Turkey and the Great Power Game

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Turkey, as a major power in the Middle East, which competes, cooperates, and interacts with major powers in the region, is a “player” in shaping the Middle East pattern. However, compared with other world powers, such as the United States and Russia, Turkey has an obvious disadvantage in comprehensive national strength, so it is also a “chess piece” in the geopolitical game of the Middle East. Although the United States and Turkey are both members of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States’ actions on the Gülen and Kurdish issues have reduced Turkey’s trust in the United States. On the one hand, Erdogan made a firm stance to defend the secular state, suppressing the military; on the other hand, he promoted some Islamization measures in the political and social life, in order to consolidate his authority. In the triangle of U.S.-Russian-Turkish relations, Turkey pursued a pragmatic policy and played a game with the United States and Russia on the Syrian issue.

Keywords: Turkey diplomacy, Syria issue, U.S.-Turkish relations, Russian-Turkish relations

Introduction

Turkey detained the American priest Andrew Brensen for a long time on suspicion of supporting terrorism and participating in an attempted coup. The United States repeatedly demanded his release but without success. On August 1st, the United States Treasury announced that it would impose sanctions on Turkey’s Interior Minister and Attorney General, after which the Turkish side announced that it would take the same retaliatory measures. On August 10th, U.S. President Trump announced on Twitter that he would double the steel and aluminum tariffs on Turkey (Steel import tariffs would be raised to 50% and aluminum import tariffs would be raised to 20%). As a result, the Turkish lira depreciated sharply, and Turkish 10-year bond yields soared to 20%, and the stock market plummeted. Turkey issued a presidential decree on August 15th to impose import duties on some of the commodities produced in the United States. Under the presidential decree, tariffs on goods included alcoholic drinks, whose tariff rose to 140%, cars, whose tariff raised to 120%, cigarettes and cosmetics with a rise to 60%, and rice, which suffered an increase to 50% (Qin, 2018a).

In recent years, the United States and Turkey have been at odds with each other, and the contradictions between the two countries have intensified on the issues of the “Cylon Movement”, the Kurdish issue, and the Syrian issue. Since the July 15 Coup defeat in 2016, Erdogan has been cleaning up the country, drawing closer to Russia, and even decided to purchase the Russian anti-aircraft missile S-400. On June 18th, the U.S. Senate passed its own defense budget for 2019, which stipulates that if Turkey buys Russian S-400 air defense missile systems, it will impose sanctions on Ankara. After U.S. President Trump withdrew from Iran’s nuclear agreement, Turkey was the first to stand up against it, declaring that Turkey “does not recognize entail sanctions”. On the issue of Syrian Kurds, the United States supports the Kurdish Democratic Alliance Party,
while Turkey opposes the United States’ support for the armed forces of Syrian Kurds. In January 2018, the
United States helped the Kurdish build an armed force of about 30,000 people. Contradictions between the two
sides intensified: Turkey launched an “olive branch” military operation in the Syrian Avrin region, sending
troops to Avrin. On June 4, Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu visited the United States and met with U.S.
Secretary of State Pompeo. The two sides mainly discussed the issue of Manbij and the delivery of Turkish
F-35 fighters. Finally, an agreement was reached on the issue of Manbij, which led to the so-called “Road-map
Plan on Manbij Peace Process”, under which the Turkish and American forces jointly patrolled from the
Manbij area. On August 3rd, Cavusoglu held bilateral talks with U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo during his
attendance at the 51st ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Singapore. Cavusoglu said that the outcome of
the talks was “constructive” and that although some problems could not be solved by a single meeting, the two
sides agreed to work closely together and continue the dialogue (Qin, 2018b).

Turkey Under Erdogan’s Administration

Turkish leader Erdogan, who has been in power since 2002, on the one hand made a firm stance to defend
the secular state, on the other hand, he promoted some Islamization measures in the field of political and social
life. At the same time, he quietly cleaned up a large number of opposing forces in the army. After the “7. 15”
Coup, Erdogan took advantage of the situation and further consolidated his authority. Erdogan rearranged the
relationship between modernity and Westernization by adjusting the contradiction between the Secularity of the
state and the Islamic attributes of society.

At the domestic political level (Li & Ji, 2018),

(1) introducing religion into politics to balance the power of secularism. In addition to adhering to the
secularist principles in the Constitution, Erdogan emphasized the priority of religion over secular politics and
strongly promoted the full return of the Islam.

(2) by adjusting the relationship between the military and civilian governments, the balance of power
between the civilian government and the military should be guaranteed. After the attempted military coup in
2016, Erdogan further suppressed the military, even enabled the civilian government to acquire a certain
dominant position, ending the long-standing dual sovereignty in Turkish politics, which has profoundly
changed the political ecology of Turkey.

(3) Erdogan’s goal is to pursue the centralization of power and the absolute control of domestic affairs by
himself and the Justice and Development Party. The 2017 constitutional referendum further centralized
Erdogan’s power, turning Turkey from parliamentary to presidential.

On the level of foreign relations,

(1) to pursue Turkey’s sense of existence in the Middle East and Turkey’s dominance in regional affairs.
Erdogan initially advocated the “zero-issue good-neighbourliness” policy, and then pursued the harmony with
the historical trend, intervening in other countries internal affairs in various ways. Its main means are opening
up trade, making friends with neighbors, and expanding and improving Turkey’s living space on the premise of
maintaining the status quo in the Middle East.

(2) Erdogan uses diplomacy to consolidate his domestic status. On the one hand, Erdogan hopes to
stimulate domestic nationalism by confronting the elites of the West, so as to win the popular vote. On the other
hand, Erdogan uses diplomatic means to serve the internal affairs, and puts the internal affairs in a priority
position, using diplomacy as a tool to expand the voter base and obtain the support of the voters.
Turkey and the Great Power Game

Turkey is a great power in the Middle East, and has become a unique one among other great powers in the region. It has the largest population in the Middle East, and its total economic strength and military strength are at the top of the list. Turkey takes advantage of its diverse geographical position and the intersection of various civilizations to wander between the East and the West in order to expand its diplomatic space, expand its influence in the region, pursue a position of extreme power within the region, and shape a favorable regional pattern. Turkey has military involvement in Syria, Qatar, and Iraq.

In the process of shaping the regional pattern in the Middle East, on the one hand, Turkey, as a major power in the Middle East, which competes, cooperates, and interacts with major powers in the region, is a “player” in shaping the Middle East pattern. Turkey is in a relatively favorable position. It is the only major country in the region that maintains normal relations with all other countries. There are no irresolvable contradictions with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel, and its position in participating in regional affairs is relatively detached. Turkey is a major force in the dynamic balance between Shia and Sunnis, between Arabians and Persian peoples, and between Arab countries and Israel. On the other hand, compared with other world powers, such as the United States and Russia, Turkey has obvious disadvantages of asymmetric comprehensive national strength, so it is also a “chess piece” in the geopolitical game of the Middle East.

The relationship between Turkey and U.S. as well as between Turkey and Russia will affect the shaping power of the two countries to the Middle East. At present, the relationship between the US and Turkey is fading, and the relations between the Turkey and Russia are getting closer and closer. As a result, for the United States, in the implementation of the Middle East strategy, Turkey becomes an uncertainty factor that cannot be ignored. To enhance their ability to shape the Middle East situation, the United States and Russia have been trying to win over Turkey. In terms of United States, both Turkey and the U.S. are NATO member states, which is the greatest attraction of the United States to Turkey, but the United States has repeatedly stepped on Turkey’s “bottom line” on the Queen and Kurdish issues, greatly reducing Turkey’s trust in the United States, and leading Turkey to doubt the nature of the bilateral alliance (Zheng, 2017).

On the Russian side, Turkey’s improvement of relations with Russia is a recognition of Russia’s presence and influence in the Middle East, and Russia fully understands Turkey’s core concerns. In the triangle of US-Russia-Turkey relations, Turkey’s preference has a great influence on the power of U.S. and Russia on shaping the Middle East regional pattern (Goksel, 2016). On September 17, after the meeting in Sochi, Turkish President Erdogan announced that the two countries had decided to establish a demilitarized zone in Syria’s Idlib Province. Prior to October 15th, a demilitarized zone of 15 to 20 kilometers in depth would be established along the line between opposition forces and government forces. The zone will be controlled by the mobile patrol unit of the Turkey army and the Russian military police. According to Erdogan’s proposal, all opposition forces will withdraw heavy weapons from the demilitarized zone by October 10th (Foreign Media, 2018).

The United States and Europe will not abandon Turkey easily, nor will Turkey easily leave the West. Turkey is the only member of NATO in the Middle East, and the most secularized and Westernized country in the Middle East. It is also the closest country in the Middle East to the European Union. In addition, due to the unique location that stretches across the Eurasian continent as well as the relatively strong military strength and cultural heritage, it plays an important role in stabilizing the situation in the Middle East. The Inguilik Air Force Base in Turkey is NATO’s most advanced military base in the Middle East, which plays an important role in stabilizing the situation in the Middle East.
role in the Gulf War, the Afghanistan War, the Iraq War, and humanitarian relief operations. In addition, Turkey also accommodated 3.5 million refugees in Syria.

Turkey’s foreign minister, Samuel Ohlu, said on August 19 that Turkey and the United States will conduct joint patrols in the Manbij region of northern Syria to seek local stability. Manbij is located in the northeast of Aleppo Province, Syria, near the Turkish border. As a military town in Syria, its strategic position is important. The U.S. State Department’s interim head of Middle East affairs, Satterfield, recently said that in spite of tensions between the United States and Turkey, no impact would be seen on the joint patrol plan. On September 20th, Turkish President Erdogan said in a recent meeting with U.S. corporate representatives in the country that, despite the crisis in Turkey’s relations with the United States, Turkey hoped to strengthen its strategic partnership with the United States through investment and trade (Zhu, 2018).

Conclusion

Turkey is highly dependent on the United States and Europe in the fields of politics, economy, and security. Although Erdogan was disappointed with the United States, he had no intention of leaving the Western camp. Turkey has always had the tradition and experience of dealing with the great powers. Turkey regards the development of relations with Russia as a tool to balance the West. Turkey pursues a pragmatic policy. Generally speaking, there is still mutual demand between the United States and Turkey. Despite the constant economic friction between the United States and Turkey, cooperation on the military security level will continue.

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