



**N. Murat Ersavcı<sup>1</sup>**

*Director of Economic and Political Policy Center*

## **A CASE FOR A KEY COUNTRY: TURKEY IN EUROPE AND BEYOND**

***“Peace at home, peace in the world” – Mustafa Kemal Atatürk***

This seemingly straightforward and powerful maxim still constitutes the main pillar of the Turkish Foreign Policy, which has always been peaceful, realistic and consistent. Why such an emphasis on peace? Well the Turkish Republic was born out of war, continuous warfare between 1911 and 1923, but also a series of wars by our opponents from 1808 throughout the 19th century which threatened our very existence. There were very few years when we were completely at peace. For Atatürk, when he established the Turkish Republic in 1923 it was of the utmost importance for survival to assure permanent peace within and outside of the country, beyond ideology or rhetoric.

If you want to understand the challenges Turkish foreign policy is designed to cope with, take a quick glance at the map. I want to emphasize this, because I believe that if you realize that peace and security are the leitmotifs of the Turkish foreign policy, this may give you a better insight into it. For example, you will understand why Turkey still is exploring all diplomatic avenues for a peaceful solution over ie. Iran, Libya, the Middle-East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Do not allow yourself to be distracted by talk about shifting and changing the axis of Turkish foreign policy. Current policies do not imply that Turkey will draw away from her alliance with the West. A quick look at Turkish Foreign Policy will reveal three distinct periods, characterized by a constant effort for peace building.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1410/N.+Murat+Ersavci>

During the first phase, from 1923 to the end of the second WW, Turkey aimed to stay out of any conflict, while trying to create a safer near neighborhood zone mainly by initiating regional alliances. The second phase roughly covered the Cold War era during which Turkey assumed an important role for the Western security. (i.e. its Korean War effort). As such, Turkey was one of the founding members of the United Nations and the Council of Europe, and attained memberships of the OECD and NATO. In 1963, Turkey signed an Association Agreement, which was the first step towards the European Communities. (It was stated in the Agreement that the full membership was its aim and this took place after the Turkish Foreign Minister of the day had persuaded President de Gaulle on this point). Its main strategy was „Zollverein“ or full customs union for industrial goods by 1996. At the time it seemed a wild dream, but in the fullness of time it was achieved. Now Turkey is among the top six trade partners of the European Union.

Today; the immediate policy landscape is dominated by security and refugee problems. Turkey has to deal with an evolving security challenges which are increasingly more amorphous and asymmetric in nature, making them harder to tackle than the less complex problems of the Cold War era. Yet we still do not hesitate to do what is required. Turkey strives for peace and stability world-wide. The country is located in a volatile region and whether it is high or low profile we play an important part in maintaining stability in the Black Sea, southern Caucasus, and the wider Middle East. To that end, it is making active contributions to efforts to bring lasting peace, stability and prosperity to regions ranging from our contingent of soldiers with ISAF in Afghanistan to the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East.

Taking part in global peace efforts is definitely nothing new for Turkey. We were an indispensable member of the NATO Alliance during the darkest years of the Cold War. This continues to be the case today when NATO is entrusted with much broader tasks. Close cooperation between EU and NATO has also become a key issue in recent times as the need grows for a more robust transatlantic partnership. This is something which Turkey is very much in favor of. Having said that, I must also emphasize that our efforts are not confined only to hard security issues. As the 19th largest economy in the world, Turkey strives for ushering in a better global economic structure through its participation in the G-20, while being equally punctilious on issues like curbing global warming (having signed the Paris Climate Agreement, now is the time to ratify it)), combating terrorism and other forms of cross border criminal activity, ensuring sustainable energy supplies, promoting harmony among different civilizations and eradicating poverty.

Furthermore, Turkey is energetically extending a helping hand to developing countries struggling to overcome chronic problems. This reflects its strong desire to make at least a modest contribution to the global efforts towards the betterment of mankind in all respects. As a newly industrialized nation, we know how hard it is to make the breakthrough from a traditional agrarian society to a modern industrial one and how heavy the human cost can often be.

At one point, Turkey had adopted a bold stance aiming to improve our relations with countries in its close proximity. This may have sounded idealistic or utopian to those who think we live in a Hobbesian world of hard realities, rather than a Kantian one of “perpetual peace”. We in Turkey are as aware of the realities as anybody else. However, we do not believe that either

human beings or states are hopelessly incapable of settling their differences peacefully. All it takes is a leap of faith, inducing the parties in dispute to embrace a simple fact: when there is enough trust, confidence and goodwill displayed by both sides, solving disagreements does not have to be a “win-lose” or “lose-lose” proposition. On the contrary, simply by walking half of the way towards their counterpart with arms extended for a sincere handshake, they are removing maybe the most important obstacle to agreement, which is the psychological barrier. If this Rubicon can be crossed, there is a good chance that even a unilateral call for dialogue will be reciprocated, mutual trust will snowball and the parties will be propelled towards their elusive settlement, which is of course the final product of a give and take exercise.

Let me now try to give you a sense of how this philosophy played itself out in our case. The earliest successes were achieved with our Balkan neighbours. Despite serious difficulties, the process of dialogue with Greece, reemerges. Likewise, Bulgaria and Romania, once our adversaries during the Cold War period are nowadays our NATO allies. We have even brought together Bosnia and Serbia.

Regarding Cyprus, the Turkish side has remained one step ahead sparing no effort for an early settlement to bring peace, stability and an environment of cooperation to the Eastern Mediterranean. It is a fact that today we are all facing the complications of the EU accession of the Greek Cypriot Administration, before a solution. A comprehensive settlement will not only benefit the two sides in the Island but also the EU and Turkey. If only EU fulfilled its obligations from the European Council decision of 26 April 2004 and put an end to the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots.

Turkish-Russian relations constitute today an integral component of our multidimensional foreign policy. Turkey has some time ago also initiated the “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” in order to serve as a unique, regionally owned forum which could help the settlement of regional problems through dialogue.

Turkey also had taken bold steps in the normalization of our relations with Armenia, though the process came to an abrupt stop due to the illegal occupation by that country of Azerbaijani territories. Now that a new phase has started following the recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, with Azerbaijan regaining its illegally occupied lands, I am still hopeful that it can be resumed.

Turkey has been encouraging its neighbor Iran to adopt a more cooperative and transparent stance regarding its nuclear program. Iraq on the other hand, is still somehow in a state of transition standing on its own feet after the withdrawal of the majority of US forces. Our aim is to ensure that Iraq succeeds in this. A united and democratic Iraq, assuming its rightful place within the community of nations, would constitute a true success for us in Turkey as well. To the west of Iraq, our relations with Syria unfortunately suffered a huge set back. The terrible cost of the Syrian civil war, causing unbelievable human misery and a massive refugee problem that came with it still continues. No other country in the world, apart from Turkey have accepted such high numbers – over 4,5 million- of refugees from that country.

Permanent peace in the Middle East is one of the main keys to a peaceful and stable future in the world. Tension there, have always had serious and adverse strategic consequences for

the rest of the world. Therefore, Turkey always supported all efforts to reach a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. But there are so many upsets in the region. In that context, I believe there is still a chance for an honest and fair relations with Israel. In my opinion the two countries should restore bilateral ties and normalize relations as soon as possible. It is a win-win situation for both and I am hopeful that the things will turn out this way.

In short, Turkey deems itself a party to any effort, anywhere that seeks peace, stability and prosperity. I believe that this is a responsibility for every civilized and modern country. In fact it is this tenacity that perhaps contributed to the election of Ambassador Volkan Bozkır, as the President of the United Nations General Assembly last year. Turkey has been vigorously seeking the peaceful resolution of international disputes and striving towards the reinvigoration of a sense of collectivism, while promoting due compliance with international law and confidence in international organizations.

The road to global peace, stability and prosperity goes via creating local and regional blocks. Regional integration is also a key driver of changes at the global level. And integrative movements, by definition, must be fair, inclusive and participatory. In that regard, there is one issue that is not just very important for Turkey, but also still constitutes our national strategic goal. I refer to our European Union. If we were only allowed to do, we could complete the negotiations in the same space of time as other candidates and perhaps more effectively than some, for Turkey with a deep administrative capacity and of course we have that 24 year old Customs Union with the EU. Something no other candidate has ever had during negotiations. I must add that time has long come for the enhancement of this process which needs to be adjusted to today's realities. Turkey has embarked on this journey a considerable time ago, and I have to admit, at times things did not go as smoothly as one would have wished for. (There have been two turning points in our relations: the Helsinki Summit decision of December 1999, whereby Turkey was declared a candidate country, and the subsequent step to open negotiations with Turkey in October 2005).

Despite today's somewhat dismal outlook and setbacks Turkey is trying to ensure a better and more modern lifestyle for its people. The reforms have to continue without hesitation. But I have to emphasize that there are two sides to this bargain. The performance of the Union in fulfilling its share unfortunately falls far short of our expectations. The general impression in Turkey is that discussions in Europe are often marked by an overall tendency to resort to unfriendly stereotypes that in no way reflect today's realities. Turkey's contribution to Europe will be much greater and definitely more positive than some segments of European public opinion currently believe. With Turkey as a possible future member, the EU will in fact be a stronger economic, military and political player at the global level. Turkish membership will enable the EU to be more effective in areas targeted by its neighborhood policy, as well as in volatile but strategic regions like the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. This will also help the West in its ability to promote stability, security and prosperity around the world, not to mention Turkey's essential role in energy security. I should also mention Turkey's role as a catalyst in bridging the gap between East and West, Islam and Christianity through intercultural dialogue. With Turkey on board, I firmly believe that the cultural diversity and human fabric of the European Union will be enhanced, in turn bolstering the vision of a Europe whole and free. I am aware that such arguments, however truthful, may appear abstract to ordinary men and women in European streets, who are understandably more concerned about their jobs and

wages. Let me tell them this: With its large domestic market, growing investment opportunities and educated human resources, Turkey's economy is far from having reached the zenith of its capabilities. Despite periodical global crises, despite Covid-19 pandemic, we are steadily making progress towards our goal; which is to make Turkey among one of the biggest economies in the world.

I must also add that Turkey has also evolved into an emerging donor country for aid. With the contribution of Turkey-based NGOs, until recently, our overall development assistance exceeded 1½ billion Dollars annually. This means that Turkey will be a generator of investments, jobs and economic growth for many decades to come. It also means that rather being a burden, Turkey will take some of the burden off EU's shoulders. To the extent that European public opinion is able to forge a better and comprehensive understanding of the real meaning of Turkey's future accession to the EU, our membership will be within our reach.

I sincerely believe that we owe this to the coming generations. Official efforts cannot do this alone, no matter how willing they may be. A lot depends on the activities of non-governmental organizations, press and academia.

I am confident that by working with our friends in Europe, we will be able to realize a better future which is from my point of view is a Union with Turkey in it.

The ancient philosopher Epictetus (who was a native of Hierapolis, Phrygia – today's Pamukkale) said that only the educated are free. I call on you to retain a free and open mind on Turkey.