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‘The generals are calling the shots’

Syria, Libya, the Mediterranean and now the Caucasus — Turkey is involved in many hot spots. Felix Schmidt explains why

Read this interview in German.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is heating up. Turkey is indirectly involved there, too, demanding that Armenia completely withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh. For his part, the Armenian Prime Minister claims that Turkish officers ordered Azerbaijan to attack the enclave. What are Turkey’s interests there?

Turkey considers Azerbaijan its closest ally. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan often refers to the two countries as ‘one nation in two states’. On the other hand, relations with Armenia have been tense since the founding of the Turkish republic and the Armenian genocide: The border between the countries is closed and they have no diplomatic relations. In this case, even the main Turkish opposition, the social-democratic CHP (‘Republican People’s Party’) supports the government.

Turks consider that Armenia clearly started the shooting war in Nagorno-Karabakh – a view that is very contested because changing the ‘frozen conflict’ is not in Armenia’s interest. In fact, the futile negotiations in the ‘Minsk Process’ launched by the OSCE in 1992 have helped Armenia to maintain the status quo, which benefits the majority Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh. Rekindling the conflict could, however, favour Azerbaijan.

To force an unconditional withdrawal of the Armenian troops stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey and Azerbaijan have long called for an end to the Minsk Process. The allies, who have steadily increased their military cooperation in recent years, consider Armenia’s military presence contrary to international law. Now they want to impose a military solution. While Turkey has not – officially – attacked militarily, it repeats its readiness to defend Azerbaijan, if requested by Baku. There are also signs that soldiers from Syria are

present.

Turkey is engaging in more and more international conflicts – first in Syria, then Libya, most recently the eastern Mediterranean and now, the Caucasus. What is President Erdoğan's strategy?

Turkey increasingly views itself as a regional hegemonial power that enforces its interests with robust – military – means. While its various interventions have had different motivations, including defending Turkey's economic – oil and gas – and security interests, the rise in Turkish nationalism also plays a role. President Erdoğan is not free to make decisions by himself. He has to take into consideration his far-right-wing coalition partner, the MHP ('Nationalist Movement Party'), whose chairman, Devlet Bahçeli, is constantly pushing Erdoğan to act more aggressively. Many Turks consider that it's Bahçeli who runs foreign policy.

Another reason for President Erdoğan to get involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is Turkey's deepening economic crisis. Erdoğan is hoping that yet another foreign adventure will unite the country behind him and distract Turks from the growing impoverishment of their compatriots. Erdoğan is getting what he wants: The conflict in the Caucasus has created an upsurge in nationalism in Turks, who broadly support Azerbaijan.

In Western Europe, Turkish involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh has been harshly criticised. What does Turkish society think of Erdoğan's geopolitical ambitions?

While they generally approve, it is important to distinguish between the various conflicts. The general public overwhelmingly supports Turkish policy on Azerbaijan. With regard to the conflict in the eastern Mediterranean, a large majority of Turks consider that Greece's claims are excessive. There, too, the CHP and smaller opposition parties back the government's position. As for Turkey's intervention in Syria, a majority of Turks are against the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad, but the destruction of the autonomous Kurdish region of Rojava in northeastern Syria is very controversial.

The doctrine of former PM and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, having 'zero problems with neighbours' and relying on diplomacy, has had its day. Now it's the generals who call the shots, a radical change that pleases many Turks.

Deploying military forces abroad gobbles up tons of money but the Turkish economy recently suffered an historic economic slump. How can it afford to get involved militarily in Nagorno-Karabakh?

It's true that Turkey's economic situation is problematic, but no one questions the large share of military costs in the total budget. It's also not true that the economy is on the brink, as it's often portrayed. In 2019, government debt measured 33 per cent of GDP. That is not very much. Many countries have shown that during crises, resources can be mobilised for foreign adventures – and to restore the government's legitimacy.

Last week, the WHO sharply criticised the Turkish government for keeping the number of cases of coronavirus infections artificially low. What's happening?

For quite some time, the daily numbers announced by Health Minister Fahrettin Koca have been questioned. The Turkish Medical Association has regularly pointed out discrepancies between official figures and the situation in the clinics and is now demanding that the minister resign. Koca has been forced to admit that, contrary to WHO stipulations, only the number of patients being treated in hospitals or at their homes – rather than the number of infected persons – has been made public.

The daily figures of 1,400 to 1,500 'patients' is therefore well below the true rate of infections, a figure needed to understand how the virus is developing in the country. The health minister has stated that 10 per cent of over 100,000 daily tests are positive – which means there are about 10,000 new infections each day. Assuming that fewer than 10 per cent of infected people actually need medical care, that suggests there are as many as 14,000 new cases each day. This shows that protecting the nation's economic interests is considered as important as protecting its people's health: Turkey must continue to be seen as a safe holiday destination.

After the large anti-government protests of recent years, not much is heard from the opposition these days. Why not?

After the Gezi Park protests in 2013, the government adopted many new measures to prevent similar demonstrations and instituted numerous bans on public gatherings. Protests are further thwarted because many of the people who supposedly encouraged them are in prison. One well-known case is that of philanthropist Osman Kavala, who has been detained since 2017. After the European Court of Human Rights ruled that his detention was unlawful and ordered his release, he was acquitted by a court in Istanbul on 18 February 2020. Yet the day after Kavala left prison, he was re-arrested on other charges.

Anti-government protest continues, with critical civil society groups

forced to develop less obvious ways to protest.

At the same time, the political opposition is actively seeking to democratically bring about regime change. In the March 2019 municipal elections, the opposition won many big cities, including Istanbul and Ankara. It remains to be seen whether a democratic change of government will result from the next parliamentary and presidential elections that are supposed to be held in 2023.

At the their recent summit, EU heads of state and government agreed a two-pronged strategy for Turkey: more sanctions in December accompanied by an offer to further develop the customs union. Does such an approach make an impression on Erdoğan?

Turkey takes the threat of new sanctions very seriously. The regime is nervous because additional sanctions would exacerbate the already difficult economic situation. The Turkish government harshly criticised the EU resolutions. At the same time, everyone knows that many regional conflicts require Turkey's involvement. In such circumstances, it's quite reasonable to use the carrot and the stick.

While Turkey's membership in the EU is out of the question, conducting a transactional dialogue based on the interests of individual countries – or ideally, the EU as a whole – would be more useful than simply turning away from our troublesome neighbour. We should remember the refugee agreement which, despite legitimate criticism of its individual parts, has kept lots of problems at bay for the entire EU.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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