

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: FROM 'ZERO PROBLEM' TO ZERO FRIENDS

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In recent years, Turkey's foreign policy has attracted scrutiny because of its aggressive postures in the neighbourhood and a confrontational approach towards regional and international powers. The latest example of its bellicose foreign policy was witnessed in the South Caucasus where Turkey provoked a military confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the long standing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Though Turkey is not a party to the conflict, its role as Azerbaijan's primary backer, the supply of weapons and drones, and statement of unconditional support has been instrumental in the eruption of the latest fighting between the two former Soviet republics. Nagorno-Karabakh is an area inside Azerbaijan with a majority ethnic-Armenian population, which has been, since 1994, under the control of an Armenia-backed rebel group wishes to establish an independent Republic of Artsakh in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Turkish action in the South Caucasus follows a similar foreign policy pattern witnessed over the past decade in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. In the early days of the "Arab Spring" protests during 2011-12, Ankara vocally supported the protest movements and presented Turkey as a "model" Islamic country for its ability to reconcile Islam and democracy in its political structure and governance; President Recep Tayyip Erdogan asserted that this model should be followed in the Arab and Islamic world. Initially, Erdogan was cheered in Arab streets that were calling for the end of corrupt, repressive, and authoritarian regimes. Nonetheless, Erdogan's own handling of protests in Turkey, his attempts to silence the media and civil society, the targeting of opposition leaders, and purging of civilian and military officers busted the Turkish myth of a model "Islamic-democratic" country.

This did not deter Erdogan, rather it prompted him to adopt a more belligerent approach to expand the Turkey's external influence. The first sign emerged in Turkey's military involvement in Iraq and Syria. Ankara entered Syria in support of the Islamist rebels and to confront the Kurdish opposition, fearing the formation of a *de facto* autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria. Eventually, this led to the creation of a *de facto* Turkish enclave in Idlib in northwest Syria. In northern Iraq, Turkish armed forces have, since the 1990s, launched military operations to neutralise the hideouts of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with the consent of Iraqi authorities in Baghdad and Erbil. The frequency of military operations have increased after the breaking down of peace negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK in 2015, and Turkish armed forces have refused to respect Iraqi sovereignty despite protests from Baghdad. The interventions in Syria and Iraq have generated tensions between Turkey and Iran, on the one hand, and Turkey and Arab regional powers, on the other. Likewise, it has generated bitterness in relations with the United States (US) and Russia due to the two powers being the primary security providers in Iraq and Syria, respectively.

As was the case in Syria and Iraq, in January 2020 Ankara catapulted itself into the Libyan conflict in support of the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Though the Turkish military intervention changed the dynamics of the civil war in Libya, it could not decisively end Khalifa Hifter's control over the oil-hub of Sirte and a vast majority of Libyan territory. The military intervention nonetheless put Turkey directly in confrontation with the international and regional backers of Hifter—Russia, France, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt—threatening a regional conflict that could only be doused due to proactive mediation

efforts led by the United Nations (UN) that eventually led to signing of a ceasefire between the local belligerents.

Similarly, Ankara's provocative actions in the Eastern Mediterranean region (EastMed) has revived the threat of a Turkey-Greece conflict and led to heightened tensions with France and the European Union (EU). The resource rich EastMed has in recent years received regional attention and Ankara has been riling over its exclusion from the newly established EastMed Gas Forum (EGF) comprising of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine. Turkey asserts it has legitimate claim over the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the EastMed, which is disputed by both Greece and Cyprus. The situation came to a head in September-October 2020 and Turkey agreed to back down only after mediation efforts by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, and threats of economic sanctions by the EU, but has not given up its claim over the EEZ.

The question that now arises is: what is prompting the display of aggressive foreign policy behaviour by Turkey? Broadly, there are four factors that can be identified. Firstly, it emanates from the ambition to enhance Turkey's comprehensive national power to emerge as a regional power and be recognised as a middle power in global politics. Undoubtedly, Turkey possesses the geographic, economic, historical, and economic ingredients, backed by its geostrategic location, to be an important regional actor. However, Erdogan's confrontationist approach, military tactics and pan-Islamist orientation has pitched Turkey against other regional powers such as the Arab states of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE as well as Israel and Iran, and has strained its relations with great powers such as the US, Russia and EU; its propensity to raise controversial issues at international forums has put it in the cross-hairs of China and India.

Secondly, Turkey wishes to establish a strategic presence in areas that it considers sphere of influence. Its military is already involved in northern Cyprus, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, has bases in Qatar and Sudan, and is looking to expand its influence in different locations in its entire neighbourhood. Thirdly, Turkey is eyeing hydrocarbon resources in the EastMed, the Caspian and Black Seas as well as the market for Turkish civilian and defence products in Africa and Asia that can propel its economic growth. Since 2016, the Turkish economy is going through one of the worst slumps in decades and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further dampened the hopes for recovery. Taking a cue from the Chinese handbook, Turkey has sought to use foreign policy to advance its economic agenda. Though this was done mainly through a soft power approach earlier, Erdogan has increasingly used hard power to achieve this goal. Fourthly, Erdogan is faced with serious domestic political and economic challenges and is using a confrontationist foreign policy laced with the rhetoric of reviving the historical Turko-Islamic glory of the Ottoman Empire as a diversionary tactic as well as a method of retaining his support base.

This aggressive foreign policy approach backed by hard power has, however, led to the deterioration of Turkey's relations with friends and foes alike. Turkey's relations with the US have nosedived over several issues, including the procurement of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia and its military intervention in Syria, despite the personal rapport between Erdogan and Donald Trump. Turkey's relations with Russia are strained due to the military confrontations in Syria, Libya, and in Nagorno-Karabakh despite having good defence and economic relations. Turkey's relations with the EU have soured due to the growing authoritarian streak of the Erdogan government. Relations with West Asian countries have also nosedived due to Ankara's increasingly pan-Islamist behaviour.

In the mid-2000s, soon after the ascendance of President Erdogan, Ankara adopted the policy of zero problem with neighbours to achieve its objective to enhance Turkey's comprehensive national power. However, a decade and half later, riding on a series of foreign policy

misadventures, Ankara is left with zero friends.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

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