Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Historical Framework and Traditional Inputs

NKWAH Akongnwi Ngwa
1- Main Arguments

Turkey is one of the great powers of the 20th and 21st century due to the potential role she has been and is playing in world politics. This has been thanks to her foreign policy which has so far been shaped and determined by on one hand by structural variables which are continuous and rather static and on the other hand by conjunctural variables which are dynamic and subject to change under the influence of domestic and foreign developments.

In effect, these structural factors are not directly related to the international political medium and the daily happenings of foreign politics. They can exert a long-term influence over the determination of foreign policy goals. Geographical position, historical experiences and cultural background, together with national stereotypes and images of other nations, and long term economic necessities would fall into the category of 'structural variables'.

On the other hand, Conjunctural variables are made up of a web of interrelated developments in domestic politics and international relations. Although not displaying any long-term continuity like the structural static factors, these conjunctural dynamic factors do exert temporary influence on a country's foreign policy and especially on its daily implementation. Conjunctural changes in the international system, such as the end of the Cold War, shifts in the world's present balance of power, domestic political changes, daily scarcities of economic factors and the personalities of specific decision-makers, would fall into this category.

From what precedes, it is clear that Turkey's important and sensitive geostrategic position has meant that national security concerns have always been paramount in foreign policy considerations. A critical element in these concerns has been Turkey's proximity to and traditional distrust of the former Soviet Union. Moreover, the fact that Turkey has borders with the Balkans and the Middle East, areas of traditional conflict, makes Turkey very sensitive to changes in both the international and regional political balance. Also Turkey's security thinking is also coloured by the historical experiences of foreign intervention and economic dependency. As a result, the foreign relations of Turkey, since Ataturk's time, have been dominated by concerns for genuine independence and sovereignty. Although the Soviet threat after the Second World War persuaded Turkey to move away from Ataturk's uncommitted posture to seek politico-military alliances, it is still sensitive to any real or implied infringements on its sovereignty.

Turkey's location at the intersection of the 'West' and the 'East' (the USSR and the Arab and Islamic World) also resulted in an identity crisis, both national and international. The
tendency of the Kemalist ruling class to look towards the West for inspiration has not alienated the cultural and religious affiliation to the Arab-Islamic world by the general public.

On the other hand, as Turkey moves toward the twenty-first century, the question of religion and secularism on the one hand, and the related issues of ethnicity, nationhood and the territorial state on the other, are coming to the fore. Although the old certainties of the ruling class' self-image as belonging to a modern, European-oriented, secular Turkey, which has been based almost exclusively on the territory of Anatolia, is coming under increasing challenges both from the left and the religious right, the legacy of the Turkish state and nationalism, embodied in a ruling class or elite with a strong commitment to Kemalist principles, still greatly affects Turkey's internal and external policies.

In this perspective, despite the emergence of a seemingly homogeneous Turkish-speaking, traditionally Sunni-Muslim society within Turkey's borders, the obvious failure of the Kemalist attempt at homogenizing Turkey, based on a majority language and Western ideals, continues to haunt both the Turkish identity and the Turkish state, as the ruling elite still refuses to acknowledge the ethnic and structural pluralism of Turkish society 'which should be understood as essential to the formation of a modern multiethnic democracy.

The self-desire to become an economically developed country has not changed since the early days of the Republic. In effect, its economic development is not only a social need but also a source of strengthened power for the nation. Moreover, economic development, in the eyes of the Kemalist elite, is one of the prerequisites of a European identity. The Turks' ambition for development and modernization is not confined to technological equality with the industrially advanced Western countries. They wish to be recognized as Europeans and to be assimilated into European civilization, which had been acknowledged as superior by Ataturk.

Turkey's foreign policy can also be seen through the legality of its actions in the international arena. In Turkey it is honourable to comply with international commitments. Any intimation to the contrary, such as the US intimation about its NATO commitments during the Cyprus crisis of 1964, usually causes widespread surprise and astonishment as well as disappointment in Turkey. Although its inflexible policies, which have often resulted from an all too legalistic approach toward international questions, would delay and sometimes prevent possible solutions, Turkey still insists on abiding by rigid legality.

Also the desire to improve its image among the international community is another factor which has determined Turkish foreign policy. Although Turkish politicians and diplomats usually argue otherwise, contemporary Turkey cares for 'international public opinion' and responds to pressures from the international arena. Given the fact that one of the most insistent national foreign policy goals of Turkey is to become a member of the European community of nations, it is not surprising to see that even the military junta of 12 September 1980, both before and after the intervention, was sensitive to perceptions abroad.
2- **KEY QUOTES:**

“The configuration of the land, its fertility and climate, and its location relative to other land masses and to waterways ... all contribute both to the psychological environment through which officials and publics define their links to the external world and the operational environment out of which their dependence on other countries fashioned.”

“It is an important historical fact which is not often appreciated that the Ottoman Turks started their career as a people in extreme north-west of Asia Minor, facing Europe; that they founded their Empire not in Asia but across the Sea of Marmara in Thrace and the Balkans, in other words in Europe, and that they expanded eastwards into Asia Minor a century after they had already become a European power. It was, in fact, only during the course of the fifteenth century that they became an Oriental power as well as a European.”

“Turkey's historical position indicates that it is obliged to pursue a policy based on being strong and stable within its region...[since] it is surrounded by unfriendly neighbours”.

“What particularly interests foreign policy and upon which it is founded is the internal organization of the state. It is necessary that foreign policy should agree with the internal organization.' Therefore it is not surprising to see that in his famous motto 'peace at home, peace in the world'

“There are many nations, but there is only one civilization. For the advancement of a nation, it must be a part of this one civilization...We wish to modernize our country. All of our efforts are directed toward the establishment of a modern, therefore Western, government.”

“Of all the great socio-political revolutions in the history of the modern state...the Kemalist Revolution in Turkey represents the only one that has produced an ideology of peace”

---

**Future Questions**

1- **To what extent does the history of Turkey Influences its Foreign Policy?**
2- **What is the Impact of International Relations on Turkey’s Foreign Policy?**
3- **What is the foreign policy of Turkey towards Sub-Saharan Africa?**

---

1 Rosenau, *Study of Foreign Policy*, pp.19-20
3 Statement by Kenan Evren, 7th President of Turkey, *Newspot*, 7 Sept. 1984