

Things That Have Changed and Have Not Changed in Turkish Foreign Policy from the DP to the AKP - Ali Faik Demir



For Türkiye, a member of the Western bloc since the Democratic Party (DP) era, the binding elements of the Cold War period in international relations created a particular limitation in foreign policy. Nevertheless, many problems began to confront Türkiye in those years. While these problems persisted, new problems and issues continued to emerge. When we consider the new and changing foreign policy issues alongside the unchanging issues and policies in terms of foreign policy, analyzing the period from the 1960s to the AKP era is indeed thought-provoking.

After the May 27 coup d'état, much changed in Türkiye's domestic and foreign policies. In a sense, the interruption of democracy in Türkiye created a proper ground for subsequent interventions. Undoubtedly, being in the process of the Cold War did not lead to a radical and fundamental change in foreign policy at first. The U-2 Crisis in 1960 led to Türkiye becoming a tool or a subject of negotiation in the struggle between the US and the USSR.

The Cyprus problem, which emerged during the DP period and was resolved simultaneously, became a multilateral issue that would not be resolved for a long time. Cyprus turned into an area where conflicts and crises took place every day. When Türkiye chose to implement an independent foreign policy in the face of these developments, it faced a harsh reaction from the United States. Undoubtedly, the Johnson Letter, which had a tremendous impact later on, left its mark both in those years and on Turkish-US relations.

After May 27, Turkish political life experienced many firsts. Türkiye met coalition governments for the first time. Many coalition governments were formed under the leadership of İsmet İnönü. Finally, the Justice Party (AP) came to power alone. In the second half of the 1960s, despite the fact that a party seen as the successor of the DP came to power alone, Türkiye distanced itself from the US and attempted to rapprochement with the USSR. The signing of the Defense Cooperation Agreement with the US in 1969 was an important development that positively impacted the future after the severe problems of those years.

Positive steps were taken in the early 1960s with the USSR, which had been a fearful dream for Türkiye during the Cold War years. In October 1960, Turkish Foreign Minister Sarper met with Khrushchev. This was the first such meeting since the Saraçoğlu-Stalin meeting in 1939. Following this summit, several bilateral technical agreements were signed. Throughout the 1960s, there were many high-level visits from both sides.

Between 1960 and 1970, domestic politics dominated Türkiye's agenda. Türkiye's importance within the Western Bloc continued. Despite the crisis with the United

States, relations with Türkiye remained partially on track. Relations with the European Economic Community and NATO were also treated with sensitivity. The USSR, which constituted the greatest fear, maintained its position, but Türkiye managed to establish bilateral relations with the Soviets and to benefit from this country in specific areas; in other words, to implement its foreign policy within the framework of mutual interest.

The 1970s were troubled and tense years, both at home and abroad. The oil crisis deeply affected Türkiye as well as the whole world. In this period, relations with the Arab world came to the fore. At the end of this period, Russia's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the Iranian Revolution did not only have a regional dimension, but these two crises had global repercussions.

For Türkiye, this period began with a military memorandum. After the March 12 memorandum, an elected government could not be formed for a long time. Just when we thought it had been created, Cyprus, one of the most unresolved issues of Turkish foreign policy, took a new and more complex turn. In 1974, the Cyprus landing, which would be discussed for many years, took place. After this landing, Cyprus became a precondition or an obstacle for Türkiye in its relations with many states and organizations. This was preceded by a serious rupture and tension with the US over opium cultivation. When the Cyprus problem and the US arms embargo against Türkiye were added, the foreign policy balance or imbalance became a complete spiral.

Chaos in Türkiye, economic problems, new and changing elements of international relations, domestic-foreign policy imbalance, and the lack of stable and strong governments to tackle the problems resulted in "many problems, no solutions".

The 1980s started with another coup. Moreover, the recovery from this coup took longer than in the past. The most important political figure in Türkiye during these years was Turgut Özal, who became prime minister and then president.

With Özal, “active foreign policy together” became a frequently used motto. For Özal, who sought to broaden Türkiye’s political sphere on a global scale, the first step was strengthening relations with the West. Activating economic policies and liberal openings were considered strategically crucial for Türkiye’s transformation and empowerment. The rapprochement with the European Community and the acceleration of the membership process began in these years. The post-coup period mainly affected relations with the Council of Europe, with human rights violations creating major tensions. In this context, Türkiye took essential steps and made significant progress towards harmonizing with the European Union (EU). Another prominent issue regarding relations with the EU and the US was the TRNC, which declared its independence in 1983. In Türkiye’s foreign policy, the plans to be named after the UN Secretaries-General (Cuellar Plan, Gali Plan, Annan Plan) began to be discussed. In addition to Cyprus taking on a new dimension, Türkiye’s foreign policy with Greece was conducted on uneven ground during these years. The Limni problem, which emerged with the armament of the Aegean islands, the tensions in the Aegean in the context of the continental shelf crisis, and positively, the Davos process, which enabled the establishment of a dialogue between Türkiye and Greece after the crises, were the prominent agenda items.

One of the most important problems that came from the west of Türkiye and left its mark on those years was undoubtedly the Turks from Bulgaria. Although Todor Zhivkov’s policies against minorities were on the world agenda, the necessary reaction was not shown. In 1989, he forced the Turkish minority in Bulgaria to migrate. Within a few months, the number of people coming to Türkiye reached 300,000. This forced migration was the most significant population movement in Europe after World War II.

Özal clearly articulated his foreign policy goals as follows: Relations with the United States would be closer. In parallel, the extension of the Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA) was discussed for some time, and it was only in 1987 that mutual signatures were signed. Economic relations remained as crucial as ever. For Özal, relations with the US were the key to solving every problem. After the DP period, a strong wind of Westernism, especially Americanism, began to blow again in these years.

Relations with the USSR, Türkiye's neighboring superpower, took a different turn during this period. In the 1980s, two new issues entered the agenda of the relations with the Soviet Union, which underwent a rapid change under Gorbachev's leadership, especially after 1985. First, with the signing of the Natural Gas Agreement on September 18, 1984, and Turkish contracting companies entering the Soviet market starting in 1988, a new opening in Turkish-Soviet relations took place.

Özal believed that regional leadership was important to create a global impact and he formulated foreign policies from this perspective. The Middle East was undoubtedly the first and most strategic region for his goals. In this neighboring region, a war has been raging for years. In addition, tensions between Israel and the Arab world were continuing. During this period, Türkiye tried to follow a balanced policy in the Iran-Iraq war. Apart from this war, the PKK issue, which started as a domestic problem in the 80s and later took on a foreign policy dimension, was on the agenda. Especially in relations with Syria, the PKK issue played a severe role for many years.

The "water problem" has become one of the most fundamental issues in relations with the Middle East. The regional development project that started with the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) created a great debate in the Middle East. The vast investments, dams, and hydroelectric power plants in the Southeastern Anatolia region have made Syria and Iraq uneasy. In a region where water sharing is considered a *casus belli*, every step Türkiye took, especially in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, was perceived as a threat. The Arab League also criticized Türkiye at every stage. Özal's visit to Damascus in 1987 and his temporary agreement with Assad on water sharing created a short-term relief, but it was not enough to achieve results. Özal, who wanted Türkiye to become a regional power, developed the "Peace Water Project", believing that water was vital. He also negotiated to sell water from Manavgat to the region. For Türkiye, water resources were a key to its relations with the Middle East.

The 1990s marked a critical historical break with the end of the Cold War. All balances and policies were about to change. The question of what to preserve and

what to change was valid in every field. The end of the Cold War ushered in a significant period of transition and change for Türkiye. In the first half of the 1990s, when Özal was the president and a coalition led by Demirel ran the government, there was a competition between the powers in foreign policy and domestic politics. The debate over who was in charge of foreign policy and whose policies would be implemented was frequently on the agenda.

The 1990s brought about major ruptures and changes in foreign policy. We can define this period in Turkish foreign policy as anxiety, change, search, and opening. There was concern because, with the end of the Cold War, the Eastern Bloc disintegrated, and the threat of the USSR disappeared. Would Türkiye, which protected the eastern flank of the Western Bloc, lose its strategic importance with the end of the old threats? These and similar concerns initiated a severe process of change in Türkiye as well as in other states. The new conjuncture required a fresh perspective and vision. The necessity of change made the search absolute. In the new era, there were not only losses. On the contrary, the diversifying and enriching international environment offered many options. The only thing to do was to make the proper use of them.

During this period, although the Middle East posed a significant problem for Türkiye, it also served as a valuable tool for Türkiye to make its voice and influence heard worldwide. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, brought the international community into turmoil. President Özal played an active role in this process. The exchange of ideas between US President Bush and Özal was a source of pride for Türkiye in those years. The crisis in Iraq brought the Kurdish issue to a different dimension for Türkiye. Implementing the no-fly zone and the Hammer Force became one of the heated debates on the domestic and foreign policy agendas. In this context, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq caused a tense and challenging process in Türkiye's foreign policy. Barzani and Talabani's visits and policies created essential debates. At the same time, relations with Syria were becoming increasingly strained over the PKK. The demand for the removal of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria brought the two countries to the brink of war. Finally, the Adana Memorandum signed in 1998 and the related deportation of Öcalan on October 9, 1998, brought an end to the tension.

Apart from the Gulf War, Türkiye wanted to play an active role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Instead of the “Oslo Accords”, Türkiye was intended to be the ground for these talks, but the desired result was not achieved. Although Türkiye has been interested in the Palestinian issue since the past, it took a more active stance after these years.

Naturally, after the collapse of the USSR, Türkiye saw a historic opportunity in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Dreams of establishing a Turkic World from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China were at the top of the political agenda. In March 1992, Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin visited all Turkic Republics. Prime Minister Demirel then traveled to Central Asia. In the first phase, Western states also supported Türkiye as a regional leader and model. The first Summit of Heads of State of Turkic Speaking Countries was held in October 1992. In the early 1990s, intense efforts were made for cooperation in every field. Türkiye made attempts to gain influence in this region.

For Türkiye, the Caucasus initially had a very different position. As a neighbor of the independent countries in the South Caucasus after their independence, Türkiye became a model country for the states in the region. Azerbaijan became the most important strategic partner for Türkiye. The emergence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict affected Azerbaijani-Armenian relations and became an element of Turkish foreign policy. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline Project, signed in September 1994 and considered the oil deal of the century, was the starting point of Türkiye’s foreign policy goal of becoming an energy corridor. In 1998, the Ankara Declaration was a turning point. In this context, the first oil shipment took place in 2006.

As for relations with Armenia, the balance between the two countries has been influenced by many foreign policy issues and has also affected Turkish foreign policy. Although it has undoubtedly occupied Turkish foreign policy since the past, the genocide debate has taken on a new dimension following Armenia’s independence. In addition to relations with Armenia, the activities of the Armenian diaspora have constituted the main problematic ground in Türkiye’s foreign policy. The main goal of the diaspora was the recognition of the genocide

in the world. In this framework, as April 24 approached, there was a debate in Türkiye about whether the US presidents would use the word genocide in their speeches. The recognition of the genocide by different parliaments around the world and the criticisms and demands against Türkiye on this issue have been among the main issues of foreign policy until today.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the post-Cold War period turned the Balkans into a war zone. Türkiye pursued an active foreign policy and became involved in the process. Turkish origin and Muslims living in the Balkan geography saw Türkiye as an important pillar. Türkiye has always displayed a following and constructive approach to establishing and protecting peace.

The most rapid development and progress in the 1990s was in relations with the EU, which had been very slow. The 1993 Copenhagen Summit was the first significant step. The Copenhagen Criteria became a sine qua non on Ankara's domestic policy agenda. On March 6, 1995, another important development was the Customs Union decision. On December 12-13, 1997, the Luxembourg Summit confirmed Türkiye's eligibility for full membership. Finally, at the EU Heads of State and Government Summit held in Helsinki on December 10-11, 1999, Türkiye was unanimously accepted as a candidate country.

A brief analysis on the period of nearly 40 years, it's possible to see how sensitive and fragile was the ground on which Türkiye has conducted foreign policy. Considering the neighboring regions and the international conjuncture, it is not difficult to understand the situation. While existing problems could not be solved, new problems confronted Türkiye every period. Unfortunately, each new problem becomes old after a while, but no results are obtained. Undoubtedly, there are opportunities and openings alongside the issues. The goal is to solve or at least freeze the problems and use the opportunities and positive atmosphere quickly and effectively. It is much more essential to make small, lasting progress in many areas rather than big victories and achievements in limited areas.



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1969'da İstanbul'da doğan Ali Faik Demir Galatasaray Lisesi'nden mezun olduktan sonra Ankara Üniversitesi S.B.F'de uluslararası ilişkiler bölümünde eğitim görmüştür. İstanbul Üniversitesi S.B.F'de başladığı siyaset bilimi ve

uluslararası ilişkiler yüksek lisans programını 1994’de tamamlamıştır. Aynı üniversitedeki doktora eğitimi sırasında Paris IEP, EHSSS, INALCO, Strasbourg ve Grenoble’da araştırmalarda bulunmuş ve 2000’de doktora derecesini almıştır. Ali Faik Demir, 1994’te Galatasaray Üniversitesi’nde araştırma görevlisi olarak çalışmaya başlamıştır. Doçent olarak aynı kurumda çalışmaya devam eden Demir, Galatasaray Üniversitesi’nde Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdür Yardımcılığını 3 yıl yaptıktan sonra halen Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölüm Başkan Yardımcılığı görevini sürdürmektedir. Lisans, yüksek lisans ve doktora düzeyinde “Türk Dış Politikası”, “Türkiye’de Siyasal Yaşam”, “Türkiye-Türk Dünyası İlişkileri”, ve “Kafkasya ve Orta Asya’da Strateji” derslerini vermektedir. Uluslararası İlişkiler alanındaki çeşitli dergi ve yayınların danışma kurulu ve yayın kurullarında görev almaktadır. Demir’in bilimsel dergilerdeki makalelerinin yanında “Türk Dış Politikası Perspektifinden Güney Kafkasya”, “Türk Dış Politikasında Liderler”, “Şaman ve Türk Dünyası” ve “Soğuk Savaş Sonrasında Türkiye-ABD İlişkilerinde Orta Doğu ve Lider Diplomasisi” adlı kitapları yayınlanmıştır.

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