

### TURKIYE'S FOREIGN POLICY IN A CHANGING WORLD

By  
**Sarah Akram**  
Research Fellow

*Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA), ISSI*

Edited by  
**Amina Khan**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**In an increasingly interconnected world, Turkiye's foreign policy outlook plays a crucial role in shaping its position on the global stage. As a country with a rich history and strategic location, Turkiye faces numerous challenges and opportunities in its interactions with the international community. One of the keywords that define Turkiye's foreign policy approach is 'balance'. Turkiye seeks to strike a delicate equilibrium between maintaining strong alliances with its traditional partners while also pursuing new partnerships and diversifying its diplomatic engagements. This balanced approach allows Turkiye to safeguard its national interests while promoting peace, stability, and economic prosperity.**

Turkiye's historical approach to foreign relations has been predominantly characterized by a status quo orientation, where its interactions with neighboring states were largely influenced by broader geopolitical struggles. However, with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent augmentation of Turkiye's economic, military, and diplomatic capabilities, a notable shift has occurred. Turkish foreign policy has now turned its attention towards redefining the regional order to align with its increasing aspirations for enhanced regional role and influence. Moving forward, the manner in which Ankara pursues its objectives and the responses elicited from neighboring countries will play a crucial role in further shaping Turkiye's foreign relations. With the slogan of 'zero problems with neighbours,' to one with substantial interface with regional countries, the country's foreign policy

has evolved in numerous ways. This evolving dynamic in Turkish foreign policy is likely to remain a constant feature, and acquire special significance in this centenary year of Turkish Republic (2023).

As an influential regional power with aspirations for greater global relevance, Turkiye is grappling with multiple challenges while navigating complex regional dynamics. One such challenge is striking a delicate balance between maintaining strong ties with Western allies, while also fostering close cooperating relations with neighboring countries in the Middle East and Central Asia. The ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq have had profound implications for Turkiye's foreign policy agenda. With millions of refugees seeking shelter within its borders, Turkiye has had to grapple with the myriad humanitarian and security dimensions of these crises. Its approach has been multi-faceted, involving efforts to provide aid and support to refugees while also advocating for a political resolution to the festering conflicts.

Turkiye's geographical proximity to regions plagued by terrorism poses significant security challenges. The country has been at the forefront of international efforts in combating terrorism, particularly in its fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and Kurdish militant groups. The country's foreign policy outlook emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation and intelligence -sharing in countering these threats. Turkiye's economic growth over the past decades has propelled it onto the global stage as an emerging market powerhouse. As such, as economic diplomacy plays a vital role in its foreign policy strategy, Ankara seeks to enhance trade relations, attract foreign direct investment, and diversify its export markets through strategic partnerships with countries across the globe.

It is likely that the current reelected government will remain occupied with key challenges concerning Turkish foreign policy in the foreseeable future. Ankara's independent stance, like the pressing issue of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s enlargement to include Sweden stood out as a primary concern. However, the recent turnaround on Sweden's accession to NATO, also stems *inter alia* from Ankara's economic considerations.<sup>1</sup> The continuing engagement in Ukraine and the heightened Western support for Ukraine's security could have led to mounting pressure on Turkiye to lift its embargo on Sweden's NATO accession. As the conflict in Ukraine continues to escalate, the urgency of addressing this matter will persist for Ankara in the near to mid-term. Turkiye's commitment to playing an active role in resolving the Syrian civil war is also likely to persist. Moreover, facilitating the safe return of Syrian-origin immigrants residing in Turkiye to their homeland continues to be a crucial objective. This endeavor necessitates not only sustained

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<sup>1</sup> Turkey's About-Face on Sweden Driven by Russian Weakness, Middle East Policy Council, July 11, 2023, <https://mepc.org/commentary/turkeys-about-face-sweden-driven-russian-weakness>

engagement in multilateral negotiations involving Turkish, Russian, Iranian, and Syrian officials but also the enhancement of strategic dialogue between Turkish and American authorities. The determination to find a resolution to the Syrian conflict will remain a priority.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, due to its strategic location and importance in agricultural trade, Turkiye's grain deal with Black Sea countries could have significant implications for food security, commodity prices, and regional trade dynamics. The United Nations (UN) and Turkiye collaborated to facilitate grain shipments from Ukraine, despite Russia's ongoing conflict in the region. A substantial portion of the exported grain was sent to impoverished nations in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The agreement also allowed Russia to export food and fertilizer worldwide, even amidst Western sanctions on Moscow. Originally established in July 2022, the deal was intended to be extended every four months but faced obstacles during the last two renewals, leading to shorter extensions. Presently, Ukraine and Turkiye are in discussions to urgently revive the Black Sea grain agreement.<sup>3</sup>

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent tour of the Gulf countries is also noteworthy, as it reflects the high importance Ankara continues to accord to its bilateral relations with the Gulf States. The tour started with Saudi Arabia followed by a visit to Qatar and then the United Arab Emirates.<sup>4</sup> During the tour, agreements were signed between Turkiye and the three Gulf nations. Soaring inflation and a weakening currency needs much needed economic support and this reinvigoration of relations is likely to have a positive impact on the Turkish economy.

Changing global scenarios may have strained the country's foreign relations in certain domains; however, Ankara has been successful in maintaining an independent posture. Amid ongoing tensions with Western nations, Turkiye is also actively pursuing other partnerships, particularly with China and Russia. Strengthening its relations with Beijing, Turkiye has seen China emerge as its primary import partner in 2021. In 2015, Turkiye became a participant in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), affording the country access to funding from non-Western sources for various infrastructure ventures, including nuclear and coal-powered energy facilities. As a result, this move has also stimulated increased foreign investment from China in Turkiye, another economic milestone.<sup>5</sup> With

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<sup>2</sup> Turkiye foreign policy in the new era, MEMO, June 15, 2023  
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230615-turkiye-foreign-policy-in-the-new-era/>

<sup>3</sup> Türkiye in efforts for extension of grain deal, July 14, 2023, Hurriyet Daily,  
<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ukraine-grain-deal-renewal-hangs-in-balance-amid-talks-with-russia-184708>

<sup>4</sup> AYSE ISIN KIRENCI, Bridging the Gulf: Why Erdogan's three-nation tour is a win-win for all, TRT World,  
<https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/bridging-the-gulf-why-erdogans-three-nation-tour-is-a-win-win-for-all-14076099>

<sup>5</sup> Kali Robinson, Turkey's Growing Foreign Policy Ambitions, CFR, July 11, 2023,  
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/turkeys-growing-foreign-policy-ambitions>

Russia, energy constitutes one of the most important elements of bilateral relations and this is evident from the deepening cooperation among TurkStream and Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant projects which is taking cooperation in the field of energy further.

President Erdogan's recent electoral slogan, "Century of Turkiye," and the subsequent focus on national foreign policy, share resemblances with the European Union's idea of strategic autonomy. However, strategic autonomy ought not to be interpreted as retreating or isolating from the competition among major powers, as Turkiye's potential extends well beyond this point as its foreign policy is based on a global vision.

Although the thrust of Turkiye's foreign policy is likely to remain the same, it is important to note that Turkiye's evolving relationships with major powers have been instrumental in influencing some of its foreign policy decisions (like the changed stance on Sweden's entry into NATO). Economic challenges would continue to be a significant test and would possibly contribute to and influence Turkiye's foreign policy postures in the near future.