

## **VOLTE-FACE OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY**

Ambassador (R) Selim Yenel  
**Global Relations Forum President**

As Turkey's effort and cooperation with the United Nations to solve the food crisis that emerged as a result of Russia's attack on Ukraine yielded a positive result, it presented a much-needed success for Ankara. When Russia invaded Ukraine, Ankara's attempt to manage both sides was initially criticized. However, the fact that the Russian and Ukrainian officials were able to get together, albeit without a result, and finally the agreement in Istanbul, which allowed the grain products accumulated in Ukraine to be released to the outside world, pushed the criticisms into the background.

The main element in Turkey's traditional foreign policy was to conduct diplomacy that allowed Ankara to talk to all parties. At the beginning of the 2000s, it was Turkey that was mediating between Syria and Israel. Again, let's not forget that the leaders of Palestine and Israel addressed the Turkish Grand National Assembly for the first time in succession.

Since the so-called 'loneliness' Turkey experienced in the last ten years has started to cause problems not only in terms of foreign policy but also regarding the economy, the current volte-face, so to speak, marks a return to Turkey's traditional policy of trying to have a regular dialogue with everyone. The turnaround has accelerated this year. Attempts to mend deteriorating relations, which tended to be evident since Biden's election as US president, have provided at least a relative détente. The efforts to improve the relations in the Middle East, which started with Egypt and Israel by leaving ideological considerations behind, took place faster with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which were hoped to provide much needed investment. There are some small efforts in the policy towards Syria as well. We wish that relationships based on interests rather than personal feelings will continue.

However, this is just the beginning. Turkey's foreign policy in the last ten years compared to the previous decade, developments and activity taken as well as expressed statements have created a serious gap of trust. These will take time to fix.

Relations with the West, in other words with the USA and the European Union, are not trouble free. However, we cannot blame only our country in this regard. The EU has not fulfilled many of its commitments by citing back sliding in areas such as human rights and the rule of law in Turkey since the migration statement made in 2016, and preferred to enter into dialogue on certain foreign policy issues only when it was convenient.

The EU also chose to avoid updating the Customs Union which is actually a non-political and mutually beneficial commercial issue.

The challenges with the USA remain unresolved. Fetullah Gülen, who is seen as the main perpetrator of the July 15 coup attempt, continues to reside in the USA. The US maintains support to the YPG, which has links with the PKK, on the pretext that it is fighting ISIS. These are the principal issues that vex Ankara. On the other hand, when Turkey bought the S-400 missiles from Russia, Washington removed Turkey from the F-35 new generation aircraft system. Although Turkey's objections to many issues within NATO in the past were not well known to the public, it caused a lot of discomfort within the Alliance. In addition, Turkey's opposition to the membership of Finland and Sweden, however justifiable, has led to criticism within NATO due to the way it was handled.

Finally, Turkey's close relationship with Russia also raises concerns. Although support for Ukraine and condemnation of the Russian invasion created a certain balance between the parties, Turkey's policies of helping Russia to circumvent Western sanctions is a new area of discontent.

The EU is ambivalent in this respect. In the EU Council Declaration of last June, candidates were asked to comply with the EU's foreign policy, and therefore with the sanctions decisions. However, Turkey's non participation to these sanctions should be understandable. While the EU has not treated Turkey as a candidate for a long time, it asks Turkey to comply on decisions of such an important issue that directly concerns Ankara without even consulting it. The only sanctions Turkey participates are those approved by the UN.

While Turkey was trying to improve relations in foreign policy, Russia's invasion of Ukraine created both new problems and opportunities. The special relationship between President Erdogan and Russian President Putin has helped to overcome various problems between the two countries in the past. The invasion of Ukraine revealed the key role Turkey can play in the international arena. Although we criticize many of our policies, we must admit that this balance policy has been successfully maintained until now. However, as Turkey's economic situation brings closer relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which were seen as adversaries until recently, it also creates the danger of becoming more dependent on Russia. The fact that the Rouble will be used in gas purchases, as well as the transfer of an amount to be 15 billion dollars from Russia recently, and that Russian tourists coming to our country can use credit cards that are not valid in the West, have attracted the attention of Washington and notices were given.

A new concern is that Turkey will become more dependent on Russia. Anti-Westernism may find a response in domestic politics, but the fact that we are a part of the West seems to be forgotten lately. This amnesia is found not only in Turkey but also in the West. In the foreign press as well as in our country's media, "the West and Turkey" are constantly referred to. Even these expressions cause divergence.

Another fact should be mentioned. How sincere is Turkey's return and whether it will remain permanent is a matter of discussion in various capitals. Considering the

# GIFGRF

upcoming elections in our country to be held at the latest next summer, we observe that many capitals also take a wait-and-see attitude.

However, if Turkey is to return to the Western world and not become dependent on Russia, everyone should make an effort. Turkey's return to its traditional foreign policy should be supported and opportunities for concrete dialogue should be increased.

To give an example, on 30 – 31 August, the EU Foreign Ministers will meet informally (in Gymnich format) in Prague during the Czech Presidency. Our Ministers, who previously participated to such meetings, have not been invited since the beginning of 2019. The absence of Turkey in such a meeting where Russia's invasion of Ukraine will be discussed and the representatives of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia will take part is a serious shortcoming. It would be the perfect opportunity to discuss and try to harmonise policies.

On the other hand, Turkey will gain more if it establishes its foreign policy once again on a sustainable, reliable, responsible and principled basis.