Understanding Turkish foreign policy as a reaction to insecurity perceptions

The geographical location of Turkey represents a double-edged sword, as it makes the country an obliged crossroad among two continents and three seas. At the same time, being a very strategical hub means that the opportunities to seize might be overshadowed by the risks of such a conflictual neighbourhood.

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Turkey’s relations with the European Union have always suffered from ups and downs. The lack of political will to boost the negotiation process is creating a situation of stalemate in the current state of play, hindering the opening of the other chapters required by the EU enlargement policy. Only 16 chapters among 35 have been opened so far (and only the one on Science and Research provisionally closed), whilst 8 are still frozen, given that Turkey has always refused to implement the Additional Protocol of 1970 on Cyprus after its accession to the EU in 2004.

Although not included in the “blacklist”, the Chapter 31 (Foreign, Security and Defence Policy) is currently paralyzed by Cyprus veto. But still, its opening would have positive strategical implications and mutual benefits for the cooperation between Turkey and the EU, as both the partners share convergent foreign policy goals in the common neighbourhood – fighting against terrorism and radicalization, promoting regional stability, joining peace-keeping

1 {Phinnemore, D., İçener, E., Holding the door half (?) open: the EU and Turkey 10 years on. Journal of Contemporary European Studies. 24:4, 2016, p. 448}.
and peace-building missions, providing humanitarian assistance to refugees, easing regular migration and curbing irregular movements. Consequently, there would be still room to foster a functional cooperation with the EU, for example through the “external differentiated integration” scheme, as a flexible way to maximize the synergies existing in foreign, defence and security affairs. The successful Turkish involvement in the CSDP missions of the past might be replied within the framework of the Permanent and Structured Cooperation recently conceived by EU policy makers, in order to enhance the international actorness of the EU and to allow the most willing Member States to deepen the integration in foreign and security issues. This ambitious track can be designed notwithstanding the “de-europeanizing” track which Turkey seems to have followed during the last years and the steer toward Eurasia highly discussed in literature.

The discussions around the eventual synergies cannot ignore the wide gap which is yet to be filled in terms of how the two theorize the international scenario and of the main security concerns at the core of their foreign posture. The asymmetry between Turkey - a “modern” sovereign State - and the EU - a “post-modern” and sui generis international union of States – should not be interpreted as an inescapable stumbling block, but rather as a persistent cleavage.

2 {Despite the complaints around the exclusion from the decision-making process, Turkey has contributed to the EU-led military mission (EUFOR-ALTHEA) and police-mission (EUPM) in Bosnia and Herzegovina; to the EULEX mission in Kosovo; to CONCORDIA (military) and EUPOL (civilian) Proxima in North Macedonia; to EUFOR RD Congo (military) and EUPOL (civilian) Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The help provided so far has been generous and appreciated, above all during the operation in EUFOR – BiH, where 274 have been deployed, ranking second among the major contributors. See Tardy, T., CSDP: getting third States on board, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief Issue n. 6, March, Paris, 2014, p.1}.

3 {Aydın-Düzgit, S., Kaliber, A., Encounters with Europe in an Era of Domestic and International Turmoil: Is Turkey a De-Europeanising Candidate Country?, South European Society and Politics, 21:1, 2016}.

which shapes the security mindset in a very different manner\(^5\).

In this article, I discuss the crucial drivers and the perceptions of insecurity which raise the concerns of Turkey in its geographical near-abroad, namely the South-Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Besides, it is worth adding to the list the role – both symbolical and economic - played by Central Asia Turkophone countries in the Pan-Turkic geopolitical imagination, whose leverage in foreign policy decision-making has grown up since the fall of the Soviet Union\(^6\).

The geographical location of Turkey represents a double-edged sword, as it makes the country an obliged crossroad among two continents and three seas. At the same time, being a very strategical hub means that the opportunities to seize might be overshadowed by the risks of such a conflictual neighbourhood. Thus, the extensive surveillance of borders, especially in the South-East, turns out to be a top priority in Ankara security agenda.

Even though a comprehensive historical reconstruction of Turkish in-security mindset exceeds the rationale of this article, it is useful to briefly sketch why some regions have been often perceived as source of continuous threats. Firstly, I consider appropriate to zoom on the Eastern Mediterranean, since it represents the main area of friction with some EU Member States.

The utmost value of the Aegean Sea and of the island of Cyprus for Turkish national security and defence cannot be ignored. The two issues have undermined the historically uneasy relations with Greece, among the main sponsors of Cyprus accession into the EU. The maritime disputes in the Aegean troubled waters date back at least to 1964, when Turkey extended its territorial seas from three to six nautical miles (about 11 km), in reaction to the same decision of Greece in 1936. This situation of precarious balance has

\(^6\) {Imai, K., The possibility and limit of liberal middle power policies. Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East during the AKP period (2005-2011). Lexington. Lanham, Maryland, 2018, p. 67}.  

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persisted so far, with Athens controlling 43.5% of the Aegean, whereas Ankara is left with 7% and the other 49% for the high seas. The eventual extension of Greek territorial waters until 12 miles is interpreted as an existential threat and a *casus belli* by Ankara, no matter which political party holds the majority of seats in the Parliament. This would mean the Greek occupation of 71% of the Aegean, in front of a limited increase of 1.8% of Turkish share. The fear of being deprived of its right to explore and exploit the high seas is still palpable in how the Turkish MFA illustrates the maritime controversy. Other matters of dispute, which might trigger an escalation between the two, are related to the absence of a delimitation agreement on the Continental Shelf, to the breadth of the Aegean air space and to the securitization of small rocks and islands, extremely strategical assets progressively militarized in the competition for the control of the seas.

The Greek-sponsored coup and the following support for the independence of the Southern part of Cyprus created a sort of syndrome of encirclement among Turkish military and policymakers. The invasion and the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in July-August 1974 was described as a “peace operation” to counter the Hellenic threat, which worsened the perception of Turkish insecurity from that moment on. The existential fracture with Cyprus hampered the process of negotiation with the European Union, despite the (failed) attempt from the AKP to reframe the security lexicon around the issue, during the first government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Downgrading the “vital security threat” into a mere “political problem” was a way to strengthen Turkish positions in the bargain with Brussels and to show a positive attitude towards the resolution of the conflict – in parallel with the endorsement of the Annan Plan by Northern Cyprus. Nonetheless, every effort to avoid a zero-sum game scuppered because of Turkish sound opposition to

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the formal recognition of Cyprus and the opening of its traffic to the Nicosia, in compliance with the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement of 1963. Turkey will be ill-affected to make concessions and backtrack from these two pillars of its security strategy, in addition to a third element which is out of discussion – cutting the number of troops deployed in the TRNC. What the EU deems as an “occupation of Cyprus soil” embodies indeed a “matter of honour for Turkey, comparable to the Falkland Islands for Britain”. The same rationale explains Turkey’s reluctance to accept that in the future, after an eventual re-unification of the island, the Turks living in the North might be addressed as a “minority” and thus discriminated vis-à-vis the Greek majority. Furthermore, the race for the control of the Aegean Sea risks rising the tension between Turkey on one side and Greece and Cyprus on the other, in terms of freedom of navigation and of exploiting the natural gas resources that recently raised the interest of some regional actors.

3. The Aegean Sea aside, it is worthwhile to pinpoint the strategical areas located on the Eastern side, the cause of periodical tough confrontations between Turkey and its Western allies. A short focus on three issues allows to grasp some of the most urgent Turkish insecurity perception, which EU policy makers should bear in mind when they sit at the negotiation table with Ankara.

-Chief among all is the threat of Kurdish terrorism in the securitized cross-border region with Syria, Iraq and Iran. In this respect, Ankara claims that the EU should endeavour more to eradicate the PKK ramifications in some Member States and thus to neutralize its terrorist threat. Turkey’s disagreement around the US support of YPG units – regarded as terrorists linked to the PKK - in the Northern Syria might damage the relations with the European States which are believed to send boots on the ground to

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fill the American gap in the Kurdish majority areas\textsuperscript{13}. The Kurdish threatening secessionism can be considered as a product of the so-called “Sèvres syndrome” or “Sèvres-phobia”, inscribed in the military mindset: the persuasion, so widespread in some military and political circles, that the external world (the West) and their internal agents (the Kurds, but it might be extended to the Islamists as well) plot to weaken and to tear apart the Turkish State\textsuperscript{14}.

-The Middle East has always been prioritized in Turkish foreign agenda\textsuperscript{15} and it is yet to placate the insecurity perceptions of Turkey for a variety of reasons - the management of water resources, energy security, illegal migration flows and the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Admittedly, the positions of Turkey and the EU chimed in on some recent dossiers (for ex., the management of refugees and asylum seekers), a key to bolster the partnership and to reduce several gaps emerged in the bilateral dynamics.

-Finally, the troubled and decadelong relation with Armenia is yet to be appeased and might represent a liability in the negotiation with the EU. More than the posture of Erevan, the dialogue with Ankara is exacerbated by the contested political use of the historical events by some Member States: namely, the recognition of the massacres of Armenian at the beginning of the XX century as a genocide. A decision considered as either moved by pure Islamophobia or encouraged by the Armenian diaspora. This is another matter of honour for Turkey, which laments the double standards of western States, often blind vis-à-vis the war crimes committed by Armenians during the very same period and the terrorist attacks of ASALA organization in Europe. The suspension of diplomatic ties and the support of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict weaken the reconciliation with Erevan.

4. Haggling over all the former critical dossiers (Cyprus and the Aegean Sea \textit{in primis}) will be a very puzzling task for Brussels policy-makers. The EU should understand that Turkey’s logic is


\textsuperscript{14}\{Terzi, Ö., \textit{The influence of the European Union on Turkish foreign policy}, Ashgate. Surrey, 2010, p. 61\}.

\textsuperscript{15}\{Altunişik, M. B., Lenore G.M., \textit{Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP}. Turkish Studies, 12:4, 2011\}.
embroiled in the calculus of a geopolitical actor who wants to maximize its national security, as well as to meet the symbolical and emotional needs of a patriotic population which, as far as the Cyprus question is concerned, is likely to interpret the signing of the Additional Protocol as “selling all the island to Greece”\textsuperscript{16}.

The existing wedge between the EU and Turkey is driven by their own conception of security culture: rooted in the traditional security concerns of the sovereign State, in Ankara, while conversely more inspired to post-modern and post-military way of interpreting security, in Brussels and in some European capitals. Despite the latest revanche of far-right and populist sovereign parties in some influential Member States, the “clash of security cultures”\textsuperscript{17} is moulded by the different representation of danger and threats to the tenure of the national and social tissue. The EU emphasis on topics like civil society, migration, human rights and environmental awareness cannot gain momentum at the same pace in Turkey, which is still affected by low intensity warfare in the South-east, terrorist attacks, disputes over territorial and maritime borders and by the domestic hegemony of the National Security Council in the security discourses\textsuperscript{18}. This explains why the West has always been constructed ambiguously as a source both of inspiration and of economic development and of in-security, isolation and subalternity.

\textsuperscript{16} {Bağcı, H., Zeitgeist. Global Politics and Turkey, op.cit., p. 216}.
\textsuperscript{17} {Bilgin, P, Security dimension. A clash of security cultures? Differences between Turkey and the European Union revisited, op.cit.}.
\textsuperscript{18} {Kaliber, A., Securing the Ground Through Securitized ‘Foreign’ Policy: The Cyprus Case, op.cit., p. 328-330}.