

The Post-Election Horizons of Turkish Foreign Policy

Ruslan Suleymanov

In early June, re-elected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made major personnel changes in the cabinet. One of the key positions, the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs, was awarded to Hakan Fidan, who had previously headed the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) of Türkiye for more than 13 years.

The rich background of the former Turkish intelligence chief, his knowledge of the Middle East, the Caucasus, and other regional dossiers will obviously be useful for Ankara's foreign policy in the new era.

The most relevant for Türkiye in the near future will be repairing fraught relations with NATO (including the issue of Sweden's membership), mediation in the Russia-Ukraine war, rapprochement with the countries of the Middle East (starting with Syria), as well as contributing to the normalization of the situation in the South Caucasus, in particular regarding the opening of the Zangezur corridor and the signing of the long-anticipated peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Security Above All

"Making a good foreign policy requires good foreign intelligence," Fidan long ago pointed out in his university thesis titled "The Role of Intelligence in Foreign Policy."

There is no doubt that the former spymaster's experience in organizations such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) underlines that Fidan's broad background will be invaluable to the strategy and execution of Ankara's foreign policy in the time ahead.

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“Fidan’s appointment as foreign minister indicates that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wants a more seasoned operative to lead Türkiye’s foreign policy amid the escalating Russian-Ukraine War and the complex rapprochements in the Middle East, including Turkey’s own with Syria,” notes Güney Yıldız in *Forbes*.

One of Ankara’s top priorities in the near future will be building bridges with its Western partners and treaty allies.

On the one hand, the Turkish economy, which is going through hard times, requires more investment. In this sense, recent steps to liberalize the Turkish economy—and specifically the appointment of Hafize Gaye Erkan, a former Goldman Sachs banker, to the post of head of the Central Bank (the first woman in the history of the country at this position)—have been positively perceived in Western capitals. The same applies to the appointment of the proponent of Western economic orthodoxy Mehmet Şimşek as finance minister, who has already declared that “Türkiye has no choice left but to return to a rational basis.”

On the other hand, NATO is interested in resolving the issue of Sweden’s entry into the alliance as soon as possible. It is no coincidence that already on 4 June 2023, a week after the second round of the presidential elections in Türkiye, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Istanbul, where he met with Erdoğan to discuss the urgency of this issue.

The head of the North Atlantic Alliance expressed hope that Ankara would approve Stockholm’s application before the next NATO summit, which is scheduled for 11-12 July in Lithuania. Meanwhile, Türkiye continues to demand the extradition of Kurdish activists accused of terrorism who received political asylum in Sweden, so the settlement of these contradictions is unlikely to be quick.

Speaking to journalists on his way back from a state visit to Azerbaijan on 13 June, Erdoğan said that Türkiye’s attitude to Sweden’s accession was not positive. “Don’t expect anything different at Vilnius,” he stated. This statement should be understood in light of the fact that, in addition, Ankara continues to link (behind the scenes) the possibility of its positive decision on Stockholm with the supply of 40 new F-16 fighter jets from the United States.

In parallel, Ankara intends to continue to play an active mediating role between Moscow and Kiev, given Erdoğan’s warm relations with both Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. So, on 7 June 2023, the day after the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, the Turkish president called the leaders of both Ukraine and Russia and proposed the establishment of a joint international commission with the participation of Türkiye (and the UN) to investigate the circumstances of the disaster.

However, given the Ukrainian army’s counteroffensive and the general escalation of this conflict, peace talks between Moscow and Kyiv in the near future will be practically

impossible, regardless of who mediates. At the same time, mediation on such local issues as the organization of food supplies from Russia and Ukraine, as well as the exchange of prisoners of war between the conflicting parties, are very important.

All Quiet on the Syrian Front

Another no less important issue for Turkish diplomacy is the evolving situation in Syria. It is well-known that Ankara considers what is happening in the neighboring Arab state as an existential threat.

First, there are more than 3.5 million refugees who have fled to Turkish territory since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. During the election campaign, Erdoğan stated that Ankara has developed a project to return home about 1 million Syrian refugees. But for this, obviously, the readiness of Damascus is important, which, by the way, so far controls only two-thirds of the country's territory.

The second no less urgent issue for the Turkish government in this regard is the fight against Kurdish armed groups in northern Syria—the so-called The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and The People's Defense Units (YPG). Maintaining a security zone in northern Syria remains a matter of Ankara's own security.

Having broken through a more than decade-long campaign of intra-Arab isolation and successfully returned to the Arab League, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad became more intractable with Ankara. Before taking a personal meeting with Erdoğan, he first demands the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syria, but does not talk about any security guarantees for Ankara.

And speaking 12 years later at the Arab League summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 19 May 2023, Assad made harsh remarks about Türkiye, accusing the country of "Ottoman expansionism." Such rhetoric is clearly not conducive to dialogue between the two neighboring countries.

And yet, Moscow, which from time to time hosts quadripartite meetings of foreign ministers, defense ministers, and intelligence heads of Iran, Syria, and Türkiye, can put some pressure on Damascus. As a result of the last meeting of the foreign ministers on 10 May 2023 in the Russian capital, the deputy foreign ministers, together with the defense ministries, and intelligence agencies of the four countries agreed to prepare a roadmap to promote Turkish-Syrian relations.

However, in parallel with this, Assad uses Tehran as a kind of counterbalance to Moscow and Ankara. For Iran, its presence, including a military one, on Syrian soil is an opportunity to irritate its main foreign policy enemy: Israel. Suffice it to mention in this regard that during the first visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Damascus in

the past 13 years in May 2023, the parties signed a memorandum on long-term strategic partnership, as well as a 20-year plan for trade and economic cooperation.

All in all, as Francesco Siccardi from Carnegie Europe recently wrote, “any changes on the Syrian chessboard will have huge implications for the European Union, which spends billions of euros to support Syrian refugees in Türkiye, and the United States, which both work closely with the Syrian Kurds to keep the Islamic State in check.”

“Zero Problems” 2.0

The process of normalizing relations between Türkiye and its neighbors and the countries of the region as a whole in recent years deserves special attention.

Türkiye has made enormous efforts to mend fences with countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

Thus, the day after Fidan was appointed to his new post, *Bloomberg* reported that, according to people familiar with the matter, “he is likely to step up efforts to build ties with the Middle East and North Africa after taking steps in that direction as head of the [Turkish] national intelligence agency.”

In this regard, it is also noteworthy that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, as well as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman were among the first to congratulate Erdoğan on his victory in the second round of elections on 28 May 2023.

It is especially important that Erdoğan and el-Sisi, during a telephone conversation, agreed to increase the level of diplomatic relations between their two countries and to exchange ambassadors after 10 years.

On 10 June 2023, UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Istanbul. During the meeting, the leaders of the two countries applauded the recent progress in enhancing Türkiye-UAE relations. In this sense, it is especially important that on 4 May 2023, Ankara and Abu Dhabi signed an agreement on a comprehensive economic partnership, which aims to increase trade between the countries to \$40 billion in the next five years.

Progress in relations with Arab countries in recent years has been largely achieved due to Ankara’s reconsideration of its attitude towards Islamist movements, whose leaders in recent years have taken asylum on Turkish soil but are now being forced to quickly take their leave. “One of the components of Türkiye’s rapprochement with a number of [Arab] countries is the cessation of the presence of Islamist groups on

Turkish territory, starting with the Egyptian ‘Muslim Brotherhood,’ which were active in Türkiye, but Ankara chose to freeze their activities,” claimed Jebreel al-Abedi in the pages of the pan-Arabic *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper.

In addition, Türkiye is committed to further developing cooperation with Israel. Thus, on 29 May 2023, during a telephone conversation, Erdoğan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to “continue to strengthen bilateral relations and bring them to a new level.” In turn, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who also had a conversation with the Turkish leader that day, expressed hope that they will soon meet.

Meanwhile, the active rapprochement between Türkiye and Israel worries Iran. This is one of the reasons why Tehran took measures (with Iraqi and Chinese mediation) in past months to achieve active rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, which was until recently thought to be an implacable enemy of Iran.

Interestingly, one of Fidan’s first telephone conversations after his appointment was with his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Among other things, the new Turkish foreign minister accepted an invitation to visit Iran “at the first opportunity.”

Having extensive experience in dealing with Tehran, Fidan is quite familiar with the Iranian dossier. At the moment, for Ankara and Tehran, one of the most pressing issues is comparing notes about the Middle East, especially Syria, and, of course, about the South Caucasus.

The South Caucasus. On the Verge of a Peace Agreement

After being re-elected, Erdoğan paid his first foreign visit (except in the internationally-unrecognized “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”) to Azerbaijan, which took place on 12-13 June 2023.

During the talks, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Türkiye paid special attention to the future of the Zangezur corridor, the opening of which is provided for by Article 9 of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement ending the Second Karabakh War.

The issue of opening the Zangezur corridor, which will connect Nakhchivan with the rest of Azerbaijan, is now obviously one of the key issues in the discussion of the future peace treaty between Baku and Yerevan.

Armenia, actively supported by Iran, is hindering the implementation of the corridor project, although it is obvious that this transport hub will be beneficial not only for Baku and Ankara, but also for Yerevan and Tehran.

“The opening of the Zangezur corridor is inevitable, the sooner the better. In any case, we will increase our efforts in this direction. The opening of this corridor will usher new opportunities for all countries and will have a positive impact on cooperation in the region,” Aliyev pointed out during his joint press conference with Erdoğan in Baku. In turn, the Turkish leader pointed out that “with the opening of the road from here to Igdir and Nakhchivan, Türkiye’s connection with Nakhchivan will be stronger thanks to the steps to be taken both in relation to the highway and railway.” Then, speaking to journalists after his visit to Baku, Erdoğan emphasized that the Zangezur Corridor “is not a problem related to Armenia, the problem is with Iran.”

In this regard, Türkiye will continue to play a stabilizing role in the South Caucasus, including influencing Armenia. The presence of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan at Erdoğan’s inauguration in Ankara on 3 June 2023 demonstrates positive dynamics in the process of normalizing Turkish-Armenian relations, which also reflect the dynamics of the peace process between Baku and Yerevan. As IDD’s Damjan Krnjević Mišković wrote in mid-May in the pages of *The National Interest*, “if Armenia actually strikes a deal with Azerbaijan, then normalization with Türkiye will swiftly follow.”

It is noteworthy that a short meeting between Aliyev and Pashinyan also took place that day. And by the next meeting of the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, which should take place on 21 July in Brussels, both sides (including through the mediation of Türkiye), can move forward on a number of controversial issues.

In this regard, again, Fidan’s rich experience and his knowledge of Iran can help smooth Tehran’s position on the Zangezur corridor and generally push it to cease to oppose the new reality in the South Caucasus. Facing a severe economic crisis, the Iranian leadership is now prone to make concessions in order to benefit the country’s foreign policy position. And Tehran will benefit more from accepting the Zangezur corridor than from blocking it. This is likely to include finding a way to deescalate tensions with Baku, perhaps with Turkish incentivization.

Moreover, the role of Türkiye is important as a mediator between Russia and Azerbaijan on the gamut of issues regarding the future status of Russian peacekeepers in parts of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and, in general, the Russian presence in the South Caucasus.

Moscow, obviously not wanting to lose its presence in the region, will do everything to maintain it. However, Baku is also determined both in terms of ending the Russian peacekeeping mission by November 2025 (and possibly earlier), and in terms of integrating Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijani society without external

interference. “By exerting more pressure on Armenia and the Khankendi Armenians, Azerbaijan succeeded in neutralizing possible provocations from Russia-linked public figures like [Ruben] Vardanyan and revanchist forces in Armenia (and the diaspora),” Aybaniz Ismayilova noted in her IDD Analytical Policy Brief in March 2023.

The determination of Baku and Ankara to develop bilateral relations is reinforced, in particular, by military cooperation. Thus, Aliyev and Erdoğan each stressed during their aforementioned press conference that a total of 16 joint Azerbaijani-Turkish military exercises would be held in 2023, six of which have already been held.

In parallel with this, Türkiye plays a very important role in the restoration of Azerbaijani lands liberated from Armenian occupation. Thus, Turkish companies have reported invested about \$14 billion in Azerbaijan in 2022 alone. According to the Turkish Embassy in Baku, roughly 30 Turkish companies are operating in Karabakh and have already invested \$1 billion in projects carried out in Karabakh. Also, during his most recent visit to Baku, Erdoğan confirmed Ankara’s readiness to open a consulate in liberated Shusha in the near future.

The Turkic World: Strengthening Fraternal Ties

Türkiye will definitely continue to seek to continue playing the role of the leader of the Turkic world. In this sense, great challenges lie ahead for the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). In furtherance of the objective of overcoming these, at the OTS summit held in March 2023 in Ankara, an OTS Investment Fund was established, the founding capital of which was state to be \$500 million.

The enhanced cooperation between Turkic states (within the framework of OTS or bilaterally or trilaterally)—in particular Azerbaijan and Türkiye—will also contribute to the implementation of large-scale economic projects linking Asia and Europe through the Middle Corridor route. One of the most striking examples in this regard is the China-initiated Belt and Road Initiative. Azerbaijan is a partner country of this project in the South Caucasus, which is strategically located between Asia and Europe. It is, in fact, as Krnjević has written, the “indispensable country for the advancement of the West’s strategic energy and connectivity ambitions in the Caspian Sea basin, and the Silk Road region more broadly.”

Azerbaijan has taken many steps to enable the execution of this strategic opportunity. “Over the last ten years, we built one of the largest, if not the largest, trade seaports in the Caspian, with a capacity of 15 million ton, which we plan to expand to 25 million ton. We build a shipyard to be able to manufacture the

vessels to transport cargo across the Caspian. We invested largely in the railroad infrastructure, not only in Azerbaijan but also in the neighborhood,” Aliyev said at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2023.

And it is quite clear that the closer relations between Ankara and Baku develop, the more effectively these and other major regional and interregional initiatives will be implemented.