

Whatever It Takes: When Foreign Policy Becomes the Key for Staying in Power

Dr. Ilke Toygür

Analyst of European Affairs
Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid
CATS Fellow, SWP Berlin

Turkey's relations with its traditional Western allies have been under the spotlight for years. European decision makers connect this declining trajectory to democratic backsliding in Turkey and its unilateral foreign policy, which is not always compatible with European interests. Lately, developments in regional theatres of power – mainly in Syria, Libya, the eastern Mediterranean and Nagorno-Karabakh – have shifted the entire focus towards foreign policy. In 2020, Turkey became a country to contain for some Europeans, while collaborating in dossiers of mutual interest. This situation has downgraded the importance of domestic backsliding in the realms of democracy, rule of law, basic rights and freedoms, while defining the framework of relations between Turkey and the EU. This reality was very much reflected in European Council conclusions in October and December 2020. It was again repeated in March and June 2021. Even if the European Council turns the entire focus towards foreign policy, treating Turkey as a third country rather than a candidate for accession, the links between domestic policy and foreign policy are quite strong. This is why the EU will always be fragile to domestic developments in Turkey.

From 2020 to 2021: A Drastic Shift?

2020 was a year of unilateral moves, shifts and drifts in Turkish foreign policy. Tensions between Greece

and Turkey, two NATO allies, through maritime boundaries and hydrocarbon drillings were central to the European agenda. Josep Borrell, defined relations with Turkey as one of the most important challenges for the EU's foreign policy,¹ in December 2020. Turkey, a long standing member of NATO and the Council of Europe, was rather perceived as an issue to be dealt with. Keeping in mind existing differences between EU institutions and between Member States, this was not an easy task.

The divisions between Member States grew, since France, Greece and Cyprus were defending a harsh response, which included sanctions, while others like Germany or Spain were rather seeking dialogue. And it was not only the EU Member States Turkey was at odds with. Also regional powers like Egypt or Israel were perceiving Turkish foreign policy as a challenge to their national interests. They started to gather around common aims. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), for example, brought many of these actors together. Turkey was isolated in the region, at odds with its European allies. Not to mention all the bilateral problems it has with the United States. The arrival of Joe Biden in the White House, however, led to an intention of reconciliation with the allies and recalibration of Turkish foreign policy. 2021, so far, has been a year of intentions.

A Trend that Links the Domestic to the Global?

To give the year 2020 perspective, those were not just momentary conflicts. For years, Turkish decision makers kept on defending that the West is in decline. Multilateralism and international institutions of the 20th century are inefficacious. It is important to un-

¹ For the full text please visit: <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/90861/way-ahead-after-difficult-2020-eu-turkey-relations->

derline this trend since it is key to understanding the dynamics of Turkish foreign policy. The incumbent Turkish government is not necessarily a true believer of solid alliances, but rather is looking for collaborations when interests align. This approach was very visible in the purchase of the S400 missile system from Russia. Cooperation with Russia when interests align is the definition of an ideal alliance in the 21st century for Turkey. This, however, would not stop the Turkish ruling elite from playing the NATO card or the EU candidate country card when necessary. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is looking for a mission impossible: to stay integrated to the West and enjoy its privileges while diversifying partnerships when needed.

With the departure of Donald Trump from the White House, the global context was to become less compatible with Turkey's unilateral foreign policy and its challenging attitude towards its transatlantic allies.

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President Biden announced that the United States is back and will put democracy as an important component of foreign policy – mainly to confront China on the global scene. Secondly, the transatlantic alliance began rebuilding its very much damaged relationship. Work began on a global agenda that includes not only global health, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also green and digital transition, and hybrid threats, etc. Thirdly, the transatlantic allies started to rethink the future of international organizations and multilateralism. G7, G20 and NATO were at the spotlight – however, the intention to reflect the realities of the 21st century in the WTO and the WHO were also topics on the table. Following all these developments, Turkey as a NATO ally and a

candidate country for EU accession, was encouraged to rethink its unilateral foreign policy.

All Politics Are Local. Turkey's Foreign Policy as Well

The reasons for Turkey's charm offensive in 2021, however, cannot just be explained with a global shift. While trying to understand what is going on in Turkish foreign policy, three elements should always be kept in mind: the government's overwhelming desire to stay in charge; the power struggles within the state apparatus; and the lack of institutional structures that serve as check and balance mechanisms. The transition to the presidential system in 2018 eliminated the separation of powers within the state apparatus, while personalizing both domestic and foreign policy. Furthermore, it has also weakened Turkey's diplomatic capacity, somehow obliging the country to step up its footprint in armed conflicts. The interests of the ever-growing national defence industry also helped to push the country in that direction.

The constant decline in Turkey's economy accompanied these global trends. In addition to the weakening of recent years, COVID-19 has been the cherry on the cake. The Turkish lira has been depreciating while inflation has been on the rise.² According to the World Bank, "the pandemic has deepened gender gaps, and increased youth employment and the poverty rate." This economic decline had dire consequences for the governing alliance, which includes the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). All recent polls reflect a decline in support for the government. This is why the ruling elite is looking for an economic impulse that will increase their chances of staying in power in the forthcoming election, which is scheduled to take place in 2023. The European Union is a key trading partner and source of foreign direct investment for the country. In that regard, sanctions by the EU or the United States would have vital consequences for the already very weak Turkish economy. Any investment from the West has become a life jacket for the survival of the coalition. When evalu-

² According to the World Bank, average inflation is projected to increase to 15.5 percent in 2021, and the current account deficit is expected to narrow to 3.7 percent of GDP. For more information: www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview#3

ated together with the global shift, these domestic trends have led to an intention of rapprochement with both Western allies and regional actors. As a result, in 2021, we are witnessing intentions of rapprochement with almost all of the actors mentioned above. Turkey anchored its research ships, to avoid causing any more tension with Greece and Cyprus; re-started exploratory talks with Greece – very much pleasing the European Union; and started negotiating for a peaceful transition both in Syria and Libya. Talks on a new modus vivendi with Egypt, Israel and the United Arab Emirates became visible. To demonstrate that it is a valuable NATO ally, Turkey supported the Baltic members and declared that it is ready to confront Russia in the region. The last surprising move came when Turkey volunteered to protect Kabul Airport in Afghanistan and allies' embassies on completion of the NATO withdrawal. Understanding the link between domestic politics and foreign policy helps to make sense of all these developments.

Conclusion: Why Should the West Not Turn a Blind Eye to Domestic Developments in Turkey?

There is a window of opportunity for the Western allies right now. It is easier to negotiate with a Turkey that is in charm offensive mode – trying to avoid sanctions from the West, upholding its argument for geo-strategic importance and one that needs economic stimulation. The current status of the Turkish economy and the desire to stay in power have an impact on the definition of foreign policy. Attracting foreign direct investment is an ultimate goal. The domestic situation is way too fragile for President Erdogan that 2021 has been the year of rapprochements.

This is why, when we look at the Turkish case, boundaries between domestic and foreign policy are blurred. Foreign policy is a tool to be used to stay in power, hence the abrupt shifts we have witnessed. Today, Turkish President Erdogan is trying to demonstrate that Turkey can still be a reliable ally, while democratic credentials at home do not necessarily reflect the core principles of these alliances.

Many in Europe defend transactionalism to be dominant in relations with Turkey that focuses on a com-

bined strategy of collaboration and containment when necessary. Even if this may look like the right way to go in the short run, it is not necessarily the ideal scenario for anyone in the medium to long run. The assumption that a transactional approach would lead to a more stable relationship is not necessarily right. If foreign policy is instrumentalized for political gain at home, Western allies could always risk facing the tensions of 2020. You never know when another “rally-around-a-flag” moment will be needed for the survival of the government. If so, a re-escalation with neighbours in the region may be just around the corner. It is only till then, Turkey is seeking conciliation, even if most of the existing challenges prevail.

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One key question is about the kind of strategic alliance the future could bring when there are no common values between allies. Can Turkey collaborate effectively with NATO allies while not respecting democracy, rule of law or basic rights and freedoms at home? This is a question yet to be answered. Global trends put democracy at the heart of the alliance – the US President perceives this as the way forward when it comes to fighting China's influence in the world. According to him, the next war is between democracies and autocracies. If so, where does Turkey stand? Next to its NATO allies? Or should it be grouped together with China and Russia?

Right now there is an opportunity both for applying democratic conditionality and also for coming up with innovative proposals to multilateralize Turkey's moves in the region. It is time to use that opportunity.