tide of confusion and controversies brought back the politics of force and confrontation.

Fundamental pillars of predictability on the international scene are eroding. This has become a world of permanent tensions, polarization, resurrected Cold War, confrontations and real wars. Politics of force is winning over the politics of prudence and dialogue. Politics of deals tries to win over the politics of rules. European values are being challenged, both outside and within the EU, thus projecting the Union in a new, ambiguous light from the viewpoint of outside partners and aspirants. The US is moving away from traditional and for decades undisputed patterns of its foreign policy, including inter alia its attitude toward Transatlanticism and NATO Alliance and, in parallel shifting its strategic focus from Europe and the Mediterranean toward rising global player China and towards the Pacific. Russia has emerged from the decades of submissiveness and continues to be back on the road of rectifying "the greatest geopolitical mistake", as Moscow interprets dissolution of the USSR. In sum, this has become a world of multi-polar competitive disorder. An opaque, perplexing, inexplicable and unpredictable world.

## Shaping the foreign policy in the age of disorder

Age of uncertainty called for a new reading of global strategic landscape in order to shape and formulate any country's foreign policy. Against this dramatically changed background of international relations, revoking confrontations, competitions, wars, abandonment of the rule of law, diminishing of democratic values and absence of any ideological guidance, it is precisely Turkey that has found itself in a completely new, challenging, demanding and dangerous environment. If one looks at the main features of the current international multi-polar competitive disorder it is evident that the main components are: geopolitical competition, growing regional insecurities, interventionism and militarization of foreign policies, breakdown of multilateralism, permanently shifting military and security alliances, plus ideological conflict between national-sovereignty and multicultural-internationalism. After emerging as a more active and important actor at the international scale during the previous period, over the last decade, with these deep changes in the very character of international relations, Turkey faced a strategic challenge: how to respond? The US as a traditional strategic partner is drifting away and periodically engaging in issues relevant for Turkey's security concerns, new Russia's assertiveness is growing, tensions

and wars in Turkey's neighboring regions are surging, and within multilateral institutions that were for decades perceived by Turkish external policy ideologues as "natural partners" or "safe heavens", turmoil is on the rise.

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With broadening geopolitical competition almost directly on its borders and, last but not least, with domestic socio-political tensions reflecting public debate on future ideological concept-foundation of state and society, Turkey opened a search for new strategies, policies and partners. The key question was evident: how to preserve and enhance national interests and remain active and assertive actor within this entirely new environment? The focus of the foreign policy debate was growingly influenced by the heightened sense of national interest as a vital starting point in shaping any foreign policy issue and responding to any foreign policy challenge. This, inter alia, did not only flavored public debate on foreign policy and security, but added the economic and trade development as a strategic asset invaluable to responding to new external challenges and threats. Thus, against the background of emerging new international climate marked by rising tensions and divisions, Turkey's review of its foreign

policy strategy has been shaped by the “zero problem” narrative of former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who broadly elaborated on goals, pillars and instruments that were to ensure active and assertive foreign policy. At the time, the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this new narrative pointed to the need of resolving remaining open issues with the neighbors, taking up new responsibilities for Turkey’s role in the neighboring regions (the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia) and designing of new relations with great powers. Although, occasionally, described as a Neo-Ottomanism, this new strategic policy outlook in fact turned out to be only a temporary attempt against the background of continued fast changes of a global international environment, with dramatic collapse of predictable and rules-based international order.

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Fast and dramatic changes of the global security and stability architecture prompted Turkish leadership to opt for a new foreign policy options, essentially based upon the self’-assertive, sovereign, independent and flexible parameters, moving away from the traditional

“from within” (basing its security interest by participating in international institutions, e.g. NATO, OIC, etc.) to “from outside” concept: basically, independently and self-confidently. New reading of international landscape brought about basic new conclusions: all former pillars of international order are collapsing and all former “natural partners” are redirecting their strategic priorities, under the internal pressures (e.g. EU), or focusing on new strategic challenges, (e.g. US) and Turkey would have to find a way to pass through such a hazardous new landscape. The debate was not an easy one, in many ways it polarized the country, as it entangled also the different viewpoints on ideological and identity issues and the very character of the society and political system. In short, it resulted in constitutional changes and a new foreign policy norm: absolute priority of national interests. Partners and actors may change, but national interest must be the key guiding line in bilateral or multilateral relations. This new rationale did not only adhere Turkey to a number of countries driven by the “sovereignty” concept and attitude to international relations (justified by the breakdown of multilateralism), but it also questioned internal democratic capacities and practice, as in many other examples across the globe, and enabled Turkey to “paddle” through the current dramatic regional and international environment.

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Geopolitical competition, militarization of foreign policies, interventionism, shifting alliances, crash of multilateralism, regional insecurities - indeed, each and every main feature of current multipolar competitive disorder has directly influenced Turkish foreign policy options. One only needs to look at the recent almost volatile competitive tensions between Turkey and Russia in Syria, over the de-escalation zone in Idlib: initially, joining forces to expel ISIL forces, but also, as a collateral, to discard the traditional US role in the Middle East, both Russia and Turkey ended up in their own competition over the influence in the region and in the broader context, e.g. Libya. Thus, the most complex and complicated variables define the geopolitical landscape against which Turkey needs to formulate and shape its foreign policy. Needless to illustrate: geopolitical competitions around Turkey, growing role of military in shaping foreign policy of all main Turkey's partners and Turkey itself, various forms of interventionism and Syrian crisis, oscillating Turkey's relations with the US, Russia and other global or regional

players, tensions within NATO, etc. In this sense, it is hard to predict future features of Turkey's foreign policy - for a foreseeable period of time. It will most probably continue to be guided by the "national interest first" paradigm, and this may bring about oscillations in Turkey's relations with the key international actors in the whirlpool of shifting alliances over different regional issues or security concerns. But, like in case of many other countries situated at the center of the most sensitive geostrategic challenges (e.g. Turkey between Europe, the Middle East, Eurasia, Russia), or in-between Europe and Russia (e.g. entire chain of countries from the Baltics to the Caucasus and Central Asia), future foreign policy choices and orientations will most likely depend more on the future shape of global security and stability order than on any individual national choice.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of the current "unfinished world order", with the most important global actors at the stage of geopolitical competition with the view to ensure best possible individual positions for the future shaping of international security and stability order, Turkey's foreign policy will continue to be open to multi-directional approach. With the re-focusing of the US security attention to China and the Pacific, new

assertiveness of Russia and with the growing global role of China, as well as its immensely sensitive geostrategic location, Turkey will continue to play on multi-dimensional accords in its foreign policy. This will, given the overall uncertainty of the current global conditions, be reflected in shifting alliances, tensions with traditional partners and security providers, as well as oscillations in a number of bilateral and regional relations. Whilst looking to the future international security and stability order, that should replace current chaotic period of multipolar competitive disorder, Turkey's foreign policy will continue to be primarily driven by its projection of national security interests.

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